

## Article

# How Do Theological and Secular Ethics Relate and Compare?

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**Abstract:** This article relates and compares some important features of Western religious and secular morality by way of surveying the debate over different answers to the question whether morality depends on religion in some significant way. The three main ways examined are whether morality depends on religion for an objective foundation, whether morality depends on religion for its content, and whether morality depends on religion for motivation. What emerges is that while religion can provide an objective foundation, a worthy content, and an admirable motivation for those who accept its distinctive theological claims, secularists can provide plausible, if debatable, alternatives to a theological foundation, as well as a moral content and motivation that can have interesting overlaps with those of religious ethics.

**Keywords:** secularism; morality; prudence; foundations; rights; egoism; virtues; altruism; gratitude

Several hundred years ago in much of the West influenced by the Abrahamic religions, there was little separation between theological and secular ethics because historically the great moral teachers were also the religious teachers. Even the prior Greek thinkers were either incorporated into religious ethics, such as was attempted with Aristotle and Epictetus, or dismissed, such as with Epicurus. If we specify that morality consists of moral beliefs and practices, while ethics is reflection on morality, both the moral teachings and the ethical reflection were the responsibility of those who were educated and respected enough to be listened to, and those tended to be the priests and monks (and rarely nuns) who were regarded as authorities. Of course, this tradition began to change with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, when, with wider educational and artistic and commercial sources of influence, more diverse authorities emerged.

Deriving from the Latin word *saecularis*, meaning “of an age”, the word “secular” meant to Christian medieval minds the realm of the worldly, which is temporal as opposed to the eternal matters that chiefly concerned the religious institutions. Religious people, of course, lived in the world, so there was no inherent conflict between the secular and the religious, though believers were warned to keep their priorities in proper order (*in* but not *of* the world). The Protestant Reformation’s insistence that religious calling did not restrict itself to the church, that it applied just as importantly to secular occupations, underscores the fact that until fairly recently there were few secular moral traditions separate from religious concerns. Of course the Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and other non-Western traditions complicate any effort to generalize here, but for the Western intellectual tradition, it is clear that, historically, moral beliefs and ethical reflection depended on religious practice and theological reflection. Even early humanist thinkers were often religious humanists. Indeed, in the United States, the first *Humanist Manifesto*, drafted by John Dewey and others in 1933, was signed by as many ministers as philosophers (though they tended to be liberal Unitarian Universalist ministers) and treats religion very positively. However in 1980, The Council for Secular Humanism issued *A Secular Humanist Declaration*, which relied on its empiricist epistemology and naturalist metaphysics to deny the existence of supernatural or transcendent beings and to insist that morality and ethics can and should be independent of any religious or theological musings ([American Humanist Association Manifestos n.d.](#)).

Thus the above claim about how in Western history morality depended on religion can be recognized even by secular thinkers, though they can go on to insist that such



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dependence was completely contingent and that morality can and should be independent of religion for its foundation, content, and motivation. So it's worth surveying the arguments for and against such independence.

### 1. Foundational Dependence

Among the ways that morality has been claimed to depend on religion is the philosophical claim that morality needs religion if it is to have an objective foundation, a foundation that appeals to facts or principles that ethicists can reason about and discuss, and thereby one that justifies and motivates morality. An ancient and still popular version of this claim is that what gives morality its authority is its being based on God's commands. The simplest version of the divine command theory is that "You are obliged to do x" just means "God commands that you do x" and "X is right/wrong" just means "God approves/disapproves of x." The most common objection to this claim goes back to Socrates's famous question to Euthyphro: In essence he asked whether God approves of something because it's good, or is it good because God approves of it. Socrates thought that choosing the latter answer would be as arbitrary as saying that a flower is beautiful only because the gardener thinks it is beautiful. Instead, he thought it was obvious that the gardener's appreciation of the flower was the result of the flower's being beautiful. Likewise there must be something about rightness that elicits God's approval. Of course, then there must be some criterion of rightness or goodness that is independent of God's will. That would enable believers to assert that God would never arbitrarily demand something that they would think was morally horrible, but it would also mean that what God demands depends on a non-theological foundation. God might know more than humans do about right and wrong, but God's moral judgment would depend on criteria independent of God's will. In the history of philosophy of religion, this problem is called "The Euthyphro Dilemma."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this philosophical objection is the religious objection that when believers praise God for being righteous or good, they seem to be implying something more significant than that God approves of God's own self. On the other hand, if they are implying that there's an independent standard of goodness that they grasp and that God ranks infinitely high relative to that standard, it seems that they are ranking God against a standard that God must meet. And this, of course, seems to impinge on God's absolute sovereignty. The Euthyphro dilemma has been debated for millennia with many proposals for a third alternative, eliciting rebuttals back and forth. A recent promising alternative to the dilemma is to claim that the divine command theory is about God's will (which can be known through parables, conscience, and ways other than explicit commands) and that God's will is controlled by God's nature. So if we can know enough about God's nature, we can know the contours of what God wills. In particular, if we know that God's essence is love or goodness, then we can know that any command that is not loving or good is not from God (Evans 2014, pp. 90–94). And then we see that our obligations and prohibitions come from God's will, and that they are not arbitrary but flow from God's nature, which is essentially loving and good. Of course, this view does require that through religious experience or reliable revelation we know that God is loving and good and that this knowledge is the foundation of what we know about love and goodness, a claim that many secularists would deny. But this view does give theists a way of grounding morality in religious conviction while insisting that it does not involve arbitrariness in God's will.

