

THE BASIS OF EVERYTHING MORAL
by Bill Becker
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(Note, 19March2011: Because of time limitations, not all of the text below was presented at the Anaheim talk. I have not bothered to show the material omitted then.)

Some of you might think me a bit presumptuous in proposing to talk about the basis of everything moral, so let me say right off that I agree with you. Ethics is a grand and difficult subject, encompassing almost the whole of human existence. Nevertheless, I think we will still be able to address some moral issues and even some theoretical ideas together this morning. I think I have a few thoughts you will find novel, and I hope to at least provide you with a down-to-earth view of ethical matters, and perhaps with some conceptual tools that you might find useful.

Let's ask just what we are after in this search for the "basis of everything moral." At the most general level, I suggest that we are looking for a foundation for the ethically satisfying life. At least that is how the philosopher Bernard Williams puts it in his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. What does this mean? What kind of foundation? Here we have at least two obvious choices: first, our foundation can be a set of laws given by a Supreme Being, or, let's say, the Source of All, as referred to in one of our UU hymns. The ever-popular Ten Commandments are just such a set of rules. It seems clear that God intended for us to live according to those edicts first as a demonstration of love and loyalty, and second, judging from other biblical writings that emphasize justice and help for widows, just so that the world might be a better place in which to live.

But, there is another set of laws arising from a different concept altogether. These are the Hindu laws of Karma. There, the purpose of living according to the law is not at all to make the world a better place to live in, since that is impossible in principle. The world as we know it is simply a gymnasium for the soul, which travels toward reunion with the Hindu source of all being, the deity Krishna, depending on how closely it has observed the law in each of its incarnations. It is true, of course, that if everyone lived according to the law, the world would be better for everyone, but it is an error to transmute this truth into the reason why one lives according to the law.

So here we have two extra-human examples of the basis of everything moral. If I guess right, most of you have rejected this kind of approach, as I have.

Another way of looking at the basis of everything moral is as a theory modeled after scientific theories. Such an approach still relies on "laws," sort of, but they are deduced from primary ethical principles. These principles serve ethical theory in the same way that Einstein's invariant speed of light and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle serve physical theory.

Like their scientific counterparts, many of the world's great philosophers searched for such first principles by subjecting experience to rational analysis. The process goes something like this: the world is obviously less than perfect, and many people are unhappy and miserable. There are also some vague concepts of "the good," and of "right," and "wrong" that are always cropping up.

After a good deal of pondering on these facts, one school of philosophy decided to define "the good" as that which produces the greatest net happiness in the world, and to attribute "rightness" to that category of action which tends to produce "the good." "Wrong," obviously, would be that which produced the opposite of "the good," namely "the bad." These philosophers are the Utilitarians. Other philosophers, though, in observing the world, noted that some people produce "the bad" even though their motives are "good," so they came up with a different kind of Utilitarianism so we would not have to call some people "bad" when they had "good" motives. This was a welcome advance for ethical theory.

So, we have two basic ways of looking at the basis of everything moral: the God-given set of laws, and the scientific model. Since the scientific model seems to be most consistent with our own theory and practice as UUs I will proceed along that line. I will, however, omit consideration of what we call "the metaphysical," and there will be no mention of the grand abstractions that often inspire us to selfless action (love, compassion, justice, ...). My approach this morning will be based solely on the main tenets of our own Unitarian Universalist religion—namely the insistence that the individual is the final arbiter of his or her own ethical life, and the insistence on accepting the responsibility which necessarily follows. My own view is also starkly atheistic, which means that when we take human freedom as the starting point, the Supreme Being, if there is one, becomes irrelevant. Thus, my insistence on our personal responsibility is also rather uncompromising, as you will see.

In my first talk on ethics, I relied heavily on ideas presented by Hazel Barnes in her book *An Existentialist Ethics*. She presents a definition of what it means to be ethical that allows us to live our lives in complete freedom from rules and psychological coercion. Barnes reckons that just as we can choose to be ethical, so can we choose not to be ethical. Here, the choice to be ethical is grounded in "... the recognition of the need to justify one's life," or, "a choice of a particular value: the sense of satisfaction

derived from knowing that one may judge his own life as he would another's and find it good." "In the justified life," she says, "there is harmony and perfect continuity between the subjective process one is and the objectified self he has become in his relation with the world and others—outside himself." Finally, "The choice to be ethical as such ..." arises not from a desire to conform to any external standard of values, but solely from "...the bare inner demand for justification as a self-imposed necessary relation between actions and judgements by and within the same individual."¹

