

Ethics and the Fabric of the Universe

Claremont School of Theology (emeritus)

David Ray Griffin

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Modern moral theory is in crisis, being unable to justify morality or to provide motivation to be moral. This inability is due to its atheism, understood as the doctrine that there is no place for moral norms to exist, so that they do not belong to the fabric of the universe. The first part of my paper illustrates modern moral theory's twofold failure (to provide justification or motivation for morality) in terms of the thought of John Mackie, Gilbert Harman, Bernard Williams, and Jürgen Habermas. The second part argues that this twofold problem can be overcome by means of a worldview that is theistic a minimal sense, meaning that it holds that moral norms do belong to the fabric of the universe and in a way in which they can affect our experience. The third part suggests that Whitehead's philosophy, by virtue of its ontological principle, provides the requisite kind of theism in a form that could be accepted by many cultures.

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Modern moral theory in the West is in crisis. It cannot explain why any moral principles are objectively right. And, although it can describe the moral point of view, explaining that it is an impartial, rather than a self-centered, point of view, it cannot explain why anyone should take this point of view, rather than simply promoting his or her own interests.

This crisis in moral theory creates a practical crisis. Given the increasing globalization of human civilization, we need a global ethic, meaning a set of moral norms that are accepted by all societies for guiding our interactions with each other. The lack of such norms means that there is nothing to guide international relations other than power, as illustrated recently by America's attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq in order to control their oil.

Universally recognized moral norms would be effective in curbing the behavior of greedy countries, of course, only if there were some global institution with both the authorization and the power to enforce these moral norms. Such an institution would ideally be a global democratic government. But such a government would presuppose agreement on a global ethic. The practical crisis is that, although our world desperately needs a global ethic if it is to create a form of global governance through which it can survive the present century, modern moral theory cannot provide the basis for such an ethic.

In speaking of "modern moral theory," I mean moral theory insofar as it has accepted two convictions that have been widely considered constitutive of distinctively modern thinking since the 18th century. The first conviction is that all beliefs must be based on experience and reason, not on any appeal to authority. This conviction by itself would not have led to a crisis in moral theory. It does so only when it is combined with the second one, namely, that experience and reason provide no justification for affirming theism. This is the case even if, as I propose, "theism" is understood minimally as simply the contrary of atheism, with "atheism" defined as the doctrine that moral norms do not belong to the fabric of the universe.

In this essay, I first show that modern moral theorists themselves admit that they can neither affirm the objectivity of moral norms nor provide motivation to be moral. I next argue that providing both objectivity and motivation requires a religious view of reality based on a minimal theism, in which moral norms are regarded as part of the fabric of the universe. I conclude by suggesting that Alfred North Whitehead has provided the basis for a form of theism that fulfills this need.

1. The Twofold Failure of Modern Moral Theory

Traditional Western thought affirmed *moral realism*, according to which normative moral values exist in the nature of things. Because this view was formulated paradigmatically by Plato, as part of his more general affirmation of the existence of ideal forms, it is often called "Platonic realism."

Plato's affirmation of ideal forms raised the question of *how* and *where* such forms could exist, which we can call the "Platonic problem." Plato himself

seemed to imply that they somehow existed on their own. This view was found unintelligible by Aristotle, who said, rightly, that abstract, ideal entities can exist only in concrete, actual entities. The position known as Middle Platonism solved this problem with the doctrine that the forms exist in "the mind of God," a thesis that was adopted in most medieval philosophy.

This doctrine also solved the question of how ideal entities can be causally effective in the world. Entities that are ideal rather than actual can, by themselves, exert no agency. But if ideal entities are in a divine actuality, they can be given causal efficacy by divine agency. Medieval thinkers could thereby understand how mathematical principles can inform the world in general and how moral norms can be impressed on the minds of human beings in particular.

This Middle Platonic position continued to be presupposed in early modernity. As philosopher of mathematics Reuben Hersh has pointed out, "For Leibniz and Berkeley, abstractions like numbers are thoughts in the mind of God."¹

The late modern worldview, however, is nontheistic. As Hersh says, "the Mind of God [is] no longer heard of in academic discourse."² This change in worldview has, Hersh adds, created a huge problem, because philosophers of mathematics cannot explain how mathematical entities can be effective in the world or how they can even exist. The same problem has been created for the philosophy of morality, as can be illustrated in terms of a few recent moral philosophers.

