

Does Morality Depend on Religion?

The Good consists in always doing what God wills at any particular moment.

EMIL BRUNNER, *THE DIVINE IMPERATIVE* (1947)

I respect deities. I do not rely upon them.

MUSASHI MIYAMOTO, AT ICHIJOJI TEMPLE (ca. 1608)

4.1. The Presumed Connection between Morality and Religion

In 1995 the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued Judge Roy Moore of Gadsden, Alabama, for displaying the Ten Commandments in his courtroom. Such a display, the ACLU said, violates the separation of church and state, which is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. The ACLU might not have liked Moore, but Alabama voters did. In 2000, Moore successfully campaigned to become chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, running on a promise to “restore the moral foundation of law.” Thus the “Ten Commandments judge” became the most powerful jurist in the state of Alabama.

Moore was not through making his point, however. In the wee hours of July 31, 2001, he had a granite monument to the Ten Commandments installed in the Alabama state judicial building. This monument weighed over 5,000 pounds, and anyone entering the building could not miss it. Moore was sued again, but the people were behind him: 77% of Americans thought that he should be allowed to display his monument. Yet the law did not agree. When Moore disobeyed a court order

to remove the monument, the Alabama Court of the Judiciary fired him, saying that he had placed himself above the law. Moore, however, believed that he was putting *God* above the law.

The United States is a religious country. Nearly 80% of Americans say they believe in God, and another 12% say they believe in a universal spirit or higher power. The main religion in America is Christianity; 41% of Americans report believing that Jesus Christ will return to earth by 2050. In America, members of the Christian clergy are often treated as moral experts: Hospitals ask them to sit on ethics committees; reporters interview them on the moral dimensions of a story; and churchgoers look to them for guidance. The clergy even help decide whether movies will be rated “G,” “PG,” “PG-13,” “R,” or “NC-17.” Priests and ministers are assumed to be wise counselors who will give sound moral advice.

Why are the clergy regarded in this way? The reason is not that they have proven themselves to be better or wiser than other people—as a group, they seem to be neither better nor worse than the rest of us. There is a deeper reason why they are thought to have special moral insight. In popular thinking, morality and religion are inseparable: People commonly believe that morality can be understood only in the context of religion. Thus the clergy are assumed to be authorities on morality.

It is not hard to see why people think this. When viewed from a nonreligious perspective, the universe seems to be a cold, meaningless place, devoid of value and purpose. In his essay “A Free Man’s Worship,” written in 1902, Bertrand Russell expressed what he called the “scientific” view of the world:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.

From a religious perspective, however, things look very different. Judaism and Christianity teach that the world was created by a loving, all-powerful God to provide a home for us. We, in turn, were created in his image, to be his children. Thus, the world is not devoid of meaning and purpose. It is, instead, the arena in which God's plans are realized. What could be more natural, then, than to think of "morality" as part of religion, while the atheist's world has no place for values?

4.2. The Divine Command Theory

Christians, Jews, and Muslims all believe that God has told us to obey certain rules of conduct. God does not force these rules on us. He created us as free agents; so, we may choose what to do. But if we live as we should, then we must follow God's laws. This idea has been expanded into a theory known as the Divine Command Theory. The basic idea is that God decides what is right and wrong. Actions that God commands are morally required; actions that God forbids are morally wrong; and all other actions are permissible or merely morally neutral.

This theory has a number of attractive features. It immediately solves the old problem of the objectivity of ethics. Ethics is not merely a matter of personal feeling or social custom. Whether something is right or wrong is perfectly objective: It is right if God commands it and wrong if God forbids it. Moreover, the Divine Command Theory explains why anyone should bother with morality. Why not forget about "ethics" and just look out for yourself? If immorality is the violation of God's commandments, there is an easy answer: On the day of final reckoning, you will be held accountable.

