

The Secular Foundations of Morality of the Radical Enlightenment

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It's no accident that moral theorizing of the Enlightenment in the 18th century is as, or more, diverse and far reaching than any time in history. As the influence of the Scientific Revolution continued to spread, the merits of competing worldviews would be pinned against each other in public like never before. The value of reason and evidence would be continually solidified in all fields of inquiry, though, there was a formidable hurdle to overcome. This was to develop an equally persuasive moral system compatible with naturalism, rejecting the supernatural as the likely origin of all phenomena. Due to the increasingly unsatisfactory alternatives of the time, it became necessary to integrate a purely materialistic and scientifically informed account of morality into society.

In this paper, I argue that the mixture of secular, universal, and consequential moral principles as argued for by philosophes such as d'Holbach, Diderot, Helvétius and others, indicates moral progress in principle and in practice. Furthermore, I raise doubts about the extent to which this blend of ethics falls prey to a hard distinction between descriptive and normative statements. Finally, I hope to address the most prominent concerns to these positions from their more moderate and conservative contemporaries.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza conceived of something having inherent moral worth to the degree that it related to a model of human perfectibility. Something could be said to be morally right or wrong, therefore, independent of the opinions of any one person, religion, or king. Elaborating on the universality of Spinoza's view, Jonathan Israel explains that, "While many different moralities and systems of values exist, he argues, they are by no means equally valid."¹ Israel goes on to clarify that "...they all overlap to an extent and only one, the purely rational, can be absolutely 'true'".² Having critiqued the inerrancy of the Bible in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and subtly separating entire branches of philosophy from theology in the *Ethics*, his influence among Enlightenment thinkers of the next century is understandably significant.

An important characteristic of this new moral sphere was its secularism, thanks to which the church or state authority became open for questioning and publically put to task for coherency. Going beyond the naturalistic philosophy of Spinoza and Bayle, d'Holbach argued outright against the divine origin of morality and the theologians that attempted to justify it. Specifically, in what has come to be known as one of the first explicitly atheistic works, *Le bon-sens, ou, Idées naturelles opposées aux idées surnaturelles* (Good Sense Without God or Freethoughts Opposed to Supernatural Ideas), one main point of contention he has against supernatural claims is the admitted fact that they are metaphysically and epistemologically mysterious. He inquires, "To say, that God is the author of the phenomena of nature, is it not to attribute them to an occult cause? What is God? What is a spirit? They are causes of which we have no idea."³ So, then, the next step would be to develop an understanding of morality of which we do, or at least can, have an idea.

It is within the origin of ideas where the moral crux of a materialistic "Spinozism" lies. Helvétius begins his categorization of moral emotions, inspired as well by Locke's empiricism, by asserting that, "...every idea and every judgment may be reduced to a sensation."⁴ Our direct experience bears this to be true. That this occurs is as factual a claim as we can hope for, however difficult it sometimes may be to interpret, communicate, or study. In every possible way, all of our understanding of the universe and our role within it, however little, is premised on the fact that we experience being conscious, i.e. have sensations. From this, Helvétius argues that all interpretations made regarding

the sensations are the result of our interests in comparing them against one another.⁵ The link to Spinoza with regard to natural comparisons here is clear. Happiness can be identified and moral judgement can be made. This early descriptive formulation of the utilitarian calculus goes so far as to preempt something like that of Singer's Expanding Circle when he states, "My afflictions for the miseries of an unhappy person, is always in proportion to the fear I have of being afflicted with the same miseries."⁶ Upon this realization, one that happens to be in the early stages of research in modern moral psychology and neuroscience, we can see how Helvétius concludes that compassion is the most important of virtues.⁷ He argues that "...it always contributes most to the happiness of humanity."⁸

The moral implications for this line of reasoning are apparent and quite consistent with the overall enlightened sentiments of secular, and universal human rights. It is possible to consider the betterment of the humanity on a universal and worldly foundation such as happiness, rather than on the dictates of religious leaders or authoritarian rule. Once "happiness" is understood to be something like a universal unit of moral measurement, then it naturally follows to determine by what means it can be most realized. In questioning the efficacy of the social structure of his day, d'Holbach remarks, "Oppressed by the double yoke of spiritual and temporal power, it has been impossible for the people to be happy. Religion became sacred, and men have had no other Morality than what their legislators and priests brought from the unknown regions of heaven. The human mind, confused by theological opinions, ceased to know its own powers, mistrusted experience, feared truth and disdained reason, in order to follow authority."⁹ The notion of sacredness is what prevents questioning and thereby coming understand our real interests and how they may be obtained. For d'Holbach, religion is an ancient social phenomenon that has been adopted to repress the minds ability to adequately understand itself, thereby forfeiting free thought as useless, something to be feared, or even worthy of damnation.