In his 1977 book *Ethics*, subtitled *Inventing Right and Wrong*, Oxford philosopher John Mackie said that moral values are not "part of the fabric of the world."³ Mackie's rejection of the objective existence of moral norms presupposed atheism. Saying that his book was "a discussion of what we can make of morality without recourse to God," he conceded that, "if the requisite theological doctrine could be defended, a kind of objective ethical prescriptivity could be defended."⁴ In another book, however, Mackie argued that theism is not defensible.⁵

The full implications of Mackie's denial of moral realism are brought out by his discussion of the moral principle that, "if someone is writhing in agony before your eyes," you should "do something about it if you can." For Mackie, such principles were simply conventions adopted by our society, not "objective, intrinsic, requirements of the nature of things."⁶

¹Reuben Hersh, *What is Mathematics, Really?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12.

² Ibid.

³ John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 24.

⁴Ibid., 48.

⁵ Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

⁶*Ethics*, 79-80.

Princeton philosopher Gilbert Harman expressed the same view. Saying that "[o]ur scientific conception of the world has no place for gods,"⁷ he also, speaking of moral norms, said: "our scientific conception of the world has no place for entities of this sort."⁸

On this basis, Harman, like Mackie, was led to a completely relativistic view: "[T]here are," he says, "no absolute facts of right or wrong." There are only "relative facts about what is right or wrong"--relative, that is, to some set of conventions adopted by a particular society.⁹

The belief of Mackie and Harman that moral norms do not exist is based not only on their atheism but also on their conviction that we can perceive things beyond ourselves only by means of our sensory organs. Mackie said that if we were aware of objective moral values, "it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else."¹⁰ Harman, claiming that all the entities studied by science are known through sensory perception, he said: "[T]here does not seem to be any way in which the actual rightness or wrongness of a given situation can have any effect on your perceptual apparatus."¹¹

Whereas Mackie and Harman focused primarily on the Platonic problem created by atheism, other late modern moral philosophers have given equal attention to the resulting problem of moral motivation.

The traditional ground for moral motivation was what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls the "religious perspective," which involves "the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection."¹² It is this feature of the religious perspective that accounts for religion's moral vitality: "The powerfully coercive 'ought' is felt to grow out of a comprehensive factual 'is.' . . . [The power of sacred symbols] comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level."¹³

To affirm this identity of fact and value at the most fundamental level of reality is to affirm the reality of something sacred, something holy. Beliefs about the holy generate feelings about how we ought to live, because we

⁷Gilbert Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. Michael Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 363-86, at 381.

⁸ Ibid., 366.

⁹ Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131-32.

¹⁰ Mackie, *Ethics*, 38-39.

¹¹ Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, 8.

¹² Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 97.

¹³ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 126-27.

naturally want to be in harmony with that which is holy. David Hume famously argued that ought-statements cannot be generated from is-statements. That claim is not true within a religious view of reality, because is-statements about the holy reality do generate ought-statements.

Hume's position is true, however, within a nonreligious view of reality. If reality is understood to be neither holy nor rooted in something holy, then no statement about what we morally ought to do can be generated from a purely factual statement about the nature of reality. It would seem likely, therefore, that ethics, once severed from any belief in a holy reality, would be unable to provide justification and motivation for a moral life. And this is what we find.

For example, Bernard Williams, who taught at Cambridge University, entitled his major book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, by which he meant that morality "can[not] be justified by philosophy."¹⁴ Given the modern rejection of theism and hence of a teleological view of the world, Williams said, we are forced to the conclusion that moral norms are not "part of the fabric of the world."¹⁵ It was this "discovery," as he regarded it, that led to the realization that it is a fallacy---the so-called *naturalistic* fallacy---to think that value can somehow be derived from fact, so that *ought* could be derived from *is*.¹⁶ We cannot say that being moral is important from the point of view of the universe, Williams said, because "to the universe . . . nothing is important."¹⁷

A similar conclusion was reached by Jürgen Habermas. Given the "disenchantment of the world" brought about by the decline of theism, Habermas has argued, we need a "postmetaphysical" morality--one that has "detached itself from the religious and metaphysical context from which it arose."¹⁸ Although this postmetaphysical philosophy can explain that morality involves taking an impartial point of view, based on empathy with all beings who will be affected by some action,¹⁹ it cannot "provide a motivating response to the question of . . . why we should be moral." Why? Because we cannot "salvage an unconditional meaning without God."²⁰

¹⁴Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 22.