There are, however, serious problems with the theory. Of course, atheists would not accept it, because they do not believe that God exists. But there are difficulties even for believers. The main problem was identified by Plato, a Greek philosopher who lived 400 years before Jesus of Nazareth. Plato's books are written as conversations, or dialogues, in which Plato's teacher Socrates is always the main speaker. In one of them, the *Euthyphro*, there is a discussion of whether "right" can be defined as "what the gods command." Socrates is skeptical and asks, Is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right? This is one of the most famous

questions in the history of philosophy. The British philosopher Antony Flew (1923–2010) suggests that “one good test of a person’s aptitude for philosophy is to discover whether he can grasp [the] force and point” of this question.

Socrates’s question is about whether God *makes* the moral truths true or whether he merely *recognizes* that they’re true. There’s a big difference between these options. I know that the Burj Khalifa building in the United Arab Emirates is the tallest building in the world; I recognize that fact. However, I did not make it true. Rather, it was made true by the designers and builders in the city of Dubai. Is God’s relation to ethics like my relation to the Burj Khalifa building or like the relation of the builders? This question poses a dilemma, and either way out leads to trouble.

First, we might say that *right conduct is right because God commands it*. For example, according to Exodus 20:16, God commands us to be truthful. Thus, we should be truthful simply because God requires it. God’s command makes truthfulness right, just as the builders of a skyscraper make the building tall. This is the Divine Command Theory. It is almost the theory of Shakespeare’s character Hamlet. Hamlet said that nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so. According to the Divine Command Theory, nothing is good or bad, except when *God’s* thinking makes it so.

This idea encounters several difficulties.

1. *This conception of morality is mysterious.* What does it mean to say that God “makes” truthfulness right? It is easy enough to understand how physical objects are made, at least in principle. We have all made something, if only a sand castle or a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. But making truthfulness right is not like that; it could not be done by rearranging things in the physical environment. How, then, could it be done? No one knows.

To see the problem, consider some wretched case of child abuse. On the theory we’re now considering, God could make *that* instance of child abuse right—not by turning a slap into a friendly pinch of the cheek, but *by commanding that the slap is right*. This proposal defies human understanding. How could merely saying, or commanding, that the slap is right make it right? If true, this conception of morality would be a mystery.

2. *This conception of morality makes God’s commands arbitrary.* We assume that God has good reasons for what he does.

But suppose God commands truthfulness to be right. On this theory, he could have given different commands just as easily. He could have commanded us to be liars, and then lying, and not truthfulness, would be right. After all, before God issues his commands, no reasons for or against lying exist—*God is the one who creates the reasons*. And so, from a moral point of view, God's commands are arbitrary. He could command anything whatsoever. This result may seem not only unacceptable but impious from a religious point of view.

3. *This conception of morality provides the wrong reasons for moral principles.* There are many things wrong with child abuse: It is malicious; it involves the unnecessary infliction of pain; it can have unwanted long-term psychological effects; and so on. However, the theory we're now considering cannot recognize any of these reasons as important. All it cares about, in the end, is whether child abuse runs counter to God's commands.

There are two ways of confirming that something is wrong here. First, notice something the theory implies: *If God didn't exist, child abuse wouldn't be wrong*. After all, if God didn't exist, then God wouldn't be around to make child abuse wrong. However, child abuse would still be malicious, so it would still be wrong. Thus, the Divine Command Theory fails. Second, keep in mind that even a religious person might be genuinely in doubt as to what God has commanded. After all, religious texts disagree with each other, and sometimes there seem to be inconsistencies even within a single text. So, a person might be in doubt as to what God's will really is. However, a person needn't be in doubt as to whether child abuse is wrong. What God has commanded is one thing; whether hitting children is wrong is another.

There is a way to avoid these troublesome consequences. We can take the second of Socrates's options. We need not say that right conduct is right because God commands it. Instead, we may say that God commands us to do certain things *because they are right*. God, who is infinitely wise, recognizes that truthfulness is better than deceitfulness, and so he commands us to be truthful; he sees that killing is wrong, and so he commands us not to kill; and so on for the other moral rules.

If we take this option, we avoid the consequences that spoiled the first alternative. We needn't worry about how God makes it wrong to lie, because he doesn't. God's commands are

not arbitrary; they are the result of his wisdom in knowing what is best. Furthermore, we are not saddled with the wrong explanations for our moral principles; rather, we are free to appeal to whatever justifications of them seem appropriate.

