

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-

movitz has both specific and general reservations regarding my comments on using God's commandments as the foundation for our ethical beliefs. Specifically, he writes that almost all the limiting rules and regulations and punishments of Exodus 22 and the five books of Moses apply to Jews only. That is a matter of perspective. I have certainly known Jews who would not agree that all the rules, etc. apply to them and I have encountered many Christians who believe the five books of Moses are the word of God and that God's commandments in those books unquestionably apply to them. In fact, I have even heard speakers state, without knowing my religious beliefs, that many of these rules and regulations also apply to me. Perhaps they should. The issue I was addressing in my essay, however, was the search for ethical truth. What are the foundations that tell me which commandments and moral rules and regulations I should follow?

Examples were chosen from the Judeo-Christian tradition because I thought these examples would bring the issues into sharper focus for the western reader than would examples from less familiar sources. According to the Bible, Samuel 1:15, it was God, not some king or military commander, who commanded the systematic slaughter of Amelkite babies. Dr. Chamovitz replies that almost every primitive religion at the time of the Amelkites practiced human sacrifice, especially of babies and young children. Certainly, that was a barbaric time, although it might be difficult to argue that our century is much improved. Nevertheless, the issue is not the barbarism of the past or present, but whether we can find a foundation for our ethics based on God's commandments. Would our behavior automatically be ethical if we followed practices agreed upon by all the world's religions? Agreement does not imply ethical truth. Even if all the religions at the time of the Amelkites agreed that human sacrifice was right, very few of us are likely to agree that this unanimity of belief made it right. Furthermore, if God's commandments define right and wrong, the slaughter of the Amelkite babies is right simply because God commanded it and ethics becomes an arbitrary expression of God's will. Alternatively, if God commands a particular action *because it is right*, then there is a right and wrong, an ethical foundation, independent of God's will.

I do not want to take the space here to repeat points already made; nevertheless, I did expect this issue to be the most controversial aspect of the essay because many people genuinely do believe that God's commandments (their religious beliefs) can serve as an unshakable foundation for their ethics. While the problems associated with a God-based ethic are not necessarily insurmountable, they do need to be addressed as Dr. Chamovitz has begun to do when he points out the problems of the English translation of the Hebrew.

One of the two quotations that began the essay was taken from an article by Dr. Ingelfinger (2).

... What special insight or superior moral sensitivity gives me the license not only to accuse but to judge? ... It is far too easy to be ethically self-righteous.

Michael Servetus was a brilliant, eccentric and somewhat rash Spanish physician who, among other things, wrote a book challenging the doctrine of the Trinity (3). For this offense, the French inquisition condemned him to be burned alive. He escaped from Lyons and reached Protestant Geneva where he was recognized, arrested and tried for blasphemy (rejecting the Trinity). His chief accuser was John Calvin who justified the death sentence by appeals to God's decrees in Deuteronomy 13:5-15, 17:2-5, Exodus

22:20 and Leviticus 24:16. Servetus was condemned to burn at the stake. There is a story, probably apocryphal, that after the fire was lit, a great wind blew through Geneva and flattened the flames to the ground slowly roasting Michael Servetus. In his pain, he cried out and begged Calvin to kill him quickly. Calvin is said to have responded, "It is God who makes the wind to blow, not I."

In this story, Calvin was certainly self-righteous. More disturbing, though, was his denial of his own ethical responsibility. The suffering of Michael Servetus was the responsibility of God. When we act as agents of God, it is too easy to absolve ourselves of any moral responsibility for our actions. The consequences of our actions become simply expressions of God's will, not our own choices. As history so amply demonstrates, very unethical behavior is often justified by an appeal to God's commandments.

In response to the question, "Who decides which parts of sacred literature are literal fact, misrecorded, symbolic or no longer applicable," Dr. Chamovitz suggests that we should look for the answer in the continuing tradition of the religious group whose sacred literature is in question. This approach has elements in common with my comments on page 301 of the essay. Certainly, such a tradition may provide profound ethical insights and even a consensus regarding certain ethical issues, but it is difficult to use tradition and consensus as a *foundation* for our ethics. The Aztecs had their traditions, the Popul Vuh and other sacred literature, yet they practiced a dramatic form of human sacrifice, cutting the beating hearts out of their victims and rolling the bleeding bodies down the temple steps. The simple existence of a tradition and sacred literature is not sufficient to provide ethical truth. Certainly, there may be considerable overlap between religions in their practices or ethical beliefs, but the foundations for these beliefs are often quite different and under times of stress may be used to justify very divergent behavior. The answers do not come easy and the quotation by Albert Einstein that began the essay is worth repeating:

The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions (4).

REFERENCES

1. Taylor A. Don't confuse me with ethics: I already know what's right. *J Nucl Med* 1992;33:296-303.
2. Ingelfinger FJ. The unethical in medical ethics. *Ann Intern Med* 1975;83:254-269.
3. Durant W. *The reformation: a history of European civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300-1564*. New York: Simon and Schuster; 1957:479-490.
4. Einstein A. In: Dukas H, Hoffman B, eds. *The human side. New glimpses from his archives*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1979:95.

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First-Pass Versus Gated Equilibrium Radioangiography

TO THE EDITOR: In an article published recently in the *Journal* (1), Green et al. referred to the few theoretical notes regarding comparative performances of gated first-pass versus equilibrium gated radioangiography, specifically the corresponding statistical precision of the two methods. We would like to comment on some of the methodological issues utilized in the cited article.