A second way to claim that morality depends on religious convictions is to insist that the best if not only way to ground assertions about basic human rights is to appeal to theological claims about God's relationship to persons. One appeal is to God's creating persons in God's own image. If persons mirror God by having some of God's characteristics, such as creativity and autonomy, or if they represent God by being God's stewards with the privilege and responsibility to make decisions about how to live and act in God's creation, then some of the awe persons feel toward God they should also feel toward all persons. This awe would not simply be an urge to nurture persons; it would also give both a reason and a passion for respecting persons as exalted and as ends-in-themselves, as hearers and

givers of reasons and not just animals to be used or manipulated. Such a reverence for the sanctity of persons arguably provides a firm foundation for human rights, firmer than appeals to utility or secular notions of human dignity (Tinder 2007, p. 119).

Some theists agree that the appeal to being created in God's image is a firmer foundation for rights than to intuitions about human dignity, but worry that the capacities that humans have by virtue of imaging God vary significantly in humans. Adults with dementia as well as normal babies, for example, do not exhibit these capacities in a higher way than do many animals fairly low on the phylogenetic scale. So these theists argue that a firmer foundation for human rights is the "bestowed worth" that all humans have by virtue of being loved by God. If God becomes attached to all humans by loving them, then God bestows worth on them, a worth that should be respected by all other humans by respecting their rights (Wolterstorff 2008, p. 360). Of course, appeals to God's will and nature, or to being created in God's image, or to being loved by God, require religious convictions. But if these convictions provide a firmer foundation for morality than what secular considerations can provide, their attraction is understandable. Given the appeal to theological convictions, it is also understandable why secularists think they have reasonable alternatives.

One alternative is to deny that morality needs an objective foundation. Instead, one can appeal to the natural sensitivity, empathy, and sympathy that normal people feel. If individuals do not have these sentiments, what they need instead of foundational facts or principles are conversations, stories, and experiences that widen their capacity to respond to the presence and needs of others and to avoid being cruel (Rorty 1999). It's true that this view cannot provide one with rational arguments that justify one's moral stance against those who disagree, but such arguments rarely change minds, at least not as often as stories, conversations, and hugs do. Meanwhile, we can get along just fine with these moral sentiments, and expect that we will outnumber those who do not share them. Whatever can be said in favor of such a view, it explicitly does not provide an alternative objective foundation for morality; rather it boldly asserts that none is needed, at least not one that justifies the appropriateness of particular moral feelings. The denial that morality needs an objective foundation raises questions about relativism and other important issues that are beyond the scope of this essay.

Another way of denying that an agreed on objective foundation for morality is needed is to ecumenically allow for any number of foundations as long as there can be substantial agreement on moral principles or virtues. Perhaps if we allow people with different religious and cultural outlooks, and thereby different foundational beliefs, to list what they regard as basic human rights, we could arrive at an overlapping consensus that could be used for cooperation while being grounded in different foundations. Soon after World War II, when civilized peoples were horrified at the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity, and when the major and minor powers agreed to establish a United Nations, there was a window of opportunity, in spite of the looming Cold War, to try to arrive at such a consensus. With Eleanor Roosevelt as its chair, a UN committee sent questionnaires to statesmen and scholars around the world and studied writings from many cultures to see whether there might be some basis for a common declaration about basic values and rights (Glendon 2001). They discovered that there was more argument about the foundation of human rights than about their content, so Roosevelt asked the participants to stop arguing about foundations and to see whether they could come up with a coherent list that they could agree on regardless of other disagreements. This proved difficult. For example, the Soviet bloc insisted that the positive rights for employment and decent economic conditions had to be stated in the same list with Western insistence on negative rights not to be tortured or silenced. And Saudi Arabia objected to any right to change one's religion. And the United States was against any statement that would be legally binding. But, using the universally accepted idea of inherent human dignity, the committee did arrive at a substantive Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Universal Declaration of Human Rights n.d.) that was passed in 1948.

The concept of human dignity is rich with possible meanings, of course. One widely-recognized, important distinction is between recognition respect and appraisal respect (Darwall 1977). The latter refers to the respect or esteem you have for persons in virtue of their excellent accomplishments or fine character or splendid abilities. Recognition respect refers to the respect you have for persons because you recognize their status as holders of rights and centers of moral consideration. It is this recognition notion of respect that the UN committee assumed when using “dignity” to seek agreement on human rights, which were outlined in 30 articles. There were some abstentions during the voting because of the differences noted above as well as some vague and ambiguous articles in order to avoid vetoes. But it passed without vetoes, so it could earn its title of Universal Declaration.

