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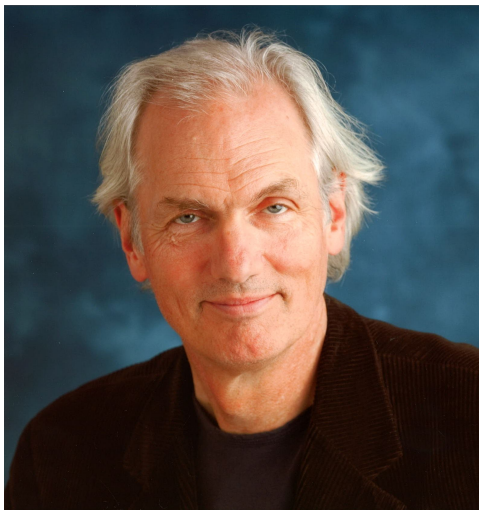
Key Issues in Religion
and World Affairs



How Morality Looks from a God's-Eye Point of View

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It has been said that Americans would sooner elect as president a Muslim than an atheist, on the grounds that an atheist, having no religion, has no basis for morality. Although much of my recent book, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories* (2016), is an argument against the assumption that religion is the necessary foundation for ethics, it's less clear why it seems so obvious to so many people who should know better. My starting point is the assumption that ethical life does *not* necessarily require religious foundations. It follows that when people come to think that ethics *does* depend on religion, this is for historically specific reasons that we should find puzzling rather than obvious, and whose consequences we should examine.

I first began thinking about how we understand ethics and morality while working on the conversion of Sumbanese ancestral ritualists to the Protestant Christianity brought to their Indonesian island by twentieth century Dutch colonial missionaries (the subject of my previous book, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, 2007). One of the central challenges this situation presented was making sense of how Sumbanese were able to rethink and change ethical values which, in the face of it, should have been part of those background cultural and ontological assumptions that are so deep and so world-defining that they can be almost impossible to question. But in this context "ethics" and "morality" seemed to be relatively straightforward concepts. They were defined in terms of an institutionalized religion with an explicit moral code.

Matters became more complicated, however, when I ventured into the less self-conscious domains of habitual activities and everyday social relations. As I use it, “ethical life” starts from that sheer everydayness.

I have found it useful to keep in mind a distinction articulated by the philosopher Bernard Williams. In his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), Williams is critical of a dominant view in modern Western philosophy which emphasizes obligations and blame, and assumes they must be based on a wholly consistent system of highly general principles which should apply to everyone regardless of their identities or circumstances. This emphasis, which he calls “the morality system,” obscures other crucial aspects of “ethics.” Whereas morality deals with such questions as what one should do next, ethics concerns a manner of life. Although both ethics and morality say something about what one owes to other people and how one should treat them, they differ in how they portray social relations. Many of the most powerful rules and obligations of the morality system, like Kant’s categorical imperative, are meant to be universal in application and available to any reasoning individual. By contrast, ethics captures the way in which one is part of a community that supports and responds to one’s way of life.

But we should not draw the distinction between ethics and morality so sharply that we are forced to exclude some of the phenomena we want to understand. Ethics does include the morality system—it is just a special *kind* of ethics. It conceals but does not eliminate the ways ethics is socially embedded. And the ethnographic and historical records are indeed full of rules and obligations, put in very general terms, which are meant to be internally consistent, like the morality system Williams criticizes. Since these extend far beyond the tradition in Western philosophy that Williams had in mind, I will use the expression in the plural and propose that there are *many* morality systems, of which the tradition Williams attacks is only one example. In certain communities, following rules *is* what the virtuous life consists in.

Assuming Williams is right, it’s still the case that many morality systems have been looming historical realities we need to understand. Putting morality systems in the context of ethics encourages us to ask what circumstances tend to foster or induce the development of morality systems, more or less context-free, more or less explicit, systems of obligations. I will treat “ethics” as the more encompassing category of the two. The meaning of the word “ethics” as I use it here is very broad. As a rough heuristic, I take ethics to center on the question of how one should live and what kind of person one should be. This encompasses both one’s relations to others and decisions about right and wrong acts. The sense of “should” refers to values, meaning things that are taken by the actor to be good in their own right rather than as means to some other ends. This refers to the point where the justifications for actions or ways of living stop, having run up against what seems self-evident—or just an inexplicable gut feeling. As such, values can also motivate the sense that the rules and obligations of a morality system are binding on one’s specific actions. There is a crucial link between one’s sense of self-worth, and what one values beyond the self, because the meaning that

values hold is typically public, one's sense of self-worth is something that others can grasp as well.

