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Who is mis-using the moral module: the self-declared godless, the faith-based, or both?

Talk notes for a May 1 lecture to a self-declared godless, atheistic group plumping for a Day of Reason on the same day as Bush's Day of Prayer

A former student of mine divides people into two kinds: producers and consumers. He's talking about contributions to the group, or to culture or art and science, or something of the sort. And of course he means net producers and net consumers. Everyone consumes and everyone produces, and sometimes we even produce by consuming, or so the economists say. I call these two kinds of people, viewers and doers.

I want to talk about a different division, and start out treating it as a spectrum rather than two kinds. At one end of the spectrum are the skeptics and at the other end the believers, or the faith-based: testers as opposed to authority-seekers and authority-acceptors.

The people at the extreme skeptic end are the pure scientists -- meaning purely scientific -- when, as the noted paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson put it, "Science is a self-correcting process of finding out about the universe, the data of which are understandable by ordinary people." The skeptics want repeatable -- and repeated -- tests whenever they can get them. They wait to see if there were errors, cheating, or inadvertent biases in a test before they start using the results or the conclusions.

Everyone is necessarily a scientist sometimes, in everyday life. We go through a series of tests just to get our automobile or our computer to work, and the better scientists we are, the more capably and inexpensively we do it. And everyone has to accept authority now and then, because we simply don't have the time or means to settle all questions ourselves, especially nowadays, when the world has become so technically complex and division of labor has produced so many people that can do things most of us cannot, but which we need to have done.

But there's a class of believers who don't try to avoid accepting authority, but rather seek it more or less continually. They want someone else to be responsible. And they also may invoke authority whenever they disagree with someone else. They may claim authority, or to know the authority. Some of them go a step further and seek to have all accepted authority belong to those who agree with only them.

In the modern world, at least, many skeptics ^{also} go a step further and become cynics. Ambrose Beirce, in his Devil's Dictionary, defined "cynic" as "a blackguard whose faulty vision causes him to see things as they are rather than as they ought to be."

I really like Ambrose Beirce's definitions. Purposely or not, they sometimes have more than one possible meaning. For example, using his definition of cynic, you could interpret a cynic as a person who lacked vision, hence couldn't focus on what ought to be and do what's necessary to bring it about. Or you could say a cynic is someone who, because he can recognize what's really going on, can – perhaps better than most others -- muster the vision to change it in the direction of what ought to be. This topic is going to come up again.

When I was a kid my family faithfully attended a tiny United Methodist church in the ghost town of Centerville, or Licksillet, in a backwoodsey township along the Sangamon River in middle Illinois. It was a fairly fundamentalist church, and, 73 years after my parents started taking me to it, it still is. It's still the same in other regards as well. The only difference is that the congregation today is made up of the children and grandchildren of the people I knew there as a kid. They do a lot of good things, and they definitely have a close-knit, mutually helpful, continuing community. They served a wonderful dinner when my 95-year-old mother died recently, and it warmed my heart to see all of the same people, or their descendants, in the community hall happily cooperating to do this nice thing to honor a lady they hadn't seen in decades. I feel sure that such continuity has virtue.

When I was a kid going to that church, I was amazed at the things that were talked about ^{there} ~~in that church~~. They involved events and behaviors for which I knew absolutely nothing parallel in the real world. I used to sit in the back of the church – especially on Easter morning, and during the fall-down-and-roll-on-the-floor revivals in the spring -- so I could watch the backs of the necks of the farmers my Dad and I worked with sometimes on week days. I wondered if they would turn redder when the preacher said things like "And the stone was rolled away and Christ arose from the dead and ascended into Heaven where he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." I didn't have any idea how anyone could arise from the dead; or get up into the sky except by flying. And I didn't have a clue what it meant to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. What kind of chairs did they have up there, and where were they anyway? I wasn't good

at metaphor, and I also realized rather quickly that those people didn't mean any of those things metaphorically.

But the necks didn't turn redder, and those practical farmers didn't even squirm in their seats or look surprised.

They caused me to realize that, if I didn't go along, I was going to be all alone and on my own. When I came to realize how widespread in the world are beliefs of that sort – centered around one group or another's concept of God and Divinity and Heaven and Hell, and all the rest, I decided it all had some kind of reality – not just for those people, but really – factually. And I decided I wanted to figure out what that reality is.

