

What Is - Ought to Be

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Newsweek's June 13, 1994, cover story focused on "the crusade against America's moral decline." The article referenced a *Newsweek* poll indicating that "76 percent of adults agree that the United States is in moral and spiritual decline." This cover story is just one among many documenting the eroding moral fiber of our country. One cover story read "What ever happened to ethics? . . . America searches for its moral bearings," read one cover story (*Time*, May 25, 1987). The author concluded that as the "American home becomes a less stable and more selfish place, many people have begun to blame the schools for not taking over the traditional family task of inculcating values." The article continued to probe the idea of educational institutions being given the responsibility to teach ethics and then raised the essential question, "Who is to decide what are the right values?"

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If the public schools become responsible to teach ethics, how will they teach it without God? As Christians, we believe that God is the logical basis for ethics, but why have so many people abandoned this idea? I

Recently read an article in a medical journal in which they interviewed Cornell biologist William Provine. He said,

Our ethics are based on the ancient belief that there are supernatural forces at work in the world, that these supernatural forces provide the basis for ethics, that we

have moral responsibility based on free will. This is all false. And even people who think it is true must recognize that there is no longer consensus on these beliefs. . . . I tell my religious students

to look at the person sitting on each side of them. . . . Chances are, at least one of those persons doesn't share their belief in God that provides the ultimate foundation for ethics (G. Liles, "The Faith of an Atheist," *MD*, March 1994, 61).

If God does not provide the basis for ethics, who or what does? As I read the spectrum of ethical theories humanity has to offer, I can understand why students are so confused. University students study all kinds of ethical prescriptions--from the self-love of Ayn Rand's egocentric ethics, to the unselfish love of Erich Fromm's social ethics. You can believe that we are economically determined (Marx), or you can believe we are socially determined (Skinner). You can embrace the theory that humanity is self-determined

(Sartre), or the theory that we are genetically determined (Huxley). With this plethora of ethical theories being taught, how can we help

these students defend the belief that ethics must be grounded in God?

If God does not provide the basis for ethics, who or what does?

The most widely accepted theory of behavior is the genetic theory. In the aforementioned article, Professor Provine explained how he teaches his students that,

There is no going back to a world in which our

ethics can be based on a revelation of what God demands of us. Nor can we reasonably expect people to behave morally by exercising free will, free will simply doesn't exist. Genetic and environmental factors do not merely influence our moral decisions--they determine them (G. Liles, "The Faith of an Atheist," *MD*, March 1994, 61).

Professor Provine's philosophy is fundamentally self-defeating. He undermines his profession as a teacher when he says that we are not free. If he really believed that, he would not be trying to convince his students to *change* the way they think, which implies that they are *free* to do so. If they are not free to act on their own thoughts, why does he think they would be free to act on his? This is

a sample of modern scholarship, Ivy League at its best, convincing students that we are not responsible for our behavior--and many of our young people are believing the lie.

This thinking is also penetrating the Church at the leadership level, persuading some Christians to believe that certain kinds of behaviors are uncontrollable. In a recent discussion I had with Christian youth leaders, some believed that homosexuality was genetically determined and that an all-loving God would not hold homosexuals accountable for their behavior. They wanted to know how we could condemn homosexuals for a behavior that is genetically determined. I realize that homosexuality is a sensitive issue and it is not my purpose to focus on this issue as if it is listed in some special category in the Bible. Answers to tough questions ought to be given in the context of "sharing the truth in love." However, this particular issue does serve as a good example of the application of biological ethics. Is there some kind of objective way to address it? I believe there is and I have briefly outlined a few steps that will help us move in the right direction.

Step One: Identify the facts. My initial response to these leaders was, "Please cite the scientific study that reached the conclusion you now believe to be true." After going through several unreliable sources, including magazine articles and news reports, they still could not even give me the names of the researchers nor the institutions conducting the studies on this topic. At this point I was able

to bring the facts into focus.

The two leading researchers on this topic are Simon LeVay of the Institute of Gay and Lesbian Education and Dean Hamer of the National Institutes of Health. Biogenetic research has been going on for 20 years and to this day, there is no conclusive evidence that homosexuality is biologically determined. With respect to genetics causing sexual orientation *the men doing the research say,*

Causal connection is speculative at this point. . . . Our research has attracted an extraordinary degree of public attention, *not so much because of any conceptual breakthrough* . . . but because it touches on a deep conflict in contemporary American society (LeVay and Hamer, "Evidence for a Biological Influence in Male Homosexuality," *Scientific American*, May, 1994, p. 46, p.49, emphasis added).

