DOES A BELIEF IN GOD LEAD TO MORAL COWARDICE?: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COURAGE OF MORAL CONVICTION AND ACQUISITION

Jonathan Ives

In our seventh and final piece on the theme "Good without God", Jonathan Ives argues that reliance on God as an external source of moral authority leads to a kind of moral cowardice.

Introduction

I remember quite clearly the moment I stopped believing in God. It was at a bible camp, in South Wales, and I must have been about 8 years old.

Every summer my family would go camping, alongside probably thousands of other born again Christians, where traditional holiday fun would be mixed with regular Sunday school-style workshops throughout the week. At one of these workshops, towards the end of the week, I learned about the 'armour of God'. The armour of God is a spiritual suit of armour that followers of Christ are encouraged to 'wear'. This armour includes, to name a few items, the 'shield of faith', the 'sword of the spirit', the 'breastplate of righteousness', and the 'helmet of salvation'. In this lesson we made our own armour (out of cardboard), and we were told that that so long as we wore our armour God would protect us. Perhaps, even at eight, I was a little naïve to take this quite as literally as I did.

On the way back to my tent, still wearing my armour, I came across two older boys who had been bullying me for most of the week. As they approached I felt a new confidence. I was wearing the armour of God – and I told them so. A few seconds after cavalierly wielding my sword of the spirit and confidently placing my shield of faith

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between myself and the coming onslaught, a large stick came crashing through my helmet of salvation and I found myself lying on my breastplate of salvation in a muddy puddle, in no small amount of discomfort. I clearly remember at that moment my faith in God and my religious teachers evaporating.

Recalling this incident 20 years later, the words of a Christian poet, Gordon Bailey, come to mind:

> I'd swallowed their lines, hook, line, sinker and rod.
> But now that I knew that the most wasn't true;
> What reason had I to believe in their God?

However, this article is not about the pitfalls of small children taking religious metaphors too literally and then leaving the faith because they think they have been lied to. It is about something else entirely.

Once I realised that my armour did not work I did not only lose my faith in God and his teachers – I also lost my entire moral compass. When I believed in God there was a clear line between right and wrong, and that line was drawn by a real and existent God. Suddenly, however, that metaphysical rug was swept from under my feet. I no longer believed in God, and there was no longer any ultimate moral authority in my life.

What I remember troubling me about this realisation was not that I no longer had anything to motivate me to be good (an issue recently discussed by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, and which is as old as Plato's myth of The Ring of Gyges), nor that the concepts of 'good' and 'evil' ceased to make sense (a substantial philosophical question that revolves around the question of how the terms 'good' and 'evil' become meaningful), but how I would be able to tell right from wrong. Up until then I had used God as my reference point. When deciding which actions were morally required, permissible or impermissible, I had always looked to biblical teachings (most often via my parents) to guide me. However, I suddenly realised that if I did not

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believe in God I could no longer rely on Him as a moral authority – and I had to work out a way to be good without God (oddly, I did not consider amorality as an option . . .). Maybe it was this experience that led me to eventually study philosophy, and to become particularly interested in ethical theory.

Back to the Present Day

Years after this incident I am able to characterise the problem I faced in slightly more sophisticated terms – though whether they are 'better' terms remains to be seen. My problem was one that was illustrated beautifully by Nietzsche in his *The Gay Science* (S.125), with the story of the madman who descended from the hills shouting:

> God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives; who will wipe this blood from us? . . . Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? (S.125)

Nietzsche did not mean that a physical being, God, has literally and physically been murdered, nor was he invoking us to literally try to become Gods ourselves. What he meant was that once we no longer believe in God he is 'dead' to us (metaphorically) – as are all the benefits that God brings, including His morality. If God is dead to us we are not entitled to draw on Him to make our moral decisions, and so we have to find some other criterion for deciding right from wrong. When Nietzsche asks if this deed was too great for us and suggests that we need to become Gods ourselves in order to be worthy of it, he is

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suggesting that we need something to fill the 'God shaped' gap that is left behind. If we are happy to entertain the thought of life without God we need to be strong enough to do it, and we need to be able to make our moral decisions ourselves – without reference to Him. Nietzsche recognised that to do this would require a great moral strength, and this is where his concept of the 'Ubermensch' springs. Sometime translated as the 'Superman' or the 'Overman' – this is a person who has the strength to forge his own moral compass, and who does not look to anyone other then himself to tell him what to believe.

