

# Ethics

Ethics is the science of propriety. It involves distinguishing right from wrong, and the invention and evaluation of normative theories of conduct. Normative propositions involve the deontic modalities of the forbidden, the permitted, and the obligatory, which are related to the Aristotelian alethic modalities of the impossible, the possible and the necessary.

According to Mario Bunge, all scientific laws acquire statistical features when framed in observational terms, such that absolutes, which exist only as abstractions, are not applicable without relativization. Only logical and mathematical problems can be resolved without remainder or residue, for only in logic and mathematics may one be delivered of incertitude. Beyond the analytic realm, the false belief that certainty is available is the luxury of the unthinking, and the loss of uncertainty is for Nietzsche also a loss of humanity. "Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied," says Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* (II.ii.). Physics has survived the abandonment of absolute time and space. Ethics likewise survives in the absence of misapplied absolutes.

To the extent that ethical principles are absolute, they are not applicable to concrete situations in the absence of relativistic *ceteris paribus* riders, though absolutists do not care whether other things are equal. Kant, by way of his deontological categorical imperative, asserts that it is one's duty to strive to commit no violation of rules even for the greater good. (Kant also says, contrary to Rush Limbaugh, that the only thing good without qualification is good will.) Even if it was laudable to have hidden Jews during the Holocaust and lied about it, Kant would rather tell the truth than save Ann Frank. By contrast, the Catholic "double effect" doctrine holds that an act's good effects can compensate for its bad ones, though the reverse should also be considered. Due process is a duty of the judiciary, not to the defendant nor to society but to logic. The denial of due process can be rationalized as a wrong done to prevent a greater wrong, but cannot be made a right in itself, and must necessarily be viewed as wrong by absolutists.

George W. Bush considers it relevant to ask whether Microsoft is creating jobs as it violates the law. If such benefits can significantly mitigate the violation of law, then Bill Gates must have earned himself a license to kill by now. Also to be considered are the billions of dollars lost due to the insecurity and instability of Microsoft products. Someone once said that he had no beef with Microsoft because he liked their products and did not feel ripped off. Most people came through Nichole Brown Simpson's murder without a scratch, and yet it is still considered a crime.

In the *Mallard Fillmore* cartoon of 8/6/06, a straw man presents a false dichotomy when he says, "I don't see things in black and white[.] I'm very sophisticated! I see things in 'shades of grey'!" as if such shades neither existed nor included black and white among them. When Mallard warns him, "Watch out for that bad pothole, buddy!" the man replies, "See what I mean? 'Bad' and 'good' are words that typify the kind of absolutist world-view that I'm much too sophisticated . . .," at which point he falls into the pothole. The implication is that gradation does not exist beyond the chromatic dimension, so that there cannot be degrees of goodness and badness. This would make triage impossible. If allowed to work in hospital emergency rooms, such absolutists would treat a hangnail with the same priority as a heart attack. One should, therefore, also "watch out for that bad" doctor (and perhaps cartoonist), for it is only in the

category of logic that absolutism makes sense, which is less a matter of sophistication than of simple intelligence.

The following is taken from elsewhere in these essays:

Absolutes might do for a start, but only until something better comes along. Had he not found superior alternatives to physical absolutes, most people would never have heard of Albert Einstein. As Daniel Dennett says in *Elbow Room*, ethical absolutes can only be imagined, not implemented. Deontology does not provide a neutral algorithm for the resolution of conflicting duties in concrete situations. Unless one is satisfied with coin flipping, duties must be ranked using some form of utilitarian triage.

Absolute ethical standards may exist in principle, but are misapplied to real, concrete situations, which necessitate triage to recognize lesser and greater wrongs. For example, although keeping a promise is right in the abstract, practically, it is only right by virtue of the nature of the promise in question. Breaking a promise may be abstractly wrong, but if the promise is to commit murder, then the wrong of breaking the promise is a lesser wrong than that of keeping it. Such a promise would be what Hamlet calls “a custom / More honour’d in the breach than the observance.” Keeping it would constitute excessive, categorical obedience irrespective of objectives. Absolutists might argue that both promise breaking and murder are absolutely wrong. But in this *situation, relative* to each other, the absolute wrong of breaking a promise is a lesser absolute wrong than the absolute wrong of murder. The greater absolute wrong is overridden by the lesser absolute wrong. Therefore, the difference made by the application of absolutes is not clear. Should one abstain from running across the street to pull a child out of a burning car because jaywalking is absolutely wrong? No, but performing such a rescue does not make jaywalking right to the extent that it relieves one from being fined, there being no free lunch. Instead, it justifies the incursion of the fine by making the result *worth* the fine. Whether absolute or not, jaywalking is a lesser wrong than abstaining from such a rescue, and failure to recognize circumstance-contingency results in the *dicto simpliciter* fallacy.

A vague, general standard must accommodate exceptions and allow for extenuation. If one person can swim and another cannot, then let the former jump into the water to save a drowning child while the latter runs for help, with both people thus doing their best. On his television program 8/13/08, Sean Hannity used John McCain’s experience as a POW to provide what he called “context” for McCain’s treatment of his first wife. This constitutes either extenuation in violation of the conservative principle of absolute ethics, or a complete waste of breath.

Intelligence allows behavior to be modified in the face of novelty. Practical ethical issues involve differential wrong and multiple constraints. Ethical principles are hypotheses with which to experiment, in the Popperian manner of conjecture and refutation. They express *prima facie* duties, but not duties proper, which must be weighed to determine the most morally insistent. It otherwise makes no sense for the FBI to make a list of its *most* wanted, even if many mistake a continuum for a Manichean dichotomy.

People speak of unconditional love, but only after the critical conditions are satisfied. For instance, people love their children unconditionally because those children have satisfied the condition of being their children. Similarly, absolute right and wrong may be specified once certain conditions are satisfied. Even the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” is rarely adhered to literally, being instead interpreted as a prohibition against *gratuitous* killing humans.

Absolutists are often heard to oppose “situational ethics,” yet one hears no opposition to situational mathematics. Consider the equation  $x+y=z$ . Is it true or false? The answer depends on the values of the variables. But in the field of ethics, absolutists say, “If you think it *depends*, then you are evil.” At a fork in the road, which direction is the correct way to travel? It depends on the intended destination, for a road is the right one only relative to a predetermined goal. The absolutist alternative, in which such “situational navigation” is considered evil, is unintelligible and would take the form of the old joke: “If you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

Though relativism is the enemy of absolutist, a distinction is to be recognized between relativism of standards and of actions. Action relativism is not inconsistent with standard absolutism. An absolute standard is subject to situational propriety. Situational ethics is the only practical kind for dealing with situational reality. Televangelist Pat Robertson’s call for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in August of 2005 would seem a rather “situational” ignoring of “Thou shalt not kill.” Defenders of the Inquisition condemned Aztec human sacrifice, an us-vs-them accent fallacy in the form of the pot calling kettle black. And conservative support for warrantless wiretapping demonstrates that relativism and situational ethics are not just for liberals any more. Additionally, the same conservatives who reject situational ethics also tend to support regional legality as embodied in the concept of states’ rights.

Conservatives routinely employ the colloquial false equation of relativism with radical normative egalitarianism, in which all rules of behavior are regarded as equal and no judgement is ever passed. Such an absolutely uncritical stance becomes self-contradictory and self-destructs when used to condemn the intolerant. Also, recalling Dennis Prager’s failure to comprehend the meaning of the word *compare*, cited in a previous essay, conservatives often make the false accusation of people asserting “moral equivalency” when *any* moral comparison is made.

Thomas Aquinas is the philosopher most closely associated with the concept of natural law, a misnomer given that it is posited as resulting from divine providence. He says that right is grounded in good and that circumstances are ethically relevant. (He also says that there are circumstances in which it would be inappropriate to profess one's belief in God.) Mark Murphy writes of Aquinas, “He allows for the Aristotelian insight that the particulars of the situation always outstrip one’s rules, so that one will always need the moral and intellectual virtues in order to act well.” In other words, the wisdom born of ethical competence is necessary in practice because, as Stephen Buckle observes, “The idea of natural law provides no shortcuts for moral reasoning.” The Catholic church regards birth control as a violation of natural law, but so then are literacy and medicine.

