

From Morality to Politics

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A FEW YEARS AGO DURING THE UTAH CAMPAIGN against pari-mutuel betting, an LDS church leader justified his involvement by claiming that it was a moral issue. The implication was that church leaders have jurisdiction over morality. Christian church leaders in the United States often justify their involvement in political campaigns because, they claim, morality is threatened. Religious organizations do this while claiming to accept the separation of church and state.

Church leaders' claim over morality includes the frequent assertion that all good state law rests on Judeo-Christian moral principles. This leaves us wondering what the constitutional separation of church and state actually separated or if there exists a separate political morality that is not separable from religion and thereby remains under church control. Morality and the claimed religious jurisdiction over it suggest a reason for inquiring into morality, its meaning, and how it and the churches' moral claim relate to politics.

Morality is not an easy word to define; it is a term with many meanings. It usually identifies a belief that humankind has individual, internal control over personal thoughts and actions separate from the physical forces of nature. Those who believe in this sort of personal morality generally claim that there exist somewhere within our grasp general standards or principles that are available for directing right choices about behavior, including politics. This implies that we have the capacity to recognize those standards and can be accountable for and to them. The location of these standards, how they are discovered and imposed, the consequences of non-compliance, and how the consequences are detected are not clear. Nor is it obvious if or how morality is distinguished from religion, since religious beliefs usually include a code of behavior administered temporally by a church. There are non-religious beliefs, however, that do accept the existence and control implications of a moral code. A pluralistic religious and secular society has problems dealing with often conflicting claims.

Politics, too, is about rules that control human behavior and seems to

be related by implication to moral-like standards. The authorizing institution of these moral-like standards in politics, however, is the state. The state is the institution that claims ultimate authority to control human life and property. The individual citizen, in one way or another, has the capacity to be accountable to the requirements of the state. This includes not just an ability to understand requirements and obey them, but also in the United States, at least, the capability of authorizing political controls. This human capacity to know and be politically responsible resembles the capacity to know and be morally responsible. The question of humankind's capacity to choose and effect its choices has been a favorite topic of philosophers. This necessary human feature central to the claims of politics and morality is sometimes called "free will," or human agency. I will try in this essay to explain how "free will" relates to both politics and morality.

THE UNFREE AGENT

Some philosophers do not accept free will, denying that humankind has choices that control personal destiny. Their philosophies claim that the individual has little or no choice about personal behavior. These philosophies are broadly associated with notions of chance and fatalism (including determinism in its many variations, historical, scientific, and other). Christian philosophers, too, are not clearly defenders of free will; they vary in their support of human control over personal destiny. Calvinism asserts that God has absolute control over our destiny and through his church total control over our world. Lutheranism leaves us some choices with some non-religious worldly controls. Catholicism divides the controls separating the earthly from the spiritual, leaving humankind some controls in each. Mormonism attempts to distinguish our involvement with our destiny by distinguishing a foreordained destiny from a predestined one, claiming that in this separation we are sometimes in control. Whether or not God is omnipotent in religious philosophies seems central to how much control we have. To all of these philosophies, secular or religious, humankind is in various degrees a part of the world's, or God's, control forces. For non-religious philosophers, even thinking that we have free will is the probable result of forces beyond our control. Those who do not accept free will assert that God, nature, or nobody is in control.

THE FREE MORAL AGENT

There do, however, seem to be some observable human traits that suggest a capacity for control over some aspects of humankind's destiny.

These include devising a language with which to explain our human understanding and proposed involvement with world forces—building on and inventing from humanity's observations, manipulating the discoveries, changing health habits, preventing and curing diseases, emotionally responding, caring for and inflicting injuries on each other. These apparent emotional responses to others' feelings are made effective by a guilt response which also has a blame release mechanism. Believers claim that these are evidences of moral self controls. It is also these evidences that lead believers to make sense out of political controls. In spite of their intertwining, politics and morality may be distinguished in their origin and implementation. Let me attempt to separate them and explain their relationship.