Acting in the spirit of critical analysis, like Spinoza and Bayle before him, he forthrightly stated radical and unpalatable ideas, not an uncommon habit among Enlightenment thinkers. From a utilitarian perspective, it isn't exactly obvious how free expression is inclined to guarantee individual and societal happiness. One can easily point to instances in which views considered to be destructive to society ought to be repressed. This could be the case, but that itself is a utilitarian concern that need not be accepted *prima facie*. Therefore, understanding potential outcomes and choosing a path that increases happiness or decreases suffering is a universal calculus insofar as our perception of the world is accurate. The major upside to this view is that it appeals to our Common Sense, anticipating Thomas Paine's influential and apropos publication.

The persuasive weight of religion in the minds of the average person had not appealed anything that could be considered common sense until after the Protestant Revolution. Even then, the expense of books and low literacy made it extremely difficult. However, as time would tell, common sense takes on a clearer meaning from the perspective of secular empiricists that believed our socialization greatly influences our judgments and behavior. Humanity has a deep common sense, in that we all have a direct experience of our sensations. As d'Holbach pleads, "Let the human mind apply itself to what is natural, to intelligible objects, truth, and useful knowledge."¹⁰ These are sentiments devoid of authority, faith, or mystery. They are also applicable to all people and the best procedural steps to address moral issues. As another passage illustrates, "They have only to commune with themselves, to reflect upon their own nature, to consider the objects of society, and of the individuals, who compose it; and they will easily perceive, that virtue is advantageous, and vice disadvantageous to themselves."¹¹

On the assumption that progress is possible in principle, it cannot be overlooked that the blending of a universal moral structure with one that relies on accurate information about how we live was a vital part in the arguments for democratic governance. By beginning with the individual's experience, and not with the Monarch, for example, social distinctions become either arbitrary or accidental. In fact, the entire project of the *Encyclopédie* relied on a diverse democratic spirit that valued the kind of freedom of thought and experimentation later envisaged in the Constitution of the United States. Similarly, better morals can be seen as something to be uncovered through trial and error, similar to government representatives or policy amendments. Of course, one would be hard-pressed to argue that the process that lead to the development of human and civil rights and the Democracies that enable them to flourish, are devoid of positive moral consideration. The peaks and troughs of moral progress are considerably as real as the experiences of those people that have benefited from principles such as freedom, equality, and justice. It is our ability to reason, Hume would agree, that allows us to understand our motives and intentions, as well as the consequences of our actions. However, flawed some reasoning may be, it is necessary to even make sense of a concept of morality. Without reason, we are animals subject to the whims of our ill-considered feelings, and the clockwork of our neurology and environment, ever vulnerable to harmful dogma. With reason, we are able to reflect on our situation, and address the concerns of a truly moral animal. This distinction, it is worth repeating, is necessary to understand morality as a concept to begin with. It is our most valuable faculty, the use of which is neglected at our peril.

Missing from earlier modern moral analysis was the production of more than trivial prescriptive commands without purchase on the minds of unbelievers, skeptics and anti-authoritarians. After all, competing with a censorious government as well as the alleged creator of the universe requires serious heavy lifting. The summarized moral proposal of these enlightened naturalists is to have better reasons for the conviction of normative and descriptive statements alike. d'Holbach argues, "Conviction can be founded only upon the constant testimony of our senses, which alone give birth to our ideas, and enable us to judge of the agreement or disagreement."¹² Only by way of using reason to convince others can ethics as a field of study, and philosophy in general, develop to begin with.