Unfortunately, this second option has a different drawback. In taking it, we abandon the theological conception of right and wrong. When we say that God commands us to be truthful *because* truthfulness is right, we acknowledge a standard that is independent of God's will. The rightness exists prior to God's command and is the reason for the command. Thus, if we want to know why we should be truthful, the reply "because God commands it" does not really tell us. We may still ask, "Why does God command it?" and the answer to *that* question will provide the ultimate reason.

Many religious people believe that they must accept a theological conception of right and wrong because it would be sacrilegious not to do so. They feel, somehow, that if they believe in God, then right and wrong must be understood in terms of God's wishes. Our arguments, however, suggest that the Divine Command Theory is not only untenable but impious. And, in fact, some of the greatest theologians have rejected the theory for just this reason. Thinkers such as Saint Thomas Aquinas connect morality with religion in a different way.

4.3. The Theory of Natural Law

In the history of Christian thought, the dominant theory of ethics is not the Divine Command Theory. That honor instead goes to the Theory of Natural Law. This theory has three main parts.

1. The Theory of Natural Law rests on a particular view of the world. On this view, the world has a rational order, with values and purposes built into its very nature. This conception derives from the Greeks, whose way of understanding the world dominated Western thinking for over 1,700 years. The Greeks believed that *everything in nature has a purpose*.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) built this idea into his system of thought when he said that, in order to understand anything, four questions must be asked: What is it? What is it made of? How did it come to be? And what is it for? The answers might be: This is a knife; it is made of metal; it was made by a craftsman; and it is used for cutting. Aristotle assumed that the last

question—What is it for?—could be asked of anything whatever. “Nature,” he said, “belongs to the class of causes which act for the sake of something.”

Obviously, artifacts such as knives have purposes, because craftsmen have built them with a purpose in mind. But what about natural objects that we do not make? Aristotle believed that they have purposes, too. One of his examples was that we have teeth so that we can chew. Biological examples are quite persuasive; each part of our bodies does seem, intuitively, to have a special purpose—our eyes are for seeing, our heart is for pumping blood, our skin is there to protect us, and so on. But Aristotle’s claim was not limited to organic beings. According to him, *everything* has a purpose. To take a different sort of example, he thought that rain falls so that plants can grow. He considered other alternatives, such as that the rain falls “of necessity” and that this helps the plants only “by coincidence.” However, he rejected them.

The world, therefore, is an orderly, rational system, with each thing having its own proper place and serving its own special purpose. There is a neat hierarchy: The rain exists for the sake of the plants, the plants exist for the sake of the animals, and the animals exist—of course—for the sake of people. Aristotle says: “If then we are right in believing that nature makes nothing without some end in view, nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.” This worldview is stunningly anthropocentric, or human-centered. But Aristotle was hardly alone in having such thoughts; almost every important thinker in our history has advanced such a thesis. Humans are a remarkably vain species.

The Christian thinkers who came later found this worldview congenial. Only one thing was missing: God. Thus, the Christian thinkers said that the rain falls to help the plants *because that is what God intended*, and the animals are for human use because *that is what God made them for*. Values and purposes were thus conceived to be part of the divine plan.

2. A corollary to this way of thinking is that the “laws of nature” describe not only how things *are* but also how things *ought to be*. The world is in harmony when things serve their natural purposes. When they do not, or cannot, things have gone wrong. Eyes that cannot see are defective, and drought is a natural evil; the badness of both is explained by reference to

natural law. But there are also implications for human conduct. Moral rules are now viewed as deriving from the laws of nature. Some ways of behaving are said to be “natural” while others are said to be “unnatural”; and “unnatural” acts are regarded as morally wrong.

Consider, for example, the duty of beneficence. We are morally required to care about our neighbors. Why? According to the Theory of Natural Law, beneficence is natural for us, given the kind of creatures we are. We are by nature social and need the company of other people. Someone who does not care at all for others—who really does not care, through and through—is seen as deranged. Modern psychiatry says that such people suffer from *antisocial personality disorder*, and such people are commonly called *psychopaths* or *sociopaths*. A malicious personality is defective, just as eyes are defective if they cannot see. And, it may be added, this is true because we were created by God, with a specific “human” nature, as part of his overall plan.