The naturalistic fallacy (a term coined by G.E. Moore) involves extrapolating from *is* to *ought*. This stands in opposition to the fact/value distinction that constitutes Hume’s Law (though Hume merely demands an argument for making connection). The only alternative to deriving *ought* from facts is to derive it from that which is not factual but merely desired. There are facts that are ethically relevant, the question being whether they are natural. Even though placing ethics beyond the realm of natural facts is to commit the sin of Plato, ethical objectivism holds that ethical objects do not exist in nature, but that values are supernatural facts, which is at least irrelevant, if not oxymoronic. The anti-naturalistic fallacy is the belief that values are non-natural facts, and that something good cannot be natural. Moral skepticism (also called subjectivism) rejects the idea of external, objective moral facts. Moral realism considers moral facts to be real. Values may, however, be subjective. As such, they are psychological facts.

A radical Hobbesian view is sometimes displayed by those for whom ethics is beyond both their practical capacity and their imagination. In this view, no good can come from man, any act of kindness could only have come from an angel, and every winning of a coin toss must be a miracle.

Ethics is taught in academic philosophy departments, while morality can be taught even in canine obedience schools, as it entails far less comprehension. (Conservatives brag about human behavior of which computers are not yet capable, but are ironically satisfied with merely moral behavior of which dogs are capable.) Morality is achieved by compliance with rules and conformity to standards, whereas ethics is the appreciation, understanding and synthesis of rules and standards. Morality and ethics are analogous, respectively, to talent and genius. Talent is the ability to excel within the rules, while genius is the ability to expand and improve and transcend the rules to achieve something better than what the rules allow. Ethics is the invention and evaluation of rules, while morality is the enforcement of and obedience to rules. Ethicists consider and study rules, while moralists simply complain about noncompliance. Morality is like reliance on a calculator instead of knowing math. The faculty needed for the critical evaluation of rules is unnecessary for the achievement of morality, and may thus go undeveloped. The abdication of ethics in favor of morality is dereliction of duty to oneself and to civilization, for as Aristotle asserted, a stupid man cannot have virtue. Stones implement morality by not violating any laws, but they do not deliberately act to do good (*virtus in actione consistit*). Trees behave morally, but they do not deserve credit for virtue (*tanto buon che val niente*).

Harvard University professor of medicine Jerome Groopman claims, "Science has no moral valence." It is the justice system that enforces the law, but ethics is the science of right and wrong, and is thus the branch of science with an ethical valence.

Joseph Campbell liked to observe that eternity is not a long time. It has nothing to do with time. It is the lack of the dimension of time. It is not everlasting time, but timelessness. Similarly, it could be said that morality itself is, in a sense, unethical, in that it does not involve the dimension of right and wrong. It is not about being right, but being obedient, whether right or not.

Lynne Truss feels herself living in "an age of lazy moral relativism." Relativists cannot afford to be lazy, for they must work to determine facts and calculate what is right. The lazy and incompetent abdicate ethical responsibility and outsource ethics so that they need be troubled only by morality. Crispin Sartwell's piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, 5/18/05, is entitled "Who Needs Ethics When You've Got Guidelines?" Indeed, ethics requires intellectual engagement, while morality is formulaic and schematic.

Moralists, as if on a drunken high because of having found a formula, praise each other for having a "moral center." It is better to have an ethical one, just as it is better to understand the proper way to calculate the answer to a math problem than to learn it only by rote. Bonehead math consists only of counting, and excludes algebra, trigonometry and calculus. Similarly, bonehead principles of proper conduct consist only of morality. There is more to literature than spelling, more to math than counting, and more to ethics than the mindless application of formulae. The merely obedient have no need to sustain any concept of ethics, which requires insight, as blind obedience provides relief from the burden of thought.

Prior to obeying rules is the creation of rules deserving of obedience. President George W. Bush was said to have "the courage of his convictions. That's the mark of a true leader." The same is true of Hitler. People are told, "Stay true to your principles." Possession is irrelevant.

Principles earn loyalty by being good, not by being yours. One should stay true to the best principles. Also, as with promise keeping, leadership in and of itself is not an absolute virtue, the destination very much mattering. Leadership would be unnecessary if people could behave properly when unsupervised. Many, however, can engage only in moral obedience because they are incapable of ethical cooperation.

No one is above the law, but law is redundant for those to whom right is intuitively obvious. They are not above the law such that they are licensed to do wrong. They instead recognize right and do it for the right reasons independent of the law, making the law unnecessary *for them*. Therefore, in an anarchic, lawless society, any resulting chaos is due to the ethically disabled. Actually, one may be above the law in the sense that the law may be beneath what is right, but one cannot be above right.

Murder persists in spite of the death penalty. Similarly, the exclusionary rule cannot deter misbehavior-prone police who are not susceptible to training and cannot help but fail. This is acknowledged when hope is expressed that suspected terrorists will not be tried in civilian courts because of the risk of them being acquitted “on a technicality.” If “technicalities” are undesirable, then agents prone to their commission should not be involved in the process. (Doc, it hurts when I do this.)

An emotive moral statement expresses an attitude or commitment, not an ethical truth. Emotivism may be useless as a prescription, but is an excellent description of actual behavior. For example, on his radio program 9/25/07, Dennis Prager emotively mischaracterized something as “morally disgusting,” disgust being an aesthetic phenomenon.

At [charactercounts.org](http://charactercounts.org), Michael Josephson lists potentially conflicting rules. Under the heading of “Trustworthiness,” he says, “Have the courage to do the right thing. . . . Be loyal – stand by your family, friends and country.” Right should rank above patriotism, nepotism and cronyism, as one’s family, friends and country could be wrong. Josephson also tells people to “do what you say you’ll do.” If the thing that “you say you’ll do” is wrong, then doing it may not necessarily be virtuous.

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Religion contributes nothing to ethics except an *argumentum ad baculum/crumenam*, prescribing how to behave, but providing no motivation beyond punishment and reward, as if recognizing that most people are insufficiently motivated by right and wrong in themselves. Reacting merely to reward and punishment is prudence, not ethics. If the resulting conduct is right, it is so only by accident. If the rightness of the conduct is recognizable, then God becomes ethically irrelevant and useful only as a threatening authority figure for the developmentally handicapped to obey, relieving them from the burden of ethics.

Morality for the sake of prudence is for the ethically impaired. These are the people who are either too lazy or too stupid to engage in ethics and who must instead settle for morality. They must be motivated by the fact that pleasure feels good and punishment feels bad. In other words, theirs is a morality based on hedonism. By contrast, the morality of the ethically competent is based on right, not prudence, such that right is done independent of irrelevant considerations, such as aesthetics. Similarly, simply declaring one’s enemies to be “evil” rather than trying to understand them relieves one of the burden of thinking, a form of relief that is especially welcome to the intellectually impaired. This behavior is often coupled with the

slothful induction of the Philosophers' Syndrome, by which it is asserted that there is nothing to be understood in the psyche of one's enemies.

God is needed in ethics only by minds incapable of dealing with abstractions, such as right and wrong, which must be replaced by reward and punishment, pleasure and pain, heaven and hell (*argumentum ad crumenam/baculum*). It then ceases to be ethics and degenerates into morality. Some people define certain actions as wrong because they incur punishment, saying that it is on this basis that sin is to be avoided, whereas it should be the case that punishment is applied to actions *because* they are wrong. Wrong is to be avoided because it is wrong, whether or not it is imprudent. Prudence does not entail ethical propriety and does not guarantee right, and is thus an illegitimate excuse for behavior. Merely trying to please God also smacks of political correctness, which is disliked by conservatives.

Sean Hannity accuses liberals of manufacturing dependency. He should know of what he speaks, he being a Catholic and there being no better example of manufacturing dependency than the notion of original sin. On his radio program 3/11/08, Hugh Hewitt spoke of "defining deviancy down." Self-forgiveness for intellectual failure constitutes defining dereliction down. Original sin is Christianity's way of defining ethics down for the purpose of rationalization in the face of those who misbehave less. Some Christians cannot abide the idea of well-behaved non-Christians avoiding hell. In any event, vengeance is not their prerogative (Romans 12:19).

Religious morality is exemplified, metaphorically, by being unable to calculate the sum of 2 and 2, asking God what sum would please Him, and then believing that  $2+2=4$  only so as not to anger Him, though there are better reasons to believe that  $2+2=4$ . Ethics is exemplified by learning how to calculate the sum of 2 and 2 and then not believing but *recognizing* that  $2+2=4$  whether God likes it or not. God's approval is ethically irrelevant. If God disapproves of right, then that is just tough. Pedagogically, one can be told that  $2+2=4$ , but one could also be told that  $2+2=5$ . It is ultimately the responsibility of the individual to recognize which is correct. As noted elsewhere in these essays, the popular preoccupation with the psychological and sociological aspects of religion is analogous to arguing whether the belief that  $2+2=5$  brings out the best or worst in people, while ignoring the the more fundamental fact that  $2+2=4$ .