The state, the central feature of politics, with its government, creates and coercively imposes its regulations. The state's control depends on a citizen's belief in and loyalty to its supremacy. This belief in and loyalty to the state seems to be a necessary part of a moral-like feature useful to political pursuits. These individual responses to political control seem also to be the features that stimulate the establishment of many different forms of government. The differences in the governments of the 175 or so states of the world vary in the way individual citizens historically became involved in making and enforcing their laws. For example, the U.S. constitutional system claims to provide a unique procedure for citizen representation to make laws with procedural protection from abuses in their enforcement. Its pursuit from its revolutionary beginning was to make political access equal among individual citizens. Like all states, however, their prime business is to settle conflict among citizens in an orderly fashion. The whole political activity, however, rests on the built-in human capacity of each citizen to respond to political controls.

MORALITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Morality, to its believers, is an individually stimulated control. To them, human behavior is directed by an individual human capacity to make choices. This built-in capacity makes each individual responsible for personal choices. How the individual discovers the standards and makes choices is explained differently by different believers. For example, to Thomas Jefferson, an outspoken moralist, the discovery was simple. "He who made us," he wrote, "would have been a pitiful bungler, if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science." To him a lecture on morality was useless. No one knew the moral rules any better than any other. Humans being destined for society were "endowed with a sense of right and wrong ... this sense is as much a part of his nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling ... The moral sense, or con-

science, is as much a part of man as his leg or his arm."¹ This view, which identifies a something with the religious sounding name called "conscience," was developed from secular, not religious, philosophies. This moral conscience, for Jefferson and his associate James Madison, was secular. It was the something that Madison intended to protect when he proposed the first constitutional amendment that finally included the four freedoms: religion, speech, press, and the right to assemble. For Madison and his co-founders of the U.S. political system, humankind had the capacity to establish a good—that is, a morally secular capacity essential to living.² This morality feature was even more apparent in Madison's original proposal. In the amendment's first draft to the first U.S. Congress, he proposed, "The civil right to none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed. No state shall violate the equal rights of conscience."³ To Madison, the central feature of the civil right was the conscience—the morality source—the something that existed independent of religious claims but, like religion, ought to be politically protected.

In a similar view, a Mormon one, the source of morality was given by Moroni in the Book of Mormon. "The spirit of Christ," he wrote, "is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge" (Moro. 7:16). This built-in, divinely granted feature, similar to the New Testament conscience, seems to be accepted by many Christians. Secular variations, however, for knowing good from bad, central to believers in morality, are achieved through a personal process of reason or intuition.

THE MORAL PERSON

Implied in the morality claim are two elements: personal qualities and behavioral standards. Their plausibility is more understandable if I separate implied personal qualities from behavioral standards, and identify five apparent qualities:

1. The moral agent does more than choose the right, the good. She pursues it. The pursuit seems to involve a personal responsibility for it, a control. This pursuing feature may be noted as an expanding effort to in-

1. Thomas Jefferson, *Timeless Treasures*, American Classics Series (Freeman Institute, 1981), 99.

2. William L. Miller, *James Madison and the Founding* (University of Virginia Press, 1992), 251-54.

3. Richard Morgan, *The Supreme Court and Religion* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1972), 21.

clude others, to organize them. Here are some examples. Moses included all Israelites in his aspiration to organize God's political kingdom. All Israelites were expected to be individually and morally able to respond to his organizing aspirations. Jefferson and his associates' Declaration of Independence intended to involve all of colonial America in the revolution for an independent political system. Each colonist was expected to share the leaders' aspirations to build a better society.

Joseph Smith invited other individuals to respond to his aspiration to restore and organize a new Zion. He made many inviting appeals to his fellow frontiersmen. Note some of his scriptural invitations: Men should engage in a good cause—do many things of their own free will, seek learning, get understanding, be industrious and diligent, cease to be idle, seek knowledge and God-like intelligence—all necessary moral features for restoring God's kingdom.

Significant to Mormonism's dependence on individual aspirations is its scriptural reference to morality: "That every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity according to moral agency, which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment" (D&C 101:78). This statement about separate individual accountability seems also to imply an individual's aspirations that include the use of leadership. Separate individual accountability, however, in the Mormon claim includes a final accounting to God's judgment for his rewards and punishments. This definition, without God's judgment, may also be paraphrased to identify secular morality. Secular morality makes every person capable of aspiring to and being personally accountable for his or her own pursuits. Accountability to God is replaced by accountability to and through self to others, the community and state. Judgment and its consequences apparently are a here-and-now self-evaluation.