The endorsement of beneficence is relatively uncontroversial. Natural-law theory has also been used, however, to support more contentious moral views. Religious thinkers often condemn “deviant” sexual practices, and they usually justify this by appealing to the Theory of Natural Law. If everything has a purpose, what is the purpose of sex? The obvious answer is procreation. Sexual activity that is not connected with making babies can therefore be seen as “unnatural,” and practices like masturbation and gay sex may be condemned for this reason. This view of sex dates back at least to Saint Augustine (A.D. 354–430), and it is explicit in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). The moral theology of the Catholic Church is based on natural-law theory.

Outside the Catholic Church, the Theory of Natural Law has few advocates today. It is generally rejected for three reasons.

First, the idea that “what’s natural is good” seems open to obvious counterexamples. Sometimes what’s natural is bad. People naturally care much more about themselves than about strangers, but this is regrettable. Disease occurs naturally, but disease is bad. Children are naturally self-centered, but parents don’t think this is a good thing.

Second, the Theory of Natural Law seems to confuse “is” and “ought.” In the 18th century, David Hume pointed out that *what is the case* and *what ought to be the case* are logically different

notions, and no conclusion about one follows from the other. We can say that people are naturally disposed to be beneficent, but it does not follow that they *ought* to be beneficent. Similarly, it may be true that sex produces babies, but it does not follow that sex *ought* or *ought not* to be engaged in only for that purpose. Facts are one thing; values are another.

Third, the Theory of Natural Law is now widely rejected because its view of the world conflicts with modern science. The world as described by Galileo, Newton, and Darwin has no need for “facts” about right and wrong. Their explanations of natural phenomena make no reference to values or purposes. What happens just happens, due to the laws of cause and effect. If the rain benefits the plants, this is because the plants have evolved by the laws of natural selection in a rainy climate.

Thus, modern science gives us a picture of the world as a realm of facts, where the only “natural laws” are the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, working blindly and without purpose. Whatever values may be, they are not part of the natural order. As for the idea that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man,” well, that is only vanity. To the extent that one accepts the worldview of modern science, one will be skeptical of the Theory of Natural Law. It is no accident that the theory was a product, not of modern thought, but of the Middle Ages.

3. The third part of the theory addresses the question of moral knowledge. How can we determine what is right and what is wrong? The Divine Command Theory says that we must consult God’s commandments. The Theory of Natural Law gives a different answer. The “natural laws” that specify what we should do are laws of reason, which we are able to grasp because God has given us the power to understand them. Therefore, the Theory of Natural Law endorses the familiar idea that the right thing to do is whatever action has the best reasons backing it up. To use the traditional terminology, moral judgments are “dictates of reason.” As Saint Thomas Aquinas, the greatest natural-law theorist, wrote in his masterpiece the *Summa Theologica*, “To disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to condemning the command of God.”

This means that the religious believer has no special access to moral truth. The believer and the nonbeliever are in the same position. God has given everyone the ability to listen to reason and follow its directives. In an important sense, this

leaves morality independent of religion. Religious belief does not affect the calculation of what is best, and the results of moral inquiry are religiously “neutral.” Even though they may disagree about religion, believers and nonbelievers inhabit the same moral universe.

4.4. Religion and Particular Moral Issues

Some religious people will find the preceding discussion unsatisfying. It will seem too abstract to have any bearing on their actual lives. For them, the connection between morality and religion is an immediate, practical matter that centers on particular moral issues. It doesn’t matter whether right and wrong are understood in terms of God’s will or whether moral laws are laws of nature. What matters are the moral teachings of one’s religion. The Scriptures and the church leaders are regarded as authorities; if one is truly faithful, one must accept what they say. Many Christians, for example, believe that they must oppose abortion because the church condemns it and (they assume) the Scriptures do too.

Are there distinctively religious positions on major moral issues that believers must accept? The rhetoric of the pulpit suggests so. But there is good reason to think otherwise.