Even though, in theodicean terms, evil may be neutralized by a compensatory afterlife (all being well that ends well), the Problem of Evil is reflected in the question: Why is it as if there were no God? The most obvious answer never occurs to most people. Evil is only a problem with respect to a postulated omnibenevolent God, such that atheists cannot have any such problem. ("Doc, it hurts when I do this.") Similarly, if character is what we do when no one is looking, then the attribute cannot apply to theists who believe in an omniscient God, and virtue is reserved for those who believe that there really can be such a thing as no one looking. In other words, atheism alone provides the opportunity for character.

Those incapable of distinguishing right from wrong are left to guess and to evaluate their behavior hedonistically in the aesthetic dimension. It is they who can do better than: "If it feels good, do it." They can do no more than *hope* to be right by accident. Religious moralists must resort to trusting that God is right, being unable to confirm His judgments. If they were capable of determining this for themselves, then there would be no need to consult God. Assuming the end justifies the means, they may deserve gratitude for having found *some* way to control their savagery, but not credit for knowing what they are doing.

Whereas a word to the wise is sufficient, one to the unwise is not, such that idiots require coercive control (*Homo homini lupus*). Since some people can be led while many need to be bossed, there is value to be recognized in the Machiavellian expedient (*splendide mendax*) of

God as a muzzle. *Dharma* is required to control people thus living on the animal level of the lower three *cakras*. That is to say, veterinary coercion by peremptory imperative is required to control those whose only concern about their misbehavior is being caught. Some of the religiously moral but ethically challenged take pride in their disability, even though without their religion they would be undeterred from raping and murdering *according to them*. They disparage their betters as “elites,” with the pot calling the sugar black.

Virtue is sometimes said to require faith. A 2002 Pew survey revealed that 47% of Americans hold religious belief as a prerequisite for being a good person. Such is the case only for those incapable of achieving goodness by better means. Without this qualification, this view is revealed to result from slothful induction by respondents who by implication also acknowledge their own savagery that is in need of restraint. (It also, as noted above, constitutes a paradox in that the very faith that allows virtues also precludes it from counting as “character.”) In a piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, 8/1/05, Niall Ferguson cites Christianity as a source of morality and notes that “it is not clear where else such a thing is available in modern Europe.” This may indeed be true for idiots, European or otherwise, who are insufficiently intelligent to participate in ethics. Mitt Romney once opined that “freedom requires religion,” though no more so than does meat loaf. Civil tranquility may require government, but this is merely a reflection of the brutality of the masses, which is nothing about which to brag.

According to Ronald Kiener, the Judeo-Christian tradition holds its God to be one “who has given commands to people to have them behave in a certain ethical way.” Obedience of an imperative constitutes morality. If the behavior in question is also ethical, and people know it, then the imperative is unnecessary. If this ethicality is unknown, then it is also accidental for the people involved in it. That is, one can be right by accident (*argumentum ad logicam*)(*interdum vulgus rectum videt*). Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty*, “Someone who, dreaming, says, ‘I am dreaming,’ even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream, ‘it is raining,’ while it was in fact raining.” It is not in the rules but in the explanation of the propriety of the rules that ethics resides. Divine law does not become ethics until God shows His work.

Absolutists are said to measure behavior against objective reality. Some regard the Bible as an absolute standard, but only because it is written down with ink. It, too, may only be God’s opinion, which would be of consequence only with respect to prudence. The law springs from the fact (*ex facto jus oritur*), not from some book, even if the book happens to be right. Talk is cheap, and even God must show His work in order to earn credit. It is the duty of religion to expand to reflect contemporary awareness. It must change not with the times, but with the facts (*omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*). It must track the facts or fall behind, disconnect and fail. Even if facts are ahistorical and timeless, they are not all discovered simultaneously.

Conservatives dislike judges looking to foreign law for guidance. Apart from the fact that legislators are the ones who should be seeking inspiration for new laws, foreign laws are at least contemporary, whereas the Bible is not merely from another hemisphere but from millennia ago. The Bible may indeed contain timeless and universal truths, but these may be found elsewhere. Also, although the Ten Commandments are said to embody truths, they cannot because imperatives, like interrogatives, lack truth value.

If utility is to be found in God’s laws, then they are facts that are empirically discoverable without revelation. If God’s laws cannot be shown to be right, then neither can they be known to be right, but can only be obeyed in the *hope* of being right. Hope, faith and trust are only applicable in the absence of knowledge, and are unnecessary if objective truth is recognizable. If

someone says that God is required for ethics, ask them with which of God's laws do they disagree. If they disagree with none because they are all found to be good, then God is unnecessary because "His" laws are empirically discoverable. So, just discover them and get on with it.

According to Ken Ham, dismissal of the Biblical account of creation allows people "to disregard the Bible's moral teachings as well." The interdependence of the two is specious, and ethical truth is empirically discoverable without any desperate resort to that which is tautologically beyond all research, discovery and knowledge. Even if the Bible accords with the teachings of ethics, this is secondary and may even be accidental. This also holds for the teachings of other religions, from which the Bible may not differ. The claim is also occasionally made that if the Bible's history is accurate, then so is its morality. Even accurate histories from the Nazi and Soviet regimes would not justify their conduct, and the same could be said of the Inquisition. The accuracy of any history offered by the Nazis need not be consulted in order to evaluate their ethics, nor could their ethics be redeemed by it. Also, much Levitical law, such as the prohibition on eating pork, is conveniently disregarded even by most Christians.

The Golden Rule can be derived in the following manner: The personal experience of and subjective evaluation of pain yields the fact that it is tautologically objectionable. Then, Ockham's Razor and an argument from homology are applied to the Other Minds Problem (placing the burden of proof on solipsism) to yield the *presupposition* that pain occurs to others and is as bad for them. If it is bad, then it would be wrong to cause it unnecessarily or gratuitously, so do not do so. Consequently, compassion, altruism and a sense of right and wrong, even without entering into a discussion of mirror neurons, are not mysterious.

It is claimed on AnswersinGenesis.com that "atheists assert many affirmative statements without proof, eg. . . . non-living matter evolved into living cells by pure undirected chemistry, . . . moral sensibilities arose out of amoral matter, etc." Such propositions should not be stated as facts, but only as the best explanations of the facts. They simply state the null hypothesis, which functions perfectly well without proof because it requires none. "Undirected chemistry" may not be an oxymoron, but chemistry is the study of the dynamically directed submicroscopic effects of a variety of physical forces. All matter is moral in the sense that it constantly obeys any number of rules, including those of chemistry and physics. Once matter is able to experience pain and to reason, "moral sensibilities" (and the Golden Rule) arise rather trivially.

Secularists are sometimes accused of trying to extend quantum uncertainty into the macroscopic, Newtonian realm in defense of radical egalitarianism, or of trying to make physical relativity a logical basis for moral relativism. Scientists are (almost tautologically) the people smart enough not to make any such unwarranted extrapolation. By contrast, nonscientists did not invent quantum mechanics or relativity because they lack either the intelligence or the concern.

Those smart enough to engage in ethics recognize the autonomy of right and wrong. Right is its own reward and an end in itself. Right should be done for no other reason than because it is right. Dante held shame, unlike guilt, to be a noble emotion, and it suffices to deter the shameful, whereas a threat (*argumentum ad baculum*) may be needed to control the shameless, those unable to appreciate propriety intuitively and those who for whatever reason lack the intellectual capacity to engage in ethics, which is a major reason for shooting cowards (*pour encourager les autres*). In the absence of aversion to wrong, civilization simply does not occur.



As if to deny that some truths may be self-evident, the logically and ethically challenged frequently indulge in the extrapolation of both their ignorance and their savagery to their entire species via slothful induction. It is folly to insist on fixing even that which is not broken, such as mandating eyeglasses even for those with perfect vision because one is able neither to accept nor even imagine that a person could see without optical aid. Savagery exists and should be controlled. But however common it may be, it is not a constitutive human property, even if many savages cannot imagine the existence of nonsavage humans. Just as humanity does not consist exclusively of the pancreatically challenged, nor does it consist exclusively of the ethically challenged. Therefore, just as exogenous insulin should be reserved for the diabetic, let religious morality be saved for the criminally predisposed. Rush Limbaugh accuses liberalism of punishing excellence. Therefore, as he would have it, let not superiority be punished, and let not inferiority be rewarded with social promotion. It is stipulated that most people cannot compose music at the level of Mozart and Beethoven. But should they be forbidden? If Mozart and Beethoven can, then they should be allowed to, especially when the accomplishment is considered a good thing.

