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LEST WE FORGET: FREE-THOUGHT AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: In the world of modern theology, specifically Western theology, there has been a tendency to knit together religion and morality. It is partially because much work in theology is done with the assumption that since God exists God must care about human intentions and actions. The existence of God and religion, as the public manifestation of shared philosophical and moral beliefs, has been thought to impart moral awareness and behavior, as well as ground morality. Many modern theologians have given voice to sentiments like these. They equate irreligion with iniquity, freethinking with depravity, and atheism with apathy about the world, human life, and morality. This essay challenges such positions by arguing for the validity of naturalistic accounts of morality. It shows how such accounts can be applied to the treatment of our environment as well as give us the motivation to do so. From David Hume to Paul Kurtz a history of freethought is drawn and the human reasons for protecting and conserving our environment are examined.

Keywords: morality, free-thought, atheism, environment, reason, emotion.

A recent example shows how both liberal and conservative religious believers connect morality with belief in God. In 2007 Christopher Hitchens, the notorious journalist who shocked the world with his book *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007), debated Rev. Al Sharpton at the New York Public Library on the issue of God and morality. Rev. Sharpton said something interesting: "If there is no supervisory being than what do we base morality on…there is nothing immoral if there is nothing in charge" (Sharpton 2007). Two years later Hitchens debated Frank Turek, co-author of *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (2004), where Turek says, "how does morality exist if it's just my opinion against your opinion and there is no standard beyond?" (Turek 2004) That same year Hitchens also debated the well-known analytic theist William Lane Craig who made similar remarks and referred to the famous dictum attributed to Dostoevsky that "if there is no immortality all things are permitted." Here we have three religious persons, a black-liberal and two white conservatives, agreeing that morality and meaning depend on the existence of God.

Against neo-conservatives, evangelicals, and the nominally religious, one does not need to believe religious doctrine or perform religious acts to be moral, responsible, or socially productive or to promote values like peace, charity, responsibility, and justice. The whole liberal tradition attests to men and women giving voice to the role of the individual and his or her social and political freedoms and responsibilities. Many "New Atheists" have presented evidence that the religiosity of a given society does not correspond to increased levels of

happiness, safety, and peace. In fact, some have made the argument that religiosity actually *decreases* these levels. One notable New Atheist made this point by saying that

> any number of societies now exist where the majority has freely abandoned religion and God. Far from being dens of iniquity, these societies are the happiest, safest, and most successful in the world (Stenger 2009, 233).

Given the best of our current knowledge it would be far-fetched to conclude one way or the other that religiosity *increases* or *decreases* a given societies overall happiness. Think about the amount of sorting required to distinguish religiosity from economics, social norms, climate, history, and culture, in the quest to differentiate *one primary cause* sufficient for happiness. That to say, irreligion or religion cannot be equated with morality, happiness, prosperity, or peace (much to the dislike of prosperity preachers). Human nature and behavior will remain, whether manifest in a religious mode or not. As Razib Khan has recently pointed out in *The Guardian*: "mothers will sacrifice for their children, whether they believe in a living God above, an eternal karmic cycle, or a mindless evolutionary process across the eons" (Khan 2010).

The free-thought community, which includes atheists, agnostics, skeptics, secularists, humanists, naturalists, and anarchists, is not a simple monolithic structure, but is composed of many different, closely related thoughts and thinkers. Because of this, it is always best to be cautious when categorizing them for fear of misrepresentation and oversimplification. Yet there are obvious similarities and connections between them. I must make mention of my distaste for the term "free-thought" at the beginning. Although a useful term, it can easily be interpreted as implying that religious persons are not free, or less free than "free-thinkers." A modern story may help to explain. Daniel Dennett, the notable New Atheist and philosopher, created a stir when he spoke on the efforts of atheists and agnostics to create a new word for their belief system; the word "bright" was considered a possible title (Dennett 2006, 21). The stir was over how this word might present religious persons as "dim." I take issue with both "free-thinkers" and "brights" as terms to describe the broader community. This is not merely for the sake of being politically correct: it is because the words we employ affect the ways we view the world, and those within it (Boroditsky 2009, 116-29). It is exactly *because* I admire many religious thinkers that I take issue with the terms, but I will, in light of this qualification, use "free-thought" as a designation for the historical movements against organized religion, religious beliefs, and supernatural explanations.