The UDHR has achieved an iconic status, especially in the West and those countries influenced by the classically liberal emphasis on individual rights. Hence, it can be and is appealed to with rhetorical effect by those promoting civil society. Even governments that Western societies regard as illiberal often have extensive UDHR elements in their constitutions and, in accordance with the adage that hypocrisy is vice tipping its hat to virtue, have to try to defend their practices by interpreting in sketchy ways the relevant articles. However, the UDHR almost certainly would not be passed today, at least not without significant opposition and vetoes. This opposition would, of course, come from the failed states or rogue states whose prevalence makes the difficult question of humanitarian intervention more pertinent than that of universal agreement on rights. But it would also come from those who object to its basic cultural assumptions. These assumptions include the claim that rights reside inherently in *individuals*, that persons have *equal* inherent dignity and therefore equal (though not necessarily identical) rights, that rights are *recognized* rather than conferred by societies and states, and that they are not derived from responsibilities that individuals have towards their groups (though the UDHR recognizes in the Preamble and articles 1, 2, 6, 7, and 29, that individuals have duties towards society and that rights and responsibilities may be correlated). The representatives from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that were instrumental in adopting the UDHR tended to be Western educated or, at least, influenced by liberal democratic values, but Asian and Islamic groups in the 1990s and authoritarian states today have challenged what they see as an individualism that is alien to their cultures. Likewise, Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis has underscored a cultural relativism that challenges universalism regarding rights (Little 1999, pp. 151–59). Hence, it is unlikely that this ecumenical approach will sustain agreement about what human dignity implies for human rights. This is so even if liberal democracies can agree to hold each other to the rights and values listed in the UDHR, underscoring both the limitations and the importance of this effort to ground the morality of human rights.

Another possible secular way to ground morality is to claim that certain rules are necessary for the very existence of society, so all we need is the well supported and likely universal belief that human survival requires living in groups (even hermits need groups to survive, at least as children), and we can simply ask what rules or values are required for groups to exist. Notice that the latter question is an empirical one. To ask if one is healthy or is thriving involves some value dimension because it asks if one is living *well*. But to ask if one is alive or dead is primarily an empirical, scientific question, though the answer does require defining what one means by life and death, and requires some criteria with empirical indicators that determine whether one is alive or dead. There is plenty of room for debate about the conceptual details, especially when one is talking about the life and death of something as open-ended as “society.” But the question of what rules and values are necessary for a society to exist can plausibly be interpreted as a largely empirical question, in which case we need not assume substantive values to ground the necessary rules and values by way of answering the question. Hence, we have a possible objective foundation for morality. Sissela Bok claims that “Certain basic values necessary to collective survival have had to be formulated in every society. A minimalist set of such values can be recognized across societal and other boundaries” (Bok 1995, p. 13). She plausibly claims that these include positive moral values, such as mutual support and

reciprocity, negative ones such as not harming others, as well as rudimentary fairness and rules for conflict resolution. There may be criminal amoralists who reject such values, but they would be parasites on societies that cannot exist without these values. Bok points out that while these minimal (or thin) values are *necessary* for group vitality, they are not *sufficient*; we also need maximal (or thick) values: ideals and virtues usually anchored in religious and cultural beliefs and practices. Obviously, it is these maximal values that can contradict and cause conflict and violence and, of course, they are not included in the empirical grounding of the minimal values. Here, Bok makes the hopeful claim that the minimal values can serve as a check on the maximal ones: “and in this way to use the basic values to critique abuses perpetrated in the name either of more general values or of ethnic, religious, political, or other diversity” (Bok 1995, p. 23). Her examples of actions and practices that would be disallowed include torture, religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, genocide, child prostitution, and clitoridectomy. However, it seems obvious that, although some of these practices may be incompatible with the indefinitely long existence of a society, others of them seem dreadfully compatible with it, as do other practices that civil society would want to ban, such as slavery. Bok could point out that such practices undermine the healthy flourishing of a society (to say nothing of the flourishing of the individual victims), but then the advantage of grounding morality through a largely empirical investigation is lost; unlike life and death, health and flourishing are terms laden with maximal values. Hence, this empirical approach can hope to provide an objective foundation for certain minimal rights and values, but not for all those that are needed for a flourishing society.

A promising secular alternative to the religious grounding of ethics, one that appeals only to reason and consistency, is to recognize that one regards oneself as a bearer of rights because of certain characteristics about oneself, characteristics that lead to a justifiable sense of resentment when those rights are violated. Then, one recognizes that these characteristics also apply to all other persons. For example, I am an autonomous person whose decisions ought not be frivolously thwarted; also, I have feelings and you should not cause me unjustified suffering; I am self-conscious and thereby I matter for my own sake, an end-in-myself not to simply be used for others’ ends; in short, I have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, rights that should be respected. But this is true of all the persons I encounter, so consistency requires that I generalize my case to all persons (Nagel 1970; Gewirth 1978; Kant 1981, p. 35). This argument promises an objective grounding as well as some clarity for the implications of the concept of human dignity that informs so much of today’s debates about human rights.