Someone once said, “We’re Christians and we know what’s right.” Actually, they have been *told* what is right and they accept it. Knowing what is right does not involve religion. Not knowing, and thus needing to rely on hearsay and urban legend, which are not veridical, allows only for morality and not ethics. (And even *with* such knowledge, Christianity in no way guarantees practical moral success is, as revealed by the positive correlation, discussed in a previous essay, between religiosity and such things as homicide, suicide, divorce, teen pregnancy, illegitimacy, abortion and STDs. Consider also the reports of bullying by Christians at the Air Force Academy in 2005.)

It is sometimes noted that the pioneers of abolitionism were Christians, as if the abolitionists’ pro-slavery, slave-holding opponents were Hindus. Even Jerry Falwell claimed to have found biblical justification for racial segregation. If America was founded on Christian principles, then there should never have been a need to abolish anything that ran counter to them, unless the principles themselves were faulty.

Elizabeth Dole once said that the Bible is the best book for teaching ethics. There is little question that it is good for morality. But when a concordance of the King James Bible is compared with the index of *The Blackwell Companion to Ethics*, it is by no means clear that the issues dealt with in the latter (agency, autonomy, consequentialism, compatibilism, contractarianism, deontology, determinism, hedonism, intuitionism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, etc.) are even addressed in the former.

Ideal observer theory is implemented as an *argumentum ad hominem* with the question: “What Would Jesus Do?” The proper question is, “What is right?” Whatever Jesus *would* do, Christians tellingly and disturbingly seldom ask what He *should* do or why. Religious moralists are concerned with “what God expects of us,” when the only proper concern is with what is right, which is what God *should* expects of us, whether or not He does. Biblical rules are said to reflect the will of God. This version of the Nuremberg Defense is a roadblock to explanation (*obscurum per obscurius*). In narratological literary terms, Jesus should, and therefore would, do right, and so should you. So, do it!

“Tell children they are nothing more than animals,” creationists like to say, “and they will behave like animals.” This suggests that telling them that they are *not* animals will prevent them from breathing, defecating and reproducing, which are typical animal behaviors. Again, children are taxonomically much more than animals, being also eukaryotes and chordates and vertebrates

and tetrapods and mammals and primates. Nevertheless, if the end justifies the means, then any lie that elicits proper behavior may have merit.

In Lawrence Kohlberg's *Essays on Moral Development, Volume 1: The Philosophy of Moral Development*, 1981, six stages of moral development, are described. Stage 1 involves obedience to avoid punishment. This is the *argumentum ad baculum*, and morality on the level canine obedience school. In stage 2, "What I say goes." In stage 3, what one's clique says goes. In stage 4, what one's society says goes. It is only at stage 5 that substantive moral content begins and countercultural courage emerges, such that society's rules are not adopted uncritically.

Popular morality is derived primarily from parents, internalized as superego, then projected onto God. When children absorb culture defenselessly and uncritically, their God tends to be no better an ethicist than their parents were.

Ethical ignorance is a virtue in the Abrahamic religions. Childhood innocence is celebrated, and its loss is characterized as corruption. Thus is ethical incompetence fostered by giving people a late start. Ethical ignorance is one of the ideal states characterizing the Garden of Eden, and it is the knowledge of good and evil that disqualifies Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:22-3). People like to employ the metaphor of the "moral compass," though often without recognizing the geographic distinction between magnetic north and true (rotational) north. Religion can indeed provide people with a moral compass, but it often delays the acquisition of an ethical one, and is incapable of providing a logical one. The conceptual paralysis of religion limits the quality of civilization and retards progress by means of a stained-glass ceiling. Ethical prowess should be maximized, and those who are capable of doing better than the mob should not be impeded from doing so.

According to Ann Coulter (in *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*), Darwinism lets scientists "off the hook morally. Do whatever you feel like doing – screw your secretary, kill Grandma, abort your defective child – Darwin says it will benefit humanity!" Acceptable or not, it is wrong in the absence of mitigating circumstances, and the attribution will be assumed to be incorrect unless Coulter can offer a specific citation. Also, on the level of "humanity," "benefit" can indeed result from certain such acts, but this does not necessarily override detriment to individuals. Also, Coulter often attempts a *tu quoque* excuse for conservatives being no worse than liberals, even when both are *wrong*. She also speaks of "timeless moral truths," which should be as self-evident as timeless arithmetic truths. So, why would people feel the need to consult the Bible about the former but not the latter?

Mike Huckabee, apparently lacking a conscience, has written, "My standard is Christ. I will have to answer to him alone." He has also written of God's moral authority, which is necessary only for the ethically challenged. Preoccupation with the Bible and recourse to it as the default answer for everything may stem from the fact that if certain people only have a hammer, every problem looks to them like a nail.

Michael Medved claims not to believe that the end justifies the means, yet defends the Boy Scouts, in spite of their discriminatory practices, by observing that they clean refuse from public parks, as if the Hitler Youth never could have. If ends do not justify means, then including the former in one's justifications is a waste of time. Conservatives, nevertheless, defend enhanced interrogation, about which more will be said in a subsequent essay, because "it works," an excuse available also to totalitarian dictatorships that are the enemies of America. Further rebuttal is delegated to Medved's fellow conservative Jonah Goldberg, who (as cited by John Hawkins on [rightwingnews.com](http://rightwingnews.com)) writes:

Let's get one thing straight from the outset: The U.N. sucks. And before you start talking about the starving babies it saves and the thorns it pulls from cuddly creatures' paws, please remember that all sorts of awful institutions do good things. Hamas funds hospitals, Hitler built highways, Stalin improved literacy, Baywatch helped people with tired blood by providing uplifting, and uplifted, torsos to look at. One can be in favor of many of the things the U.N. does without being in favor of the U.N., just as being in favor of regular garbage collection doesn't mean I have to be in favor of the government collecting garbage. If the government stopped picking up my trash, that wouldn't mean my home would be swallowed up in bags of filth. And, if the U.N. stopped feeding starving people that would hardly mean starving people would never be fed.

A statistical argument could be made that the Boy Scouts do *net* good, but such an argument is not supported by the individual observation of the collection of trash.

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In an essay posted on Townhall.com and dated 1/11/05, Dennis Prager, writes the following, cited here in a series of extracts:

For those who subscribe to Judeo-Christian values, right and wrong, good and evil, are derived from God, not from reason alone, nor from the human heart, the state or through majority rule.

Given that the famous bumper sticker concludes with “That settles it,” why would Prager allow for reason at all? It is gratifying that he at least recognizes the fallacy of the *argumentum ad populum*. He does, however (Townhall.com, 12/5/06), reject the notion that “the individual’s culture trumps the national culture.” The national culture may deserve deference, but the superior otherwise “trumps” the inferior, regardless of popularity.

Though most college-educated Westerners never hear the case for the need for God-based morality because of the secular outlook that pervades modern education and the media, the case is both clear and compelling: If there is no transcendent source of morality (morality is the word I use for the standard of good and evil), “good” and “evil” are subjective opinions, not objective realities.

The practical need to control the ethically incompetent rabble is so widespread and obvious that no case need be made. However, this need for coercive morality has no bearing on ethical truth.

What is it that makes an act wrong? Not imprudence, for even Prager would acknowledge and honor those who imprudently sacrificed their lives to preserve his liberty. Similarly, holding the belief that  $2+2=4$  is right even if it incurs the wrath of a god who demands the belief that  $2+2=5$ . Sanity entails recognition of good and bad, which cannot be known to be objective realities without ethics. Without the knowledge that one’s actions are right, one can only *hope* to be right.

Pain is an objective reality. Without God, does pain not hurt? Must scripture be consulted to determine if it does? Do atheists not feel pain? How is a cube any less cubical in the absence of God? If God were to say that  $2+2=5$ , would He be correct? Or does “ $2+2=5$ ” become an objective reality by virtue of God saying it? Given the objective properties of bad and wrong, which suffice as the basis of ethics, the concept of evil is not missed because it adds merely a speculative cause for bad and wrong, which exist independent of explanations thereof. Even without a theory of quantum gravity, things still fall. In practice, “most college-educated Westerners” murder at a lower rate than the uneducated, so Prager should relax and be grateful to them.