The English language provides words that accommodate the self-aspiring, self-accountable agent. In contrast to the command language of the words "shall," "must," and "will" from external control directives are the self-aspiring words "ought" and "should" that speak to the self about its aspiration to be right and do good. "I should" or "I ought" anticipates the moral agent's pursuits. We note the individual's use of this moral language to identify pending decisions all the time. We often hear and use them: Should I go to school? Should I become a school teacher? Should I study law? Ought I marry Susan? Ought I drink Coke? Ought I be a Republican? Ought I vote for Bill Clinton? Ought I go to the temple tonight? Should I announce that I am gay or lesbian? Ought I live with my boy friend? My morality assumes that I can decide. My wife says she lives a life of "should haves": I should have married a richer man. I should have married five years earlier. We should have bought a better arranged

house. Her variation of moral, self-aspiration requires only hindsight. Her self evaluations, however, are still part of the same "ought." In passing, maybe I "ought" to include the moral agent's capacity to judge the behavior of others with a "you ought." I am suggesting, however, that the moral person primarily aspires and directs impending decisions about the future self.

2. Aspiring moral agents seek philosophic and artistic expressions. The moral agents' survival needs and aspirations are about more than pursuing food and shelter. Some moral agents write literature, some compose music and create instruments to play it, others paint, sculpt, dance, write, and perform plays, all useful expressions for satisfying their moral needs. For participants in these expressive activities, moral agents in their various ways shape and give meaning to their lives. The moral self is easily identified with the spiritual. Spiritual and philosophic expressions are to many people indistinguishable. It is from these artistic and philosophic expressions that moral agents share with each other and gain courage. The courageous, romantic, and beautiful are often equated with the moral. Listen to the poet William E. Henley, who years ago provided the poem-hymn "Invictus" that stirred my young high school spirit. I sang it then with enthusiasm and conviction. I thought audiences were stirred by it, too, by words that identify the aspiring spirit and its declaration of self-responsibility.

Out of the night that covers me
 Black as the pit from pole to pole
 I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced or cried aloud
 Under the bludgeoning of chance
 My head is bloody but unbowed

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
 Looms but horror of the shade
 And yet the menace of the years
 Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate
 How charged with punishments the scroll
 I am the master of my fate
 I am the captain of my soul

3. Aspiring, moral agents assume a degree of freedom even while claiming accountability to existing standards. Even though to moralists

the standards are universally fixed, they are often altered or adjusted to accommodate a changing world. I note that in current society the words "values" and "morals" are sometimes used interchangeably. A student friend was advised that if he valued a certain style of home and car, he ought to change his aspiration from teaching to an occupation that could pay for them. His choices, he was advised, ought to be guided by what he valued. When once I was convinced that I couldn't afford to raise my family on a farm income, I changed. The value of family, car, or home all seem to be within the accountability requirements of the moral agent. Changing the moral agent's behavioral guides from standards, rules, and principles to values does not seem to change the self-accountable feature of morality. It may leave us with a question, however. If a value can become a moral standard, can an aspiration become a value? When values and standards change, they redirect ones' pursuits. Thus moral standards shift with moral aspirations.

4. The aspiring moral agency is about *all* choices, not just sexual behavior. The capacity to be self-accountable includes buying a home, managing a business, teaching a class, signing a note, courting a woman, joining a church, selecting a diet, and on and on. To be self-accountable requires total self-control. The moral person's self-control feature is the same regardless of one's pursuits: in the market place, on a date, about religion, in the home, or pursuing learning. My neighbor's wife's decision to qualify for the Publisher's Clearing House invitation to win a million dollars uses the same moral, self-control tools as does my senior citizen neighbor to qualify for a temple recommend. My older friend, Oscar, is just as conscientious about saving from his retirement income for a trip to Europe as is my friend Joe about saving for his grandson's education. My neighbor's son's decision not to be active in the church uses the same moral facility as does his daughter who chooses to be active. All of them are responses to values, values that direct choices and behavior, pursuits involving decisions. They judge the value of their pursuits by the satisfaction of their "oughts." The values or standards which the moral agent sets do for the individual what morality was intended to do; they direct choice and behavior. The labeling of some issues as moral may imply that some are not, which suggests a distinction between moral and non-moral. Since all are made by the moral individual, the distinction is difficult. Sometimes the distinction is made as to whether the choice is between good and evil, right and wrong, implying that some choices do not involve these distinctions. But these distinctions, too, though with apparent qualitative and priority differences, are made by the moral agent. The attempted distinctions are difficult and may not be as useful as we would like.