For one thing, it is often difficult to find specific moral guidance in the Scriptures. We face different problems than our ancestors faced 2,000 years ago; thus, the Scriptures may be silent on matters that seem pressing to us. The Bible does contain a number of general precepts—for example, to love one’s neighbor and to treat others as one wishes to be treated. And those are fine principles, which have practical application in our lives. However, it is not clear what they imply about the rights of workers, or the extinction of species, or the funding of medical research, and so on.

Another problem is that the Scriptures and church tradition are often ambiguous. Authorities disagree, leaving the believer in the awkward position of having to choose which element of the tradition to accept. For instance, the New Testament condemns being rich, and there is a long tradition of self-denial and charitable giving that affirms this teaching. But there is also an obscure Old Testament figure named Jabez who asked God to “enlarge my territories” (1 Chronicles 4:10),

and God did. A recent book urging Christians to adopt Jabez as their model became a best-seller.

Thus, when people say that their moral views come from their religion, they are often mistaken. What's really going on is this. They are making up their minds about the moral issues and then interpreting the Scriptures, or church tradition, in a way that supports the conclusions they've already reached. Of course, this does not happen in every case, but it seems fair to say that it happens a lot. The question of riches is one example; abortion is another.

In the debate over abortion, religious issues are never far from the discussion. Religious conservatives hold that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception, and so abortion is murder. The fetus, they believe, is not merely a *potential* person but is an *actual* person, possessing a full-fledged right to life. Liberals, of course, deny this—they say that the fetus is something less than that, at least at the beginning of the pregnancy.

The abortion debate is complex, but we are concerned only with how it relates to religion. Conservatives sometimes say that fetal life is sacred. Is that the Christian view? *Must* Christians condemn abortion? To answer those questions, one might look to the Scriptures or to church tradition.

The Scriptures. It is difficult to derive a prohibition against abortion from either the Jewish or the Christian Scriptures. Certain passages, however, are often quoted by conservatives because they seem to suggest that fetuses have full human status. One of the most frequently cited passages is from the first chapter of Jeremiah, in which Jeremiah quotes God as saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." These words are presented as though they were God's endorsement of the conservative position: it is wrong to kill the unborn because the unborn are consecrated to God.

In context, however, these words obviously mean something different. Suppose we read the whole passage in which they occur:

Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” But the Lord said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.”

The sanctity of fetal life is not discussed in this passage. Instead, Jeremiah is asserting his authority as a prophet. He is saying, in effect, “God authorized me to speak for him; even though I resisted, he insisted.” But Jeremiah puts the point more poetically; he says that God had intended him to be a prophet even before he was born.

This often happens when the Scriptures are cited in connection with controversial moral issues. A few words are lifted from a passage that is concerned with something else entirely, and those words are then construed in a way that supports a favored moral position. When this happens, is it accurate to say that the person is “following the moral teachings of the Bible”? Or is it more accurate to say that he has searched the Scriptures to find support for a moral view he already believes, and then has read the desired conclusion into the Scriptures? If the latter, it suggests an arrogant attitude—the attitude that God himself must share one’s own moral opinions!

Other biblical passages seem to support a *liberal* view of abortion. Three times the death penalty is recommended for women who have had sex out of wedlock, even though killing the woman would also kill her fetus (Genesis 38:24; Leviticus 21:9; Deuteronomy 22:20–21). This suggests that the fetus has no right to life. Also, in Exodus 21, God tells Moses that the penalty for murder is death; however, the penalty for causing a woman to miscarry is only a fine. The Law of Israel seemed to regard the fetus as something less than a person.

Church Tradition. Today, the Catholic Church strongly opposes abortion. When the Pope visits America, where abortions are performed routinely, his main message is always: *Stop killing unborn children*. In many Protestant churches, too, abortion is routinely denounced from the pulpit. It is no surprise, then, that many people feel that they must condemn abortion “for religious reasons,” regardless of how Scripture is interpreted. What lies behind the Church’s current position on abortion?