There were things I didn't like about the church. One morning the Sunday School teacher asked my class if South Sea Islanders can go to Heaven if no one (meaning none of us!) tells them about God. No one wanted to answer. So, after a long silence, I did. I said, "Yes." The Sunday School teacher looked nervous, and stared down at his Methodist teacher's manual. He said, "No, they can't." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "Because it says so right here in my book." And I said, "But who wrote that book? And how did they know? What if they just spell God differently?" I did say all of those things that morning in Sunday School class.

Needless to emphasize, we didn't settle the question. Because of various incidents like that, I feel sure that many people sighed with relief when I went off to college.

I realized that what I didn't like about some of these things was their parochialness and proprietariness regarding the concept of God. We were being schooled to believe that God only provides his favors for a certain group of people – us – if we believed, and presumably weren't Catholics or something equally evil. Later I would think of this whole business as amity and enmity being correlated. I didn't like that much.

That's going to come up again too.

Some time after I entered high school, I realized that the Centerville United Methodist Church was the only place I ever heard anything about the origin and long-term history of humans – how they came about, and why they became what they did. No school or institution anywhere else talked about that when I was growing up. No class in college did either, even though I took every course I could find that considered human

nature. None of the books my mother brought home by the armload from the public library said anything about these questions. I didn't get into that topic at all in school until I became a graduate student in biology. Many years later I pointed this out to my mother and asked her why, in view of the fact that she and my father were both former teachers and much more intellectual than I had known as a child, we hadn't talked about where humans came from and how they got to be this way. She was silent a while and then said, "We didn't have time." I said, "Mom, you know that is not true. One thing you have when you're running a farm is lots of time to think. We read books all the time, and we talked about everything under the sun, but not about this." She was silent, and I felt a little sorry for her. I finally said, "Do you suppose it's because we didn't have any decent theory?" She allowed finally that that might have been part of it.

Despite my early skepticism about the concept of God, at least as it is used by most people, I never got around to calling myself an atheist. I also never knew exactly why. I knew the disbeliever is sort of up against it because the believers believe everything. They're really sure, and there are a lot more of them. In effect, the disbeliever is a self-ostracizer. I have told a few Ann Arbor kids who have in my presence proudly declared themselves atheists that they are too ignorant to make such a declaration.

Jim Heynen, a fine midwestern poet, asked his readers what they were thinking about the people from his part of Iowa, "Do you think they are nice?" And he answered his own question, "They are not nice. They are right."

I asked myself: Why does everyone believe all this stuff? As I suggested earlier, I finally decided that there had to be something to it. I decided that the whole thing is too real – there has to be something behind it. The concept, after all, exists – in the minds of everybody – even the disbelievers. In that sense it's real. But what is it? What is God all about? From what does the particular way we look at it spring? Why does it have to be a personified thing? The question is: Could it represent something most or even all of us never even thought of before – maybe it wasn't in our consciousness at all but in that part of our minds that doesn't think, in the sense of "I think, therefore I am," which means, "I think consciously."

Not too long ago I argued to one of my postdocs that, by his or her complete rejection of God, the self-declared godless person validates narrow definitions of God – definitions that are probably too narrow, and maybe

just an outlandish outgrowth of something we haven't thought enough about. He argued back, at first,

The other day, though, he laughed and related to me something that Garrison Keiler had said. Keiler said, "The atheists around here are Lutheran atheists. The God they don't believe in is a Lutheran God!"

That's exactly what I meant by validating a narrow definition. But Keiler's statement also includes a second thought I had had, that the self-declared godless person backs himself into a corner. When he says to, say, a Lutheran, that he doesn't believe in God, he denies the Lutheran version of God, but he also incidentally cheats himself by denying all god concepts – not just the one he used as his model for the denial. By saying the whole thing isn't real, he places himself in the position of not allowing questions about the nature and background of the god concept – where it came from and what its significance is -- and from that, why we Lutherans or Methodists or any other group have done what we have with the concept.