5. The aspiring moral agents compete with each other. In a world of

scarcity, economic and otherwise, the accountable moral agent competes for almost everything—power, goods, services, attention, income, etc. The successful pursuer is the one who is fastest, most skillful with the most resources. Winning over other moral agents often becomes the test of goodness, rightness, success, and the ability to be accountable. The contest-like element is difficult to remove. Sometimes we claim that the pursuit of excellence replaces competition, but the claim of excellence seems unable to avoid comparison. For example, the recent attempt to improve the American educational system began by comparing U.S. students' scholastic tests scores with those from other countries. Independent standards of excellence are difficult to find. The failure to find them leaves the aspiring moral agent searching for new ways to compete. Consider the sports world and the market place.

THE STANDARDS, MORAL PERSONS IN CONFLICT

Now to the second part of the morality claim, the standards. The implication is that the standards exist independently of the moral agents. According to most believers, however, the standards are only discoverable by the individual, the moral agent. As noted above, for Jefferson the standards came with birth, like an arm or a leg. Similarly, to Moroni the discerning spirit came with the spirit of Christ given to every person. This dependency for behavioral standards on the individual makes the moral agent central to the search for standards. The notion is that from the moral individual's pursuit there would be uniform standards resulting in orderly relationships. This seldom happens. In place of compatibility, these pursuits of standards frequently bring conflict. The conflicts add a new feature to the moral control language. The "I ought" is changed to "you ought," language which initiates conflict. One's judgments about others' behavior and aspirations threaten friendly relationships. History, ancient or current, between persons or nations seems to tell us that violent conflicts have persisted from the beginning. Moral conflicts dominate historical writings. Mormon history is a story of conflict. From Joseph Smith to Gordon B. Hinckley, Mormonism's exclusivity claims of truth and light have been in constant conflict with the rest of the world. The Book of Mormon is a story of conflicts. From Nephi's encounter with his brothers and with Laban, to Moroni's encounter with the last Lamanite, the book is a story of violent conflict. The morality claim that behavioral standards can be uniformly discovered and peacefully implemented is not apparent. Moral agents have conflicts about standards, aspirations, and jurisdiction. Politics results from unresolved moral conflicts. Thus politics is the result of a failure to find common moral standards. An appeal to the state with its coercive resolution, the law,

changes the moral "you ought" to the legal "you shall," from the voluntary to the involuntary. The change may be noted with the coercive threat "there ought to be a law" or "I'll sue," transforming moral conflicts into political ones. Political resolution absorbs, not accommodates, moral conflicts, altering the involved human relationships. Punitive law usually intensifies the conflict rather than alleviates the hostility of the disputants. The state, however, retains its supreme, morally neutral role. It is a non-person.

There is no agreement among historians about how or when the state, the supreme control institution, developed, but it does seem clear that whenever or however it happened, the same moral-like human pursuit to control that now puzzles us was present and probably caused its establishment. It is also clear from historical writings that a claim of a God, a supreme non-human authority, was useful in legitimizing coercive control. With that political supremacy, the moral agent became something less than free. A god's authority justified the state's control over human conscience and behavior. Apparently it was this total control over the citizen, the moral agent, that so concerned Jefferson, Madison, and their associates.

It was the religious God who legitimized political authority in the beginnings of seventeenth-century colonial America. The divine claim, however, was weakened over the 150-year colonial period with numerous diverse religious claims in each British colony. The rebellion of the thirteen colonies, during the 1765-76 period, in the absence of a single church and a single god, permitted political leaders to seek non-religious moral authority to justify their rebellion. As in all conflicts, moral authority and standards were devised and appealed to. It was under a Jeffersonian-type morality that the American colonial revolution was defended. It was the secular free moral agent, according to the Jefferson-authored Declaration of Independence, that demanded not just colonial, but personal independence. The Jefferson-Madison conscience that came with every human life was to be politically free to pursue happiness. This happiness was intended by a creator, not a partisan religious one, to equally endow all men with certain inalienable rights. With this declaration and the success of the Revolution, a secular morality was claimed for American politics. A Jeffersonian secular "creator" who authorized the rebellion left no doubt about the secular source of morality. Freed from church authority, governments were to be established by "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

The political system that followed the secular Revolution was established by a secular superlaw, the Constitution, which declared itself and "all laws made in pursuance thereof, the supreme law of the land." The certainty of the religious exclusion was not only evident by its omission

in the Constitution, but by a declaration of exclusion in its First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The declared supremacy of the secular document gave the necessary authority to control conflicts, leaving the conscience free, but accountable to the political process for behavioral regulations. The preamble to the Constitution identified its authority as the secular "we the people" and then declared its secular moral purposes to "establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." With its secular supremacy, a government was established.