¹⁵ Bernard Williams, "Ethics and the Fabric of the World," in *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 203-14, at 205.

¹⁶ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 128-29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁸Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 71, 146.

2. Minimal Theism and the Fabric of the World

Many theists, understanding how atheism leads to a relativistic outlook, have argued that the solution is to return to the worldview of traditional theism.²¹ People cannot do this, however, just because they become convinced that it is the only way to undergird morality. Traditional theism has simply become incredible to most intellectuals, especially because of its doctrine of divine omnipotence, which creates an insoluble problem of evil and a conflict between religion and science.

This fact would undermine the prospects for a global ethic, however, only if the options were limited to atheism and traditional Western theism. But most Asian belief systems are quite different from either of these views. Even within the West, there have been many philosophies that lie somewhere between traditional theism and the complete atheism affirmed by Mackie, Harman, Williams, and Habermas.

To move beyond the impasse, accordingly, we need to quit thinking parochially about the meaning of these terms, as if to affirm "theism" necessarily meant embracing traditional Western theism, and as if rejecting that doctrine entailed embracing the completely nihilistic view endorsed by philosophers such as Mackie and Harman.

A good starting point for finding non-parochial definitions of theism and atheism is provided by these philosophers' assertion that there is simply no *place* in the universe for moral norms, so that they are not "part of the fabric of the world."

We have here a true either-or issue and thereby a true dividing line: Either there is a "place" in which moral norms exist, or there is not. This provides a basis for defining theism and atheism as strict opposites---as the words suggest they should be. Atheism in the broadest sense can be defined as the doctrine that *the universe has no place for moral norms to exist*, so that they are *not* part of the fabric of the world. Theism in the most minimal and hence broadest sense would then be the doctrine that *there is a place in which moral norms exist, and in a way in which we can become aware of them*.

This final stipulation---that they exist in a way in which we can become aware of them---should not be thought to provide an insuperable stumbling block. Philosophers such as Harman claim that we cannot experience moral norms because they are not objects of sensory perception. But, as several writers have pointed out, moral norms, mathematical truths, and logical truths are all in the same boat.²² Given the fact that we do not doubt our ability to be aware of these truths---even if we are unsure just *how* it is that we are aware of them---there is no reason to treat moral norms differently.

Given this extremely broad conception of theism---according to which "theos" is understood simply as the "place" where moral norms exist---many

²¹ The best statement of this position I know is Basil Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular: The Dilemma of the Traditional Conscience* (Oxford University Press, 1980).

²² Hilary Putnam has pointed out that "the nature of mathematical truth" and "the nature of logical truth" are one and the same problem; see *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 500. On the problem of perceiving moral and mathematical entities, see Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, 9-10.

philosophical and religious worldviews would be considered theistic that, under more parochial definitions of theism, were not. Although Confucianism has often been considered a purely humanistic tradition, it clearly regards its moral norms as rooted in the universe.²³ Although Buddhism is often described as atheistic, all that it denies, because of its doctrine of "co-dependent arising," is the idea that our universe was created out of absolute nothingness. Few if any forms of Buddhism deny that religious-moral values belong to the fabric of reality.²⁴

3. Whiteheadian Theism and Moral Norms

My argument is that for any society to have a basis for providing justification and motivation for the moral point of view, it must have a worldview that includes theism in the minimal sense, according to which moral norms belong to the fabric of the world. Theism in this minimal sense, however, is not an actual doctrine held by anyone. It is simply an abstraction, always being embodied in some particular form of theism.

For many people, this form will continue to be some version of traditional theism. But what about people who can no longer hold this doctrine? Is there a form of theism that does not have the problems that led to the widespread rejection of traditional theism?

Whiteheadian process philosophy has, I believe, provided a theistic way of thinking that can be found intellectually satisfying by people from any society. Besides rejecting the traditional doctrines of omnipotence and creation out of nothing, Whiteheadian theism also explicitly addresses the twofold question of how moral norms can exist and how we can become aware of them.

Whitehead's answer to this question can be introduced by a statement from Reuben Hersh, who was quoted earlier. Having pointed out that mathematicians no longer speak of God and yet continue to affirm a Platonic realm of immaterial numbers, Hersh pointed out the incoherence of this view, saying: "Platonism without God is like the grin on Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat.... The grin remained without the cat."²⁵

The point behind this metaphor, according to which the grin needs the cat, was made by Whitehead in terms of what he called the "ontological principle," one formulation of which is:

Everything must be somewhere; and here 'somewhere' means 'some actual entity.' Accordingly the general potentiality of the universe must be

²³ See, for example, Tu Wei-Ming and Weiming Tu, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

²⁴ "Serious distortions may result," wrote E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "when it is said that Buddhism and Jainism are atheistic religions" (*Theories of Primitive Religion* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965], 119).

