SESSION TWO: IS THERE TRUTH, A MORAL LAW WE CAN ALL KNOW?

Introduction

Morality, ethics, and human rights

In our first session, Chuck Colson made the case that the idea of moral relativism makes it impossible to teach ethics, that there must be a commitment to transcendent moral truth for ethics to be possible. The concept that there is a moral law is the essential foundation for ideas of human rights, civil equality, and justice. This was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s argument in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, where he appealed to readers from the Christian natural law tradition to make the case that an unjust law does not bind the conscience, and that we have a moral responsibility to resist unjust laws.

The idea that there is a transcendent moral law is controversial today because of the influence of moral relativism, which teaches today because of the influence of moral relativism, which teaches that there are no absolute standards of right and wrong, but that ideas of ethics come from culture and that right and wrong are determined by the situation rather than by any objective standards.

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Natural law

In contrast, natural law ethics teaches that there is a moral law that is binding on all people, and that this law is knowable to human reason. So, for example, all societies have laws for marriage or something resembling it; the details may vary from culture to culture, but there is no society without norms for sexual relationships and child rearing. All societies have laws against theft and against murder. Most societies recognize some version of the Golden Rule. All of these are reflections of people’s capacity to grasp certain human goods and reason about their implications for behaviors and the organization of society.
Christianity has historically argued that the natural law was given by God in whose image man is made. Because of human frailty and sin, we do not see the law as clearly as we should, and so divine revelation in Scripture is necessary to clarify it. Augustine of Hippo went so far as to say that since the Fall, life according to natural law is no longer possible and men need instead to seek salvation through the divine law and grace of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, a significant segment of the Christian tradition, particularly within Catholic thought following St. Thomas Aquinas, holds that human reason is sufficient to develop an understanding of the fundamentals of ethics even apart from the Bible.

Natural law theory—Christian and otherwise—further argues that *positive law* (that is, human legislation) must be rooted in natural law for its legitimacy. Positive law is itself required by natural law for the protection of human goods and the well-being of all members of the community.

The need for consistency

The moral law must inform everything we do. We cannot compartmentalize it and only apply it in some areas of life while ignoring it in others. For example, when laws are unjust, when they do not conform to the moral law, we have a moral obligation to work to change them and to resist them if necessary through civil disobedience. This principle was at the heart of the Civil Rights movement as illustrated in Dr. King’s *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*.

Failure to recognize and live by moral truth invites chaos in society. It can result in the worst injustices, including slavery, apartheid, and genocide, along with the kinds of behaviors that led to the economic crisis in the U. S. If we do not govern ourselves according to the moral law, government will have no choice but to legislate morality for us in the form of ever tighter laws and regulations of all aspects of our behavior. And that is the high road to tyranny.

**Video Outline**

I. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail
   a. The Judeo-Christian tradition
   b. Natural law
   c. Unjust laws and civil disobedience

II. The argument from experience
   a. C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man
   b. Children and fairness

III. Evolutionary psychology: is morality programmed into our genes?
   a. The argument from transformed behavior
   b. The argument from altruism
IV. Is moral relativism possible?
   a. Compartmentalization
   b. The problem of atrocities
   c. Religion in public life
   d. The problem of raw power in law and government

Questions for Discussion

1. **Discuss**: Read Romans 2:14-15.
   What is the “work of the law” and what does it mean to say this is “written” on the hearts of human beings? What would you cite as evidence that this is true?

   **Consider**: Both the Bible and the natural law tradition argue for the “principle of equality, the equal worth of every human being, no matter how high or how low in the world’s eyes, no matter how rich or poor, weak or strong, all being equal,” as Professor George put it.

   **Discuss**: Read Genesis 1:26-28. What is the “image and likeness” of God? How does this factor into the belief in human equality before God? At the same time, in view of the immense differences between people in terms of ability or opportunity, how can we make the claim for human equality?

   **Discuss**: Read Daniel 3:16-18; Acts 4:16-20; and Acts 5:27-29. How do you reconcile Dr. King’s profound respect for law with his call to civil disobedience?

2. **Consider**: In The Abolition of Man, C. S. Lewis makes the argument that natural law, which he calls the Tao, is the foundation for all other laws:

   This thing which I have called for convenience the Tao, and which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes, is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgment of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) “ideologies”, all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess.

   **Discuss**: In view of Romans 2:14-15 and the cultural and moral relativism common in our culture, what do you think of Lewis’s argument? Are all systems of value, all concepts of right and wrong ultimately derived from the same source? What are the sources from which we can learn moral truth?

   If moral truth is knowable, why do we have so much disagreement about it in our own society and across cultures? Does Proverbs 14:12 suggest and answer?
3. **Consider:** Christianity argues that natural law ethics comes from God and is written on the human heart, which is why there is a measure of commonality on ethical norms across cultures. Non-theists need a different explanation. One popular alternative today is evolutionary psychology, which argues that “natural law” is a result of natural selection, that is, that people who behaved this way had a survival advantage. Glenn Sunshine argued, however, that evolution does not occur by groups but by individuals, and thus that sacrificing yourself for the good of the group is not a trait that you can pass on to your heirs.

**Discuss:** How does the existence of altruism challenge the credibility of Darwinian evolution and the notion of “the survival of the fittest”? Is natural law theory a more satisfying explanation for altruism?

**Consider:** Michael Miller noted that people experience their ability to make choices every day. But if our behavior is programmed by our genes, free choice is not possible; all our choices are determined by genetic functions beyond our rational or moral control.

**Discuss:** Where would you turn in the Bible to support the idea that human beings are individually morally accountable for their choices and works? Under the umbrella of Scripture, can anyone try to excuse his or her conduct by blaming genes? Explain.

4. **Consider:** There probably are no thoroughgoing relativists when it comes to ethics. People tend to compartmentalize their ethical behavior, and, in the process, show in many ways that they can’t live without objective standards of right and wrong.

**Discuss:** How do Romans 2:14-15 and the idea of the image of God help to account for this fact? Why do some people continue to insist on relativism as a moral standard? How might you explain to an “absolute relativist” that such a view is not at all workable?

5. **Consider:** Michael Miller argues that we have only two choices: either questions about the nature of humanity and the common good are settled on the basis of truth, or they are settled on the basis of power. The only hope for those holding minority views on ethical matters is that the political powers-that-be will act favorably toward them.

**Discuss:** Read Leviticus 5:1; Proverbs 15:22-23 and 25:26. In a pluralistic society, is it appropriate to advocate for your ethical beliefs even if informed by a religion or worldview that others may not accept? Why or why not?