I hope I have distinguished by their origin and implementation the control claims of morality—the church and the state. I have not found it an easy task. I believe, however, that the colonial secularization of political morality and the U.S. Constitutional protection of the individual conscience make the distinction possible. Distinguishing individual moral pursuits and conflicts, their transition to political ones, and noting the effect of the constitutional church-state separation make other questions I raised at the beginning more understandable.

CONCLUSION

What about the church's jurisdictional claim over "moral" issues? The statements of Moroni and Jefferson, which I believe are representative of religious and secular believers in morality, leave the individual moral self the sole source of moral standards. The church's moral claim echoes the earlier Old Testament-like political claim that God's will to the prophet authorizes its moral jurisdiction. That claim, the U.S. Constitution's founders believed, intruded onto the civil and, to Madison, at least, the moral conscience. That intrusion, in the interest of moral freedom, was what Utah statehood constitutionally prohibited. The 101st section of the Doctrine and Covenants supports the Constitution's denial of the church's moral jurisdiction: "According to the laws and constitution of the people, which I have suffered to be established, and be maintained for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles: That every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment." A political system that insures the moral agent's accountability appears to be divinely preferred.

As noted earlier, all politics are the results of moral conflicts. Moral persons, including church leaders, like all political combatants in secular political arenas, are indistinguishable in political pursuits. The moral

equality claim extends to all conflicts denying exclusive political jurisdiction to any moral agent, including church leaders.

The church's method of control also, according to Doctrine and Covenants 121, excludes the coercive force of politics. Note this restrictive control language: "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned." Even though the church in its early history aspired to use or to be the state, this scripture seems to limit church control to the persuasive, the teaching method. To resort to political control is for the church to abandon its friendly instructive role for an unfriendly punitive one. Political controls tarnish all participants with unfriendliness.

The U.S. political system does not, however, exclude anyone from its political arenas. The First Amendment excludes religion from the state and makes it neutral in religious conflicts. Politically protecting Madison's conscience with the four freedoms and accepting the Revolution's declared secular political morality add a significant dimension to religious freedom. Church leaders attempting to exploit members' faith in them with a claim over political morality/hardly accept that freedom preference. Neither do they seem to accept the risks inherent in participation in the political arena. The risks are from the secular church-state separated culture with its divisive, inescapable "no holds barred" campaigns. To the church comes the risk of secularizing it, to participating church leaders the risk of destroying the members' trust in them, creating doubts and secularizing their faith—all weakening the spiritual influence of the church.

Even the persuasive method, when combined with church leaders' authority to punitively withhold God's blessing, threatens the moral agent's accountability. Obedience as the first principle of the gospel, with punitive implications, political or otherwise, conflicts with the self-accountability principle. This morality-political paradox is emphasized when we realize that only the convictions of a free moral agent can stimulate genuine religious faith.

I have only hinted at the similar current conflict involving some individuals' moral claims against the supremacy of the U.S. government. Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" is not very different from the moral outbursts of the Davidians at Waco, Timothy McVeigh at Oklahoma City, and Ranchers at the Montana-FBI stand-off. Probably it is too much to say that this political moral independence claim began at Philadelphia in 1776, but it certainly provides a credible political boost. The secular moral agent's claim may find moral legitimacy in the Declaration of Independence which is useful to the international freedom claim of human rightists and their opposite, international terrorists. And even

though we have now replaced the American revolutionary natural rights with international human rights, conflict between political power and the morality claim of the individual has not changed. The rights of the individual conscience are still the central claim for defending the personal and political accountability of the rebel. Moral conflicts about the rights of the moral agent are and always have been the stuff of politics. Meeting the state's demands for compliance with its laws as a needed protection of moral agents from the violence of other moral agents is still the political enigma. The prospects of the Christian second coming or the successful extension of the U.S. Constitutional system for solving this dilemma hardly look promising. Both, however, could use the intervention of a savior.