

CHAPTER EIGHT

God, Morals, Ethics and Socrates

Any discussion of religion requires a discussion of the difference between morals and

To be ethical is quite one thing, but to be moral is another; so too, to be religious is something else again.

ethics as well as the differences among morals, ethics and religion. The reason for this requirement is that people tend to identify ethics and morals and to confuse morals with religion. Two problems result from such identification and confusion. The problem which results from the identification of ethics with morals is a loss of self worth as separate from the worth a given society extends to any citizen. The problem which results from the confusion of morals with religion is the lack of recognition that a human being might have to a power other than a temporal state versus the recognition that a citizen would receive from a temporal state. Two examples will illustrate these two problems: the first is that of Socrates and Athens; the second is that of a Lithuanian and Moscow, or, indeed, of an American and Washington D.C.

But, first we must clarify the meaning of the terms ethics and morals, and second we need to apply the meaning of religion already provided within the "Preface" and "Introduction". "Ethics" comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning the way one has oneself, or, in one word, character; the Latin equivalent is *habitus*, literally, the way one is clothed -- English equivalents are "haberdasher, habiliment, habitable" and "habit". Ethics, however, is not something we learn, rather it is something we do with and to ourselves; to be ethical is to be **how we are** because of the actions we perform. So, ethics is individual and unique. If we were to apply such individuality and uniqueness to being virtuous, we would say that to be patient for one person might not be the same as to be patient for another, yet both could and would be patient, notwithstanding the fact that each is patient in his or her own way.

Morals comes through the Latin from the Greek and means custom, usage, what is common to a group. *Morals*, therefore, is social, what is approved of by the group, whether that be the Athenian Greeks, a particular group, such as Democrats, or a family. So, morals is group generated as conformed to by individuals who choose to identify with that group.

Religion, according to Cicero and Thomas Aquinas, comes from three different Latin root words: **re'legere, relegere or religere**, literally, to reread,

rechoose and rebind. Call this natural religion, since these three roots provide us with the denotative rather than the connotative meaning of the word. Actually, religion is both individual and social since any given individual rereads, re-chooses and rebinds him or herself to a first principle, called *Y-hw-h, God, Tao, Ptah, Allah, Jesus Christ*, or some other name. Yet, every individual practices such a rereading, a re-choosing or a rebinding within a social group and thus engages in what is called *liturgy*, literally, people acting. Most children, for instance, are baptized into the denominational religion of the parents and more citizens are born into a political state. So, these people practice the denominational religion given by parents or permitted by the laws of the society within which they live. Yet, every human being is born into a relationship with that *being* who is the source of dependent existing beings and therefore, causes and conserves the existence which that human being shares - some, of course, identify such a source to be nature; others claim such a source to be independent of nature.

Thus, people who practice denominational religion vis a' vis parents or government do so as an adopted child acts to adoptive parents. Yet, Aquinas maintains (as do many others, as we have seen, including Socrates) both prior and basic to the practice of denominational religion every human being has an personal relationship with that being who is the existence which it causes and conserves as shared by the individual living being. So, any and all social relationships occur consequent and in addition to that primary personal relationship. To draw from within a Christian example: every Christian is first a child of the *New Testament* "Our Father" before that Christian is a Baptist, Catholic, Congregationalist, or some other denomination.

Let us consider the example of Socrates in relation to Athenian citizen morals and Athenian religion within the sixth century B.C. to clarify these distinctions and verify their validity. We, after all, refer to Greece of this time as the "cradle" of occidental civilization and Plato's *Apology* reflects the Athenian views toward religion, morals and ethics which shed light on occidental civilization.

Plato wrote the seventeen year old reflections of

Socrates questioned the Oracle's statement that he was the wisest of men, but this meant he questioned the state's God and such questioning is treasonous.

his seventy-two year old teacher's responses to the Athenian accusations of impiety, corruption of youth and treason within the *Apology* some 2,500 years ago. The *Apology*, therefore, is a good place to start any "religions" course because Socrates was accused of being an atheist, by Athenian standards the equivalent to

committing treason. Socrates was also accused by Athenian prosecutors of corrupting the youth of Athens and thus of being a seditionist, a second charge equivalent to treason. Finally, Socrates was accused of making the weaker argument the stronger and, by a twisted logic, of treason against the state for failure to abide by the state mandated “gag” order against Socrates.

This third allegation is the most important, both in relation to the other two and to our study of religion within

“I am wiser than this man...(because)... he thinks that he has knowledge when he has not, while I, having no knowledge, do not think that I know.”

sixth century Athenian society, as depicted within Plato’s *Apology*. What, for instance, could asking questions have to do with the equivalent of a federal Justice Department indictment of treason and a public trial against a respected citizen, by vocation a “stone cutter” and by avocation a seeker of wisdom as he engaged in conversation in Athens forum, the equivalent of today’s “farmer’s market”?