The question may not be whether God is real, but what is the particular nature of the reality underlying the concept of God? Maybe it's something perfectly understandable and rational that we have never really brought out into the open. *So many things are.*

The reason I can be bold enough to say something like that is that we humans have never solidly accepted an evolutionary view of the human species. So it's pretty tempting to have confidence that no matter how much non-evolutionists may have thought about this question, the likelihood that they have ever gotten it more or less straight may be vanishingly small. I'll come back to that.

We tend to think consciousness is everything – that if we drew our mental operations as a huge circle, that we pretty much just drew a picture of ^{or} consciousness. I don't think so. Sometimes I think consciousness would be a very small circle somewhere inside that huge circle. And suppose we were asked to guess where the small circle of consciousness fits in the big circle of our overall mental activities. We might think right in the middle – whatever that means. But maybe that's not true – in fact, I think we have very good evidence that it's not true. It looks as though consciousness evolved to deal with social matters, and is only incidentally, or pleiotropically, used in other human activities today. And there isn't much doubt that certain things have evolved in such a way as to be kept out of our consciousness.

Think about incest for a moment. Does anyone here know why he or she is not interested sexually in close relatives, like siblings or parents or children? "Why?" is what I am asking. I asked that question of myself when I was 10 or 12 years old and realized my sister was beautiful, and even though I liked to look at other beautiful girls in what would have to be called a lascivious way, I tended to get sick at even the thought of looking at my sister that way. Nowadays we happen to know what the origin of incest avoidance is. It's a consequence of learning during close association when one or both people involved are quite young. The learning is unconscious. So it seems like a magic trick to us – to our conscious selves. *A lot of sad things have happened because most people don't know this –*

Or consider how you know who your mother is (explain why this knowledge is entirely based on circumstantial evidence). *or heard it.*

To set up the topic of what might be the background of the concept of God, let me say some things about the human species, and the problems in understanding it – in understanding ourselves.

For several reasons it is extremely difficult to study the human species:

First, it's surely the most complicated of all species – indeed, by far the most complex thing known in the universe, with its brain the most complex part of it, which makes it extremely difficult to analyze.

Second, we have to use the attributes we wish to understand to do the analyses. That's notoriously difficult and risky.

Third, many of the attributes we might like to study have evolved so as to be kept out of our consciousness. I'll come to the most important of those in a minute.

Fourth, as I already noted, we think that consciousness is everything in our mental activities, but it is not. The other things, by definition, are not things we can think about easily.

Fifth, the human species is so distinctive that it amounts to an N of one. How do you study a single species scientifically, taking into account its long-term evolutionary history? We are hindered, compared to all other species, because some traits of humans are literally reversed from those of their closest relatives.

Sixth, for some of these reasons, biologists have avoided studying the human species. Another reason, which I haven't mentioned, is that they figure that the social and medical sciences get their money to study humans, so why should biology departments spend their precious funds doing it. This means that an evolutionary perspective has essentially been left out in the study of humans, because the social and medical sciences grew up without evolution, during times when biologists didn't understand the evolutionary process well enough to tell them how to use it. That omission has had catastrophic effects.

We once had a distinguished ecological scientist at Michigan named Marston Bates. I never forgot that another of our distinguished ecologists, a man named Nelson Hairston, remarked that when Marston Bates started writing about human behavior, he stopped being a scientist.

So how do we study the human species, so distinctive that I once called it the uniquely unique species, and, as a result, dauntingly difficult to understand.

I think we have to do it the same way theoretical physicists study the universe. They too have but a single subject, which they are trying to understand in its entirety. I call the method they use, and the one I fell into a number of years ago for thinking about the human species, the jigsaw puzzle method of analysis. We know the human organism, as a whole, operates harmoniously. It works – even if we want to qualify that when we start getting moral about things. So if we try to analyze its many separate traits and then put them together, like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and expecting to come up with a coherent picture, we might understand ourselves better.

I'm going to give you a quick summary of what some of the results of such an analysis tell us.

I'm going to start by just stating a couple of things you may never have thought about the human species.

1. First, humans are the only organisms known to compete group against group in play. Long before I set that out in print as a challenge, biologists had concluded that play is practice for the later "real thing." We'll come back to this.