Whilst Nietzsche is, to my mind, the most poetic and forthright exponent of this view, its basic premise is not original to him, and many philosophers before him had made attempts to provide a system of determining right from wrong without reference to God (although they certainly did not set up the problem in the terms that Nietzsche used!). In the remainder of this article I will briefly describe two alternative approaches to moral decision making offered by philosophers. I will then make a short, and intentionally contentious, argument to the effect that despite the fact that there are problems with both of these approaches, they are still preferable to a theistic approach, because appealing to God to tell us right from wrong is a form of moral cowardice.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialist moral theory, which states that the rightness or wrongness of any action is determined by its consequences. Classical utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill believed that the consequences that matter are the consequences for human pleasure or happiness, but modern exponents of the doctrine tend to think that the consequences that matter are the consequences for human welfare in general (such as Geoffrey Scarre), and others extend this to

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include the welfare of animals (such as Peter Singer). The most basic form of Utilitarianism is called Act Utilitarianism, and it focuses on the consequences of each specific action that we perform. Its doctrine can be summarised in the following principle:

> *Whenever you have to make a choice between action A or action B, you should always choose the action that will maximise welfare, all things considered.*

For a Utilitarian, then, actions are judged to be good or bad in accordance with their tendency to promote welfare – and this seems to be intuitively plausible. Everyday we make numerous decisions, often between two courses of action, and we make those decisions by thinking about the likely consequences of each. To use a rather facetious example, every day when I come in from work to find the cat's litter box full, and stinking to high heaven, I consider kicking the cat. My choices are 'kick the cat' or 'don't kick the cat'. I invariably choose not to kick the cat, but this choice is not based on any respect I feel for the cat's right not to be kicked, or any repulsion I have towards kicking cats (I wouldn't kick it hard . . .), but upon a consideration of the likely consequences. If I kicked the cat my wife would notice and would no doubt be very upset, creating a frosty atmosphere in the house which would no doubt go on for weeks – which would be a horrible experience for all involved and would certainly reduce both mine, my wife's, and the cat's welfare. So on the basis of the likely consequences, for both my own welfare and everyone else's, I always choose not to kick the cat. I expect that most people reading this article will be familiar with (if not entirely endorse, in this example) this kind of reasoning. Similarly, most public health decisions are made on the basis of utilitarian reasoning. When the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) decides whether or not to provide a particular drug on the NHS, they do so by weighing up the costs and the benefits. NICE considers how

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much good the drug can do (or how much welfare it will produce), balances that against how much it costs and where the money could be better spent, and makes a decision based on that cost/benefit ratio. Generally, it will choose the course of action that produces the greatest amount of welfare for the greatest number of people, at the smallest cost.

One of the strengths of the Utilitarian doctrine is that it draws on a principle that is intuitively plausible – that welfare is a fundamental good – and on a form of reasoning we tend to intuitively adopt – to always seek to promote those things which we see as goods and to maximise those goods wherever possible. Essentially, Utilitarians claim that so long as we are always seeking and acting to produce the greatest amount of welfare possible, we are always doing the right thing. In doing so, Utilitarianism gives us a way to make our moral decisions without reference to God.

Kantianism

An alternative approach to finding 'good without God' can be found in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant argued that the essence of moral action was to be found in purity of intention – a good will. Kant thought that if the will (or intention) is good, then whatever the consequences of the action the goodness in the action itself shines through. In this sense Kantianism is the antithesis of utilitarianism insofar as it defines goodness on the basis of the reasons for acting as opposed to the consequences of the action. Kant also believed that any action performed out of a sense of duty was necessarily performed with a good will (presumably because if a person is acting on a principle of duty he or she is not acting for selfish or self-interested reasons), and so it follows that any action performed out of a sense of duty must be morally permissible. Kant thought that in order for an action to be morally permissible it must be in line with what he called the 'Categorical