An obvious problem with this approach is that one way in which I am significantly different from other persons is that I am me and others are not me. Whether this difference is morally or rationally relevant is a matter of dispute. Ethical egoists, who claim I have the moral obligation to pursue only my own self-interest, are not persuaded by the above argument. Of course, an enlightened egoist who believes that her own happiness depends on the happiness of others, has strong reasons to avoid violating the rights of others; indeed, a truly enlightened egoist probably has reason to abide by the same rules as those that motivate altruists. But for the egoist, these would be rules of prudence rather than morality. Prudence requires looking out for oneself primarily and for others only as their wellbeing affects one’s own. It does not require an intrinsic concern for the wellbeing of others, which morality does require. Hence, for many people the above consistency argument does not provide an adequate objective foundation for ethics, although it seems self-evident to many others.

In this section we saw that a theological foundation for ethics can avoid the Euthyphro dilemma, though it still requires distinctive theological claims. Meanwhile, there are some plausible secular alternatives, though each of them involves debatable claims.

## 2. Epistemological Dependence and Unique Content

Even if religious beliefs do not provide the necessary foundation for morality, perhaps religious revelations or experiences do provide some unique contents for it. Presumably

God would know more about morality than the wisest humans. Perhaps God created us in a way that allows us to figure out some or most of what morality requires, but it may also be that religious experience or God's revelation provides important insights not found by reason or sentiment alone.

One important claim about unique content is that certain elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition have so infused Western morality that they cannot be dismissed without causing deep confusion. Recall the the point discussed above that appeal to human rights needs to be grounded in important theological beliefs. Now the claim is the back-handed compliment that the content of Western morality is unintelligible apart from central theological doctrines. This claim can be found in a widely-cited article by Elizabeth Anscombe in which she writes that modern efforts to talk about what we morally ought to do without presupposing a Divine law are confused and that we should jettison such talk since it is baseless and even dangerous without that rejected presupposition (Anscombe 1958). Probably the most famous sustained effort to assert the claim about confusion and to offer an alternative is Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Here, is my brief summary (using mainly Chp. 2–6, 9, 12, and 15 of MacIntyre 2007):

Aristotle taught a teleological morality in which the virtues were the traits of character that enabled humans to attain their proper end. Given that a human in the raw is uneducated and that what he is meant to be (his proper end) is a reasoning being, he should have an education that nurtures the classical virtues of courage, justice, moderation, and wisdom (and their derivatives). Aquinas adapted this basic teleological structure to include sinfulness as part of the human condition and imaging God as the the proper end, which required additional virtues to move from what humans are when born to their proper end, namely the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. This teleology made the question of what are the essential virtues a factual question about what traits are necessary for getting a human from birth to what a human is meant to be: there was no fact-value gap. But the enlightenment project sought to eliminate any metaphysical, theological, or biological teleologies, basing morality on universal features of humans as they actually are. Hume appealed to feelings and Kant to reason, but were persuasive only in refuting each other's foundation, leading eventually to Nietzsche's reduction of "oughts" to "taboos" and to his joyful insistence on creating one's own values. The result is our emotivist culture in which we cannot intelligently discuss morality but mainly seek to manipulate each other's feelings through shrill protests about rights and shrewd unmasking of each other's motives.

So the charge is not just that Western secular ethics has no foundation without theology, but that the central concepts—such as obligations and rights—make no sense outside of the theological context in which they were developed. Anscombe and MacIntyre have stimulated a revival of virtue ethics, an approach in which morality is not a matter of using moral principles to decide what are our obligations or which rights override which when they come into conflict; instead it relies on proper nurturing of traits of character that enable us to discern how we should respond appropriately in situations that call for moral decision. One obvious way for a virtue ethicist to respond to the above charge is to cheerfully agree that theology is needed. Indeed, in the prologue to the third edition MacIntyre observes that, although the first edition gave us a choice between Nietzsche and Aristotle, he since has returned to Aquinas as a way out of the enlightenment catastrophe (MacIntyre 2007, pp. 10–11). A way for a secularist virtue ethicist to respond to critiques such as those of Anscombe and MacIntyre is to avoid moral categories like obligations and rights and develop a promising secular version of virtue ethics, something we noticed that MacIntyre himself was learning toward before deciding that Aquinas was the better choice.<sup>2</sup> A very different way to respond is to show that rights and obligations do make sense without the theological context and, indeed, can be developed in fresh ways.<sup>3</sup> A plausible mediating position is that some central moral concepts such as rights and obligations may fit most naturally in the theological context in which they developed but that they are adaptable to secular uses. Such adaptation may be done naively, without awareness of the genealogy of the concepts, but can also be done knowingly and carefully.

