

# Appendix

## The Knowledge of Good and Evil: A Critique of Religion

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Religion causes more harm than good. When I mention this observation during polite after-dinner conversations, most people study the table and pretend not to have heard. If anyone replies at all, they usually suggest that I probably haven't considered the many advantages that religion brings to humanity. That's possible; after all, the issue is essentially one that revolves around cost-benefit analysis. Clearly, it would be monumentally difficult to marshal all of the facts necessary to support my impolite conclusion. But that particular problem is just as severe for the *defenders* of religion; neither side can prove its case on the basis of evidence alone.

After so rudely interrupting the otherwise polite flow of an after-dinner discussion, my native contrariness typically urges me to prevent the conversation's safe return to those gentle territories that we have all rehearsed to a fine pitch of pleasant monotony. However, pursuing such an unpopular and impolite hypothesis requires that I add some sort of warrant for the claim. As I have noted, the warrant is not to be found merely by examining the available evidence; nobody has access to all the information that would be required. So my argument must incorporate the reasonable implications of the evidence, implications that depend upon our common understandings about how we humans arrive at conclusions generally accepted as true. Assertions (whether rude or polite) ultimately base their appeal for proper warrant upon a logical assessment of their truth or falsity. It seems appropriate, therefore, to examine the roles played in religion by truth and falsehood.

Religions, virtually universally, advance knowledge-claims concerning issues germane to human well-being. Especially when viewed from the naturalistic perspective of an evolutionary ethics like that advanced by Larry Arnhart, such considerations of well-being are centrally relevant to questions about good and evil. Religious epistemology, I argue, necessarily entails the following fundamental contradiction: its basic premises always advance claims that involve clearly empirical statements (particularly about the human good), however, at the same time, it prohibits the free and unrestricted investigation of whether those claims are true or false.

The biggest problem with religion is that it opposes truth. It's not simply a matter of confusion or inaccuracy. Even some fairly polite people will admit that those problems abound in religious teachings. If religion were merely a benign congregation of errors, I don't think that its harmful influence would outweigh the benefits. The real tragedy of religion is that it promulgates untruth and actively *resists* efforts to replace superstitious nonsense with facts.

Religion, one is frequently informed, is not science. The defenders of religion think that is a good thing. Science is often presented as cold and heartless, devoid of sensitivity to the subtle and sublime essence of reality. Poetry and music, paintings and mythology: these are the domains (one is told) that can adequately reflect that ineffable, infinitely mysterious *je ne sais qua*. Science is fine for mere *facts*, but if we want to discover the *deeper* truth beyond mere facts, then we must turn to religion.

But what kind of “truth” could constitute this non-factual variety? Are there factual truths and non-factual truths? Maybe I’m just too simple-minded, but I cannot understand that notion. If it is a fact that the earth orbits the sun, then it is true that the earth orbits the sun. If it is true that God loves all people, then it is a fact that God loves all people. Conversely, if the next space mission discovers that we’ve been wrong for centuries and the earth only *appears* to orbit the sun, we will then say that it is *not* a fact (and so is not true) that the earth orbits the sun. By the same token, if we have evidence that God does *not* love all people, then we should conclude that it is *not* a fact (and so is not true) that God loves all people. Fine, but what could count as such evidence? I submit the historical facts of rape, torture, genocide, plague, starvation, slavery, Auschwitz, etc., particularly when considered in conjunction with God’s alleged omnipotence, omniscience, and status as creator of the universe.

Certainly these considerations don’t weigh equally against *all* religions, but the underlying point has to do with religious epistemology, a deeply flawed approach to knowledge-claims that does afflict most (if not all) major world religions. When one attempts to identify the facts of the matter about religious claims, one is told that the truth is in principle beyond the realm of facts. It is *faith*, not factual knowledge, which underwrites the belief that God loves all people. Facts, you see, just get in the way. Religion is about truth, not facts.

Science relies on the opposite assumption. For most scientists, facts are what really matter. Truth, insofar as it could possibly be anything other than facts, could only be approached via facts. This distinction matters a great deal, because we rely upon facts to discover the difference between truth and falsehood. Jurisprudence in western democratic societies relies upon the idea that testimony can be corroborated or falsified by relevant facts. Juries are instructed to attend to the facts of the case in assessing the truthfulness of the defendant’s plea of innocence. They are not instructed to disregard the facts and to pray for divine revelation. Why not? It’s simple: facts are a much more reliable way to assess the truth or falsehood of claims than is any human experience of divine revelation.

On the other hand, I do not dispute that some truths are indeed beyond expression and quantification. Furthermore, some of the most profound of human feelings resonate with a quality of truth that eludes any propositional or “strictly rational” formulation. I also recognize that much of human knowledge and understanding is not only non-linguistic, but is also mostly unconscious, often only dimly apprehended (if at all) during ordinary awareness. Many aspects of our appreciation of reality are best described as ‘intuitive’; they cannot be fully comprehended by any ordinary form of rational thought. All of this, extremely important as I take it to be, does not weigh against my main point. These ‘intuitive’ or emotional modes of apprehending truth must not pre-empt our rational faculties, nor should they be allowed to trump our more prosaic, empirical methods of assessing truth claims.