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Imperative' (CI). The CI can be expressed, according to Kant, in four ways, but the most famous two expressions are the Formula of Universal law (FUL):

> *Act only according to that maxim which you can at the same time will should become a Universal law*

and the Formula of Humanity (FOH):

> *Only act so as to treat people as ends in themselves and never merely as a means*

Whether or not these two formulas are truly expressions of exactly the same idea is contestable, but what they both have in common is an appeal to *reason*. The FUL appeals to us, as rational persons, not to adopt as reasons for acting anything that could not be adopted as a reason by everybody else in the world. In making this appeal, Kant is not looking at what the consequences would be if everyone adopted those reasons, but at what could rationally be willed. For instance, it would be irrational for me to adopt the maxim 'make false promises in order to get what I want'. This is because if everybody else in the world did this then nobody would ever believe what they were promised, and the false promise that I made would not get me what I wanted. In order for a false promise to work there must be a presumption of truth; but if everyone adopted the same reasons for acting as me there could not be a presumption of truth, and therefore my false promise would be ineffective.

The FOH appeals to us, as rational persons who are ends in ourselves, to respect each other as such. It is the adoption of this kind of principle that has led to the requirement to obtain informed consent from participants in clinical drugs trials. Potential participants must be given accurate information about the likely effects of the drug and the risks involved, as well as the benefits. After being given this information they are allowed to exercise their autonomy

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(or self-rule) and come to their own decisions. If, for example, the researchers lie to the participants, telling them that there are no risks at all when in fact the risks are great, then the potential participants are not being allowed to make a fully autonomous decision. By lying to them the researchers are treating potential participants as a means to achieve their own ends, rather then respecting them as persons who are ends in themselves and able to make their own, fully autonomous, decisions.

Both Kantianism and Utilitarianism, though undoubtedly flawed in many ways (which I have not been able to discuss here) both offer us a way of thinking about moral issues, and of making moral decisions, without reference to God. I will now make a case for why I think either of them is preferable to relying on the moral authority of God.

The Appeal to God as a Form of Moral Cowardice

The argument I now wish to make is quite a simple one. I have not seen it made before – although I most certainly owe an intellectual debt to Nietzsche – but I very much doubt that is it wholly original or that many people before me have not had similar thoughts. By setting it out here my intention is to provoke thought, rather than to convince. There are many possible lines of objection to what I will say – but I will not mention or pursue them in this article. The challenge will then be to the reader, who objects to my claims, to formulate his or her own response. It should become obvious, as you read on, why I think this is a good thing.

My argument is that in some instances a belief in God that leads to reliance on Him for one's moral decision making leads to a form of moral cowardice. This may instantly raise eyebrows, for it is very often those people who follow their religious convictions in spite of great danger to themselves whom we think of as being the most morally courageous – take for instance Dietrich Bonheoffer, or even

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Jesus himself. To do what one believes is right in the face of great personal danger is surely a sign of great moral strength and bravery? Of course it is, but the moral cowardice I am talking about is not cowardice in relation to the carrying out of a moral conviction, but cowardice in relation to how one acquires those convictions in the first place. Arguably, it is possible for a person to be brave in holding and carrying out a moral conviction, but to be 'cowardly' in how he or she came to hold that conviction in the first place.

To make this clear, I will need to first define what I mean by 'moral courage'. By 'moral courage' I mean the strength of will required to take responsibility for one's morality and to take ownership of one's moral beliefs. To be morally courageous in this sense a person must think deeply about moral issues, and decide on his or her own terms what is right and what is wrong. He or she must then take responsibility for the moral convictions that they have formed by being willing and able to defend them as their own.

Conversely moral cowardice, in the sense that I am talking about here, would occur when a person relies on a source external to themselves to determine their moral beliefs and who, when asked to justify their moral convictions, does so by appealing to the authority of that external source. In doing this a person is in a very real sense failing to take responsibility for their moral choices. When asked 'why do you believe that abortion is wrong' a moral coward will not give a list of reasons that justify that moral position, but will simply defer to someone or something else, and will justify their moral choices by saying 'because X says so, and I defer to X for moral guidance'.