Another frequently suggested contribution of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures to Western morality is their unique emphasis on the demand to *love* one's neighbor, love in the sense of *agape*, the self-sacrificing benevolence that seeks the wellbeing of others, including one's enemies. The emphasis is notable both for the content of *agape* and, at least in the Christian version, for its radical expansion of who is one's neighbor. In the Natural Law tradition of Thomas Aquinas (which the summary of MacIntyre alluded to above) the four classical Greek virtues of courage, wisdom, moderation, and justice are thought to be available to anyone using reason, whereas the Scriptures reveal that the specifically theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, are the gifts of God's grace to believers. This grace provides both the knowledge of the virtue and the motivation to act in accordance with it (Aquinas 1984, pp. 108–23). There may be room for debate about whether faith and hope are *moral* virtues, but benevolent love is widely asserted to be the essence of Christian morality. Of course, those who emphasize *agape* can admit other principles or considerations in their morality, but most would agree with St Paul that "the greatest of these is love" (I Corinthians 13:13). Thus benevolent love is a good example to use in asking whether religious revelation makes a unique contribution to Western ethics.

Here, it is important to notice that, especially with religious outlooks, morality does not come separated into the categories of minimal and maximal values such as those appealed to above by Bok. A widely used distinction is between *thin* and *thick* evaluative terms. Normative ethics tries to thin down evaluative terms to concepts like "rights" and "obligation." But most people use thicker terms like "kind" and "awful." When raising children, families rarely sit down to explain what is the minimal morality they accept and then add on the maximal religious or cultural ideals. Rather, children learn what is good or bad by rewards, nudges, praise, frowns, criticism, and disincentives; and these come with words like kind, courageous, decent, nice, godly, naughty, ungodly, cruel, abomination, and selfish, and phrases like "We don't do that" and "What would Jesus do?" These words and phrases not only connote evaluative and empirical elements that go beyond what is strictly moral, they also come integrated with cultural ideals and religious virtues. For example, rarely do people in the Judeo-Christian tradition learn the second tablet of the Ten Commandments independently of the first. Any distinction between the two might come later when, for example, the children encounter friends from other religious and cultural traditions. But, ordinarily, moral convictions cultivated in children are thick with religious and cultural connotations, and these combine moral elements with world-views that shape how morality is interpreted and motivated.

So the content of a moral outlook involves not just the words or ideas that are used but also how they are integrated with the ideals, role models, overall world view, and ways of life of those who accept that outlook. This point is especially pertinent when we find overlap between outlooks in their use of general terms—thick or thin—such as love. For example, the Effective Altruism (EA) movement appeals to benevolent love. Although the term "*agape*" is not often used, it is clear that the altruism it promotes is the self-giving benevolence that is central to *agape*. There is a shared radicalism: Jesus famously told the man who asked what he should do to inherit eternal life that he should sell all his possessions and give to the poor (Luke 18:22), and EA is committed to a level of charitable giving that exceeds what most people regard as extremely generous. Moreover, what distinguishes EA is not just its radical view of the amount of charitable giving, it also insists that morality requires us to promote the most effective ways to promote the wellbeing of others. The utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer is the leading proponent of EA and, as the title of one of his books makes clear, he calls for doing *The Most Good You Can Do* (Singer 2015). A maximization ethic such as utilitarianism in theory requires one to follow the path that will result in the greatest general good, whether that good be thought of as happiness or preference satisfaction or some combination of intrinsic goods. And needy people at a distance should figure prominently into the equation when one asks how to use one's resources to benefit others. Here, is where a religious commitment to benevolent love may call for something other than effective altruism. EA would not encourage one to sell

all one's possessions and give to the poor, because there are much better calculations on how to do the most good. In fact, Singer begins his book by approvingly referring to one of his students who joined a Wall Street firm so that with his high income his donation of half his income would be much more effective at helping the needy than if he pursued a less lucrative career while donating the same percentage. An effective altruist would not waste expensive ointment on washing feet. For that matter, all the resources used to have houses of worship and paid clergy would not meet secular criteria for return on investment, even if the architecture and salaries were modest.

Perhaps one could say that the difference is that religious believers simply bring into their calculations considerations that secularists do not, such as the importance of worship, fellowship, salvation and eternal life. But weighing in some of these considerations complicates the calculations beyond measure; how does one weigh resources for offering eternal salvation against providing for a higher quality of life now? If one discerns a calling for teaching or nursing, how does one calculate the resultant benefits to others against making more money that can be given to vitalize any number of effective charities? There is a growing literature on possible cooperation and probable tensions between religious commitment and Effective Altruism (Lieberman 2017; Roser et al. 2022) and one main conclusion to draw is that differences have less to do with the concepts used and more to do with the different overall worldviews that provide different contexts in which those terms, principles, and virtues are lived. So this discussion of benevolent loves suggests that if a morality emphasizing love depends on religious revelation for some of its content, it would be mainly in the thick sense that how one lives morally depends on how revelation affects the way that one's moral beliefs are integrated into one's communal life and practices.