Indeed, in the same issue of *Scientific American* there appeared a critique of biogenetic research. William Byne, research associate at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City and an attending psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, questioned the obvious oversimplification of those who prescribe to genetic causation of homosexuality. Although I do not agree with some of the things he stated, I believe he has isolated the fact that we are very complex beings and ought to be treated as such. He said,

"Studies that mark homosexuality as a

heritable trait (assuming that they can be replicated) do not say anything about how that heritability might operate. *Genes in themselves specify proteins, not behavior or psychological phenomena. . . .* Psychoanalysts have noted that of those gay men who seek therapy, many report having had poor rapport with their fathers. They thus suggest that an impaired father-son relationship leads to homosexuality. . . .

These speculations reemphasize how far researchers must go before they understand the factors--both biological and experiential--that contribute to sexual orientation. . . . Confirmation of genetic research purporting to show that homosexuality is heritable makes clear neither what is inherited nor how it influences sexual orientation. For the foreseeable future, then, interpretation of these *results will continue to hinge on assumptions of questionable validity* (W. Byne, "The Biological Evidence Challenged," *Scientific American*, May 1994, 55, emphasis added).

The facts demonstrate that researchers have not isolated any gene that influences sexual behavior. Scientists have no knowledge of how individual genes affect sexuality; their conclusions are purely speculative.

Step Two: Isolate defective thinking. The subjects of human sexuality and personality are extremely complex. Even if the genetic evidence were more conclusive, reducing a

complex issue like sexuality to only its genetic cause would be fallacious. It is called the *reductive fallacy in logic*, an attempt to explain something complex in terms of only one of its many aspects while ignoring other factors (e.g., an absent parent, sexual or emotional abuse, an overbearing male or female influence, etc.).

Another fallacious idea associated with this issue is the belief that a proposition is true because many people believe it. The fallacy is called *appeal to the people*. It is committed by anyone who tries to establish truth by appealing to popular sentiments instead of the relevant evidence. It is foolish and illogical to conclude that what is popular must necessarily be true. It was once popular to believe that the earth was flat, but it was not true. Even if a whole society decided to believe it again, it would not change the shape of the earth.

Step Three: Consider the logical implications of the theory. If one were to truly believe that behavior was determined by genetics and people were not ultimately responsible for their actions, then what about criminal justice? We are already witnessing defense attorneys trying to use the genetic theory of ethics in courts of law.

In 1991, Tony Mobley shot and killed a Domino's pizza manager execution-style and was sentenced to die. The attorney for Tony Mobley, Daniel Summer, contended that "there may be a genetic reason for his client's violence" (A. Rochell, "Violence and the

mind," *The Atlanta Journal / The Atlanta Constitution*, July 2, 1994, C2). The article went on to describe how Summer argued for a different punishment on the basis of his client's biogenetic cause for his *inherently aberrant and violent behavior*. This is the logical outworking of an ethic that excuses behavior on the basis of the laws of science. The logical implications of this view would lead us to accept the proposition that all behavior must be reduced to a set of chemical reactions. If that is so and a criminal act is out of the control of the perpetrator of the crime, where do we draw the line?

Step Four: Identify and justify the standard.

If drawing the line is a problem, what about the question of the line itself? What is ethics? The word *ethics* comes from the Greek term *ethos* which is rooted in the word *stall*, indicative of something static or constant. *Ethics* is classically understood to mean some universally fixed standard by which to measure human behavior. The term *morality* denotes the degree to which that behavior conforms to the standard. In other words, *ethics is a prescription for behavior* while *morals are a description of behavior*. Simply put, ethics prescribes *what ought to be (a value)*, while morality describes *what is (a fact)*.

The problem that was raised in question form in the beginning of this article must still be answered: "Who is to decide what are the right values?" What is the logical justification for prescriptive statements about behavior? In science, natural laws are only descriptive--

these laws describe what happens as matters of fact. This is a description of what nature does, *what is* happening.

This ought to help us see the ethical inadequacy of what many people refer to as "natural law." Natural law cannot tell us what ought to be, it only describes what is taking place. It would be ridiculous to think that objects can decide to behave in some other socially acceptable manner because they *ought not to* fall to the ground. It logically follows that *natural law* ethics reduces itself to the meaningless proposition of "*what is (a fact), ought to be (a fact)*." Not exactly a solid moral principle to "hang your hat on."