Given these definitions it is plausible to say that a person who justifies their moral decisions by appealing directly to God's teaching is in danger of being a moral coward. It is important to note that this is moral cowardice in a very specific sense. A person may show great courage in upholding their moral convictions – for example those brave few who defied their orders to execute Jews in Nazi

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Germany. Such people were undoubtedly very brave in the *application* of their moral convictions. However, if such a person acquired those moral convictions by following religious teachings, and if, when asked to justify those convictions, such people simply appealed to the moral authority of God, then they do not show courage in the *acquisition* of those moral convictions. They are simply following someone, or something, else, and thus they neither take ownership of, nor responsibility for, the moral convictions that they are acting upon.

This point is difficult to understand when we consider a moral conviction, acquired by appeal to God, which we consider to be worthy of approval. The point becomes clearer when we consider a moral conviction, similarly acquired, that we do not approve of. Take, as an example, the moral conviction held by a dangerous minority that it is morally required to commit mass murder (of non-believers) in the name God. If we ask such a person to defend this view, the answer we expect to hear is that the killing is sanctioned, nay encouraged, by God. The moral justification for these acts is the moral authority of God. Such people will not examine the morality of those acts any further, and will simply defer the moral responsibility to God's higher moral authority. Neither do such people take responsibility for their moral convictions – they do not say 'I believe it is right to perform these acts because of a, b and c', but rather they say 'is is right to perform these acts because God says it is'. They do not reflect, they do not think, and they do not take responsibility. In essence – they are the ultimate moral cowards.

It is also almost certainly true that in many instances it takes a great deal of courage to blow oneself up for one's beliefs, just as it would require courage to defy the Nazi regime for one's beliefs – but this is courage of a different sort, that requires one to put concerns for one's self aside and act according to a higher principle. This might be called 'courage of moral conviction'. Conversely, the kind of moral courage that I am talking about is different, which

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involves taking personal responsibility for one's moral convictions, and might be called 'courage of moral acquisition'.

When we consider these two kinds of courage, we see that whether or not a person has courage of moral conviction has nothing to do with how one's moral convictions are acquired. One could acquire them through religion, through moral philosophy, or through the roll of a dice, but if a person acts according to that conviction despite risk or inconvenience to him or herself, that person has courage of moral conviction. Thus, a person might have courage of moral conviction and yet be cowardly in their moral acquisition.

If we now consider a case of a person who acquires a moral conviction by appeal to God which we consider to be worthy of approval, we find that the same argument must hold. Dietrich Bonheoffer, whose defiance of the Nazi regime in Germany showed great courage of moral conviction, was nonetheless, insofar as his moral convictions were acquired through God, a coward of moral acquisition. The fact that his conviction happened to be admirable has no bearing on this. Jesus, who defied the Pharisee and was sent to his death for his beliefs, showed great moral courage of conviction but, given that he deferred to the moral authority of God, he did not show courage of moral acquisition (although, depending on one's view of the trinity, this may be a moot point. Also, if the historical Jesus was not or did not claim to be the Son of God, but was merely a free-thinking moral revolutionary, then in fact he would have had a great deal of courage of moral acquisition, on this definition).

It is simply because I believe that a reliance on God as an external source of moral authority leads to this kind of moral cowardice, whether that conviction is one I admire or abhor, that I believe any alternative is preferable. If a person defers to the moral authority of God, then the only kind of moral courage available to him or her is courage of moral conviction. If one does not rely on God, then it is possible to have both courage of moral conviction *and*

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acquisition. I would prefer to be morally courageous in both senses, and to be such is, arguably, to be *more moral*.

Some Final Words

Joseph Conrad famously claimed that "the belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness". This rings true for me, but I would like to push an adverse claim. I think it is quite reasonable to think that the belief in a supernatural source of goodness is not necessary, and that men alone are quite capable of every goodness. They are quite capable of deciding for themselves what is right and wrong and they do not need to appeal to God to make their moral decisions for them. In fact, to do so, as I have tried to argue here, might lead to a form of moral cowardice; thus making a person *less* moral than they otherwise could be had they chosen to be courageous, to move out of the comfortable shelter of a God-given morality, and to take personal responsibility for their own moral convictions.

Jonathan Ives is a Research Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Birmingham.

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