

Appendix 1: A New Dualism?

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It will be clear to the reader that I find Arnhart's arguments persuasive. Indeed I have to admit to being something of a convert: I wrote my last review article for this journal (Sutherland, 1998) at the same time Arnhart's book was published and argued at the time that religion was our only robust source for morality. But are these two viewpoints necessarily opposed?

Writing in the magazine *Science and Spirituality*,¹ Arnhart (1998) appears to be replacing the dualism of nature and culture with a dualism of his own creation. Towards the end of his essay he develops the Thomist distinction between natural and supernatural ethics, and argues that you can have the one without the other (p. 261).

However, many commentators, the most prominent being Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, would claim that the only thing that keeps us from the law of the jungle is the ghostly shadow of the ethical restraints lingering on from theistic religion. As Michael Oakeshott puts it (1947, p. 41):

Moral ideals are a sediment; they have significance only so long as they are suspended in a religious or social tradition, so long as they belong to a religious or social life . . . When Confucius visited Lao Tzu he talked of goodness and duty. 'Chaff from the winner's fan', said Lao Tzu.

Similar sentiments can be found in writers as diverse as Dostoevsky, Dawson, Kirk, Himmelfarb, Voegelin and Scruton. Bishop Tom Butler remarked recently that morals in the absence of faith are like the smile on the face of the Cheshire cat: the last thing to fade, but fade they do. He was echoing a text of Sir David Livingstone from the 1940s:

We are left with traditions and habits inherited [from the Victorians], as the earth may for a time still receive light from an extinct star. But that light will not continue to shine, nor can these habits and traditions long survive the beliefs from which they grew (quoted in Longley, 1988).

Another emigré Russian, Pitirim Sorokin, who founded the sociology department at Harvard, devoted most of his professional life and a large research team to an investigation into the decline and fall of civilizations. Using the arts (and in particular painting) as a barometer of social values, Sorokin concluded that the very survival of a society was a product of the health of its ethical system, which in turn depended on the nature of its religious beliefs. Belief in some sort of power that transcends human agency seems to be the basis of a stable society. Sorokin concluded that, once a society had lost touch with its religion (or, more specifically, once the religion had given into the forces of secularization), that it would be unlikely to survive. A more recent study by Anne Glyn-Jones (1999) has charted a similar pattern, using this time the theatre rather than painting as the mirror. Whilst sweeping surveys like this face serious methodological problems, the findings echo the widespread unease that many feel as the millenium comes to an end.

There is an irony contained in Arnhart's treatment of religion — he (quite rightly) argues that nature and culture should be treated as a continuum, but then fails to apply the same Darwinian standards to cultural institutions, even in a metaphorical fashion.

[1] Financed, ironically, by Sir John Templeton, the Christian philanthropist.

Every culture has thrown up some sort of religion and 99% of them have been supernatural in character. And yet Arnhart promotes the Thomist separation of natural law and divine law, and treats divine law as some kind of optional extra, despite the fact that civilization after civilization seem to have ‘selected’ for religions that were based upon it.

Arnhart reminds us that Aristotle was a biologist and that his ethical ideas are rooted in his biology. However Aristotelian science, although remarkable at the time, was clearly wrong over a number of key issues. The intellectual ferment at the end of the sixteenth century (which gave rise to the very Hobbesian and Cartesian traditions that Arnhart deplures), was a result of the widespread scepticism with the naïve realism of Aristotelian theories of perception. If this is true of Aristotelian science, then we should be equally cautious in our assessment of theories of ethics that rely too heavily on Aristotle.

We should remember also that both Aristotle and Aquinas wrote at times when there was a broad overall acceptance of religious principles, so ‘naturalistic ethics’ have to be seen against a very different backdrop than is nowadays the case. To quote directly from one of Arnhart’s earlier publications on the *Nichomachean Ethics*: ‘Aristotle indicates that a man becomes truly human only when he becomes more than human — that is, when he abstracts himself from his body through the activity of his intellect, which is divine’ (Arnhart, 1987). Arnhart admits that there is an ambiguity in Aristotle and there are difficulties involved in the reconciliation of this apparent dualism (the divine intellect and the physical body/soul) with his appeal for embodied ‘naturalistic’ ethics. Surely the latter must involve the sacrifice of the divine side of this dualism, in the same way that materialism involves jettisoning the spiritual half of the Cartesian divide. One is reminded of the attempt by a number of western Buddhist theorists to reconcile Buddhism and cognitive science, through the secularization of traditional Buddhist philosophy. Many will argue that the baby is being thrown out with the bathwater. (Guenther, 1994)

Arnhart discusses the religious doctrine of marriage as a sacrament as an illustration of the distinction between natural and divine law (p. 265). Adopting a standard sociobiological perspective, Arnhart argues that once children reach a certain age there is no natural need for the parent to remain together. This being the case, naturalistic ethics would endorse the modern practice of serial monogamy, in contrast to the prohibition of divorce by the Catholic Church, which is ‘contrary to the the natural pattern of human mating’.

However, the defence of sacramental marriage by the current Pope and other conservative Christians is largely on the grounds that the goal of long-term human happiness is not best served by serial monogamy. As soon as the principle of marriage for life is discarded then people will always tend to favour their short-term desires over their long-term interests. Throughout the book, Arnhart draws a distinction between [short term and long term] and argues that the goal of human happiness requires the prioritising of the long-term over the short-term. But this presupposes the classical moral virtues of prudence, patience, restraint and self-denial and the guiding hand of tradition and the wisdom of the elders.

At its best, religion have been a means of developing these moral virtues, by prioritising long-term interests over short-term passions. It is a mistake to assume that religion is only concerned with supernatural ends, rather than teaching the moral virtues

that support the good life in this world. Arnhart admits as much with his acceptance of Mosaic religion as ‘naturalistic’ and endorsing religion in so far as it helps to underpin ethical naturalism.

It seems to me that, rather than promoting a new dualism of natural and supernatural ethics, we should be sponsoring a two-way dialogue between science and religion. Like all other branches of science, Darwinism will provide important constraints for this dialogue, but we should beware of attempts to replace one monolithic system with another.

I think one of the reasons that Arnhart is disinclined to include religion in his scheme is that, despite his own grounding in Aristotle and Aquinas, Arnhart, like most Americans conflates religion in general with Protestant Christianity. But in many respects Christianity, especially in the reformed traditions, is very different from the other major world faiths.

1. The key phrase of the Christian manifesto on ethics (the Sermon on the Mount) is ‘be ye perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’
2. Perfection in Christianity is through grace alone and is God-given. No effort on the part of the individual will make any difference.

This creates an unbridgeable dualism between the fallen creature (with his appetites, wishes and emotions) and the Creator, the ultimate source of all ethics. By contrast, many of the moral precepts of Islam are grounded in human passions — for example the role of the victim’s relatives in the administration of justice. The major religions of the East (Buddhism and Hinduism) place greater emphasis on individual action, largely through the doctrine of karma, so there is a link between ethics and human desire and action. But Christians dismiss this as the ‘Pelagian’ heresy.

The unreformed church did attempt to construct a ladder between the human and the divine — and I refer here to the Thomist synthesis, not the abuse of indulgences. But Luther and Calvin soon put a stop to all that, and modern western ethics is really just the secularisation of this tradition. The disembodied, a priori, universalist nature of Kantian ethics has its origins in the Sermon on the Mount, whereas other religions tend to be more grounded in human experience.

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