In other words, if there is no God who says, “Do not murder” (“Do not kill” is a mistranslation of the Hebrew which, like English, has two words for homicide), murder is not wrong.

Imperatives, like interrogatives, lack truth value. The statement “ $2+2=5$ ” is wrong whether God bothers to say it or not. With imperatives alone, an action can be stipulated and accepted as wrong, but nothing can be *known* to be wrong.

Victimization is wrong, not because of divine disapproval, but because of its effect on the victim. It is the effect that tautologically makes a victim a victim. If there is no God, then pain does not hurt? Why not? If there is no God and murder is consequently not wrong, then why not? How would murder not be objectively wrong? How does the absence of God improve it? How, in the absence of God, are the victims of murder any less dead? How is death not an objective reality? Whether or not there is a God, if His existence were knowable, then it would be a matter of science rather than religion. As belief in His existence requires faith, so does Prager’s morality, making him the pot calling the kettle black, at best. And to the extent that ethics has any validity at all, he is calling the sugar black.

Prager tellingly uses the word *if*. Without proof of God, the matter must remain perpetually, insolubly subjunctive, at least for Prager. Mistaking speculation for objectivity is an *obscurum per obscurius* fallacy and violates the Curie principle. Possibility does not prove actuality, and impossibility proves it even less. Failure to appreciate this leads to irresponsible, unsupported reification. God Himself is not part of objective reality, and without proof of Him, Prager is left merely to *hope* that murder is wrong, and perhaps that pain does not hurt and 2 is not less than 3. Prager then writes:

Many people may think it is wrong, but that is their opinion, not objective moral fact.

Let him speak for himself. What is not to know about the wrong of one’s own involuntary death? Exhibiting the Philosophers’ Syndrome, Prager cannot independently comprehend the wrong of murder and so denies that it is an objective reality discoverable empirically. This slothful induction ignores the ability of some of us to see for ourselves that 2 is less than 3 and that pain hurts. How would there be no arithmetic facts but only arithmetic opinions? Even with God, there are still only moral opinions unless objective reality is the basis of His judgments (*ex facto jus oritur*). Opinion or not, what matters in practice is that murder is illegal, such that arrests and convictions continue unabated with or without metaphysical speculation. And the prohibition on murder extends beyond the Abrahamic religions. The ethically competent would

find it shocking that Prager *or God* would allow for the possibility that gratuitous murder may not be wrong. Prager also writes:

There are no moral “facts” if there is no God; there are only moral opinions.

A moral fact exists wherever a rule exists and is obeyed, with or without God. There can be no moral facts only if there are no rules. If this is the case, then ethics should be engaged in and some should be made, even if some people are too lazy or incompetent to make them. It is hoped that Prager can recognize that there are *mathematical* facts without God. One would search the Bible in vane for tables of trigonometric identities, which would seem to leave Prager to assert that such things can be nothing but mere opinions, which is false. If God were to say, “ $2+2=4$ ,” the proper response would be, “That is tautological, even if people exist for whom it is not intuitively obvious. So, what do you want, a medal?” or in the vernacular, “Duh!”

Rules can come from any source and obeying them is morality. With or without prohibitions, there are *ethical* facts, such as pain. It is as if Prager is saying that without God, it is indeterminate as to whether pain hurts. Even with God, the facts supposedly derived from Him are of the same order as Hamlet being Danish. They are stipulations about literature. Hamlet is objectively Danish *in fiction*. Hamlet may teach that murder is wrong, but this wrongness exists independent of that teaching and remains a fact whether Shakespeare or God bother to teach it or not. God-derived moral facts are rules, which may or may not be right. Prager can only *hope* that they are, such being the nature of faith and of his lack of ethical insight. The things that reportedly come from God that constitute moral facts are either imperatives, which lack truth value, or threats, which, ethically, are no more than an *argumentum ad baculum*. Beyond this, to the extent that God does not show His work, no ethical facts come from Him.

Swinging one’s fist in the air does not become wrong until contact is made with another’s nose. Such contact constitutes wrong because of the resulting physical injury, pain and possibly embarrassment to the victim. This wrong is sufficiently explained “as is,” with God being able to add nothing but futile ornamentation. If God is smart enough to manage the rather unimpressive feat of recognizing the wrong of gratuitously punching people and to derive from it the corresponding prohibition, then bully for Him. If Prager is not smart enough to recognize it without being told, then shame on him. It is slothful induction to imagine that everyone is so savage as to need to be told such things (or so pancreatically incompetent as to require exogenous insulin). Such savagery certainly exists and should be controlled, perhaps by any means necessary, even by lies, if the end justifies the means. But not even the effectiveness of lies can undo their untruth.

Ignorance of wrong does not result in the absence of wrong. Prager, however, seems to be claiming that if God does not tell people that murder is wrong, then it may not be. How is it that murder could be right? Perhaps if God does not tell people that  $2+2=4$ , then  $2+2=5$ . God’s pedagogical laziness could change the facts. Trigonometric identities exist as algebraic facts in spite of their absence from the Bible. Even if people are too stupid to realize that  $2+2=4$ , the equation remains true nevertheless. So it is with right and wrong. Without God, some people may be too stupid to recognize wrong, but this makes it no less wrong.

How is it that God’s commandments are facts rather than opinions? God merely has the power to enforce his will by the *argumentum ad baculum* and could, if He wanted, damn people for not believing that  $2+2=5$ . The fact here would be that God *says* that  $2+2=5$ , while the mathematical statement itself is a literal falsehood. Without God telling him, Prager may not

know that  $2+2=4$  or that the sky is blue or that pain hurts, but this writer does. If there is a God, His existence is unknowable and is itself not a fact. It would otherwise be a matter of science rather than religion. Thus is God Himself subject to opinion. If the end justifies the means, then keep this secret from the savage and stupid in order not to foster their misbehavior.

Einstein recognized that the constancy of the speed of light was an empirical, while absolute space and time were not. Even if God would not play dice, the playing of them is an empirical fact. It is objective reality that  $2+2=4$ . Therefore, if this would not be true if there were no God, then there simply is no God. Objectively based ethics is no less primary than arithmetic. Objectivity is primary, being empirically factual, while God is hypothetical. God's own stance must be based on objective reality in order to be superior to that of liberal relativists. If it is not objectively based, then it is arbitrary, and therefore not particularly laudable. If God can recognize the cubicality of a cube, then bully for Him! What does He want, a medal? Nor should He be socially promoted if He does not show His work. Let Him demonstrate that He bases His principles on objective reality, as human ethicists do, or eat their dust. Talk is cheap, even that of God, and is elevated above opinion not by divinity but only if reflecting objective reality, which forms the basis of knowledge, which outranks opinion, be it human or divine. Rules that are not known to be right or wrong are arbitrary with respect to ethics.

Unlike this writer, Prager seems to inhabit a strange universe wherein the possibility exists that murder is not wrong, cubes are not cubical and 3 is less than 2. It is odd to think of Prager having the mere opinion that he is in pain and having to check with God to determine whether he actually is.

Years ago, I debated this issue at Oxford with Jonathan Glover, currently the professor of ethics at King's College, University of London, and one of the leading atheist moralists of our time. Because he is a man of rare intellectual honesty, he acknowledged that without God, morality is subjective. He is one of the few secularists who do.

There should be even fewer. Morality consists of obeying rules. Rules are, objectively, either obeyed or not. It is only by faith that man could operate "with God." Therefore, the objectivity of which Prager speaks is subject to uncertainty. Creationists demand recognition of the possibility that Darwin could be wrong. Anything dependent on faith is subject to the possibility of being wrong, with no way to show that it is right. Belief in God is objectively dependent on faith.

This is the reason for the moral relativism – "What I think is right is right for me, what you think is right is right for you" – that pervades modern society. The secularization of society is the primary reason vast numbers of people believe, for example, that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter"; why the best educated were not able say that free America was a more moral society than the totalitarian Soviet Union; why, in short, deep moral confusion afflicted the 20th century and continues in this century.

Eating broccoli is wrong for George H. W. Bush, or so he claims, in a way that it is not for this writer. For Prager, it must be either right or wrong. So, which is it? When Prager errs, his beliefs are not only not right for him, they are not right at all.

