What rules apply to everyone?

Our political discourse features strong convictions about moral obligations—and widespread uncertainty about where they come from.

by Neal F. Fisher in the February 28, 2018 issue

Bradford County courthouse, Starke, Florida. Some rights reserved by Jud McCranie.

Anyone observing contemporary political discussions would conclude that people of this nation believe firmly in moral absolutes. Town meetings and campus rallies resound with affirmations of what is right and morally binding on all.

For example, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia was recently shouted down when she attempted to speak on First Amendment rights for

students. Students walked to the front of the auditorium at the College of William and Mary shouting, “ACLU! You’d protect Hitler too!” Then the demonstrators chanted “Shame! Shame! Shame!” and the speaker was unable to continue. The demonstrators shut down the discussion because the ACLU had earlier defended the rights of white supremacists who attempted to rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Those who on moral grounds had defended the freedom of others to express odious opinions were denied the right to speak by people who stood on different moral grounds. Two sets of moral imperatives collided.

On talk radio and in classrooms, the morality of abortion, gender-neutral rest rooms, environmental pollution, minimum pay, sexism, racism, taking a knee at football games during the singing of the national anthem, colonialism, and a host of other issues are hotly debated. Public discourse has become what columnist David Brooks referred to as “a free-form demolition derby of moral confrontation.”

What is especially striking about this display of strong convictions about moral obligations is the uncertainty in the minds of many about the origin and standing of those convictions. Even as many people appeal to universal moral commands, a sizable group of people deny that moral obligation is anything more than a personal choice or a social convention. Moral laws, once considered to represent God’s will, are in the minds of many strictly personal choices.

Perhaps the spiritual progenitor of our age of practical atheism is the figure dismissed as a fool in Psalms 14 and 53. His failing is not a public denial of God. Rather it is in the inner ruminations of his heart that he concludes that God is not relevant to the moral choices he made. What he is saying to himself, one commentator noted, is not a theoretical denial of God but rather the assertion that “God is not here.” Thus there is no need to heed God’s law in dealing with his neighbor. Perhaps the practical atheist of the Psalms could be numbered among that numerous company of modern people whose creed, Alasdair MacIntyre drolly reports, is “there is no God and . . . it is wise from time to time to pray to him.”

Unlike Dostoevsky, who wrote, “Without God and the future life . . . everything is permitted,” the practical atheists of our day think that it is we and our society alone who designate what is morally required. Some write off feelings of moral obligation as merely the residue from our evolution as human beings. Best-selling author Richard Dawkins, for example, speculates that the impulse or obligation for altruism emerges from (1) the need to care for our kinship group; (2) the prospect of

reciprocity and payback from the kinship group when we are in need; or (3) the benefit of cultivating a reputation and standing for being helpful to others by representing oneself as an individual with conspicuous generosity. If, according to Dawkins, some men and women show a sense of moral obligation that goes beyond these categories, it is a habitual or lingering quality that—welcome though it may be—stems solely from the evolutionary needs of kinship groups.

Others argue that rules of morality represent simply an exercise of power. What are taken as moral laws are adopted because societies find them useful, and they are discarded when they are no longer deemed useful. If people find murder and rape to be wrong, it is simply a sign that these activities do not serve their interests.

What is striking about our current situation is that we experience a resurgence of relativism just as we debate with full-out conviction the moral absolutes that we claim to be binding for all. We are witnessing a split between our expressed opinions and our moral underpinnings.

Tim Keller has referred to this apparent split as the “schizophrenia of modern morals.” He cites as an example the statement of Mari Ruti, a professor at the University of Toronto, who wrote:

> Although I believe that values are socially constructed rather than God given . . . I do not believe that gender inequality is any more defensible than racial inequality, despite repeated efforts to pass it off as a culture-specific “custom” rather than an instance of injustice.

In other words, moral values are constructions of a social group, yet claims based on those values and judgments constitute an obligation for all.

What morality, we might ask, does one culture or social group create that another with equal authority could not revoke? On what basis should my personal perceptions make a universal claim? The issue here is not to challenge universal moral claims. The point, rather, is that many of those who make universal claims disavow any reasonable basis for explaining how that claim can be made.

A parallel observation is what Wilfred McClay has termed “the strange persistence of guilt.” In the context of a society in which certain religious and philosophical underpinnings of right and wrong have eroded, we would think that notions of guilt

would recede and that we could all settle into a nonjudgmental form of relativism. Circles that lack confidence in religious categories of grace, forgiveness, and redemption have no obvious way of resolving moral conflicts. They often must then resort to judging some groups to be guilty and insisting on their own innocence or victimhood. Yet we must ask again what the categories of guilt or innocence mean if they represent nothing more than personal or social preferences.

Some might respond that morality is basically a matter of responsibility. But the relativist theory gives us no basis for claiming that this is so. Responsibility is a relational term. It implies a relationship with an agent with authority to hold us accountable. In a self-determining and self-authorizing world, it is precisely this agency that has been denied or ignored. In short, in an era of practical atheism we are left without any basis for the feeling of moral obligation, and yet our public discussion proceeds on the assumption that certain moral principles are binding for all.

The Aristotelian tradition in ethics holds that what is good and morally binding on us is based on the telos or purpose for which we were created. MacIntyre puts it in these terms: “To say what someone ought to do is at one and the same time to say what course of action will in these circumstances as a matter of fact lead toward a man’s [or a woman’s] true end and to say what the law, ordained by God and comprehended by reason enjoins. Moral sentences are thus used within this framework to make claims which are true or false.” When we say, for example, that a watch is a good watch we mean that it is effective in telling time. That is the purpose for which it is created.

The collapse of a basis for moral claims has not stopped people from making them.