The way we think things ought to share an interdependent and inextricable connection to the way things are, and vice versa. Our values couldn't exist but for the fact that we exist. Likewise, we wouldn't conclude there to be any facts at all but for the values we place on the reliability of our senses and our ability to reason. Furthermore, normative statements, however axiomatically justified, may well produce the opposite of their desired intent on the condition that they're formed with an inaccurate understanding of the facts. Such a determination can only be believed and considered to be true given that it is offered on good reasons. Therefore, understanding morality to begin with requires drawing connections between our thoughts and the world and the most reliable way of doing so is both philosophical and scientific in nature.

Among the formidable attacks against the more radical of the philosophes was that launched by David Hume, who's theorizing concluded that morality cannot be demonstrated by reason.¹³ Hume was influenced by and largely in agreement with the works of Francis Hutcheson, who staunchly argued that we "...evince not only self-love but 'benevolent affections also toward others'" and that "our approval of moral actions, he urged, does not, and should not, properly arise from their effects, social or personal."¹⁴ Though, Hume did agree that morality was to be entirely separated from religion and agreed that superstitious variants were an 'enemy to civil liberty', he contended that there is no stronger moral foundation than institutions derived from human interest and that "right to authority is nothing but the constant possession of authority, maintain'd by the laws of society and the interests of mankind."¹⁵ This deliberation between the 'Epicurean Opinion' of the radical philosophes, tradition, and institutions encapsulates much of the division in moral philosophy at the time.

Denis Diderot likely had the best argument against Hume's claim that reason had no say in moral matters. Where they diverged was the extent to which rationality played a roll. For Diderot, "human rationality, is conceived as an extension of sensibility and the unconscious, rather than standing against or in conflict with it, proceeding along the same lines, only further and more efficiently."¹⁶ The goal as he saw it, was to move forward on this basis and assert that moral virtue is that which balances individual self-love with the bien général. There are a few responses one could give to how this may come about, despite criticisms by post Enlightenment thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas who questions the possibility of such a homogeneous moral sense.¹⁷ One response would be that a homogeneous moral sense isn't necessarily required for such a balance. Rather, the balance may be achieved by consistent fundamental principles, the effects of which may appear homogeneous in that they converge towards the promotion of the bien général. Upon discovery of these natural principles, it is conceivable how they may be utilized.

Additionally, the strict materialism was considered to suffer from a lack of compromise on the part of d'Holbach and appalled his contemporaries.¹⁸ Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Kant, and many others, had deep societal concerns about the implications of the conclusions that someone like d'Holbach reached. In fact, most moderate and even radical enlightenment thinkers disagreed with his argument that strict materialism was common sense. Despite his attack on the Christian religion that perpetually restricted his highly valued freedom of expression, Voltaire wasted no time in condemning bold arguments in support of anything that implied atheism, as he believed that depriving the poor and uneducated of the consolation of superstitions would endanger society.¹⁹ As he famously wrote in *Épître à l'auteur du livre des Trois imposteurs* (Epistle to the Author of the Book of the Three Impostors),

If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.
Let the wise man announce him and kings fear him.
Kings, if you oppress me, if your eminencies disdain
The tears of the innocent that you cause to flow,
My avenger is in the heavens: learn to tremble.
Such, at least, is the fruit of a useful creed.²⁰

Voltaire's primary concerns were that the belief in God has utility in both the reward for good actions by means of a heavenly incentive, and the prevention of wrong actions by means of damnation. Even as the strict connection between religion and government fell out of favor, a common understanding of the place of religion was to provide a kind of moral backup plan for when laws and punishments didn't work as intended. This is undoubtedly true in countless

societies and applicable to nearly everyone within them. As Kingsley Martin summarized, “God as a Creator and Dispenser of rewards and punishments was surely an essential deterrent, an omniscient Policeman who must be invented should He happen not to exist.”²¹ For Rousseau, though his reasons for agreement didn’t stem from the low expectation of the innate goodness of mankind (it was quite the opposite), nevertheless, his fears of the consequences were largely the same.

This view incidentally allied them with both Locke and Leibniz, and others that had a larger stake in Christianity. They deemed that, “it was axiomatic that salvation through Christ is the sole path to individual redemption and simultaneously the best and most reliable basis for social and moral order.”²² And though the religious skepticism of Hume prevented his agreement with this point, he nonetheless believed that the history, culture, rituals, language and entire Western identities have been centered on this idea and to uproot it is essentially asking for the destruction of society as they knew it. The good of the society was the primary concern for morality and allowing a disruption of the social order was simply untenable.