At the same time, there is a sense in which I think some religious believers to be "trapped" in their beliefs. Politically speaking, religious movements have exerted substantial control over their practitioners and laymen, especially in the high or magisterial types of Churches. Under the banner of unity and solidarity they have enabled those in power to stay in power. Socially, religious communities often put pressure on each other to live up to what they consider the godly life. John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfectionism* (1767), Charles Finney's 1837 lecture on *Christian Perfection*—not to mention the Pentecostal and Wesleyan holiness movements and the Keswick Convention—show the enormous requirements religious persons put on others on the grounds of scriptural warrant. When born into such a community it can be extremely hard to disassociate one's self from the community or bring disagreement into the community. In this context dissent is not

considered a virtue. Lastly, the psychological factors at work in the mind of the spiritually inclined are far from simple. Guilt, condemnation, expectation, holiness, and devotion are parts of their inner-dialogue, and cause many anxiety, fear, and paranoia. The psychological and existential turmoil of the likes of Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky speak of the trauma experienced when one gives in to the belief that God and supernatural entities are in relationship to you. And this is not uncommon. Many religious believers think they are influenced by external forces like demons, angels, the Holy Spirit, or even by God himself. It is my belief that the extent to which one thinks of him/herself as influenced by these forces, and without escape from them, is the extent to which they are determined by them, and so not free.

Because religion is not necessary for morality, or moral living, it is also not necessary for moral decisions regarding the physical world we inhabit. Many liberal Christians have done great work on issues relating to ecology, environmental philosophy, stewardship, and creation-care. Similar ideas have been spoken of by Islam, Buddhism, and many other world religions. A useful parallel is in order. At the end of last year (2009) the United Nations held a Conference on Climate Change at Copenhagen, discussing issues of global warming, reducing carbon emissions, and sustainability. Slightly before and after this time, two different groups, the IV Summit of Religious Leaders and the Parliament of the World's Religions, held conferences and sessions relating to economic and environmental concerns. These meetings show how invested many religious communities are in the fight against poverty and ecological destruction. Where, I wonder, was the "2009 Free-thought Conference on Ecology?" The reason there was none is the reason I write this article.

Many who are considered part of the heritage of free thought have provided arguments for a morality based on human need, sympathy, and responsibility. Admittedly, there are those who simply never wrote on environmental philosophy, and some who did not even care for it. Some of the more pessimistic philosophers have asked us to resign our concern for this world because it is meaningless, tragic, and because our lives are simply too short for worry (Schopenhauer 1966). But this appropriation of free thought does not represent the sentiments of all, or even most. I mean to show in this article how many atheists and agnostics have provided naturalistic arguments for morality and moral living, including care for the physical world, and have not given up on humanity and our responsibilities to one another. This way we may better appreciate those, who although lacking religion or religious beliefs, propose models of behavior toward each other and toward the earth.

Some models of behavior proposed by these philosophers are not *explicitly* concerned with the environment, or ecological issues, but their proposals may be extended to speak to them. They tacitly address issues about the natural world and our treatment of it. Some of these models include:

- David Hume: Sentimental Ethics
- Charles Darwin: Evolutionary Ethics
- John Stuart Mill: Utilitarian Ethics
- Karl Marx: Communist Ethics
- William James: Pragmatic Ethics
- Jean Paul Sartre: Existential Ethics
- Paul Kurtz: Secular Humanist Ethics

What each of these ethical theories has in common is that they are grounded in human experience and reason (John Wesley's *Quadrilateral* minus Scripture and Tradition). They do not require any God, supernatural force, or spirit to justify their claims. God does not *reveal* them, humans *construct* them. Many conservative religious persons have spoken out against such attempts. They feel the need to certify, universalize, and absolutize morality. Morality is a zero-sum game for them. If they are apologetic in their approach they usually argue against conventional, relative, or situational ethics, showing that they "destroy themselves," are self-contradictory, or at least harmful to society.

Conversely, many liberal theologians have synthesized their view of God and humanity with the moral philosophies of men like these; Paul Tillich, Karl Jaspers, Rudolf Bultmann, and Karl Rahner were directly influenced by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger; Martin Buber, Thomas J.J. Altizer, John D. Caputo, Jean-Luc Marion, and Gianni Vattimo have spoken of their indebtedness to Friedrick Nietzsche; and Etienne Cabet, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Ernst Bloch base many of their opinions on the philosophy of Karl Marx. There are fewer, if any, theologians who have taken up the case for empirically minded men like Francis Bacon, John Locke, or David Hume, or the scientifically minded positivists like John Stuart Mill, Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, or Bertrand Russell. This is obviously because their philosophies do not lend themselves easily for theological interpretation, if at all.