A morality system depends on the coordination of what might otherwise be disparate ethical ideas and practices. That coordination is not something to be taken for granted. Yet because morality systems are typically easy to see—they announce themselves through their rituals, disciplines, rules, texts, authorities, slogans, laws, justifications—they loom large in the historical and ethnographic record. Their visibility makes it easy to forget that nothing guarantees that any given social world will produce a coordinated and explicit morality system, or if it does, that the resulting morality system will actually govern people's ethical lives in their entirety. At the same time, if we insist, as some phenomenologists do, that ethics is really and only a matter of the unself-conscious habitual practices of everyday life, it becomes hard to account for the empirical existence of morality systems when we *do* encounter them. Moreover, it becomes hard to understand certain kinds of actions, people's purposeful efforts to change ethics across entire societies. For morality systems loom large not just because they are easy to see, but also because they play such a large role in history. Morality systems are often shaped by self-conscious people who stand apart from the taken-for-granted flow of life in order to act upon it.

Here I want to look at specific kind of morality system, associated with religious piety. Evangelizing piety movements tend to share a propulsive movement, as large numbers of people take action in order to transform their ethical worlds. I am interested in the question, what makes it possible to step outside the flow of life and look at it from a critical distance? Consider two thriving contemporary piety movements, one Christian, the other Muslim. Although they differ in their theological and moral doctrines, these movements have much in common. In particular, the participants in these movements actively and self-consciously strive to live ethically consistent lives. In both piety movements, that demand for consistency is partly explained by the inculcation of a God's-eye-view, a version of the third person perspective from which the faithful is expected to see the totality of his or her life and impose order on it.

Assuming that what we call "religion" and "ethics" are in principle distinct from each other, what is the conceptual relationship between them? What are the historical pathways along which the two often seem to converge? What are the social implications of that convergence where it occurs? And when they converge, what remainder escapes the conflation of these two? Here I want to focus on people's purposeful efforts at pious self-fashioning as analyzed in studies of two religious revival movements at the end of the twentieth century. One is the charismatic Christianity of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea made famous by Joel Robbins (*Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*, 2004) , the other the self-cultivation of Muslim men in Cairo described by Charles Hirschkind (*The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, 2006) .

The Urapmin are a small group in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Responding enthusiastically to a revival movement that swept the region in the 1970s, they have

emphatically rejected anything associated with “the ways of the ancestors,” working to construct a completely Christian life. To that end they undertake frequent prayers, group spirit possessions, confessions, and take part in church services in which they are subjected to lengthy harangues about their lack of self-control. Robbins describes their condition in the 1990s as one of “moral torment.” The torment in question arises from contradictions between the older ethics embedded within daily activities and forms of sociality, on the one hand, and the explicit precepts of the new religion, on the other. For despite their rejection of the old religious practices, Urapmin still hunt, work their gardens, and enter into social relations much as before. Social relations depend on established forms of recognition, especially gifts and cooperation. To be a good person, in this social world, involves balancing two sets of demands. On the one hand, one should restrain one’s willfulness in order to live up to the model of generosity, reciprocity, and helpfulness expected within established relationships. On the other hand, one should also work to create new relationships. To do this, however, means exercising one’s will, which is likely to be at the expense of existing relationships. For example, instead of giving meat to an affine where it is due, one might give it to someone with whom one is developing a new connection. If the tension between morality and the value of new relations already existed in pre-Christian society, it is brought to the foreground in the constant Christian attack on willfulness.

According to Robbins, Urapmin think of morality in terms of law-like dictates. Their dilemma is thus implicit in the tension between the taken-for-granted domain of everyday practices and the realm of explicit doctrinal teaching brought by Christianity. But the problem is even deeper. Their version of Christian morality defines it in opposition to any this-worldly calculations of utility. *The very impossibility of perfectly fulfilling the demands of their version of Christianity is part of what defines a rule as being moral in the first place.* This induces the sense that, despite their best efforts, they are ultimately doomed to live as sinners as they persist in the ordinary, this-worldly business of sustenance and communal life.

Consider now another religious revival movement, among Muslim men in Cairo’s lower working class neighborhoods in the 1990s. Like the Urapmin, these Cairenes are deeply influenced by religious currents that have been sweeping the globe, in this case the Islamic Revival. They too have made the religious movement their own, and actively work to achieve profound moral transformations, both personal and social. This activist relationship to moral change takes place against an everyday background of modern urban life. Theirs is a community in which many (if not all) aim to make religious morality a dimension of everything, not just a specialized domain set apart from the rest of life. And like Urapmin, these men in find Cairo ethical life to be difficult and requiring constant, highly self-conscious effort. But nevertheless it remains an attainable goal which can and should be integrated into daily life. What is crucial to the movement is the insistence that ethics does not require withdrawal into a pious enclave kept pure by its barriers against an unpious world, unlike, say, communities of Hasidim or Russian Old Believers. Whatever torment may haunt these men is found not in contradictions within ethical life, nor even exactly between that and their worldly context, but in the threat of hell for the unfaithful. That threat is represented in graphic terms

within the recorded sermons to which these men constantly listen. If these men aspire to ground their ethical lives in automatic bodily responses to religious summons, highly explicit reminders of the afterlife constantly prod them to see themselves *from the third person perspective, provided in this case by the God's eye view*.