Remember, the Greeks defined the *human animal* to be different from all other animals by stating the characteristic difference to be *logos*, or *speech*. Well, Socrates describes how the accusations against him arose by telling how Chaerephon asked the Athenian Oracle at Delphi: “Who is the wisest in Athens?” This Oracle priestess, representing Athens before their city-state Gods and Goddesses, responded: “Socrates”. Whereupon Chaerephon returned and told Socrates and some friends. Socrates, however, questioned the answer, stating that he was not wise. The Athenian politicians saw this to be the essential act of treason. Socrates questioned the truth of a statement by the Delphic Oracle. But, this was not the end of the matter.

When I heard of the oracle I began to reflect: what can the god mean by this riddle? I know very well that I am not wise, even in the smallest degree. Then what can he mean by saying that I am the wisest of men? It cannot be that he is speaking falsely, for he is a god and cannot lie. For a long time I was at a loss to understand his meaning. Then, very reluctantly, I turned to investigate it in this manner: I went to a man who was reputed to be wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I should prove the answer wrong, and meaning to point out to the oracle its mistake, and to say, ‘You said that I was the wisest of men, but his man is wiser than I am.’ So I examined the man - I need not tell you his name, he was a politician - but this was the result, Athenians. When I conversed with him I came to see that, though a great many persons, and most of all he himself, thought that

he was wise, yet he was not wise. Then I tried to prove to him that he was not wise, though he fancied that he was. By so doing I made him indignant, and many of the bystanders. So when I went away, I thought to myself, ‘ I am wiser than this man: neither of us knows anything that is really worth knowing, but he thinks that he has knowledge when he has not, while I, having no knowledge, do not think that I have. I seem at any rate, to be a little wiser than he is on this point: I do not think that I know what I do not know. (*Apology*, 21b-e)

Socrates not only questioned the divine Oracle, but his desire to

uncover the truth drives him to question people who have the reputation for wisdom. Indeed, he states unequivocally:

To practice religion means basically to acknowledge a unique source of the existence and goodness which each human shares in but can not be identified with.

But, gentlemen, I believe that the god is really wise, and that by this oracle he meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. I do not think that he meant that Socrates was wise. He only made use of my name, and took me as an example, as though he would say to men, ‘He among you is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is really worth nothing at all.’ Therefore I still go about testing and examining every man whom I think wise, whether he be a citizen or a stranger, as the god has commanded me. Whenever I find that he is not wise, I point out to him, on the god’s behalf, that he is not wise. (*Apology*, 23a-b)

Socrates merely projects into Athenian society his rational urge to question himself as he searches for the truth of who and how he is. After all, if we are human we examine ourselves, such is the very nature of **logos**, or reason, since “the unexamined life is not worth living”. To be the human animal, therefore, which the Greeks found to be superior to all other animals means to live life in a rational search for truth. Nothing must be taken for granted; everything, even statements from the divine Oracle must be questioned.

Within the *Apology* and with Socrates, therefore, originates Augustine’s famous

statement of the third century A.D., within his dialogue the *Soliloquies*: *fides*

The Athenian trial of Socrates is the first time an occidental “democracy” tried a teacher for asking questions, found him guilty of treason and executed him.

querens intellectum, literally, *faith*, or *belief seeking understanding*. In other words, Socrates, the pagan and Augustine, the Catholic christian, as well as Moses Maimonides, the Orthodox Jewish Rabbi demand that *faith* or *belief*, what the Greeks called *doxa*, or *opinion*, accept human *logos*, or *reason* as the instrument humans have available to faith and use it to probe what we believe in order that we may understand our belief, rather than just accept what we are told without question. These 501 Athenians might be the first formally to reject such a view and to prosecute Socrates for treason, but they would not be the last. Indeed, the word *heretic*, used so widely during the Christian Protestant reformation is from a Greek word *hairesis*, *hairein*, meaning *to pick and choose*, something rational animals, indeed, most non-rational animals do daily by nature.

The Athenian society accepted the viewpoint that politicians, poets and craftspeople were wise. Indeed, the itinerant teachers of that part of Greece were called *sophists*, or wise ones because they taught many of the politicians how to be wise. To be wise within Athens meant to win an argument or law suit by verbal power, whether one took the affirmative or negative side of the issue. *Truth* was not the goal, rather, manipulating answers in a manner that one won the argument was the purpose. Athens, therefore, defined truth to be relative to winning arguments, rather than as *an absolute in relation to the attainment of justice*. This was the Athenian custom, the moral thing to do and this was the approved activity of Athenian teachers. Thus, Sophists were the morally acceptable teachers.

