The Materialist Atheist Worldview, A Follow Up
The Rev. Jonathan C. Page

Several posts ago, I wrote about the inherent limitations of a secular materialist worldview in relation to ethics and ethical reasoning. I was both surprised and encouraged by the many insightful responses I received and I wanted to follow up on that discussion.

I claimed that a secular materialist who wants to create a de-ontological system of ethics must rely on the claims of science for ethical norms. If you want to create a reasoned system of right and wrong without God, there are no grounds for that system outside biology. From the perspective of evolutionary biology, we are hard-wired, so to speak, to promote our survival and, in some cases, the survival of our group. People responded to my claim by citing Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*, in which Dawkins makes it clear in his opening chapter that humans are not limited in ethical reasoning to their genetic pre-disposition. In other words, simply because evolutionary biology can create a system of ethics does not mean that a secular materialist must rely on this reasoning. Society can and does create ethical norms that go far beyond what mere biology would dictate. Dawkins and others say that this is good and natural. A secular materialist is not bound to a system where survival of the fittest dictates behavioral norms.

Given that sensible critique, allow me to elaborate. Ethics are those rules, spoken and unspoken, that guide behavior in a particular society. Ethics are governed by societal norms and written laws. In our society, for instance, we have agreed that killing is wrong, but it depends on the murder's level of intentionality when we think of how wrong it is. Premeditated murder is a worse violation of ethics than accidentally killing someone with your car or killing someone in self-defense. Ethics also vary within our country. In Cambridge, Massachusetts it is generally accepted as wrong to make homophobic comments. In large parts of Iowa, it is okay to make homophobic comments. In each instance, those norms arise through debate and public engagement with others.

The key question is how we judge the ethical norms of a particular society or culture. The advantage of Christianity or other belief systems is that you can appeal to the language and tradition of the faith to engage in ethical debate. There is no clear Christian system of ethics, but Christianity does provide grounds for engagement. In a secular materialist system, what are the grounds for ethical debate? How do you make the claim that one system of secular ethics should be better than another without some agreed upon basis for discussion? Without a belief system that appeals to a higher power or a transcendent norm, how can you call out someone's behavior as wrong when it is generally accepted by society?

A classic example is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*. In that famous example, King had violated the written laws and generally accepted norms of the Southern society and he was justifiably jailed for that. King then appealed to a higher law that transcended local norms and laws to claim that his behavior was right. He had the advantage of appealing to Christianity and generally accepted views in society that owe

much to the Christian heritage. What if you claim there is no higher power? What is right?

In his book *Good Without God*, Greg Epstein argued for an ethical system loosely based on the heritage of Western culture that has been saturated with Jewish and Christian ethical norms. Specifically, he appealed to a new version of the Ten Commandments and to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. My complaint against Greg and others who take his view is, "Why should I listen to you?" Why should I not support torturing the enemies of the United States? I don't want my family or friends to be bombed by terrorists so I will support torturing people if there is even a slight chance it might save my life or the lives of others I care about. I don't give a hoot about your categorical imperative. I choose me.

Greg might offer a consequentialist argument like, "Torture is ineffective, or torture hurts the reputation of the United States and leads to more violence." But, that reasoning still comes back to my self-interest. I should not support torture because it will likely help me in the long run. But if torture is even potentially effective or if it potentially deters future terrorists, doesn't that make it right for me? Any course in ethics will show that you can make ethical arguments, well supported ethical arguments, for almost any side of an issue. How do you judge between them without some higher norm that you can call upon?

We live in a culture that owes much of its ethical life to Christianity and to the Hellenistic culture that preceded it. We accept those norms because we were raised in this society. But why should I listen to them, other than as a result of fear of violating laws and their attendant consequences? Cultural norms are dangerous to rely upon solely for our ethics.

Our current political state is a perfect example. Why should I not support cutting all programs to help the poor? I am unlikely to need that assistance. Why should I care at all about Medicaid? I can always live in a gated community. I would rather keep my tax dollars. Those statements would have been unacceptable in the 1950's but are perfectly acceptable in many circles today. How do you argue against that view, especially in a culture saturated with Ayn Rand's Objectivism?

Obviously, there are many good, kind, and generous people who are secular materialists. There are also many cruel and bitter Christians. But isn't it important to have some language of ethics that can appeal effectively to something other than self-interest, that can appeal to a higher norm?