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July 21, 2009: The Rejection of God Leading to Relativism

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Title: The Rejection of God Leading to Relativism

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7/21/2009—Sometimes I wonder if I am not overwrought and mistaken in thinking that secularism in the West, and in the United States in particular, is unthinkingly headed for a culturally unsustainable descent into relativism and nihilism because of its break with traditional religion and a concept of God. Some secularists have been assuring me that no connection exists between secularism and the rejection of the theory of objective value. Daniel Dennett tells me that we don't need religion to be good and Sam Harris says that he believes in absolute right and wrong. I am certain they are right, but I don't share their assumption that rejection of relativism is easy in a secular worldview.

Then I run into the real, unadulterated thing: rejection of God leading directly to relativism. Here is my most recent example: a letter to the editor in the New York Times book review. I reprint it here in its entirety.

To the Editor:

The tone of Paul Bloom's review of Robert Wright's "Evolution of God" (June 28) suggests that perhaps both he and Bloom, in assuming that God does not exist, take an untenable step in assuming that a "God's-eye view" of an "expansion of the moral imagination" does exist, and that in conducting their historical survey, which transcends specific civilizations, they know what it is.

Certainly, they know what such an expansion of moral imagination is from a Western Enlightenment perspective, and as a fellow inheritor of that perspective, I share their view. But only from our own perspective. Every thinking member of every high civilization — Egyptian, Greek, Hindu, medieval Christian, etc. — probably has or had the tendency to assume that he or she is on the right track philosophically and morally, that all predecessors were mistaken or at best insufficiently enlightened about morality, and further, that all future moralists are likely to be decadent. In other words, they (we) find it too easy to assume that we have finally arrived.

A "God's-eye view" both exists and is at last understood. By us. But once we have kicked the metaphorical God-ladder out from under ourselves, we no longer have a basis for any universal moral absolutes. An absolute "God's-eye view" of morality no longer makes sense. What I call an advance in moral tone is likely to be seen as sentimentally softhearted, or insufficiently stoic or what-have-you, by a sophisticated member of another civilization, past or future. And I have no way to demonstrate that I am transcendently right, and he is wrong.

THOMAS CUDDIHY

[I don't know Cuddihy, by the way. If he is out there, please write in.]

Now, several points. First, Cuddihy's relativism is internally inconsistent. He claims that it is true absolutely that nothing is true absolutely. This is not a serious objection, I know.

Second, the fact that society might collapse if we agreed with Cuddihy and acted on that belief does not mean he is wrong. But I think we would collapse and that is at least worth thinking about. Even Rorty, if I remember correctly, did not want children exposed to his thinking.

Third, Cuddihy is mistaken in a much more serious way. He assumes that he is making an ontological claim—no moral claims are absolute if God does not exist. But actually all he is making is an epistemological one—there is no way to demonstrate that I am right and you are wrong. The ontological claim is complex. Charles Taylor agrees that there are no absolutes without God. I don't believe that it so. The universe is still a certain kind of thing. The good may be to be in accord with the kind of beings we are and the kind of thing the universe is (with apologies to C.S. Lewis).

Fourth, the epistemological claim is not significant and is unaffected by the existence or not of God. The South believed in God and so did the North. They disagreed not over whether truth and good were real, but over the substantive claim that slavery was in fact wrong. Now, I believe history has revealed the absolute truth of the claim that slavery is morally wrong. I don't care if some civilization believes otherwise. Nor do I think this is just my opinion. If it were just my opinion, someone would today be proposing that humankind return to chattel slavery. Mr. Cuddihy is wrong, thank God (if you will excuse the expression). No one is going back to slavery in the absence of catastrophic breakdown in human civilization. And even if that occurs, it is likely that the tyrants who do it will know perfectly well that what they are doing is morally wrong. Fortunately. There are moral absolutes even though we mistake them and don't follow them.