



Sanchez v Douhat on Religious Ethics

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Julian Sanchez, who works for the Cato Institute and the Reason Foundation, and Russ Douhat, conservative columnist for the New York Times, have been having an exchange, preceded by one between Douhat and Slate's Will Saletan, about the validity of religious ethics. And Sanchez is absolutely pummeling him at this point. It began with this statement from Douhat:

Say what you will about the prosperity gospel and the cult of the God Within and the other theologies I criticize in *Bad Religion*, but at least they have a metaphysically coherent picture of the universe to justify their claims. Whereas much of today's liberalism expects me to respect its moral fervor even as it denies the revelation that once justified that fervor in the first place. It insists that it is a purely secular and scientific enterprise even as it grounds its politics in metaphysical claims. (You will not find the principle of absolute human equality in evolutionary theory, or universal human rights anywhere in physics.) It complains that Christian teachings on homosexuality do violence to gay people's equal dignity—but if the world is just matter in motion, whence comes this dignity? What justifies and sustains it? Why should I grant it such intense, almost supernatural respect?

To which Sanchez [responded](#):

Now, I know Ross has read his *Euthyphro*, but since he talks here as though he hasn't, I'll go ahead and make the obvious point: Invoking God doesn't *actually* get you very far in ethics, because ascribing "goodness" to a deity or its laws is meaningless unless there's some independent criterion for this. At best, God gets you two things: First, a plausible *prudential* internal motivation to behave "morally" (because God will punish you if you don't), though of the same formal sort as the motivation you might have to obey a powerful state or a whimsical alien overlord. Second, a potential form of "expert validation" for independent moral truths we lack direct epistemic access to, as when we accept certain propositions on the grounds that mathematicians or scientists have confirmed them, even if most of us are incapable of comprehending the detailed proof. But invoking God doesn't *solve* any of the problems that secular moral philosophers grapple with—it's essentially just a way of gesturing at a black box, wherein we're assured the answer lies, and asserting that we needn't worry our pretty little heads about it.

If divine commandments are not supposed to be mere arbitrary rules we obey out of fear, then every question Ross thinks confronts the secular moralist reappears within a theistic framework. *Why* does being made in the image of God, whatever that entails, imbue people with dignity? Why would it obligate us to treat them (or refrain from

treating them) in certain ways? Why should we believe that *supernatural* properties can supply us with the appropriate sort of reasons if *natural* properties cannot? As with cosmological questions, appealing to God defers the questions rather than answering them. In the moral case, one might add, it seems to do so in a rather unattractive way: It turns out that the reasons we have to respect other persons are rather like the reasons we have to respect property—flowing not from anything intrinsic to the object, but from the consideration due some third party who is the *real* source of value.

He's right, of course. Saying "God said so," for whatever reason, is absolutely meaningless unless you first establish that said god actually exists. If not, it is no more compelling an argument than "my leprechaun said he'll beat you up if you don't do what he says." Douthat [responds](#) with a good deal of religio-babble:

Virtue is not something that's commanded by God, the way a magistrate (or a whimsical alien overlord) might issue a legal code, but something that's inherent to the Christian conception of the divine nature. God does not establish morality; he embodies it. He does not set standards; he is the standard. And even when he issues principles or precepts through revelation (as in the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount) he isn't legislating in the style of Hammurabi or Solon. Instead, he's revealing something about his own nature and inviting us to conform ourselves to the standards that it sets.

Revelation does, in this sense, provide a kind of "expert validation" in the sense that Sanchez suggests, effectively putting a divine thumb on the scale of human moral debates...

But in general, the point of invoking God in moral debates is not to pre-emptively solve the dilemmas that moral philosophers grapple with. Certainly no serious Christian moralist has ever suggested that moral problems are "a black box" that "we don't need to worry our pretty little heads about" because God will always tell us what to do. Rather, the possibility of God's existence — and with it, the possibility that moral laws no less than physical laws correspond to an actual reality, or Reality — is what makes those problems genuinely meaningful and interesting (as opposed to just innings in an "ethics game") and lends the project of moral reasoning its coherence. The idea of God doesn't replace secular moral reasoning, in other words, but it grounds this reasoning in something more durable than just aesthetic preference.

That's a neat little straw man he's beating up, as though secular liberals prefer human rights for purely "aesthetic" reasons, in the same way that we might prefer earth tones to pastels when decorating our houses. Sanchez [responds](#):

This, I think, helps illustrate my original point quite nicely. Ross evidently thinks this counts as some sort of explanation of how there might be moral truths. I think it is a classic *virtus dormativa*—a series of grammatically well-formed strings masquerading as propositions. It's not much of an explanation to say Zeus causes thunderstorms unless you have an account of how Zeus does it.

My claim had never been, for what it's worth, that God is a "black box" because it removes the need for moral deliberation about *which specific acts* are right; it's a black box because saying "God" or "divine nature" or whatever doesn't actually solve—or even make a gesture in the direction of solving—the question of how there could be normative facts or properties. If God *is* the standard, why *ought* we accept the standard to emulate it? How could a natural fact about God—even if you call it a "supernatural" fact, whatever

that distinction amounts to—constitute a reason? If the fact that some action will cause suffering isn't adequate motivation to avoid it without something further, why is the fact that the divine nature abhors suffering (or sin, or whatever we think) supposed to do any better? Why do we imagine someone could (rationally?) greet the first fact with a shrug, but not the second? Why is it more meaningful and interesting for moral rules to "correspond to reality" than to exist in some sort of "ethics game"? Are "meaningful" and "interesting" also natural properties, or just part of a meaningfulness-and-interestingness game? Every canonical modern metaethical question can be repeated with undiminished force *after* we accept (arguendo) everything Ross says here.

Douthat is just embarrassing himself at this point.