I personally think this is a fine way to look at the ethical choice, and it is a theme we encounter often in ethical philosophy in one form or another. Leaving aside the question of competence, I think this means we are all ethical, since we all justify our lives in myriad ways, both to others and to ourselves. I see a problem here, however, in the fact that we also loathe the idea of having others sit in judgment upon us. Often, when a discussion about a sensitive subjects such as religion or politics turns in this direction, someone says "now, let's not get personal." But, in fact, everything is personal. We even go so far as to say that we shouldn't judge others, as if it is possible not to judge them. I follow Barnes here too, when she says:

No matter how unformulated or flexible the standard of judgment may be, there is nobody who does not approve or disapprove of the specific conduct and personality of others.²

What we have then, is a profound contradiction: we all justify our own lives, either to ourselves or to real or imagined others. We all sit in judgment upon others, either secretly, or openly with those we trust. Yet, because of the challenges we might thereby invite, we are so uncomfortable with the whole notion of judgment that we will not openly validate it. This particular contradiction is by no means harmless, because all attempts to avoid facing it involve a lie.

Let me now turn to the view of the religious philosopher Loyal D. Rue:

It remains for the artists, the poets, the novelists, the musicians, the filmmakers, the tricksters and the masters of illusion to winch us toward our salvation by seducing us into an embrace with a noble lie.³

¹ *An Existentialist Ethics*, University of Chicago Press (Phoenix), 1978, p.9

² *ibid.* p. 77.

³ Loyal D. Rue, religious philosopher. *Daily News*, July 20, 1991.

Rue reckons that to dispel the myths of religion is to be left with nothing but nihilism, which considers life and the universe meaningless. But, he admits, "Nihilism is not something that can be argued away ... I assume it's true." But it is ultimately destructive, a "monstrous truth."

I think that as a matter of pure social science, Rue is correct. Whatever examples there may be of collective honesty about and with ourselves, they are certainly not well publicized, and none of us will make money betting that we will improve our behavior through more openness and truth-telling. I don't want to be hard on Rue here, because his heart is in the right place. Nevertheless, I must consider his proposal itself an "ignoble misrepresentation" at best, concocted to avoid facing another "monstrous truth," namely that none of us can avoid responsibility for the world we live in. At least one other philosopher disagrees with Rue:

There is no system of philosophy to spin out. There are no moral truths; there are just clarifications of particular ethical problems. Take advantage of these clarifications to work out your existence. You are mistaken to think that anyone ever had the answers. There are no answers. Be brave and face up to it.

This statement, by Donald Kalish of UCLA, opens the chapter on ethics in the UUA adult curriculum *Building Your Own Theology*.

So here we have one philosopher who has essentially given up on our ability to act at all in the face of a "monstrous truth," and another who at least hopes that we can summon the courage to live ethically satisfying lives in spite of it.

I think that Rue represents a particular problem for us—namely the public figure who, either openly or by unwitting example, urges us to deny our responsibility. Let me present some other examples, and also include more private denials. Here I will admit to a certain one-sidedness in my choice of examples, and I invite you to offer some balance during the response period.

Senator Barry Goldwater:

Years ago, when Reagan's support for the vicious Salvadoran dictatorship, and the equally vicious Nicaraguan contras was generating serious questions about our commitment to human rights, Senator Barry Goldwater spoke to a business group in Arizona. Commenting on the violence in the region, he told his audience "its a very mixed up, muddled picture down there, and we don't know who wears the white hats and the black hats." At the time, Goldwater chaired the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which is supposed to keep tabs on U.S. foreign policy. It is easy to imagine

the good merchants of Arizona looking at each other somberly, as if to say "If good ol' Barry can't figure out what's going on down there, how can we?"

It is not reported whether anyone challenged Goldwater's competence as the Intelligence Committee chair, but certainly no one there could honestly say that Goldwater did not have an opinion as to who the good guys and the bad guys were. His support of all U.S. military action is legend. I imagine that the sense of complicity in Goldwater's effort to deceive the American people was palpable.