Socrates is the first to equate human virtue with the search for truth by asking questions.

The unexamined life is not worth living.

Socrates, however, refused to acknowledge truth to be relative to the winning of arguments. He refused to accept money for his instruction because he claimed that he gave students nothing, since he possessed no knowledge, or answers. So ethically it was wrong to take money for doing nothing. Socrates only questioned other people about the meaning and *truth* of their answers without regard for winning arguments. His stated purpose was that he questioned others because he sought self-knowledge, an obligation he was convinced that all human beings had, independent of any material reward and independent of their reputation or position of power. After all, the Delphic Oracle had stated that Socrates was the wisest of Athenians and he, therefore, had the obligation to find out whether or not and how he, Socrates was wisest. So, his search for the *truth* was directed by Zeus' Divine representative in Athens, namely, the Delphic Oracle! Socrates, in other words, had a divine command to do what he did!

Plato's *Apology* describes the public trial wherein Socrates is charged with three crimes against the state of Athens: first, corrupting the youth, questioning things above and under the earth and taking money for instruction. Being found guilty of the first two charges was the equivalent of treason against the state and three penalties existed by law, if the verdict of the defendant's peers upheld the accusation: the first was to cease these actions and pay a fine; the second, to accept exile from Athens; the third, to die by drinking hemlock.

Socrates refused to plead guilty. Rather, he declared his innocence so by Athenian law had to defend himself against these charges and accept the decision of 501 Athenian jurors as ordered by Athenian law. (19a-b) Socrates defended his personal actions before a jury of his peers. Ethics went on trial before morals. Socrates argued that his actions had justice and truth as their basis, whereas the actions of the Athenians were based on wealth, honor and reputation. Indeed, Socrates claimed, as we saw, that his actions originated in a proclamation by the Delphic Oracle, the Athenian Prophetess (20e-21c), were guided by an inner voice (31d-e) and were performed out of obedience to God (23a-d, 28e-29c, 29e-30b). Socrates even contends that God sent him to Athens as a horsefly to a horse (30e-31a); his mission is to sting Athens into the awareness that Athenians should "make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls..."(30a-c)

Socrates begins his defense by asking: "...what did my critics say in attacking my character (literally, *ethos*, *ethics*, the way I have myself, 19b)?"

I must read their affidavit, so to speak, as though they were my legal accusers: Socrates is guilty of criminal meddling, in that he inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger, and teaches others to follow his example. (19b-c)

The charges are of two kinds: one set old and referred to by the playwright, Aristophanes; and one recently filed with the court by the three state prosecutors, Meletus, Lycon and Anytus. The charges are three: corrupting the youth of Athens, atheism and treason, all capital offenses. But, in one word, Socrates is accused of nothing more or less than asking questions. Seven centuries later, Aurelius Augustine explained his purpose for discussing philosophy at Cassiciacum by saying that his *faith sought understanding*, *fides querens intellectum*. Socrates believed in divinity and believed that the gods could not lie; Socrates' **belief** sent

him seeking to understand what the Oracle stated, namely, that he was the wisest of men. Greek myth and Socrates' "religious duty" (21e-22) originates his search for self-knowledge and the meaning of human wisdom. But, even Joseph Campbell and Mercea Eliade overlook this simple historical fact in their various writings about the origins of religion.

Socrates himself characterizes his quest, one paralleling the Homer's tale of Odysseus seeking to return home and, much later of Jason searching for the golden fleece:

I want you to think of my adventures as a sort of pilgrimage undertaken to establish the truth of the oracle once for all. (22a-b)

Indeed, he specifies that this is the driving force for his continuing practice of questioning and pursuing the love of wisdom:

That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger, and when I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not. This occupation has kept me too busy to do much either in politics or in my private affairs. In fact, my service to God has reduced me to extreme poverty. (23B-c)

But, what has been the effect of Socrates' search for the meaning of wisdom through his philosophical method of questioning?

Socrates has come full circle. His

Socrates compares his obedience to the state, both in obeying laws and in serving in the military to his obedience to God in searching for truth.

philosophic search originated with the statement by the Delphic Oracle and ends with his conclusion about the meaning of wisdom for humans and for God. The oracle drove Socrates within, to search for the meaning of wisdom as predicated of himself, and led him to the truth about himself and about God. He and other human beings have wisdom when they are aware that they do not know, but God is wisdom.

The effect of these investigations of mine, gentlemen, has been to arouse against me a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a particularly bitter and persistent kind, which has resulted in various malicious suggestions, including the description of me as a professor

of wisdom. This is due to the fact that whenever I succeed in disproving another person's claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself. But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless. (22E-23b)

Socrates' search for truth is triggered by a dual belief: the belief that the gods cannot lie and the belief that he knows that he does not know.

