

Goodness and Religion

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This essay highlights some connections between the Principle of Goodness and the great philosophies of the past, in particular the great religious traditions of the world. This is an important connection because the Principle, it would seem, is not really new, just newly-stated in an explicit form.

There would seem to be the world of difference between someone who believes in a personal god and one who thinks we are nothing but atoms in the void. But let us look closer. The wisest thinkers of the past have long recognised that there are many levels on which any given message may be understood. One person, reading, say, *Beauty and the Beast*, sees a “fairy story”; another sees an analysis of the human condition. Similarly one person, hearing of angels, thinks of ethereal, heavenly beings, another sees a metaphor for hidden realities, and another may see a lesson in right behaviour and morality. We see, therefore, that it is not as simple as to say that one person believes in “God” and another believes there is “no God”, as that leaves unexplained what one person believes in and the other does not. Equally, we cannot dismiss the difference as entirely vacuous, for there seems to be a real difference between these positions.

One consideration that can help us here is the concept of evolution: the human species has grown and evolved, from an upright ape to a reflective being capable of comprehending abstract realities such as advanced mathematics. One thing we have come to learn is the existence of unseen realities, such as the causeless connection between two atomic particles as is revealed in the Einstein, Podolsky, Rosen (EPR) experiment. Our ancestors gave names to some of these, such as “angel”, “spirit”, or “god”. Perhaps in the infancy of our species the nature of the realities behind these names was much misunderstood or oversimplified, but that might not be a good reason to entirely dismiss them.

For a simple example of this point, on a religious television program recently, a woman was describing how she attended a biology lecture on the “selfish gene” idea. Suddenly, she said, she understood how all our morals, all our highest ideals, were nothing more than the product of physical forces, and at that point she lost her religious faith. Yet consider this remarkable fact: the very same idea that is packaged as the “selfish gene” is, in another guise, one of the most inspiring and profound of all religious symbols! I refer (perhaps not “of course”) to the lotus, the beautiful flower growing out of the mud, a symbol of the great truth that the highest arises from the lowest, told in another form by Jesus in the parable of the widow’s mite, wherein one with almost nothing produces the thing of the greatest value, which, on inspection, is still nothing more than base metal, despite its inestimable value. Once the poisonous viewpoint is removed from the “selfish gene”, we see that it is a telling of a deep and much misunderstood truth: that the very fabric of this universe, in all its “baseness”, is the fertile ground in which love, honour, justice, care, truth, mercy, and every high quality can arise and flourish. It is no surprise that a gene will cause these qualities to emerge, as they are built in to this precious cosmos, our home, of which the gene is a part. We need no miracle, no angel on a cloud, to see the wonder of it.

The thing that counts, therefore, may well be, not that one has the right belief (or none) or the

right scientific viewpoint, but that one cares, that one desires the flourishing of all: that one turns towards the light. Such is the recommendation of the Principle of Goodness. Our species must find ways to transcend the limiting and separating ideas of the past, ideas which are not necessarily wrong, but wrongly emphasised, having sought out the distinctions and differences rather than the great commonalities. Other writers, too, have noticed the fluidity of notions of God in our time. Sometimes taken as a sign of decadence, perhaps it is an awakening. In *The Disappearance of God*, author Richard Friedman considers how belief in God has become increasingly irrelevant to our life as a society, and he asks

"On what else could we base a morality if not on God? One has to have been comatose through this century [i.e. the 20th] in order not to know that this is no longer just a theoretical point, not just a really good question... It is a matter of the fate of our species, being on the brink of discovery and of destruction at the same juncture in our life."

One only has to pick up a newspaper to see that our society is preoccupied with politics and economics, as if things would only be alright if some new and superior policy could be discovered and agreed upon. But somehow, security and fulfilment elude most of us.

Part of the trouble is that often the things that matter most can't be measured (security, community spirit, fulfilment, quality of life, environmental preservation). By concentrating on things that can be measured (employment statistics, GDP, etc.) our political leaders act as if ethics (and all other intangibles) have become luxuries we can't afford. On the contrary, the central thesis of Goodness is that our political and ethical dilemmas are really the same thing. However, the solution is not to simply implore everyone to "be good". As Friedman emphasises, in the past

"...belief in a supreme power that could... offer a faithful follower a measure of security helped to make life livable. "I shall fear no evil, for you are with me"... The growth and spread of the feeling of divine absence contributed to producing an age of uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability. Second, much of morality was based on beliefs that "God has told you what to do." Beliefs ranged from general principles ("Love your neighbour as yourself") to very specific commandments ("Don't oppress the widow and the orphan")."

Friedman explains how the sense of a divine power guiding humanity has gradually receded, culminating at the end of the nineteenth century in Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead." The happenings of the twentieth century have certainly given religious believers something to ponder; it is unnecessary to go into details that are all too well known. Friedman continues:

The feeling of divine absence undermined this basis of morality, leaving the question: on what are we to base our morality if not on the deity?

On what will we base morality if not on God? Friedman speculates that if humanity can solve the question of how to guide their own lives, without leaning like children on an all-powerful god who will simply tell us what to do, then perhaps God will re-emerge from His disappearance. The way to live as a mature intelligent species is to accept limits to our power, with or without a god who enforces them with threats of hell or promises of heaven. If we can do that, perhaps we may well find the True Friend does not merely reappear, but was never missing in the first place.