Congressman Anthony Beilenson:

Not only Republicans try to deceive the public, of course. My own Congressman, the solid liberal Anthony Beilenson, also made a valiant effort in that direction a while back, and I invite you to ask me about it during the response. Beilenson was being interviewed on the John Swaney radio talk show, and I called in to talk about U.S. foreign policy. I mentioned the advice given to the Truman Administration by George Kennan, then Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. In a top-secret document concerning post-war policy toward Asia, Kennan reckoned that our real task in the coming period was to devise a pattern of relationships that would allow us, with 6% of the world's population, to maintain control of 50% of the world's wealth. To that end, he said, we would be better off to dispense with certain concepts such as concern for human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. Swaney asked Beilenson if he knew about that statement. "Of course I do," said Beilenson. "They throw it at us all the time. I think it's ridiculous. Most members of Congress have never seen that document." "I agree," said Swaney (who is also a liberal). "Kennan was clearly talking about Asia."

This was very disappointing to me, of course. First, Swaney would have flunked out of covert action school for not having the imagination to extend Kennan's advice about Asia to the entire Third World. President Eisenhower certainly realized the benefit of doing so in Iran and Guatemala.

Second, Beilenson knows perfectly well that policy is set from the top, in this case the President and his foreign policy advisors. Only a very few people would have to see the document to make it effective, because its real power lies just in its location at the very heart of our democracy. Beilenson's labeling "ridiculous" the efforts of the peace and justice community to make this policy known is very unfortunate.

Jonathan Kirsch on Howard Zinn:

Some of you may know of the historian and political scientist Howard Zinn,

author of *A Peoples History of the United States*. Last year, Zinn came out with a new book *Declarations of Independence*, which was reviewed by attorney Jonathan Kirsch under the title *A Lion of the Left Roars Again*.⁴ Referring to Zinn's experience as a WWII bombardier and as a labor and civil rights activist, Kirsch notes that he is no "ivory tower intellectual." He quotes Zinn:

I decided early that I would be biased in the sense of holding fast to certain fundamental values: the equal right of all human beings ... to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Jefferson's ideals.
... To depend on the simple existence of the First Amendment to guarantee our freedom of expression is a serious mistake, one that can cost us not only our liberties, but, under certain circumstances, our lives.

Kirsch grants that Zinn has written a "spirited, provocative, and intentionally unsettling" book. "Zinn is a clear thinker, a careful writer, and a profoundly compassionate man," who "... draws convincingly from the wellsprings of our civilization."

Nevertheless, "there is an irony at work here," says Kirsch. "I detect something old-fashioned and even antique about Zinn's 'Declarations,' and I came away from his book with a sense of nostalgia rather than an impulse to join the barricades."

In my own reading of Kirsch's review, I completely missed the man stuck in an "old-fashioned and even antique" time-warp, out of touch with modern political reality. Instead, I found Zinn's statements to be up-to-date, even containing, perhaps, an oblique reference to the potentially disastrous threat to our civil liberties that the Iran/Contra planners devised, and which was completely glossed over in the Congressional hearings.⁵

Kirsch admits "nostalgia" for the days when idealists were fighting the good fight, so he must share Zinn's values even now. Where then, does he detect the "irony

⁴ Los Angeles Times, 10/17/90.

⁵ Lt. Col. North had devised a plan, to be implemented by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) whereby, if the President sent troops into combat in Nicaragua or El Salvador, some 400,000 hispanic aliens would be rounded up and put in camps such as were used to house the Japanese internees during WWII. During this period, the Constitution would be suspended, and it is easy to imagine that many U.S. citizens with a record of protest against Washington's interventionism in Central America would be interned with them.

at work here ... something old and even antique." I suggest that he found it within himself, and, for whatever reason, projected it onto Zinn.

Perhaps Kirsch feels burned out from his salad days in the protest movements; perhaps he despairs of "making a difference" as the Reagan legacy unfolds; perhaps he has simply become a yuppie elder. In any case, he knows exactly what Zinn is talking about, and he knows that Zinn wants to move him with "Declarations." Kirsch knows then, that whether he—Jonathan Kirsch—"joins the barricades" or walks past them on the way to the health club depends not at all on Howard Zinn's prose or style, but only his own willingness to act on his principles.

I imagine this future conversation between Kirsch and, let's say, a son who is old enough to understand that we lost our freedoms to fascism only a few years before: "Why didn't you demonstrate against the government when it began repressing our rights, daddy?" asks Kirsch's son. "Because, son," Kirsch replies, "Howard Zinn's book wasn't inspiring enough."