2. Second, humans are the only mammals that live in multi-male groups in which there is considerable paternal care directed toward the offspring of the male's mate. Paternal care means the male has confidence of paternity.

Just to set this second fact in context, lots of birds live in multi-male groups and have much paternal care. But in birds and insects the egg is fertilized just before it is laid, sometimes near the entrance of the genital opening, often by sperm stored temporarily in a sperm sac or spermatheca. In all mammals – at least all but those that lay eggs – the egg is fertilized high up in the reproductive tract and doesn't come down as an egg. This means that in mammals, the first sperm in at the right time gets the egg, while in birds and insects the last sperm in often gets the egg because the last sperm in are in front of the previously deposited sperm. So a male bird can increase his likelihood of paternity when his female may have philandered by mating excessively with her before she lays another egg. A male mammal may gain a little by doing the same, but not nearly as much.

3. There's another factor involved in paternal care, and it's also unique to humans: the human female does not advertise ovulation the way all other mammal females do: human females conceal it, even from themselves. This concealment disenfranchises dominant males that might mate with an ovulating female and then leave her, and it favors males that stay with a female even if the male cannot guard her against a dominant male. The longer a male stays with a female, the more likely that her offspring is also his, and the greater his investment in that female and her offspring. End result: paternal care.

4. The fourth distinctive or unique human feature is the altriciality or helplessness of the human infant – not even approached in any of our primate relatives, hence, evolved anew in the human species. In many species altriciality is associated with fast growth or fast development, enabling the juvenile to leave a dangerous environment as soon as possible. But the human infant is also unique because it is not only altricial but also has a long helpless juvenile period. And it has two individuals acting as parents. And only its brain grows really fast. And the brain is apparently a social tool. The human baby learns more things faster than any other kind of mammal. Its parents contribute not only by protecting it but by teaching it. And human parents tend their offspring even after they become adults. By being altricial, human juveniles are devoting a higher proportion of their calories to becoming a better adult rather than to getting through the juvenile stage by protecting themselves.

5. Another human trait fits here: menopause. The human female is the only mammal female that terminates offspring production approximately halfway through its lifetime. Humans, incidentally, added about 100% to their lifetimes after diverging from their closest relatives; in females nearly all that time is after offspring production. This distinctive human trait is evidently also a part of parental care. The postmenopausal woman becomes a super parent, not only tending the offspring she already has, but as well overseeing parts of the extended family, or of the entire kindred, seeing to who gets what from whom, etc. She aids her own reproduction by turning into a social and political animal.

Incidentally, I have made the argument that the rates and patterning of copulation in humans has essentially nothing to do with offspring production. That happens incidentally. It appears to me that rates and patterning of copulation have to do with establishing, elaborating, and maintaining the parental bond. In evolutionary terms, marriage – or pair bonding in humans -- is really designed as a parental trait.

We've discussed about ten distinctive human features – ten pieces in the jigsaw puzzle -- most of which were probably not apparent to you as such before now. It appears to me that they fit together extremely well, even though I don't think anyone would have predicted that beforehand.

Group-living is always expensive because it throws individuals into more direct and potentially violent competition. Humans live in groups despite the expense indicated by the number of things just described that have evolved tremendously since humans separated from other primates. Rapid evolution means that there was lots of room for positive change, meaning change that increased reproductive success. We have to ask what the hostile force or forces might have been that drove this evolution. After a lot of thought and argument I decided that only other human groups can fill the bill. One reason I came to this conclusion is that I couldn't imagine what might have driven the increased size – and probably complexity – of the human brain long after it had surpassed the brains of competing species. The only thing I could think of that could do this was competing human groups. The only thing increased brain size couldn't leave behind was itself, represented in competing groups of humans – members of the same species. Moreover, this argument would provide the explanation of how human groups could continue rising in size and complexity of organization, right up to nations of millions, and even a billion or more.

If all of what I have just argued is true, it's still one more unique human feature: that groups of conspecifics form the most important hostile force of nature – the most important aspect of natural selection.

And what about that group-against-group competition in play? Practice for intergroup strife?

But notice, just as with the concept of God, there is no promise here of one huge all-inclusive human group, no promise of world government. There is also no promise of a single God acceptable to all. Every one of these issues seems to require competing groups, below the level of the entire human species. It may be our greatest curse.