To some extent, the Vatican has always opposed abortion for the same reason that it has always condemned condoms, birth control pills, and other forms of contraception: All of these activities thwart natural processes. According to natural-law theory, sex is supposed to lead to the birth of a healthy baby. Condoms and birth control pills prevent this from happening by preventing pregnancy; and abortion, whenever it occurs, puts a man-made end to the fetus's natural course of development. Thus, by the lights of traditional Catholic thinking, abortion is wrong because it disrupts natural processes. This type of argument, however, can hardly show that Christians "must" oppose abortion. The argument depends on natural-law theory, and, as we have seen, natural-law theory is based on a worldview that predates modern science. Christians today need not reject modern science—the Pope himself, for example, believes in Charles Darwin's 19th-century theory of evolution as well as the 20th-century idea that the universe began with a "Big Bang." Thus, Christians are not required to oppose abortion based on natural-law considerations.

At any rate, to say that abortion disrupts a natural process is to say nothing about the moral status of the fetus. The Pope does not merely believe that abortion is immoral, like using a condom; he believes that abortion is *murder*. How did this position become dominant within the Catholic Church? Have Church leaders always regarded the fetus as enjoying a special moral status?

For most of the Church's history—until around A.D. 1200—little of relevance is known. Back then, there were no universities, and the Church was not especially intellectual. People believed all kinds of things, for all kinds of reasons. But in the 13th century, Saint Thomas Aquinas constructed a philosophical system that became the bedrock of later Catholic thought. The key question, Aquinas believed, is whether the fetus has a soul: if it does, then abortion is murder; if it doesn't, then abortion is not murder. Does the fetus have a soul? Aquinas accepted Aristotle's idea that the soul is the "substantial form" of man. Let's not worry about exactly what that means; what's important is that human beings are supposed to acquire a "substantial form" only when their bodies take on human shape. So now the key question is: When do human beings first look human?

When a baby is born, anyone can see that it has a human shape. In Aquinas's day, however, nobody knew when fetuses

begin to look human—after all, fetal development occurs in the mother’s womb, out of sight. Aristotle had believed, for no good reason, that males acquire a soul 40 days after conception and females do after 90 days. Presumably, many Christians accepted his view. At any rate, for the next several centuries, it was natural for Catholics to strongly oppose abortion at any stage of pregnancy, because the fetus *might* have already acquired a human form, and so abortion *might* be murder.

Contrary to popular belief, the Catholic Church has never officially maintained that the fetus acquires a soul at the moment of conception. Around 1600, however, some theologians began to say that the soul enters the body a few days after conception, and so abortion is murder even at an early stage. This monumentally important change in Catholic thinking occurred without extended theological debate. Perhaps it seemed unimportant because the Church already opposed early-term abortions. Yet we understand little about why the Church changed its position.

Today we know a lot about fetal development. We know, through microscopes and ultrasounds, that fetuses do not look human until several weeks into the pregnancy. Thus, a follower of Aquinas should now say that fetuses do not have a soul during the first month or two of pregnancy. However, there has been no movement inside the Catholic Church to adopt that position. For reasons that remain murky, the Church adopted a conservative view of the status of the fetus in the 1600s, and it has held fast to that view ever since.

The purpose of reviewing this history is not to suggest that the contemporary church’s position is wrong. For all I have said, it may be right. My point, rather, is this: every generation interprets its traditions to support its favored moral views. Abortion is but one example of this. We could also have discussed the church’s shifting views on slavery, or the status of women, or capital punishment. In each case, the moral stance taken by the Church seems not to be derived from the Bible so much as imposed on it.

The arguments in this chapter point to a common conclusion: Right and wrong are not to be understood in terms of God’s will; morality is a matter of reason and conscience, not religious faith; and in any case, religious considerations do not provide definitive solutions to most of the moral problems

that we face. Morality and religion are, in a word, different. Of course, religious beliefs do sometimes bear on moral issues. Consider, for example, the doctrine of eternal life. If some people go to heaven when they die—so that dying is a good thing for them—then this might affect the morality of killing these people. Or suppose we believe, upon studying ancient prophecies, that the world is about to end. This might diminish our fear of climate change. The relationship between morality and religion is complicated, but it is a relationship between two different subjects.

This conclusion may strike some readers as antireligious. However, it has not been reached by questioning the validity of religion. The arguments we have considered do not assume that Christianity or any other theological system is false; they merely show that, even if such a system is true, morality remains an independent matter.