

## Clarification of Traditional Bases for Ethics

**TO THE EDITOR:** Andrew Taylor's essay on ethics, "Don't Confuse Me With Ethics" (*J Nucl Med* 1992;33:296-303), is a deft handling of a difficult subject. It effectively combines a light touch with an erudite approach and leads to a positive resolution. However, on the way, a number of observations are made and dilemmas and questions raised which are resolved less fully and less effectively than they might be. Some even warrant correction. Permit me to offer a few suggestions.

- *The question of one true religion:* Taylor points out—if Moslems are right, are not Southern Baptists necessarily wrong and vice versa? I suggest that the either/or approach is not correct. Instead, there is considerable overlap by most religions with each other such that rather than one being true and the others having to be false, the "true believer" may feel that he is 100% right, whereas those whose true belief is different may be seen as perhaps 90% correct. Thus, a unified ethics based on areas of agreement is possible—although most believers will take their ethics completely from their own tradition.
- Since my move to Israel from the Pittsburgh area seven and a half years ago, I have become familiar enough with Hebrew to recognize how approximate my knowledge of the Bible had been in the past. Translations in English may not be *incorrect*, but they are often *misleading* or *incomplete*. The Hebrew verb in the Ten Commandments is not "Thou shalt not kill". It is "Thou shalt not murder." Murder is a particular kind of deliberate killing. Thus, there is no contradiction between prohibiting murder and prescribing capital punishment for certain crimes, or between prohibiting murder and allowing self defense or preventative killing of a murderer on the loose.
- Taylor expresses concern for the life of the peaceable heathen, since in Exodus 22, "God also commanded Moses 'to condemn to death anyone who offers sacrifice to any god except to Me'." It is not clear whether this concern is for the biblical or the contemporary "peaceable heathen." However, we can rest easy in either case, for the following reasons:
  1. The operative verb in the verse quoted (verse 19) is "yeherem" whose root is "harem", which means *isolate* rather than *execute*.
  2. All of the limiting rules and regulations and punishments of Exodus 22 and almost all of the five books of Moses apply to Jews only.
  3. Although, biblically, idol worship is the most heinous of crimes—it has this status only if practiced by Jews. Israelites are not commanded to crusade against it except within the borders of the Promised Land—and then only to protect the Jews there against infection by idolatry. It is important to understand that by idolatry they did not mean mere bowing down to some altar. Almost every primitive religion in that part of the world practiced human sacrifice, especially of babies and young children. In addition, gross sexual behavior and bestial tortures and

mutilations were part of their religious ceremonies. This is why the only three sins a Jew may not commit even to save his life are *murder, incest* and *idolatry*.

- The writer further asks, "Who decides which parts of sacred literature are literal fact, misrecorded, symbolic, or no longer applicable?" I would suggest that the *continuing tradition* of whatever group has that particular literature as its sacred literature is perhaps the most important factor. And one should also be both aware and wary of the contributions of scholars.
- Taylor finally asks, if all the religions of the world agreed on God's commandments would our behavior automatically be ethical if we followed those commandments? The implication of the questioner is, *no*. I think that *yes* would be a more correct answer.

It is not only in mathematics that the derived conclusions are determined by one's basic premises. This is equally true of systems of ethics. Whether based on "pure" reason, on rights, on one of a number of foundations of revealed truth, on raw intuition or on some combination of factors, including developed traditions, serious ethical decisions are not easily or lightly derived. Ethical decisions require human involvement at the highest levels and may sometimes lead to conflicting conclusions. Therefore, it is of great importance that those teachings which are the foundation stones of what is to be derived, be understood as fully, clearly and correctly as possible.

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**REPLY:** Dr. Chamovitz points out that "a number of . . . dilemmas and questions are raised which are resolved less fully than they might be." I wholeheartedly agree. One problem, of course, was lack of space; however, even if the *Journal* had given me several volumes of space, there would still have remained unresolved "questions and dilemmas." It was these unresolved questions and dilemmas that I wanted to share with the reader, unresolved questions and dilemmas which illustrate the difficulty of uncovering the ethical foundations that the moral superstructure of our daily lives seems to take for granted (*1*). The desire to share this wealth was not purely perverse. Someone may well have insights that I have overlooked and I could be further educated. Furthermore, to the extent we realize that some of our own deeply held beliefs may not be so firmly grounded as we may wish, perhaps we can limit our own dogmatism and develop a greater sense of tolerance and understanding for different points of view.

There have been a number of different reactions to my essay. One friend of mine who read an early version criticized my "exegesis of Kant." Others believe that it is so clearly right to enroll a patient in a diagnostic antibody study without telling him that a HAMA response may preclude future experimental therapy that the issue doesn't even merit discussion. Dr. Cha-