Socrates has testified to his loyalty to the state

of Athens and his support of the expulsion of the prior Athenian government administration as well as the restoration of the democracy now in power (21a). Furthermore, Socrates testified of his loyalty to the state of Athens as an obedient soldier "assigned to my position at Potidaea and Amphipolis and Delium..". (28e-29) Yet, despite his obedience to the state in the face of death, he will not obey the state's demand that he cease questioning citizens about the meaning of wisdom:

...I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth (literally, "uncovering the covered up") for everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way...you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul? (29d-e)

Socrates himself compares his obedience

Socrates is ethical because he is religious, not the denominational religion of Athens, but the natural virtue of religion about which Aquinas speaks.

to the state as a soldier facing death in war with his obedience to God as a philosopher facing death by hemlock and, in so doing, dramatizes his preference for ethical action over moral obligation. At the same time, Socrates compares his military service to Athens on the battlefield to his practice of philosophy on the battlefield of life - we viewed this same analogy presented in the Indian *Gita* as well as in the case of Rikyu as a result of emperor Hideyoshi's order.

...it would be shocking inconsistency on my part, gentlemen, if, when the officers whom you chose to command me assigned me my position at Potidaea and Amphipolis and Delium, I remained at my post like anyone else and faced death, and yet afterward, when God appointed me, as I supposed and believed, to the duty of leading the philosophical life, examining myself and others, I were then through fear of death or of any other danger to desert my post. That would indeed be shocking, and then I might really with justice be summoned into court for not believing in the gods, and disobeying the oracle, and being afraid of death, and thinking that I am wise when I am not. (28e-29b)

Plato's
Apology clearly
portrays Socrates as
being ethical

To practice the natural virtue of religion, as Socrates did, means to be religious independent of denominational religion.
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because he is religious, that is, lives according to the natural virtue of religion. Furthermore, the *Apology* carefully describes Socratic philosophic method to be born from Socrates' **belief** in the twin myths of the Delphic Oracle and the truthfulness of God. The *Apology* presents a state's first prosecution of the occidental world's first teacher for treason and records the first use of ethics to defend the truth against the state's moral demand to stop questioning authority's definition of truth and/or religion. The occidental world lives with the fact that the philosopher, Socrates was found guilty by the state and condemned to take hemlock because he insisted pursuing a philosophic method which uncovered the truth which the moral majority covered up.

I am quite clear that the time had come when it was better for me to die and be released from my distractions. That is why my sign never turned me back. For my own part I bear no grudge at all against those who condemned me and accused me, although it was not with this kind intention that they did so, but because they thought that they were hurting me; and that is culpable of them. However, I ask them to grant me one favor. When my sons grow up, gentlemen, if you think that they are putting money or anything else before goodness, take your revenge by plaguing them as I plagued you; and if they fancy themselves for no reason, you must scold them just as I scolded you, for neglecting the important things and thinking that they are good for something when they are good for nothing. If you do this, I shall have had justice at your hands, both I myself and my children.

Now it is time that we were going, I to die and you to live, but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God. (41d-42)

The history of
occidental
scholarly reflection
and study of myth

Socrates, as any virtuous human being, lacks any fear of death because dying becomes another opportunity to practice virtuous living.
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and religion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is undermined by the attitude of what this author calls betterment through horizontal progression. In other words, A.D. is better than B.C. and we are better in 1990 than we were in 199 A.D. Yet, the Christianity of A.D. is no better than the B.C. religion of the Troibrand Islanders or of Socrates in Athens. Comparisons are odious because they are relative to the knowledge and understanding of the one making the comparisons. This is no clearer than with Socrates.

Socrates was not Christian, yet, few Christians manifest the character and virtue which Socrates showed during his treason trial, as recorded by Plato. Fewer A.D. Christians could argue as clearly as the B.C. Socrates about the value of self-knowledge, the meaning of human wisdom and the preference for his knowledge and consequent way of

acting over theirs, notwithstanding the fact that the majority of 501 Athenian peer jurors sentenced him to death.

That we are born in A.D., the "year of the Lord" and thus, call ourselves Christians is irrelevant to and separate from the question: whether or not we are human? To be human, according to Socrates, means being true to nature by being true to ourselves and, thus being religious. Such to him was more important than continuing as a citizen of Athens; such too is more important than being born in A.D. and being baptized Christian. Thomas Aquinas observes that "grace builds on nature". So, Christianity, and any other denominational religion must build upon the foundation of humanity. To be human is independent of being Christian, but to be Christian is dependent upon being human. The pride of being Christian or, indeed, American, British or any other geographical identity in the twentieth century A.D. is empty without the humility of Socrates in the sixth century B.C.

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