Gulf-Western/Booker Int'l.:

On June 12, 1985, PBS aired a documentary titled *Hungry for Profit*, about the effects of multinational agribusiness activities in the Third World. The standard practice is to gain control of large tracts of land, and use that land exclusively to grow an export crop. Such a pattern of land control has, over the years, created a vast and hungry workforce in the Third World, comprised of people who no longer have land on which to grow food for themselves. In the documentary, the managers of two agribusiness giants are interviewed. Robert Glasford, General Manager of the British firm Booker Agriculture International, describes a cane-growing operation in the Mumias area of Kenya. There, small subsistence plots are interspersed with small plots of sugar cane. Glasford:

We found that we could run a profitable operation, run it efficiently, and at the same time create a livelihood for, at present, 20,000 families, just as families alone. ... The Mumias township now has a lot more facilities than it had, say, ten years ago. There are a lot more consumer goods as such. A lot more people are educating themselves. This is something they weren't able to do 8 or 10 years ago. If instead of creating an outgrowth scheme we had purchased all the land that we needed around the factory, we would have had a dislocation of something like 15,000 families. Now, there isn't that much arable land around and the government would have had a very, very serious problem in relocating them.

This project was undertaken with the cooperation of the Kenyan government. Kenya also asked Del Monte to help modernize and diversify the Kenyan economy. Del Monte took over a local cannery, which had previously bought pineapple from nearby small farmers. Del Monte took over the small farms, and created its own large estate on which to grow pineapple.

Narrator:

Although Del Monte employs 6000 people in Kenya, their critics argue that the company's estate would support a larger number of small farmers. If Del Monte expands, there would be less land available for local food, and thereby contribute even more to local hunger.

James Rowe, Manager, Del Monte, Kenya:

We do expect to expand over the next five years, probably 20 percent higher than we are now. I personally don't feel that this land being utilized any other than the way it's used would be of benefit to as many as 6000 people. It might be of benefit to a handful of people but you'd have the 6000 people that we now employ would probably be out of work. As far as standard of living I would think our employees are in the upper 50 to 75 percentile of the workforce in Kenya. I think that most of the people that work here are very happy here.

The documentary then cuts to Del Monte workers singing a song about low wages and poor working conditions. It would be better to go back home and work their parents' land, the workers sing.

The question here is whether Mr Rowe believes what he said or not. I personally cannot imagine that a businessman and manager of such an operation is unaware of its effects on the local population, or that he is unaware of the alternative kind of operation run by Booker, and its effects in the Third World. In many countries, multi-national agribusiness benefits from the host government's use of intimidation, up to and including murder, to acquire the land needed for such projects. We do not know how Del Monte acquired its land, or how it plans to expand by 20%, but that, too, is an important question. Frankly, I believe that Mr. Rowe is trying to con us. 2 years ago, I read that the agribusiness community saw to it that this documentary never aired on public television again.

Columbus getting a bad rap:

Next year we will experience the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee, to celebrate the 500th anniversary of his discovery of this continent. Columbus is

getting a bad rap these days, however, because he evidently killed a lot of native peoples and had plans to enslave the rest. Thus, some believe he should not be lauded, but excoriated instead. But not Professor Dauril Alden of the University of Washington. Alden says Columbus "was a product of his times. ... I object to overloading [him] with responsibility. He was interested in discovery, in wealth and prestige. He wasn't interested in genocide," says Alden.

On the other hand, Professor Jack Weatherford of Macalaster College says Columbus "represents the worst of his era. We should honor those who rise above their times."⁶

Here we have two professors of history, each with a different view of how we should treat Columbus. There is no dispute about the facts. My question for Professor Alden would be whether he showed the same "objectivity" as regards the portraying of Columbus as pure hero for decades upon decades. Did he suggest that perhaps Columbus, as a "product of his times," did not deserve the *adulation* he was receiving? Did Alden argue that school texts should also include commentary on the atrocities committed by Columbus, with a view toward teaching children that he was, alas, very much human. Did Alden argue that the writings of Barolome' de las Casas be presented in high school texts? De las Casas was a Spanish priest who came to the new world to civilize the savages, but who ended up taking their part against the monstrous cruelties that were inflicted on them by his own countrymen. He was one those who "rose above his times," as Professor Weatherford put it. Why is it only now that academics are finding the courage to say out loud what they have known about Columbus all along?

The question of how much revision the Columbus legend deserves is open, but Alden's comments certainly are not helpful. Indeed, they are practical. If Columbus is to be let off the hook because he was a "product of his times," then perhaps future historians will not judge too harshly their predecessors' tacit acceptance of specious heroism and other subtle forms of propaganda.