The problem many people have with these naturalistic accounts is that they seem to place all value in the *valuer*. For naturalists there is no reason to believe that ethics are rooted in anything other than human emotion and reason. There are many who have presented arguments for how morality is based in the evolution of the human species (e.g. E.O. Wilson, Michael Ruse, Peter Singer, and Richard Dawkins). It would be hard to imagine our world, given the evolutionary picture of human cognitive development presented to us by the sciences, having value or meaning located outside of the valuer. For naturalistic accounts there are no mind independent moral laws existing in abstraction. Many think there are no good reasons for what Kant called "a metaphysic of morals." Kant's deontological ethics provide a good picture of what many naturalistic accounts stand in opposition to. For him "pure philosophy (that is metaphysics) must come first, and without it [there can be] no moral philosophy at all" (Kant 1785, 58). Those who accept a morality based in metaphysics see naturalistic ethics as uprooting any ground upon which moral claims are made. Kant put it this way:

> Every one must admit that a law has to carry with it absolute necessity if it is to be valid morally—valid, that is, as a ground of obligation (Kant 1785, 57).

After all, if ethics are rooted solely in human emotion and reason, then how can they be normative, or a rule that condemns certain human behavior? The answer they give is simple: emotion and reason. Reason, for many of these philosophers, is enough to ground assertions that *condemn* and *condone* certain behaviors, based on their utility and consequence; and emotion-based (emotive) ethics provides accounts of the origin of human morality and the development of sympathy, empathy, care, and concern. "Moral principles" according to Paul Kurtz, should "be judged by their actual consequences" and "need to be hammered out on the anvil of reason" (Kurtz 1983, 38). It is my opinion, contra Kant, that a normative ethic can be established on the basis of these two human characteristics.

Each of these philosopher's falls somewhere on a spectrum between rationalist and emotive moral theories; for instance, Hume would be on the side of sentiment and feeling, while Mill would be on the side of rationality and reason. Although each of these men differ slightly regarding what appropriately grounds morality, they all share the common ground of looking to the *human* for answers regarding morality and ethics. Some think that you are forced to pick between these two categories (reason vs. feeling) when arguing for a moral philosophy, but I am of the opinion that one can easily accept both as different ways of addressing moral issues. In my mind it cannot be feeling alone, or reason alone, that establishes morality, but a combination and mixture of the two. I am in agreement with David Schmidtz when he noted, against what he calls "single stranded theories" (like Utilitarianism or Deontology) that "the truth is that morality is more than one thing" (Schmidtz 2008, 120). It seems problematic to assert the primacy of one value, be-it happiness, pleasure, freedom, or duty, over against the others. That is, an honest moral philosophy cannot be monistic or exclusive but should promote a value pluralism that takes account a diversity of values, difference, and situational contexts in which morality is produced and expressed.

When asking the question *why should we protect and conserve our natural environment* each of these thinkers has an answer:

- David Hume: Because it is felt as a human sentiment
- Charles Darwin: Because we are entangled in it and it protects our survival as a species
- John Stuart Mill: Because it maximizes human (present and future) happiness
- Karl Marx: Because the natural environment has use-value
- William James: Because of its practical value for humanity
- Jean Paul Sartre: Because in our freedom we bear the responsibility of humanity
- Paul Kurtz: Because it is valuable and good for humans

It may sound like a plea for common sense but each of these answers is enough to conclude that we ought to take care of our environment. I can think of no better reasons than these. To think that we ought to care about the environment for any other reasons—reasons like divine mandate, scriptural imperative, or orders from religious authorities—is problematic. It would be immoral and dehumanizing if the impetus for environmental concern were an authoritarian command to do so. In the spirit of George Orwell we ought to be apprehensive towards any institution, be-it political, religious, or secular, which seeks to strip us of our autonomy and freedom to dissent. Here is where freethought resounds with contemporary anarchism and the general conclusion that power structures in politics and religion inhibit human freedom and development. The motivation, they conclude, should be out of the freely decided concern for the environment we inhabit. On humanistic principles alone—principles like reason, sentiment, and science—they establish the motivation and need to protect and conserve our natural environment.

J. Baird Callicott, a leading environmental philosopher and exponent of Aldo Leopold's famous *land ethic*, examines the Humean notion that humans project their sentiments onto mindless matter. Although challenged by many as relativistic, Callicott thinks that Hume's sentimental approach can "ground" morality in the feelings and emotions of human beings (Callicott 1989). Alan Carter, the environmental philosopher at the University of Glasgow, has similarly explored ways in which Hume's theory of sentiments and projection can be applied to environmental concerns (Carter 2000, 3-37). Here are two examples of a

list that can be expanded. Many have taken David Hume's and Adam Smith's theories of moral sentiments and applied them to care for the environment. There are also many works connecting the philosophies of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx to the environment. This is illustrative of the fact that the naturalistic moral theories put forward by these men can be harvested to promote global care and concern.

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