As storytelling creatures, we sum up our self-understanding and purpose in narratives. We become Christians when we find our life’s narrative in the story of God’s redemption in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our participation in that story tells us who we are and what we are to do. Finding the story of our lives in the Christian story points us toward the person we are intended to be and toward the choices that direct us to that end. MacIntyre reminds us that we answer the question of what we must do by addressing the prior question, “Of what story do I find myself a part?” Every action, he insists, is an “episode in a possible history.”

It is illuminating to read the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) in light of the question of moral obligation. Jesus commended the young lawyer when he responded to Jesus' question by quoting, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." When the lawyer asked for clarification on who it was that was his neighbor, Jesus responded not with a rule but with a story. Jesus cast the story in cross-cultural context by making a Samaritan, a hated group among the Jews, the hero of the story. The enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans, of course, ran deep. Jews cursed the Samaritans in the synagogues and prayed that they would have no part in eternal life. Samaritans defiled the temple in Jerusalem by scattering human bones in the temple area, making it impossible for the faithful to celebrate the Passover.

When Jesus asked the lawyer which of the three travelers on the road to Jericho was a neighbor to the one in need, the lawyer, unwilling to let the word *Samaritan* cross his lips, grudgingly responded that it was the one who showed mercy. Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." An individual who was created to love God and neighbor was required to show mercy to anyone in need. One's moral obligation had its foundations in the purpose intrinsic to his being, loving God and neighbor.

The mounting volume of clashing moral absolutes combined with the insistence of many that morals are strictly personal or socially defined offers a chance to reexamine the uncritically embraced mood of practical atheism itself. Churches and people of faith have little to contribute to the struggle for justice if we are merely one more interest group joining the shouts and sometimes conflicting moral claims of the day. Undertaking moral commitments as obedience to the will of God provides three principal advantages in an era of practical atheism.

First, it confronts the easy assumption that moral concerns and commitments are founded merely on personal choices or societal demands. The conviction that we are creatures of a loving God carries with it the belief that we are created for certain ends. What is good and essential for us, therefore, is what contributes to fulfilling that purpose. Jesus confirmed in his response to the lawyer's citation of scripture that we are created to love God and the neighbor. What is to be judged good and the pathway to life, therefore, rests on a purpose that we may recognize and embrace but do not ourselves create.

Furthermore, the very intensity and universality claimed for moral goals yields support for the notion that these moral ideals have their foundation in God's creation. If we are the authors of our own morality, then universal claims become incomprehensible. But if, in fact, we are created for certain purposes, then the universality claimed for moral obligation is quite understandable.

In our ordinary reasoning we consider a theory more likely to be true if it helps to explain what is otherwise inexplicable. This was termed "abductive reasoning" by Charles Peirce (1839–1914) and, more recently, by Alister McGrath. If belief in and trust in God help us to understand the feeling of absolute moral obligation that is so evident in our current discourse, then this provides support for the conviction that the content of that belief is reliable and true. It provides further support for confidence that moral obligations are grounded in the purpose for which we are created. These beliefs are embedded in traditions and narratives that convey God's action and intention, and the narratives in turn provide clues for knowing who we are and what we are required to do.

We answer the question "What must I do?" by first answering, "What story am I part of?"

Another contribution people of faith make to the moral argument is the deep-down assurance that God's purposes will prevail. Nothing builds perseverance more than the conviction that in some real sense the victory has already been won. Jürgen Moltmann reminds us in his Experiences of God that we should "stop looking at Christ's resurrection in the perspective of history and look at history in the perspective of the resurrection." In that perspective, he said, "the compulsion of evil has been broken."

When Taylor Branch wrote his three-volume history of the civil rights movement he outlined it within the framework of God's liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt: *Parting the Waters, Pillar of Fire,* and *At Canaan's Edge*. Drawing on the power of that narrative, Martin Luther King in his last speech assured those on the march for justice that as a people they would enter the Promised Land. "We Shall Overcome" was not only the soaring anthem of thousands of marchers for justice. It was reflected as well in the voice of an elderly African American woman handing out free peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to participants in the 1965 March to Montgomery. With each sandwich given, Tex Sample reports, she added quietly, "We're gonna overcome." The conviction that great moral causes are founded on the

purposes for which we are created gives staying power to movements that might otherwise end in despondency and despair.

Finally, the founding of moral imperatives in the purposes for which God created us helps define the goal and the methods employed to reach it. Biblical faith provides ample motive for involving ourselves in movements for justice and equity. But we join others in the struggle for justice not as just another voice in the clamor of competing—and sometimes colliding—voices, but as a body with definitive goals and methods for reaching those goals that arise out of biblical faith. Moltmann in the opening pages of *The Crucified God* says that the church has a distinctive role to play. “Solidarity with others in meaningful actions,” he says, “loses its creative character if one no longer wishes to be different from others.” Only those who have the courage to be different, Moltmann writes, can exist for others—they will otherwise exist only for those like themselves.

Once again, the civil rights movement in this country provides an illustration. Against considerable resistance, the leaders of the civil rights movement held that the goal of the movement was not merely freedom from oppression but redemption of the oppressor. They sought not to exact vengeance but to move toward the beloved community. King said that love was the most powerful force in the world. The movement, therefore, was conducted with the discipline of nonviolence. Nonviolence, not merely a tactic, was rather an expression of the biblical teaching that there is saving and reconciling power in suffering willingly undergone. Both the goal and the methods for reaching it were grounded in biblical faith.

We may expect to continue to witness expressions of moral absolutes even in a time of practical atheism. In faith we have a basis for understanding among many competing claims how certain moral challenges are applicable to all. In faith we will also sense an urgent summons to join with others in struggling for a society and a world that more nearly reflect the purposes for which they are endowed by God.

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