There are many more substantial problems with this view than meet the proponents eye. One, is that it requires an unfounded pessimism toward the idea of progress, and if believed widely enough, will result in its impossibility, no better than a prophecy of self-fulfillment. Another issue with this view is that socially accepted fictions are unstable in that they manipulate themselves almost infinitely throughout the world and throughout time. Of course, religion does provide a deep sense of community and belonging, with incentives to do good. However, we also know historically that social cohesion through the use of ideological identity enables our tribal instincts and fosters unnecessary resentment towards those who believe differently. In this way, it is similar to the relationship between nationalism and xenophobia, a connection which is hardly defensible as a positive moral principle. Lastly, as the Scientific Revolution had already occurred, and with the Enlightenment well under way, a long term shielding of average people from advancements in human knowledge wouldn’t have been a feasible task to keep under wraps indefinitely.

Bayle’s, and later Diderot’s, arguments for the ‘virtuous atheist’ also can’t be ignored. They argue that the atheist, like everyone else, has it in their interest to act in such a way that preserves their lifestyle and the well-being of the society in which they live. Equally, society has an interest in nurturing morality within him or her as an individual.²³ Therefore, Diderot says, the non-religious good deed is more ethical than the religious one, because the latter can be done, and is encouraged to do so, purely for the reward of an afterlife or the fear of hell. The concern for the well-being of society need not enter the picture on this account, whereas for the atheist, one’s true happiness cannot be realized without a consideration for his happiness within the place of society as a whole.

Another major contention about the undermining of religion in moral matters is its association with free-will and personal responsibility. How is it that can we hold people morally accountable for their actions if there is no free will? To fully address this topic here isn’t possible, but there many similarities among radical thinkers to package a cohesive response to this question. Determinists such as Spinoza, Bayle, Collins, Mandeville, Boulainvilliers, Meslier, Du Marsais, d’Holbach, Diderot and others, argued for just punishment under the law on the grounds that it was pragmatic.²⁴ Because a crime was committed without the freedom of the individual to act otherwise doesn’t necessitate the illegitimacy of the legal system. It can be seen how understanding the consequences of our actions results in certain ill-effects for society. The point that Diderot makes regarding the ‘virtuous atheist’ sufficiently deals with the fact that there is incentive to be good in the very fact that living cooperatively within a society is best for the individual, regardless of their religious beliefs or lack of free-will. It becomes meaningful to preserve the positive aspects of our lives in the only way truly possible, without anticipation of some kind of divine coercion. In fact, the modern progressive case can be made that institutionalizing punishment in this non-retributive way may actually lead to more just sentencing and a better understanding of recidivism.

To conclude, morality, and the subsequent study of ethics, are sensibly derived while rationally understood. It is from an incalculably large set of observable and predictable facts about our sensations, and even about our values, that we can possibly provide answers to moral questions to begin with. An attempt to minimize suffering and encourage flourishing can be deliberated after the fact through a process of understanding everything from the character of the actor, the consequences of their actions, and the logical conclusion of the of moral rules of which they happen to be convinced. By moving forward on the basis of naturalism and realism we can, and do, discover that a universal foundation of carefully chosen enlightened principles, principles that can be applied and withdrawn, is truly better than the dictates of tyrants or religious absolutism.

References

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- ⁴ Kramnick, Isaac, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (London: Penguin, 1996), 287.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.
- ⁷ Lamm, C. and J. Majdandžić, "The role of shared neural activations, mirror neurons, and morality in empathy – A critical comment", *Neuroscience research*, (January 2015) Accessed December 04, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25455743>.
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- ⁹ Holbach, Paul Henri Thiéry, *Good Sense Without God: Or Free Thoughts Opposed to Supernatural Ideas* (S.I.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2013), 5.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 31.
- ¹³ Israel, Jonathan I, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*, 687.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 688.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 691.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 694.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Martin, Kingsley, *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Phoenix House, 1962), 174.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Voltaire [1768], *Epistle to the Author of the Book of the Three Impostors*, in *Complete Works of Voltaire*, Volume 10, translated by Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885), 402-405.
- ²¹ Martin, Kingsley. *French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 174.
- ²² Israel, Jonathan I. *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*, 673.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 694.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 685.