In this section we saw that some thinkers claim that Christian theological ethics provided moral categories—such as rights and obligations—that continue to be used in modern ethics but that do not make sense without the theological context, though we also noted that others think that a coherent secular use of these categories is possible and that the suggested alternative to using these categories—virtue ethics—has secular versions. And we saw that the most frequently cited distinctive content for western religious ethics—agape love—is also used by a secular ethic, though there are differences in how it is applied given the different world views.

### 3. Motivational Dependence

A prominent view about the relationship between morality and religion is the claim that people can know what is morally right and wrong independently of religious beliefs, but that religion supplies the main motivation for doing what is right and, more importantly, not doing what is wrong. Throughout history, probably the most common version of the dependency claim is that the hope of future reward and the fear of future punishment is what motivates most people to behave. Evidence for this claim includes the frequent warnings about a judgment day we find in the Christian Scriptures and even more in the Quran. And some secularists also make this claim. The well-known historians Will and Ariel Durant, in their *Lessons of History*, say that even skeptical historians respect religion because “There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion” and that even the most prominent regimes today that repudiate religion do so only because Communism has become a new religion or opiate for the people (Durant and Durant 1968, p. 51). They add presciently that if these regimes fail to deliver the goods they may well wink at the restoration of religion as a way to quiet dissent.

Indeed, one frequently comes across the pragmatic view of Benjamin Franklin and Voltaire, among others, that religion is useful to society and governments because it internalizes the motivation to obey the laws that are necessary for the thriving of society and probably for its very existence. The “fear of the Lord” (interpreted as being scared of a judgmental God) substitutes very well for an otherwise huge and overly expensive police

force, the hope of future heavenly bliss inducing the oppressed and suffering masses to obey the laws and acquiesce in their current condition rather than revolt against it.

One type of objection to this view is that, to the extent it is true, it reduces morality to prudence; sheer self-interest implies that any cost-risk-benefit that includes such considerations would obviously favor current sacrifice and obedience for eternal reward. This is why Kant, who did in fact think that it was reasonable to hope for eternal reward, insisted that making such considerations part of moral training ruined true moral motivation, which must be reverence for the moral law itself (Kant 1981, p. 22). Of course, it may be that for many people morality does fade into prudence, but another type of objection to the claim that people need religious eschatology to motivate moral behavior is that it seems false when generalized. While desperate people may cling to religious hope as the motivation to behave, there is little evidence that the loss of such hope tends to result in moral anarchy. Not only do secularists include some of the most morally upright people one can find, but many religious believers are (often self-admittedly) some of the worst sinners around. For one thing, it may be that as an empirical fact serious wrong-doing is often not a matter of calculation; instinctual reactions rather than cost-benefit analyses may be the culprit. Also, complicating the picture is the theological doctrine of salvation by grace rather than works; although calculating that we can sin so grace may abound is dangerous, the faith in forgiveness before one dies complicates a simplistic judgment day motive for behavior. So let us explore another motivation that theists have for living up to moral demands—gratitude—and see whether secularists have something similar.

In an important way, the question of moral motivation can be understood as the question, “Why should I be moral?” This question applies to secularists as well as theists. Notice that even someone who thinks there are good answers to the question “Why should *we* be moral?” (such as Bok’s claim that commitment to some moral values is necessary for societies to exist, and certainly to flourish) might still wonder why *I* (or any rational individual) should not cheat when I can get away with it. Why not preach virtue while cheating when one can get away with it? A good answer appeals to the folk wisdom that you cannot fool all of the people all of the time, so the best way to *assure* others that you are trustworthy is actually to *be* trustworthy. Does this folk wisdom base motivation on prudence rather than morality? Yes, at least initially. But if parents use this reason to raise their children to *be* moral, the children may acquire the character trait—the virtue—to act morally without calculating self-interest. And then, although they may see that morality is usually prudent, they do seem to act morally, and not just prudentially. And when the chips are down, they may feel obligated to act morally even at significant costs. So while it is possible that prudence can nurture moral motivation, many people have a different motivation, to which we now turn.

When asked why they should be moral or what motivates them to gladly accept the demands of morality, many theists appeal to their broader religious outlook: they owe their lives (many would add “and their salvation”) to a loving God and they are grateful. And that gratitude flows into an ethic of caring for creation and for each other.

A theistic defense of such a sentiment can be found in Wendell Berry’s essay, “The Gift of Good Land.” Berry argues that the land, as well as everything we appreciate in our lives, should be experienced as a gift. More precisely, it is the *use* of the land and our other resources that is the gift; God owns the earth and all within it, and God gives us the usage. And this gift elicits the sort of gratitude and humility that calls for neighborliness and good husbandry (Berry 1981, pp. 267–81). I have often asked students whether they would rather *earn* something important (e.g., a college education, a career opportunity, or a house) or have it *given* to them. They almost invariably say they would prefer to earn it, especially if the real gift was the *usage* of what was provided and the usage came with sustainability strings attached. Preferring to *earn* something important is a thoroughly American attitude, of course; we like to see ourselves as individuals autonomously earning whatever we have or achieve. But most of my students also admitted that much of what they *are*, and *have*, and *achieve* is largely due to grace or luck combined with a lot of contributions from others.