For all their differences, these two works portray movements that share a basic starting assumption, that religion is the necessary authorization and sufficient justification for ethical actions. Religious institutions and practices are the chief practical means by which the ethical life is shaped. Now to be sure, such piety movements are typical neither of Christianity nor Islam. However, in one respect, the Urapmin and the sermon-listeners in Cairo are exemplary of an influential strand of popular thinking in many parts of the contemporary world. This is the assumption that religion is the necessary foundation for ethics. The assumption that ethics requires a religious basis seems to be an important factor driving the present global religious revival, whose effects are manifested in both Urapmin millenarianism and the Islamic Revival movement in Cairo.

Hirschkind's account of the pious men in Cairo focuses on habits and practices embedded in the ordinary activities of everyday life. Available to consciousness or not, virtue is not confined to particular domains of life; any given aspect of social existence potentially bears ethical weight. This portrayal of virtue as habitual and pervading communal life has many of the hallmarks of the "total social fact." One of the best examples of the ethics of the total social fact is Marcel Mauss's description of "the gift" (*The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 1925). The gift, he writes, involves "an enormous complex of facts. . . . In these 'total' social phenomena, . . . all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time — religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family." Mauss places ethical intuitions and expectations at the center of the everyday practices of law, economics, and kinship. The concept of the total social fact thus pushes back against the tendency to privilege religion as the basis of ethical life. Although the modern division of labor attempts to sort out domains such as the religious, the juridical, the domestic, the economic, the political, this is a historically specific, and, ultimately (according to Mauss) not entirely successful, endeavor. But of course history matters, and this sorting out of domains is enormously consequential. What happens to the concepts and practices of ethics when they come to be identified with religion?

In what follows, I will summarize part of the argument of my book, *Ethical Life*. Certain scriptural monotheisms tend to objectify ethics, exerting pressure on them to become more consistent and cognitively explicit. But objectification also tends to separate ethics from everyday habits, and foster the taking up of a third person perspective on ethical life. This tendency is reinforced by the modern division among what Max Weber called "value spheres." Paradoxically, this very division of value spheres, by identifying ethics with a specifically religious domain, can inspire strenuous efforts to break out of that confinement. The result can be the cultivation of piety meant to encompass *all* domains of life. Yet the piety project must still wrestle with the consequences of that initial objectification that tend to undermine that very goal.

Both the Urapmin and Cairene piety movements presuppose a category of “religion” that is already the outcome of a history of sharpening distinctions among different spheres of action. Religion in these movements emerges in *contrast* to the ubiquity and taken-for-granted everydayness that characterizes the social fact that Mauss describes. Many contemporary versions of the idea that ethics depends on religion derive from this distinction among value spheres.

Christian Urapmin and Cairene Muslim versions of piety foster a point of view located in the person of a single supreme being. Whether they stress divine transcendence or immanence, they posit a unifying perspective that demands of ethical life that it have a high degree of principled organization. The monotheistic perspective is expressed in this remark about the effect of Islam on tribal Arabia. According to the religious scholar Toshihiko Izutsu, in his book *Ethico-religious Concepts in the Qur’ân* (2002), Islam marked “the first appearance of moral principle which was consistent enough to deserve the name of ‘principle’. A whole practical code of conduct, though as yet largely unsystematic, was imposed upon the believer,. . . . [prior to Islam, moral values] were just there as membra disjecta, without any definite underlying principle to support them; Islam made it possible for the first time for the Arabs to judge and evaluate all human conduct with reference to a theoretically justifiable moral principle.” When Izutsu sees this prior condition merely as the *absence* of principles, he is taking on the totalizing perspective of the monotheistic moral code. But the state of being that Izutsu calls “membra disjecta” is hardly some failing peculiar to early Arabia. Rather, the ethnographic record shows that it is a familiar state of affairs, in the absence of some centralizing ethical project.

The explicit goal of totalizing ethics under a theoretically justifiable moral principle, in religion, stands in contrast to the ways ordinary social existence is already thoroughly saturated with ethics *prior* to any regulating principles. For social interaction is saturated with ethical stances, that is, matters of values, obligations, the demand for recognition and the risk of its denial. These do not require any overarching organizing principle in order to have their effects. As I argue in my book, some ethical worlds accord a privileged role to self-consciousness, others to habit, but nothing in the concept of ethical life makes this a matter of either/or, confining it wholly one basis or the other.