Humans also are probably the only species that has morality. And that brings us right back to the concept of God, because if there is one topic that is consistently associated with God, it is morality. Unless I am wrong, all Gods are moral Gods.

Maybe we call its seat the soul

What is morality? Morality is something all humans probably have – it may even be the criterion – the certificate of being human. I argued in a 1987 book on morality that moral questions arise because of conflicts of interest, and that morality implies a willingness to invest socially – a willingness to incur temporary expenses for the good of the group – a willingness to restrain one's own search for reproductive success in others' interests -- presumably whenever the individual's welfare is tied to the welfare of the group. When the canoe is headed for the waterfall, everyone rows as hard as he or she can. And if you were the only one rowing, you would row as hard as you could because your interests are identical with those of the group.

All of this fits with the other traits discussed so far – not only group-against-group competition but also the helplessness of the human baby correlated with the evolution of a huge brain that appears to be a social tool.

If moral questions involve conflicts of interest, we have to ask what are our interests – our life interests? Can we distil them down to something we can handle. The answer, I think, is a strong yes. The interests of every living creature can be described as reproduction. The only thing we know for sure about our ancestors is that they reproduced. Reproduction is sufficient, all by itself, to explain us and every other creature on earth. We just differ in how we do it because we evolved in different circumstances.

Now do you understand better the difference between conscious belief and reality?

Don't be troubled by a narrow definition of reproduction. Reproduction is not just sex and having babies. It's being parents and grandparents, and it's being good to dependent and needy relatives and friends: relatives because they carry some of the same genes we do, including those that in effect instruct us to help relatives; friends because of something called reciprocity. If friendships work out the way they ought to, we get our kindnesses repaid with interest. We can use that interest to help our relatives. That's reproduction.



Now let's return ^{As said,} to the question of where different concepts of God might have come from. God seems always to be associated with morality – and that may be the only “always” about the concept of God. Probably all humans know what morality means and have a tendency to show it. I don't think anyone has ever demonstrated morality in another species.

Let's hypothesize that all humans have a morality module – meaning that we humans all have an apparatus of some kind within us which allows us or causes us to be cooperative and kind –when it's appropriate to our interests – and to be willing to invest in others

We can ~~even~~ gain by being cooperative even if no one knows we did something for others (when our interests are the same as those of the group), but we can usually gain more if other people know about it and treat us as if our moral modules were working overtime.

/ We reward people for doing these things – we give them good reputations, and they gain from that. We say, “Reputation is everything.”

I am talking here about direct and indirect reciprocity: The direct version is all forms of I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine. Indirect reciprocity is when we are rewarded for cooperative or benevolent behavior by a change in our reputation, which provides resources to us from others who themselves have never received reciprocity from us. Heroes are examples.

Suppose having a morality module is indeed the criterion for being human. Who determines whether that criterion is there inside each of us? Suppose that it's all the rest of us in a person's group, and we test every new person we have to interact with to see if the morality module is in there. Once we

find out it's there, we can accept the person being tested – at least tentatively. We acquire a degree of trust that a person will perform morally when the appropriate circumstances arise. This allows us all to get along in groups. We wouldn't need a morality module if we lived alone.

Other group-living species don't need a morality module because they don't engage in risky reciprocity, such as reciprocity involving long-term delay between investment and return on investment.

It's pretty obvious that human males tend to honor mateships – parental couples. We don't have much trouble thinking of that as a kind of morality. Maybe honoring everyone else's legitimate expectations is what morality is all about.

Everything about humans seems keyed to group-living of a special sort that calls for a fluctuating kind of tolerance and cooperation. We get patriotic when a threat arises, and we become less likely to invest socially when external threats to the group, or to ourselves, abate or seem to have disappeared.

If the morality module is universal, we can know how to test for its presence but may not know consciously that we're doing that. But all our morality modules are woven together by communication of various sorts, including language, so we might want to ask if God starts out as a kind of realization of this spirit of cooperativeness, tolerance, kindness, and willingness to invest in one another.

intercommunicated

arises out of?

Doesn't that seem to accord with the tendency of God concepts to relate to separate groups of humans? To be a parochial and proprietary concept? With each group having its own rules, and trying to impose them on any other group they come into close contact with?