Importantly, our profound and non-rational apprehensions of reality are not transparently explicable by any rational framework of theory. That purely experiential character of such ‘transcendent’ encounters with what many mystics have called ‘higher’ reality is, in principle, beyond the bounds of ordinary understanding. Therefore, any attempt to explain such experiences according to a body of theory, whether religious or scientific, can be—at best—no more than an educated guess. But reli-

*sense* of profound truth that most of us have experienced during sublime moments as warrant for theoretical claims with straightforwardly empirical implications. So, for example, one's sense of wonder when gazing at a glorious sunset or a star-drenched night sky might be advanced as evidence that the Judeo-Christian God exists and is the Creator of all of this wonder. If that is true, it is a fact, on par with other facts about the nature and origin of the universe. Therefore, it should be subject to the same kinds of scrutiny accorded any other empirical claims. It should only be accepted as truth to the extent that it is supported by the overall weight of the evidence.

Science is fundamentally skeptical. Claims must be supported by factual evidence if they are to be regarded as true. Religious thought proceeds according to a different kind of logic. Religions are fundamentally organized around beliefs, principles, and/or creeds. Certainly other elements play important roles, but the main unifying feature of any religion is its body of fundamental beliefs. The purpose of any given religion is intrinsically connected to its belief system; it exists primarily as a vehicle for those beliefs. Try to imagine a religion without any fundamental conceptual commitments. Why would people participate in such a religion? The basic beliefs of a religion are crucial to its ongoing existence. Science, by contrast, exists primarily for the purpose of discovering facts, a pursuit which often entails falsifying prevalent beliefs. Science is, at root, an epistemological methodology that is in principle devoted to skepticism about belief systems.

If one accepts my argument this far, the implications are very serious indeed. I take it as a fact that accurate knowledge of the environment confers significant survival benefits on organisms. This principle also holds true for humankind as a whole. We must have accurate information about ourselves and the universe around us, especially those parts of it that most critically impact our ongoing survival and well-being. Therefore, we must foster systems of understanding and investigation that enhance our accurate knowledge of ourselves and the rest of reality. As the human population continues to grow logarithmically and technology advances our destructive, as well as constructive abilities, the margins for allowable error are becoming ever smaller. We can no longer afford the luxury of widespread ignorance, particularly among those with enormous power. We cannot risk continued tolerance of induced mass stupidity. Humanity, if it is to continue to survive on this shrinking planet, must develop safeguards against systematic attempts to stifle knowledge and perpetuate ignorance. Religion opposes truth. Not always, and not in every instance, but as a general rule—it must do so in order to survive. It opposes truth because it opposes skepticism. Factual knowledge, if it jeopardizes the central beliefs, threatens the very existence of the religion. Like all other systems, religious systems persist because of their resistance to destruction. Imagine a religion that taught, as its central doctrine, “Blessed are those who *abandon* this religion.” That religion simply would not survive. Religions that *have* survived have done so because they are very good at perpetuating themselves. To the extent that the facts threaten their survival, it is the *facts* that must be dispensed with, not the religion. That systemic structure leads inevitably to the religion adopting measures to restrict skeptical challenges aimed at eliminating its central doctrines. If it is to survive, it must safeguard its fundamental basis for existence. That safeguarding process must favor the preservation of the doctrine over the discovery and dissemination of truth.

Arnhart points out that Aristotle believed that we should prize *eudaimonia* (well-being) above all else. Of course, as the ancient philosopher explained in great detail, identifying the essence and constitution of true human well-being is no simple matter. However, we can probably agree that some practices can obviously be excluded from any list of ingredients for *eudaimonia*. Drinking copious quantities of battery-acid would be one such practice. Loitering underwater for long periods without the assistance of artificial breathing apparatus would probably be another. A third example of such unwise practices, more to the point, is consistent and significant misinterpretation of the salient evidence. Generally speaking, organisms must make fairly accurate assessments concerning the constraints that their environments impose if they are to survive and flourish. Humans, obviously, are no exception. We benefit from accurate knowledge of the facts and, conversely, we suffer when we ignore the facts—or are misled. *Eudaimonia* requires a high degree of accurate knowledge of ourselves and the rest of reality. We now have much more scientific information about human well-being than did Aristotle and, the pursuit of *eudaimonia* requires a pursuit of those scientific facts, regardless of whether or not they accord with our prior convictions. Belief-systems, practices, and/or institutions that oppose the investigation of the facts are to that extent also opposing human flourishing. When such regressive belief-systems are further reinforced with the authority of religion, their potential to threaten human wellbeing becomes truly pathological. Nowhere is this pathology more profoundly problematic than in the area of ethics. We humans are organized, biologically and socially, so as to revere and obey basic moral imperatives. Leaving aside questions regarding the evolutionary origins of our moral natures, we cannot escape the conclusion that we are deeply affected by moral views. Any social and/or intellectual system that controls the basic constituents of our ethical commitments will inevitably also control significant aspects of our behavior. Religions, of course, are primarily concerned with ethics. They profoundly influence general social perceptions regarding right and wrong, good and evil, and the best course for a human life. Sometimes, I am sure, the moral teachings of major world religions accord with empirically verifiable hypotheses regarding human welfare. Unfortunately, however, many central tenets of many religions *do not* coincide with the best results of contemporary science. Consider sex. Virtually every great religion has teachings about sexual practices. These teachings crucially organize the behavior and psychological states of their adherents. Yet, from at least the time of Freud, we have known that the effects of sexual prohibitions on human psychological health are potentially extremely problematic. This is not the place to extend this analysis; I mention it merely as one example of possible empirical considerations that should be brought to bear on religious moral teachings. But to do so requires a fundamental change in basic religious epistemology. It must relinquish its fundamental premise that the knowledge of good and evil is prior to and independent of the facts.