²⁵Hersh, *What is Mathematics, Really?* 12.

somewhere. . . . The notion of 'subsistence' is merely the notion of how eternal objects can be components of the primordial nature of God.²⁶

Besides answering the Platonic question about the *location* of ideal entities, Whitehead's ontological principle also addresses the question of their *efficacy*, saying, in another formulation: "[A]part from things that are actual, there is nothing--nothing either in fact or in efficacy."²⁷ The eternal objects can be effective, Whitehead said, because the "primordial nature of God," which he also called "the Eros of the Universe," is "the active entertainment of all ideals, with the urge to their finite realization, each in its due season."²⁸

Whitehead came to this view only late in life, after he began constructing a systematic metaphysics. Given his long involvement with mathematics and logic, he was aware that a metaphysical position would need to explain how the ideal entities studied by these disciplines could exist and be effective in the world.

He also became convinced that his metaphysics needed to do justice to the fact that "the impact of aesthetic, religious and moral notions is inescapable." It is inescapable, he said, because a central feature of human experience is "the intuition of immediate occasions as failing or succeeding in reference to the ideal relevant to them."²⁹ He realized, therefore, that his metaphysics had to have room not only for "mathematical Platonic forms," which he called "eternal objects of the objective species," but also for "eternal objects of the subjective species," which include normative values.³⁰

At first, Whitehead thought that an "envisagement" of the eternal objects could be attributed to what he in his first metaphysical book called the "underlying eternal energy,"³¹ which he later called "creativity." But he soon realized that he could not attribute any kind of activity, even "envisagement," to energy or creativity, because to do so is to violate the ontological principle's stipulation that only *actualities* can *act*.

Whitehead's resulting conviction was that "the agency whereby ideas obtain efficiency in the creative advance" is "a basic Psyche whose active grasp of ideas conditions impartially the whole process of the Universe." Whitehead's formulation of this idea was an attempt at "understanding how the Ideals in

²⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁸ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 11, 277.

²⁹ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press 1968), 19; *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996 [reprint of 1926 edition]), 60.

³⁰ *Process and Reality*, 291.

³¹ *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press 1967), 105. This passage reflects Whitehead's position when he delivered the Lowell Lectures, before he had developed his first doctrine of God, which is reflected in Chapters X and XI.

God's nature, by reason of their status in his nature, are thereby persuasive elements in the creative advance."³²

The idea that moral ideals are given agency by God is only half of Whitehead's explanation of how they can affect our experience. The other half is his theory of perception, according to which sensory perception, far from being our only mode of perception, is derivative from a more basic, nonsensory mode, through which we know the reality of other actualities, the past, and ideal entities, including logical principles, mathematical truths, and moral norms.

While developing these ideals, Whitehead also came to hold that theism is necessary to sustain the moral point of view, especially in light of the fact that natural sympathy, on which Hume rested morality, does not extend much beyond a rather limited circle.³³ Having pointed out that modern thought, from Hume to Darwin, has eroded the basis for the humanitarian ideal, which cultivates respect for human beings qua human beings, Whitehead suggested that we need "a reconstructed justification" for this ideal.³⁴

In suggesting how his philosophy provides the basis for this reconstructed justification, Whitehead spoke of a "bond of sympathy" that can extend to all humanity. What is this bond of sympathy? It is "reverence for that power in virtue of which nature harbours ideal ends, and produces individual beings capable of conscious discrimination of such ends. This reverence is the foundation of respect for man as man."³⁵ Whitehead agreed, therefore, that motivation to live in terms of the moral point of view can ultimately be nourished only by a religious vision, with its reverence for a holy reality.

Besides coming to this conclusion, Whitehead also suggested, and provided a rational defense for, a new religious vision that does this while overcoming the aspects of traditional theism that have rightly caused offense.³⁶

³²*Adventures of Ideas*, 147, 168.

³³*Ibid.*, 36.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 28-38.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 86.

³⁶This rational defense, I have suggested, involves a thirteen-part cumulative case for the existence of the kind of theism Whitehead advocates; see my *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), Ch. 5.