Is abortion morally wrong? To the secular world, the answer is “It's between a woman and her physician.” There is no clearer expression of moral relativism: Every woman determines whether abortion is moral. On the other hand, to the individual with Judeo-Christian values, it is not between anyone and anyone else. It is between society and God. Even among religious people who differ in their reading of God's will, it is still never merely “between a woman and her physician.”

Theory evaluation is never between society and God but is a matter of arithmetic. The germ theory of disease is better than the demon theory, whether God likes it or not. The truth of  $2+2=4$  is between the symbols and themselves, whether God likes it or not. It is not argued here that abortion is not wrong, merely that the arguments used against it are often amusingly unsound and invalid. Such arguments may be right, but they are seldom demonstrably so, some people being very poor at showing their work. The moral status of an act is a function of the effect on the effected party, which in the case of abortion is, primarily, neither a woman nor her physician nor God, but the abortee.

And to those who counter these arguments for God-based morality with the question, “Whose God?” the answer is the God who revealed His moral will in the Old Testament, which Jews and Christians – and no other people – regard as divine revelation.

The revelations of other gods are regarded as divine by other people. If other gods were to say that murder is right, then which position is correct? Either Prager is able to recognize independently that murder is wrong or he is not, and can only *hope* that this rule is correct. When one god says that  $2+2=4$  and another says that  $2+2=5$ , this writer is able to judge which is correct. Divine moral will merely reflects the rules that a god wants enforced, whether or not they represent right. Ultimately, the revelation of the God of the Old Testament is no more ontologically or epistemologically interesting than that of the ghost who reveals himself to Hamlet. Talk is cheap, as is writing. If choosing among gods could be more than opinion, then it would be a matter of science rather than religion.

The best-known verse in the Bible is “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). It is a reflection of the secular age in which we live that few people are aware that the verse concludes with the words, “I am God.” Though entirely secularized in common parlance, the greatest of the ethical principles comes from God. Otherwise it is just another man-made suggestion, no more compelling than “Cross at the green, not in between.”

Even if a principle “comes from God” in the sense of literary attribution (just as “Love is blind” comes from Shakespeare), it need not. As explained above, the Golden Rule is derivable from empirical facts, which are immune from opinion. Thus, from the point of view of the ethically competent, Prager offers God, who is not a fact, as a solution in search of a problem. Also, the love-your-neighbor principle is not unique to the Abrahamic realm. In fact, very few things are. Abrahamic exceptionalism may demonstrable with respect to the doctrinal inversion that demoted the deities representing universal forces of nature in favor of a local, tribal patron. Beyond this, however, there is little of significance that is so Abrahamicly unique as to be unavailable elsewhere.

Compulsion for the civilized comes from right and wrong, not by threats about man-made suggestions attributed to fictional characters. There is nothing insufficiently compelling about “Cross at the green, not in between” for the civilized. They obey this rule because it is right, leaving the uncivilized to fear punishment for disobedience. Prager seems concerned more with social engineering than ethics, with the ends justifying the means. The civilized appreciate the minimization of crime, but simultaneously recognize that even when the truth hurts, it does not stop being true, just as a lie that achieves social harmony remains a lie. It is stipulated that the rabble require coercion, but let not the social success thereof be mistaken for a demonstration of truth. Only logic ensures the correctness of one’s conclusions, it being possible but insufficient to be right accidentally. However “compelling” Prager may find God, the *argumentum ad baculum* remains fallacious whether he likes it or not, for logical principles are not the least bit arbitrary or subjective. Compulsion can make one moral, but it is ethically irrelevant. It also appears to be of little practical value given the higher rate of compliance among atheists, their moral superiority being reflected in their underrepresentation in the prison population. Even if theists regard rules as divine and absolute, they are worse at obeying them. Conservatives who justify profiling are faced with the fact that people in this society, not the Soviet Union, are far more likely to be victimized by a theist than an atheist. Theoterrorism (as by James Kopp, who was convicted of murdering abortion provider Dr. Barnett Slepian) indisputably happens. So even if, as Prager says, religious doctrine is more than mere suggestion, the ethically and morally challenged, including those who are devout Christians, nevertheless manage to escape its influence. (Recall that Rev. Lonnie W. Latham denounced homosexuality and was then arrested 1/3/06 for soliciting oral sex from a male undercover policeman.)

Compulsion is often rejected by conservatives. For example, the cartoon of 7/28/07 features “A stunning Mallard Fillmore confession!” with Mallard saying, “I bike or walk most places I go. I only put 5,000 miles a year on my truck. The difference between me and ‘greens’ is I don’t want *legislation* forcing *everyone* to do what I do.” Conservatives are far from content to hold this attitude toward abortion. Freedom certainly facilitates the detection of idiots. But why, then, should *any* misbehavior be outlawed? Everyone should be forced by logic and ethics to avoid misbehavior, except to the extent that misbehavior is entertaining. No one should be forced to do what Mallard does, only to do what is right, or at least comical.

In an essay titled “Socialism Makes People Worse” (as measured by their narcissism) on townhall.com and realclearpolitics.com dated 3/21/06, Dennis Prager asserts, “Socialism undermines the character of a nation and of its citizens.” It is an *argumentum ad hominem* to assert that a proposition is false if it is held by a bad person. It is expediently acceptable for falsehood to yield “character” only if ends justify means. Truth is no less true if it “makes people worse.”

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, atheists are vastly underrepresented in the prison population, comprising only 0.2% of those incarcerated. Either theists are more criminally inclined or perhaps atheists are simply not stupid enough to get caught. God, though reputed to be omnipotent, seems less effective at restraining His people than atheists are at restraining themselves. Even if Christianity does not cause criminal behavior, neither is it sufficient to stop it. Even Rollen Stewart (“Rainbow Man,” the “John 3:16 guy”) was condemned to three life sentences. “Jesus Saves,” but could do much more to dissuade. Replying to the famous bumper sticker, atheists may be neither perfect nor forgiven, but may simply be better. Ultimately, Christians may seek right, but are satisfied with forgiveness, which does not convert wrong to right. Wrong remains such, and forgiveness is not much of a deterrent against it.



Prager claims (Townhall.com, 12/5/06) that “the Bible is the source of America’s values.” Whether or not it is, it need not be. Also, how different are the values from other sources? “America derives its laws from its Constitution. It derives its values from the Bible,” he says. The latter statement is merely statistical and *de facto*, but neither official nor *de jure*, and borders on an *argumentum ad populum*. And if precedence is the issue, Hammurabi predates both Moses and Abraham.

“We don’t get inalienable rights from the Constitution; we get them from God,” claims Prager. This is only true in a literary sense, as rights derive from one’s capacity for being wronged. In matters of faith, one can merely hope, making the declarative mood inappropriate. Prager himself opposes the codification of such decisions as whether the Koran may be used for swearing in government officials. In the matter of Keith Ellison, Prager writes, “I am well aware it is not a law, and I do not want it to be.”

Along with other conservatives, Prager enjoys reporting (as he did on his radio program 7/12/07) that secularists give less to charity than religious people. It is not known whether Prager has ever dropped the other shoe and reported whether secularists *take* correspondingly less charity, which would offset their lesser giving. Taking less would leave more for others and earn their gratitude for what would constitute net giving. One is part of the solution partially to the extent that one is not part of the problem. And given that atheists are underrepresented among the imprisoned, they may also be expected to be underrepresented among the impoverished. (Prager cannot plausibly deny the ability to think in such net terms because on his radio program 8/19/09 he acknowledged that smokers cost society money but save it even more by dying early. In the course of this discussion, he claimed to hate “nonsense arguments,” and that we cannot disagree about facts. Such hatred does not always seem to deter him adequately, and, as noted earlier, he seems to disagree with the dictionary regarding the meaning of the word *compare*.)

However, as conservatives brag about their charitable giving, they simultaneously decry socialized medicine. To the extent that people are responsible for their own healthcare, it is wrong to brag about helping them. If they are to be helped and their needs are not being met, then the messenger is not to be denigrated for reporting it. Those who think it right to help the needy should be grateful to those who bring such needs to their attention. Those who do not think it right to help the needy are fools to brag about doing so.

On his television program in August, 2008, Sean Hannity said that liberal handouts would not be necessary if people demonstrated the same dedication and commitment as Michael Phelps. This is equally applicable to conservative handouts, even the ones about which conservatives brag.