Some may think me churlish and overly "picky" Here. After all, these are not bad people, they simply suffer from the same foibles as the rest of us. Of course. Nevertheless, they are leaders, and what they have to say, and how they say it has weight. Moreover, there are public figures who do have the courage to speak the truth as it appears to them, and in that number I count people on both sides of the political spectrum. I suggest that even bitter enemies like Jesse Helms and Jesse Jackson have more in common with each other than either have with many of the academics,

⁶ *NEWSWEEK*, June 24, 1991, p.54,55

journalists, talking heads, and news media gurus who dominate the public debate on the ills of our time.

At the personal level, we also deny our freedom and our responsibility on a regular basis. Most such denials begin with "I can't ..." but the real meaning is "I choose not to but don't want to say so out loud." Another, often given by those with a predilection to violence is: "I couldn't help myself." One of my friends once told me that she didn't believe she could be a good person unless she believed in God. I consider that view to be downright mistaken. One of my favorites, and one I have heard many times, is the old saw "I don't try to impose my standards on anyone." This statement reveals either great sophistication or great naivete'. Every time we vote or promote through majority rule a particular program or direction, we are trying to impose our standards on those who take an opposing stand. Such is exactly what is happening now with the issue of choice. Every lobbyist in Washington is trying to impose his or her client's standards on everyone. Finally, there is the response to just the kind of "unbalanced" criticism of the United States foreign policy that I demonstrated above. Long ago I lost count of the times when I was told that it is a lot worse in some other countries. This is a variety of another common response: "If you don't like it here, why don't you move to Russia?"

Those who so advise me clearly do not understand the real meaning of their response—namely that they are allowing others to set their own highest standards for them. They imply that there is no lower limit to the behavior they will tolerate, so long as they can find someone who behaves worse. This is a particularly serious denial of responsibility, and deserves a thorough analysis.

But it is time to move on. I suggest, by these examples, that the lie, in all of its myriad and especially in its subtle forms, is one wellspring, if not the wellspring, of everything we are in the habit of calling immoral or unethical. Look for the lie. If you find it, let others know about it. If, after diligent effort, you can't find a lie, rethink your position.

We are now able to conclude that the truth is the basis of everything moral, but only in the sense that it makes a coherent ethic possible. If I choose to justify my life, I will very quickly be forced to base that justification on the truth, whether in my statements about the world, or in my statements about my own beliefs and goals. Why? Because, like everyone else, I want to be taken seriously by others. If I am truthful as I attempt to justify my life, I must be taken seriously by those to whom I direct my arguments. If they perceive instead that I am being specious or am lying outright, they will not take me seriously, and I will suffer the torments of hell.

Now, someone might demur to my assertion that I must be taken seriously if I am being truthful in justifying my life. This is a logical "must," of course, not a physical or psychological necessity. It follows from another fact that we need to fill out our basis of everything moral. The fact is, that like you and me, the person to whom I justify my life has felt *wronged* by another. And when one has felt wronged, or is even capable of feeling wronged, one must take others seriously.

Let me summarize here, since I have thrown out a wide variety of ideas and information. First, the contradiction that we all attempt to justify our lives, but we deny the concomitant truth that we sit in judgement on each other. This leads to lying on a mind-boggling scale.

Then I tried to show how the lie can take subtle and therefore acceptable forms. Thereby, I've tried to show that the lie of omission is perhaps more important than the lie of commission. In our sophisticated society, we are encouraged to see the lie only as a positive telling of falsehood, thus masking from us the alternatives that could be spoken or undertaken.

I then tried to show that the truth is part of the basis of everything moral, but it is not enough—that we also need some other notions, similar to Barnes' observation that none of us is neutral regarding the specific behavior and personality of others. These other notions must also be true for everyone, but they must also tie us inextricably to each other, and in specifically ethical terms.

To Barnes's idea of universal judgment, therefore, I would add the statements that there is no one who has not felt wronged by another, and there is no one who does not want to be taken seriously by others.

I have hopes that the abstract idea of truth, and what I consider to be the self-evident facts that we all sit in judgement on one another, we all have felt wronged, and we all want others to take us seriously, together constitute a basis from which we might be able to unfold more specific guidelines for both personal and collective behavior. I hope we have thus made a good beginning in our quest for the ethically satisfying life.