Unlike various modern liberal experiments in social engineering, Goodness does not hinge upon a cynical or patronising doctrine that assumes everyone is acting in bad faith and needs to be guided 'for their own good', nor does it necessarily recommend a return to a mythically perfect past or even the 'family values' past of the conservative side of modern politics and religion. Ideologically, the Principle is neutral, but it provides means, a way forward in a new direction, an enablement, a tool that lets one set one's own goals -- and society's -- ethically and profitably. Goodness is not merely a theoretical proposal; it is a practical plan capable of motivating the development of an entire political, legal, and economic system that allows all people, in a real sense, to become a genuine community rather than a mere collection of lonely individuals.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address an important philosophical question regarding good and evil that might occur to any believer in God. Some people maintain that goodness is defined to be that which is in accordance with the will of God. Others maintain that goodness is independent of God, but that it so happens that God is, in fact, good. The former view is often held in order to uphold the infinite power of God. He can do what He pleases; whatever that might be, it automatically becomes goodness itself. In this view, for example, there can be no question of needing to justify God's actions to the biblical patriarch Job, because whatever God did must have been good, simply by virtue of the meaning of the word "good". There is a fatal defect in this position: if goodness is simply another word for God's will, then it becomes meaningless to say "God is good" because the claim would merely be saying "God does what God does." It is a tautology. The entire question of pondering God's goodness is short-circuited; religion becomes a matter of doing God's will just because the All-Powerful wills it, and for no other reason. If God had in fact been like the traditional image of Satan, nothing would be different except that we would have a different sort of 'goodness' to practice. This is the essence of the philosophy that "might makes right" and is surely outrageous.

Luckily this is not the case: when those who love God tell us "God is good" they really mean something. It really is saying something to say "God is good": it says that God is aligned rightly with an impartial reality external to Himself. If this is true, then it must be that ethics is independent of God: ethics can exist without God. This fits perfectly with the phenomenon of the disappearing God discussed by Friedman: as ethics is independent of God, what better way is there for God to show us how well or poorly we have understood it than to get out of our way? Any true ethical principle must stand on its own without the backing of divine force.

“Now we see through a glass darkly”

Goodness has always been with us, but seen imperfectly. Let us look at some foreshadowings of this Principle in the religions and philosophies of the past.

The Upanishads:

“Who sees all beings in his own his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear.” – Isa Upanishad.

“Concealed in the heart of all beings is the Atman, the Spirit, the Self; smaller than the smallest atom, greater than the vast spaces. ... Not even through deep knowledge can the Atman be reached, unless evil ways are abandoned. ... Who sees the many and not

the One, wanders on from death to death. Even by the mind this truth is to be learned: there are not many but only One. Who sees variety and not the unity wanders on from death to death.” -- Katha Upanishad.

The Bhagavad-Gita:

“No doer of good works will tread an evil path...” -- (6:40)

“The essence of the soul is will and it is really single... have done with all dualities, stand ever firm on Goodness. Think not of gain or keeping the thing gained, but be yourself! ... [But] work alone is your proper business, never the fruits [it may produce]: let not your motive be the fruit of works nor your attachment to [mere] worklessness. Stand fast in Yoga, surrendering attachment; in success and failure be the same and then get busy with your works.” (2:41...48 -- trans. R.C. Zaehner)

The Dhammapada:

“He who for the sake of happiness hurts others who also want happiness, shall not hereafter find happiness.” (131)

“How can there be laughter, how can there be pleasure, when the whole world is burning? When you are in deep darkness, will you not ask for a lamp?” (146)

“He who overcomes the evil that he does with the good that he afterwards does, he sheds a light over the world like that of the moon when free from clouds.” (173)

“A man is not on the path to righteousness if he settles matters in a violent haste. A wise man calmly considers what is right and wrong, and faces different opinions with truth, non-violence and peace. This man is guarded by truth and is a guardian of truth. ...” (256,7)

“A man is not called wise because he talks and talks again; but if he is peaceful, loving and fearless then he is in truth called wise. ...” (258)

“A man is not a great man because he is a warrior and kills other men; but because he hurts not any living being he in truth is called a great man.” (270 – trans. Juan Mascaro)

Proverbs:

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is within your power to do it.” (3:27)

“Do not plan evil against your neighbour who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm. Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways; ...” (3:29-31)

Isaiah:

“They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” (65:25)

"He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man;" (66:3)

New Testament:

*"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."
(Matt 18:1-6)*

*"See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my father who is in heaven. What do you think? A man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."
(Matt 18:10-14)*

*"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they will also answer 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."
(Matt 25:31-46)*

Koran:

*On that day shall men come forth to behold their works,
And whosoever shall have wrought an atom's weight of good shall behold it,
And whomsoever shall have wrought an atom's weight of evil shall behold it (Sura XCIX)*

And when the female child that had been buried alive shall be asked

*For what crime she was put to death, ...
Every soul shall know what it hath produced. (Sura XXXII)*

*He saith "My Lord despiseth me:"
Aye. But ye honour not the orphan,
Nor urge ye one another to feed the poor,
And ye devour heritages, devouring greedily,
And ye love riches with exceeding love. (Sura XXXIX)*

Adi Granth:

*In whose heart the calumny of another is harboured, he will never do well. ...
Justice is not administered by mere words...
Behold, O brother! the true justice of the creator! as one acts, so he receives.*

“Then we shall see face to face”

In all these passages it is unmistakably clear that a principle in agreement with Goodness is being taught. Perhaps the great thinkers who wrote these works understood something about reality that many or most of us still do not understand today? Humanity has learned and grown in power and knowledge, as, any theist would agree, God intended from the time before time. Perhaps now we have advanced to the stage where we have the maturity to understand the greater truths behind the words of the ancient books, rather than clinging to the outer form, the particular doctrines and statements that made sense in the childhood of our species?

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