On his radio program, 11/26/08, Rush Limbaugh said that the sufficiency of one’s income is a personal evaluation and no one else’s business. He then said that if CEOs are denied their bonuses, they may be inclined to contribute less to charity, though this would seem exactly the type of thing that he would consider to be none of one’s business, even his.

Michael Ramirez once produced a cartoon in which a starving African child is told by an affluent couple, “Gee, we would love to help out, but we’re saving every dime to clone our dog.” Ironically, it is conservatives who crusade for this freedom of choice in opposition to the liberal concept of the involuntary redistribution of wealth. For example, Glenn Beck’s “Nine Principles to Believe In” include “7. I work hard for what I have. I will share it with who I want to. Government cannot force me to be charitable.” Nor, apparently, can it force Beck to avoid dangling prepositions and improper dative pronouns.

In his commentary of 11/8/04 in the *Los Angeles Times*, David Klinghoffer offers a textbook-worthy set of fallacies while proudly proclaiming, “In God we trust.” Admitting that he must *trust* God to be right because he himself does not know, Klinghoffer’s belief about what is right can be no more than a hope. What he calls “objective morality” is objective only with respect to history, as embodied in “established religious tradition,” which, by itself, is a fallacious appeal to the old (*argumentum ad antiquitatem*). Apparently, for the logically challenged, tradition would be a sufficient excuse for believing that  $2+2=5$ . Subjectivists are said to rely on “their own opinion.” However, being able only to prove the existence of their tradition, and unable to confirm the tenets handed down therein, “objectivists” are left to *assume* that such tradition is more than merely the opinion of others. To claim that “in god *we* trust” simply because one’s own intellect is unworthy of such trust is slothful induction, inferring that all intellects are similarly untrustworthy.

Klinghoffer claims that the reason “we need to abide by” God’s commandments is “because it is ‘the Lord your God’ who sanctions them.” This argument abandons the concepts of right and wrong and degenerates into the fallacious appeals to the carrot and the stick (*argumentum ad crumenam/baculum*), as if right could be based on prudence alone. Tautologically, right should be done because it is right, independent of prudential considerations, and whether God likes it or not. Requiring the principles of canine obedience school to manage one’s savagery and being unable to realize that  $2+2=4$  without relying on the Bible as a crib sheet are nothing about which to brag. Nevertheless, the pot continues to call the sugar black.

It is asserted that, for a “relativist,” “values are whatever he accepts to be right or wrong.” Literally, values are whatever one considers valuable. Values have the same ontological status as colors. They are subjective and so require valuers to do the valuing. There is no abstract good, only specific goods relative to caring agents. No ethical issue arises unless an action is good or bad *for* someone. The only moral value is obedience, whereas right is independent of compliance. In other words, obeying a rule does not make that rule right. (*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*)

In the cartoon of 11/23/04, Mallard explains that “moral values” somehow involve “right and wrong,” which they do not, morality entailing compliance with rules, whether those rules are right or wrong. A liberal is then ridiculed for saying that “being judgmental is wrong,” which it is not. Real wrongs include being *groundlessly* judgmental, mischaracterizing wrong and failing to recognize, acknowledge and salute one’s intellectual and ethical superiors. In Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock asks, “What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?” The answer is: *mis*judgment.

In the *Los Angeles Times*, 5/1/05, George Weigel writes, “A free European public square, Europeans have convinced themselves, must be radically secular.” Not even God has made it demonstrably otherwise. “That is why Europeans can only debate grave issues in biotechnology in utilitarian terms; ‘will it work?’ completely trumps ‘is it right?’” as if the latter were any less secular. Weigel writes that secularity “has led to a vast and withering spiritual boredom.” It is spiritual only if the secularity in question is delusory, which it has not been shown to be.

Michael Medved, in his book *Right Turn*, reportedly “argues that conservatives are ‘both happier and nicer’ than liberals.” These qualities can also be achieved pharmacologically, and being right is a much higher virtue than being happy. Dogs can be quite happy and nice. People in Nazi Germany who joined the Nazi Party were less persecuted. It is better to be right than

happy, and there can be no better excuse for being happy than being right. Other conservatives simultaneously rationalize that happiness is nothing about which to brag, an example being Eric G. Wilson, author of *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 2/17/08.

Sean Hannity has said, “I know in my heart that if people lived a conservative life, if we had . . . conservative moral values, we’d be a happier country.” The heart is the wrong organ to consult, even according to conservatives. Dennis Prager offers a related false dichotomy in the *Los Angeles Times*, 5/29/05, when he claims that “as a guide to doing the right thing,” the choices are Scripture or one’s heart. “[D]o I listen to my heart or to what I believe is God’s word?” he asks, adding that Scripture warns against consulting one’s heart, though Hannity seems not to have gotten the message. Nonidiots need consult neither, for they can use their intellect to engage in ethics. If one is too stupid to confirm that what God says is right, then one can only *hope* that it is right, but without knowing it. The only alternatives to doing what one considers to be right is to do what one does not know to be right or to do what one knows to be wrong.

In the *Los Angeles Times*, 8/14/05, Dennis Prager acknowledges “the hierarchy of sin.” He then claims that the only alternatives are “a God-based moral code” or “personal preferences.” The former derives from the latter, while wrong is self-evident to the sane. Truth may be derived from the Bible, but some truths, even according to conservatives, are self-evident. Had the Bible never been written, 2+2 would still equal 4, and intelligent people would know it. From the Popperian perspective, anything, even religion, can be a source of conjecture, but this must then be tested. Right is indeed the personal preference of the morally obedient. The ethically competent are also able to recognize it when they see it.

If liberal secularists make their own rules, then ethicists make not their own rules but the best ones because they recognize right, just as arithmeticians recognize that 2+2=4. One may have assurance that this is correct, but some are competent to confirm neither ethics nor arithmetic and must rely on authority, while the ethically and arithmetically competent can see the truth for themselves. Idiots perhaps lack the capacity for anything more than blind obedience, but this is the lowest form of love, that of servant for master, which may be better than nothing, but is hardly praiseworthy.

In the cartoon of 8/6/06, a man says, “I don’t see things in black and white[.] I’m very sophisticated! I see things in ‘shades of grey!’” Mallard then warns, “Watch out for that bad pothole, buddy!” The man replies, “See what I mean? ‘Bad’ and ‘good’ are words that typify the kind of absolutist world-view that *I’m* much too sophisticated . . .,” as he falls into said pothole. There are not only good and bad, but also, contrary to the “absolutist world-view,” better and worse, as in Prager’s “hierarchy of sin,” which Tinsley acknowledges when convenient. In the cartoon of 8/29/06, a parent is mocked for saying to her child, “Now remember, Chloe, if you get pulled over for driving drunk, no ethnic slurs, okay?” Behind the sarcasm, Tinsley at least implicitly acknowledges the greater severity of DUI.

In the *Los Angeles Times*, 9/20/06, commenting on a lecture given by Pope Benedict XVI, George Weigel writes, “The pope’s first point was that all the great questions of life, including social and political questions, are ultimately theological. How we think (or don’t think) about God has much to do with how we judge what is good and what is wicked, and with how we think about the appropriate methods for advancing the truth in a world in which there are profound disagreements about the truth of things.” What is good and bad and right and wrong is determined empirically, theology is impossible, and faith, which is neither truth-determining nor

truth-preserving, is unable to contribute anything useful to an “appropriate methods for advancing the truth.”

Weigel continues, “The God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus is a God of reason, compassion and love, a God who comes searching for man in history, appeals to the human mind as well as the human heart and invites human beings into a dialogue of salvation.” “Heart” is actually a function of mind, and the invitation is an empty one to the extent that God is supernatural.

Weigel writes, “If the West’s high culture keeps playing in the sandbox of postmodern irrationalism – in which there is ‘your truth’ and ‘my truth’ but nothing such as ‘the truth’ – the West will be unable to defend itself. Why? Because the West won’t be able to give reasons why its commitments to civility, tolerance, human rights and the rule of law are worth defending.” It is precisely “the truth” that cannot be discovered through faith, which can only support “‘your truth’ and ‘my truth.’” Weigel also writes of what is “pleasing to God.” “The truth” is independent of the pleasure of God or anyone else. Anything that is right is “worth defending” *because it is right.*

Ann Coulter, on *The O’Reilly Factor*, 10/3/06, said that Republicans behave better than Democrats after both get caught misbehaving. Even if true, this does not excuse the misbehavior indulged in prior to getting caught.