The positing of a transcendental point of view is likely to instigate an effort to rationalize ethics under an organizing principle. This is because such a point of view invites a universalization that seems to demand principles sufficiently general that they can hold across an indefinite number of cases and contexts. The point of view of a transcendent deity offers a position on which to stand, from which one may survey the whole range of ethical values available in any given cultural world, such that their inconsistencies become visible. It is the pressure exerted by this asymptotically transcendental point of view that provides at least the conceptual and ethical motivation for the kind of purification or reform movements that are so common in religious history.

A universal abstract ethical principle is not likely to render itself immediately inhabitable. Some further mediation is needed. Perhaps the most ubiquitous medium for doing so is entextualization. Entextualization refers to the processes by which specific chunks of discourse are rendered into texts, by eliminating features that ground them in a specific context. This renders them transportable away from particular contexts in order to circulate among a potentially indefinite range of other contexts, where they have the potential to be recontextualized. The process of entextualization is what makes a so-called scriptural religion, which possesses texts extracted from one context that can have powerful effects when recontextualized in another: scriptures, creeds, catechisms, liturgies, sermons, prayers, hymns, and so forth. The practices surrounding these texts--studying scripture, reciting creeds, learning catechisms--are also crucial to their realization in adherents' lived experience.

Consider the Qur'an. The multi-stage transmission from revelation by the Archangel Jibril to the speech of Muhammad to its inscription by scribes at his dictation thematizes the entextualization process. The ethically authorizing nature of the scriptural text is clear: it conceives of religion in terms of divine guidance. According to Izutsu, revelation is regarded as essentially a merciful guidance (*hudá*) for those who are apt to believe: some people accept it while others reject it of their own free will.

Ethical guidance by this account comes to people from something *beyond* them, which they can accept or reject. Indeed, this separateness is a condition of its ethical character to the extent that ethics depends not just on adherence to a law or ritual procedure but that it is a *chosen* adherence, since one could have rejected the law, like Iblis, or Satan (that is, although "submission" is definitive of Islam, it must in principle result from an act of free will). The transcendental nature of this divine point of view that posits a single organizing vision on what might otherwise be a fragmented field of ethical norms and moral injunctions (Izutsu's "*membra disjecta*"), is implicated in its separateness from humans.

This kind of ethical stance forms a marked contrast to the more or less tacit everyday ethics embedded in social interactions. The latter do not require any particular set of explicit truth claims for their moral authority. This is one reason why notions of sincerity tend to be so much more prominent in creed-based religions, since acceptance of truth claims is so closely linked to ethical judgments. It is this reference to truth claims, and the textual organization of those truth claims, that helps give the sense of coherence, of being a matter of context-independent principles, to scripture-based ethical systems. The demand that ethics be based on a small number of general principles reflects this link to knowable truth and its roots in the transcendental perspective from which the alternatives seem merely incoherent, so many *membra disjecta*.

For all their differences, both the Charismatic Urapmin and the sermon-consuming Cairenes take ethics to depend on heightened awareness, both through doctrinal knowledge and self-monitoring. This awareness is reinforced by the tensions and conflicts between piety and the unmarked habits of daily life. For even the goal of rendering piety a matter of deep, instinctual everydayness seems to require the pious to

maintain constant alertness to the impious possibilities around them. In both the Urapmin and Cairene cases this tends to result in ongoing struggle. This is due, in part, to the how religion has become a distinct category within a world of secular institutions, mundane activities, less pious contemporaries.

The more the faithful identify ethics with piety, the more unethical those less pious people and practices, amongst whom they find themselves everyday, are likely to seem. Yet unless they follow the route to separatism, those who aspire to piety cannot wholly abandon every one of those habits and social relations that tie them to other persons and practices, at least not without social difficulty and personal loss. This difficulty is not just a practical matter of making a living and sustaining bonds of kinship, neighborliness, or workplace fellowship. Beyond those practical matters, those everyday habits and relations are likely to possess their own ethical implications, whose pull may not simply be eliminated by the ethics of piety. Piety notwithstanding, as the anthropologist James Laidlaw has remarked, in everyday life one is still likely to acknowledge that a decent person owes something to kin and colleague, to care about social justice and good character. These can all be in conflict in various ways. Paradoxically, the totalizing pressure toward the full integration of pious personhood appears to stem, in part, from the very distinction between religion and non-religion it seeks to overcome. These persistent tensions seem an important source of the restlessness urgency of those revival movements that identify ethics with piety.