Maybe we have a reason for the very features of the god concept that puzzle and concern many of us.

Now let me make some assertions:

The self-declared godless people tend to mis-use the morality module concept by self-ostracizing – by declaring themselves not a member of the cooperating group – declaring themselves unwilling to invest socially in the group – even if, in the narrowness of their rejection of the God concept, they would deny doing any such thing. In effect, if what I have just said is

even partly correct, they tend to declare their independence from the rules of their own group. It's a crazy thing to do! But worse, they form their own groups within the group – and here we are, being proprietary about our membership in a group said to be rational and chuckling about those in our bigger group who don't get it – who aren't rational?

I want to make a very big point. If all this that I have been saying has a significant grain of truth in it, then instead of wincing every time someone invokes God or prayer or something else that is holy and divine and all of that, the previous disbeliever can understand the invoking, and in fact accept nearly every expression of it. This is because almost no matter how someone uses the concept of God, you can easily translate that usage as an expression relating to God as a label for the togetherness and power and helpfulness that comes from using the concept of God as an outgrowth of the universal existence of morality modules in humans and their use in human sociality.

Suppose I say after winning a competition, "Thank God for helping me in this race." Before you might have been offended, saying, "You mean, thank him for helping you more than others, or not helping them? Give me a break!" Now you can read it as "Thank everyone for whatever they did that happened to enable me to win this competition." If you are sitting in the audience, you are being thanked too, and you won't feel nearly as testy as you would if you thought God was a little old man with white hair sitting up on a cloud and waving a wand preferentially in favor of the winner of the competition. Try any use of God you have ever heard invoked, and you'll find it works, *this same way.*

All we really have to do to make this concept of God real for us, and cause it to work, is to drop the use of God as the Creator of the entire universe rather than as strictly an aspect of human sociality and morality, with every other use to which we put our brain in the scientific or other analyses of the universe a kind of incidental or pleiotropic effect.

Power resides in the hands of people, and people wield power. Is it not reasonable that humans may have been compelled to turn the collective power of their own combined moral modules into a mythical human-like being and seemingly given the power to Him while retaining it for themselves as a group, in a group-competitive world? And sometimes given over to ordinary humans the concession of being able to communicate with the possessor of this power, and to interpret it? As nations we do the same

thing with law. In a democracy, law is pretty much the aspects of morality on which more of us agree. *we do a bit of this in appointing and accepting all leaders - to have coordinated successful groups of any size, we always need leaders*

I have been intrigued by the saying, *Vox populi, vox Dei*. The voice of the people is the voice of God. Professor Don Cameron of the Classics Department traced that saying back to Alcuin, a British churchman and teacher, in a letter to Charlemagne. Charlemagne^{had} invited Alcuin to court at Aachen, in the Carolinian Empire about 781. Alcuin counseled Charlemagne not to let the rabble promote the idea of *Vox populi, vox Dei* because, he said, the emperor should maintain the principle that the emperor was the only one who could interpret the will of God. How is that anything but entirely consistent with what I have been suggesting?

I see nothing wrong with prayer if, as I imagine, it tends to reinforce a feeling of amity among those praying and those who know about the intentions of those praying. I am not a fan of the rigid self-ostracization that goes with declarations of atheism. Nor am I a fan of those who magnify the parochial nature of the concept of God and power so as to serve their own groups at the expense of others. I think we would all benefit if there could be a gradual spread of the realization that God and Soul and prayer, and probably all other major religious ideas, may stem from a general attitude or spirit of cooperativeness and empathy that arises out of the universality of something we might call a morality module in all humans.

The answer to the question in my title, I think, has to be "Both."

? So, supposing all of this has made some sense, how do we proceed now? How do we overcome the problems inherent in this interpretation? How do we work from the realization that there never has been one group of humans, one God, or one government? The UN hasn't made it, the God concept hasn't made it, and the idea of all humans everywhere being one big morality group has never made it. Indeed, you can see that it is virtually precluded by our history unless some real genius comes along and generates a solution. A history guided powerfully by group-against-group competition is the virtual opposite of one-world and universal God themes. I think we have to keep asking: How in the world do we go from here?