In the *Prickly City* cartoon of 5/3/07, Carmen says, “It’s a commandment in every single one of the world’s faiths. . . . ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” If true, this counters the accent fallacy that implies that Christian rules and values are somehow unique. It is as if Christians consider the statement “ $2+2=4$ ” to represent Christian arithmetic.

On his radio program, 6/18/07, Michael Medved, rebutting the notion of Christian cowardice, asked how cowards could have created a country as great as America, saying that America’s greatness was evidence of the hand of God at work. It is actually, at most, evidence merely of the fear of that hand, for cowards will make whatever nation they believe will please God and spare them punishment. Cowardly moralists behave so as to avoid damnation, whether those actions are right or wrong. Courageous ethicists do what is right whether God likes it or not. It may be argued that Christian patriots bravely risked their lives for this country. However, much less courage is involved when one risks one’s life in the belief that another is pending, and not just another but a better one.

On his radio program, 6/19/07, Dennis Prager bragged about the effectiveness of God-based ethics, specifically in fighting drug addiction. This writer does not dispute the value of effectiveness. However, the effect of beliefs is irrelevant to their truth or falsehood. So even if the belief that  $2+2=5$  were similarly effective, this would be in spite of literal falsehood and would be in no way relevant in attempting to demonstrate its arithmetic truth. In fact, it is those very people for whom logic is not intuitively obvious and who thus are stupid enough to believe the untrue who are also likely to be those for whom ethics is not intuitively obvious and who must be controlled by any means necessary, at least to the extent that the end justifies the means.

In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, 11/11/07, Dorothy Hoge writes, “Targeting the young has always been the strategy of the destroyers of human dignity.” The young are targeted by all, making this an accent fallacy. “When they succeed,” she continues, “the most atrocious things happen, like Hitler or the Khmer Rouge,” while the faith-based Inquisition was only marginally less atrocious, there having been fewer victims available due to a lower population and less advanced technology. Nevertheless, Christians often feel that they deserve a medal for being slightly less efficient murders. Hoge then writes of “when we try to protect our children’s human

dignity, which atheism tends to diminish,” whereas faith, being a form of logical degradation, is an alternative to dignity, making Hoge’s assertion a *tu quoque* fallacy at best.

Why would Christianity have deterred Stalin or Mao if it did not deter Torquimada? Even if Hitler was not a Christian, he could not have perpetrated the Holocaust single-handedly. Millions of those who did *were* undoubtedly Christian. Even if they were merely nominally Christians, resort to the No True Scotsman fallacy makes their victims no less dead, demonstrating that the label “Christian” is no guarantee. Related to this is the fact that many still have grounds for complaining about the attitude and actions of Pius XII, about whose Christianity there can be little doubt (“Is the pope Catholic?”). Robert Ingersoll writes, “Theocracy was tried through the Middle Ages. God was the Governor – the pope was his agent. . . . The result was that the noblest and best were in prisons, the greatest and grandest perished at the stake.” Conservatives speak of Islamofascism but also disclaim the influence of Christianity on the murder of abortion providers, such as that of Dr. Barnett Slepian by James Kopp. Even if the Inquisition did not occur *because* of Christianity, such things are nevertheless able to occur *in spite of it*.

The point is that Christianity is an insufficient deterrent for the insane, insanity being the determining factor, rather than either theism, atheism or political polarity. Both conservative theism and liberal atheism are capable of functioning, for the insane, as gateway ideologies leading to genocide. People’s insanity, however, is excused by neither their conservatism nor liberalism. In neither case should the asylum be run by the inmates. Nor does religion among one’s murders sufficiently compensate for one’s murder.

In a letter to *Vanity Fair*, 11/07, regarding Christopher Hitchens, Caroline Ambbs Niesley writes, “In response to Christopher Hitchens’s challenge to ‘name an ethical statement or action, made or performed by a person of faith, that could not have been made or performed by a nonbeliever,’ the answer is simple: prayer.” The answer is both simple and a non sequitor. A prayer is a request, about which there is nothing inherently right per se, as it is just as easy to ask for what is wrong as for what is right. Nor is it necessarily right for God to wait to be asked before He does right. If God is omnibenevolent, then let Him do right without having to be asked.

In a similar letter in that same issue, Don Clark writes, “The issue is not whether a nonbeliever can live by the same ethics as a believer. The issue is: Will he? The reality Hitchens fails to face is that an uncountable number of people in every era have faithfully engaged in innumerable ethical acts they would never have done had it not been for their belief in a holy God, to whom they are ultimately held accountable.” The same issue applies to believers. The reality that Clark fails to face is that an uncountable number of people in every era have engaged in innumerable *unethical* acts in spite of their professed belief in a holy God to whom they claim to be ultimately held accountable. The restraint exerted by religion on the ethically challenged is welcome. However, the fact that believers would never otherwise have engaged in ethical acts disqualifies those acts from being ethical. They are merely moral prudence in the face of a *argumentum ad baculum*. The goal should be to be smart enough to recognize right and to do it not because of accountability to God, but, if necessary, in spite of it. In addition to the ethically challenged being unable to constrain themselves, the deterrence afforded by divine accountability is finite, whereas truth is sufficient to constrain the ethically competent.

In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, 12/30/07, Lee Mikell writes, “The U.S. president is the most powerful person on Earth. It is important that the possessor of such power believe that he or she is held accountable to an even higher power.” Accountability to truth suffices for the

ethically competent, while accountability to “power” is merely an *argumentum ad baculum*, which is fallacious.

On Dennis Prager’s radio program 12/8/08, Dinesh D’Souza claimed that atheism can explain neither altruism nor the “moral chasm” between apes and humans. He said that apes kill and rape each other (as do humans), but did not suggest that gorillas should be prosecuted in court for these acts. Perhaps he employs “situational ethics” and does not consider these behaviors bad for nonhumans. Plesiomorphic brutality is explained perfectly by phylogeny. Ethics inevitably results when instinct is overridden by intelligence. Civility toward other humans results from the correct presupposition regarding the other minds problem, yielding an assumption of experiential equivalence and compassion. The lower intelligence of nonhumans explains their lesser degree of compassion as well as their failure to develop calculus.

D’Souza claimed that politeness, such as the giving of a seat to an old lady on a bus, cannot be explained without recourse to the supernatural. Given compassion born of intelligence, politeness then derives trivially from the recognition that an old lady *deserves* a seat and that giving her one constitutes *justice*, regardless of what God has to say about it. To the extent that altruism involves conscious, deliberate, voluntary actions, theism cannot explain compassion when it is exhibited by atheists. It would have to be argued that God robotically manipulates atheists against their will.

D’Souza further claimed that the value of a human that makes it wrong to murder one derives from being made in the image of God, as if sentience meant nothing to its possessor. It suffices that sentience is a terrible thing to lose. By contrast, theists often paradoxically hold murder to be wrong even when its victims are destined for a “better place.” D’Souza would have no reason to abstain from murder were he an atheist, whereas this writer would. On a practical level, anything that can deter D’Souza from murder is welcome, at least to the extent that the end justifies the means. His civility, according to him, is dependent on faith, whereas facts, from which laws derive (*ex facto jus oritur*), suffice for atheistic kindness.

On an earlier program, Prager claimed that reason could not establish the value of a human fetus, as if any other faculty could. Emotion can establish desirability and Prager may prefer such alternative, subjective faculties and the pleasures they may afford him, but none of these is truth-preserving. Of course, if truth is not a priority for Prager, he is welcome to eat the dust of those of us for whom it is. Should Prager claim that his evaluations are not his but God’s, while maintaining that reason cannot produce them, then he would be saying that they result from God using something worse. If he means to fault only human reason, then he would be admitting that he himself is unable to confirm that God is right, being himself human and therefore a hostage to that which he considers inadequate for the task. Being incapable of knowing leaves Prager merely to hope that he is right.

In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, 5/7/11, Orson Bean writes, “The Christian God is totally loving and totally just. Once you let such a God rule your life, you don’t behave out of fear; you simply want to please him.” The justice of God cannot be recognized without an understanding of justice. Without such an understanding, characterizing Him as just is mere speculation. Given such an understanding, why be ruled by a God when one can simply be ruled by justice? Bean denies that fear is an issue, but any displeasure for an omnipotent God cannot be other than voluntary, so there is no need to worry about the matter (Acts 17:25). Again, the goal is to be just whether God likes it or not. If He does, then bully for Him.