And they admit that realizing this does elicit a sense of responsibility to use their gifts wisely, many of them translating that into a calling toward covenantal responsibility to live lives of worth and service. So here we have a religious motive for living morally that does not collapse into self-interest or mere prudence (though prudence is called for as part of grateful stewardship). Is this rich sense of gratitude unique to a religious outlook or can secularists have a similar sense of gratitude. one that elicits a motive for living morally?

Today, publishing books on cultivating gratitude is something of a growth industry, but one also finds the view that there is no such thing as a free gift, since gifts always elicit a burden of reciprocity and obligation. The latter may be simply a dark way of describing what my students see as the advantage of earning what one is and has. However it is hard for discerning persons—whether religious or secular—to deny that much of what they are and have is due to grace, luck, social infrastructure, contributions from ancestors and strangers, and gifts from relatives and friends. It seems easier to see how theists can be grateful to God than how secularists can be grateful to everything that made them who they are, including sheer blind chance. Can one thank one’s lucky stars in such a way that it elicits a sense of calling for living morally? Ronald Aronson, an atheist, recounts what amounts to a secular gratitude story:

Hiking through a nearby woods on a spring day recently, I followed the turning path and suddenly saw a tiny lake, then walked down a hill to its edge as birds chirped and darted about, stopping at a clearing to register the warmth of the sun against my face. Feelings welled up: physical pleasure, delight in the sounds and sights, gladness to be out here on this day. But something else as well, curious and less distinct, a vague feeling more like gratitude than anything else but not toward any being or person I could recognize. (Aronson 2008, p. 43)

Aronson sees the problem with calling this feeling “gratitude,” since we tend to think that we are grateful *to* someone (he notes that he originally published this passage in an article entitled “Thank Who Very Much?”). But he thinks that we can be grateful *for* something without being grateful *to* someone. Of course, there are plenty of someone’s to be grateful to. He says that at a thanksgiving dinner, we can be grateful “ . . . to our ancestors distant and recent and their struggles, whose labors have accumulated in the comforts we enjoy; and to countless other people, wherever they are, whose toil helped set the table at which we feast.” Thus secularists clearly can feel a sense of gratitude to other people, but Aronson goes on in this passage to being grateful for the “natural forces that have made our own life, and this reunion possible” (Aronson 2008, p. 63). He claims that “Allowing our relationships with nature to be mapped across time, from the big bang that created the sun, to the cosmic processes that created the earth, to the rains that created its oceans—yes, to the microbes in the water and in the soil, leading to the evolution of the other species of plants and animals—leads us to educate our sense of gratitude by becoming aware of our own sources.” So in this passage he endorses a response that elicits the determination

. . . to preserve the wilderness, and thus the possibility of such an experience for their children and grandchildren, and as their sense of time expands, even those living in the distant future. Other striking responses are a democratic sense—the belief that this heritage belongs to everyone and the desire to preserve this for everyone—and a feeling of this stewardship giving their life a meaning and purpose. (Aronson 2008, pp. 54–56)

Aronson’s distinction between grateful *to* and grateful *for* enables him to agree with Robert Solomon that we need not personify the universe in order to feel grateful, a feeling that Solomon says is a philosophical emotion:

So viewed, “opening one’s heart to the universe” is not so much personifying the universe as reflecting on as well as feeling and expressing a cosmic gratitude, that is, expanding one’s perspective, as the Stoics insisted, so that one comes to appreciate the beauty of the whole as well as be absorbed in our own limited

projects and passions. That is spirituality. It is, perhaps, the ultimate happiness, and it is an ideal expression of emotional integrity. (Solomon 2007, p. 270)

It is not hard to see how this sense of gratitude can elicit a sense of responsibility to live morally. The calling would come not from God but from one's own conscience, one that says the more fortunate should help those less fortunate and that the only decent thing to do when one is gifted and lucky is to pay it forward. It can be argued that "appreciation" is the better category here for secularists, gratitude being the type of appreciation that includes a "to" as well as a "for" and that "... we can allow a metaphorical extension of existential gratitude for those who want to speak about life as a 'gift' as a way of expressing their appreciation for the unmerited good of life, even though, strictly speaking, they do not believe life is a gift in any ultimate sense, but rather it is good luck" (McPherson 2022, p. 39).

Moreover, some secularists do not think it is appropriate to thank impersonal forces: "... it seems evident to me that you can only thank a being whom it makes sense to ask something of. And it makes no sense to ask something of a non-personal being" (Tugendhat 2006). Feeling lucky might be appropriate, but not gratitude with whatever feelings of responsibility that may elicit. But other secularists think that gratitude for sheer luck has a lot to be said for it, and it in fact is more morally appropriate than gratitude to God for one's life and gifts:

For my part, having long passed the age at which most human beings who have ever lived are dead, I feel gratitude every day for being alive. But if I thought some God was to be thanked for that, as opposed to brute luck, I'd worry about the unfairness of it. Why should God privilege me, while condemning millions of innocent people to early and often horrible deaths? (de Sousa 2007)

The latter comment raises theological issues about the workings of God's providence, but the point is that even anti-theistic secularists can feel the sort of appreciation that they see as gratitude for their life without necessarily feeling gratitude to someone. It is an empirical question whether people *do* feel gratitude for cosmic good luck, one that nurtures morality. The answer is that some do and some do not, and that those who do seem to be recommending it to others as well, which comes close to the normative view that people *should* feel such gratitude or, at least, feel the type and degree of appreciation that nurtures a sense of responsibility for sharing one's good fortune with others.

If so, the advice, whether from theists or secularists, is not always taken. Both Job and Jeremiah, theists to the core, cursed the day they were born (Job 3:3, Jeremiah 20:14). And David Benatar is just one of the pessimists who insist on our seeing the dark side of the unbalanced human predicament: "Chronic pain is rampant but there is no such thing as chronic pleasure" (Benatar 2017, p. 77). This is not just a momentary outburst of frustration, as when blinded and embittered Gloucester says to humiliated King Lear, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (King Lear, Act 4, scene 1, 36–37). Benatar thinks that feeling gratitude is inappropriate because the human condition itself is appalling: "All things considered, the quality of human lives is not only much poorer than most people recognize it to be; it is actually quite bad" (Benatar 2017, p. 201). He thinks that only lack of attention to all the misery in the lives of the less fortunate as well as to the imbalance of happiness and sorrow in the lives of the more fortunate, would make people feel thankful enough to want to perpetuate such conditions by having children. Now, many of those who feel gratitude for their existence do not focus so much on whether their life is *happy*, but on whether it is *worthwhile*, the latter being in part a matter of sharing one another's fate. But articulate pessimism shows that a response of gratitude to one's life, especially a gratitude that elicits a moral commitment to share one's gifts with others is not automatic; it flows from a discerning and appreciative interpretation that cuts across religious and secular outlooks. Although a religious outlook may have a better claim on strictly calling it "gratitude," that advantage does underscore the question that de Sousa raises about unfairness.

In this section we saw that using divine reward or punishment as motivation for moral behavior seems to reduce morality to prudence, as does the claim that the best way to assure others that you are moral is to actually be moral, though we saw a way that prudential motivation may elicit moral motivation. Both theists and secularists refer to gratitude as a main motivating factor for stewardship and morality, though “appreciation” may be a better term for secularists, since gratitude arguably requires someone to whom one is grateful.

#### 4. Concluding Summary

In this article<sup>4</sup> we have compared religious and secular morality by way of asking whether morality and ethics depends in some important way—other than historically—on religion and theology. Regarding several ways of claiming that ethics depends on theology for its foundation, we examined a plausible version of the divine command theory, one that grounded ethics on the will of a loving God. We also examined plausible ways of claiming that human rights are grounded in the theological claim that God created us in God’s image or in the theological claim that God bestows worth on humans by relating to them in love. Noting that the plausibility of such groundings depended on theological convictions not shared by secularists, we also examined secular alternatives, such as the claim that morality does not need a foundation, the claim that all we need is an agreed on set of human rights that has a plurality of foundations, the claim that we empirically discover a minimum morality that is necessary for a society’s very existence, and the claim that rational consistency requires us to grant to all other persons the moral considerations that we assert for ourselves. The theological foundations presuppose distinctive religious claims and the secular proposals involve their own debatable claims.

Regarding the view that religion provides a unique or, at least, a distinctive content to morality, we reviewed the charge that some modern moral ideas are so integrated with theology that much of modern ethics, having dropped the theological context, is confused and chaotic. We also examined the claim that agape, or benevolent love, is such a contribution, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and we compared it with the effective altruism that some secularists promote. We noticed that the morality of benevolent love is embedded in distinctive worldviews, and that what is likely to be distinctive of a religious contribution to the content of morality involves the “thick” religious context of how a concept is interpreted and applied.

Regarding the view that religion provides the necessary or, at least, the best motivation for morality, we noticed how the older “carrot and stick” appeal to divine reward or punishment compares unfavorably with the Kantian view that moral obligation is motivated by respect for the moral law itself rather than prudential calculation. We then considered the religious view that gratitude to God is the proper motivation for moral obligation, and we considered whether secularists can be motivated by gratitude *for* gifts (often the result of blind chance) without being grateful *to* a Creator, noting that secularists differ on this but that theists probably have a better claim to “gratitude,” while secular “appreciation” may still be a moral motivation.

The upshot is that there are plausible views on both sides of the question about whether morality depends on religion or ethics on theology, and that surveying these views provides a useful comparison of religious and secular moralities.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The summary in this paragraph and the next is, I believe, the sort of standard account one finds in introductions to ethics or philosophy of religion; see, for example, (Taliaferro 2009, pp. 172–76).
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, (Pincoffs 1986; Hursthouse 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, (Scanlon 1998; Darwall 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Comments and suggestions from the Special Issue editors and from three anonymous reviewers on an earlier draft of this article were helpful and appreciated.

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