Good without God (expanded)
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Two prior points to be taken into account: 1. I take the broadest, probably oldest, view of what philosophy is about: 'how to live'. 2. Our modern ethical (how to live) quandary is that we recognise no authority to tell us. So, we are alone (as the existentialists pointed out), with no clear purpose or direction. In order to find these purposes we have some methodological options: biology (evolutionary psychology), history (tradition), ideals and meliorism – the identification of what is bad and how to make it better – the therapeutic model. All, *pace* Hume, refer to what *is.* But, as Hume also points out, what we *are* is not what we *should be.*

Biology and history look backwards, ideals and therapy look forward. Fact – what is done – is opposed to the possible – what could be done. But the possible includes both good and bad, desirable and undesirable. And the desirable includes both what *I* desire and what *is,* objectively, desirable. How, by what criteria, do we distinguish? (If that is possible.)

Alain de Botton's model is clearly the last – the therapeutic, or meliorist. His subtitle makes this clear: "The *uses* of religion". That is, religion as *for* something, some end – in just the way we normally use the word 'should' – not as a given faith or set of beliefs, not as an *a priori* or overarching authority with inbuilt rules, but as a human tool; quite the opposite of how religions are usually seen. No distinction, therefore, is made between what *we* desire and what *is* desirable (or between, it follows, the prudential and the moral).

The ends, or goals, which he sees religions serving are: 1. to enable us to live together in harmony; and 2. to deal with pains (by which he means largely psychological pains or unease). The means that religion has historically provided to these ends are listed and described in the book: art and architecture, mental exercises, gratitude, communal activities, festivals and reminders, rewards, rituals of release, forgiveness and humility. The forms of religious practice combine these in various ways. Religious services, for example, bring us together as equals, cure fears and loneliness and guilt. Funeral ceremonies allow release of grief. Feasts like Saturnalia release suppressed feelings. Some headings:

Moral education. Mill said that the state had no say in *moral* matters; but children get moral guidance, and we do not suddenly cease to need it when we grow up. Religion has traditionally provided the moral 'monitor' or reference point that we need. It sees us as imperfect, does not expect us to be perfect – as we are inclined to do; so it relieves us of shame. It focuses on small imperfections and puts them into perspective. It uses the arts of persuasion (which modern commerce and politics know all about!): eloquence, repetition, spiritual exercises, role-models, mother-figures that console, instead of glittering prizes – false hope.

Can wisdom be taught? It was long thought so; but the modern tradition, including Mill and Romantic individualism, says no. 'Morals' are now thought to be a private matter, perhaps for the conscience; so we are left alone.

Wonder. Religion uses the vastness of eternity and space to remind us of our tiny place in the cosmos (as science can). We can learn humility and perspective (which calms and heals).

Art. 'The sensuous presence of ideas' – Hegel. For example, pictures of suffering teach compassion. He sees the protestant dislike of the visual medium and favouring of the

verbal as a loss.

He calls on Plotinus here, who said beauty is good for you, and ugliness morally bad.

Institutions. Religious institutions supply our psychological needs in ways similar to branded goods. We can learn from the methods of both.

In sum: religious practices can promote feelings of community, kindness, secular role-models, good design, education in wisdom, realism, values. They can fill a gap in modern life.

If I were a librarian, I would be puzzled as to where to put this book on the shelves: it is more concerned with psychological health than metaphysics, but with policy more than self-help. His references are to philosophers. He does not recommend that you should actually, as an individual, *join* a religion (certainly not adopt a faith), but that we, collectively, should learn from the methods of big religion (and big commerce) in order to live better. 'Better', in this case, meaning with less discord, both internal and external.

Dworkin is primarily a jurist. His approach is entirely different: he is concerned less with religious practice and more with religion as a state of mind – an *attitude*. The book is called *Religion without God,* and announces his intention to reconcile atheism with theism (though he has doubts about his success!). It is centred on the idea of *values*, which he claims really exist. Not only that, they are logically prior to God. The religious attitude entails that: human life has value, ie meaning and importance and the responsibility to live well ('it matters how it goes'); and nature (the cosmos) has value – and/or beauty. Naturalists (by which I guess he means reductive naturalists) he says, claim that values are human-dependent.

On the other hand, he frequently calls scientists as witnesses: he quotes Einstein saying "What is impenetrable to us really exists." And as separating science and value conceptually (which is the basis of his claim to its logical priority). The existence of value is not grounded in some other existence: it is self-standing, a matter of faith.

Traditional ideas of God – pagan, Sistine, or 'bookmark' (God of the gaps) – are *personal:* (s)he has intellect, will and purpose. What is an *im*personal god like? He calls once again on Einstein, and adds Spinoza: it is a holistic vision of immanence and awe... of which *we* are part. It is sublime and beautiful. Natural instances ('the beauty of nature') of 'it' are beautiful for what they represent: "Nature can be particularly beautiful in detail because nature is beautiful in the whole."

Beauty is a central concept: he wants to link the idea with the scientific notion (or aim) of a 'beautiful theory of everything' *and* the normal concept of aesthetic or sensual beauty. The ideas are different, but lie on a continuum. How to identify the scientific presumption of universal beauty with the human sense? Symmetry could be a candidate, but is insufficient in itself.

Three scientific theories of theory 1. Models – distinguished only by adequacy (Hawking); 2. 'Just is that way' – but this is bereft of reasons, and even reasons for reasons, and so ugly; 3. Inevitable – the solution, when found, is 'blindingly obvious'. The last kind has 'strong integrity': that is to say it is not merely coherent but also integrated in such a way that no part is redundant.

Strong integrity, he says, is displayed in the *aims* of both science and the arts: 'this was always how it had to be' – inevitability. The whole and its parts [including us] are mutually dependent. "For those of us who think beauty real, the scientific presumption that the universe is fully comprehensible is also the religious conviction that it shines with real beauty." This kind of religion goes deeper than theism because it best accounts

for the variety and importance of people's convictions.

Religious freedom: can it be justified (as in most Western democracies) in a way that does not apply also to atheist values? No; for consequentialist reasons. Following Mill: 'the principle of 'ethical independence' claims that no government may limit freedom just because it assumes one chosen way of living (norm) is *intrinsically* better than others. (This does not confer special rights). Thus agreement between theists and atheists is possible on policy and ethics.

Ethics: if it matters how we live, then judgements are necessary; but not necessarily God-imposed "No Sistine God would be satisfied with obedience from fear." He cites the Euthyphro problem: if the gods' decree makes what is right, then we can merely be obedient; if their decree is right because there is an independent standard, then the gods could be right or wrong. So may an atheist. What matters most is "the initial conviction that there is, independently and objectively, a right way to live".

Finally, he proposes the similarity of the good life to a work of art (an idea supported, and some might say, brought into to disrepute, by Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde and d'Annunzio). "When you do something smaller well – play a tune or a part or a hand... pay a compliment, make a chair or a sonnet – your satisfaction is complete in itself. Those are achievements within life. Why can't a life be an achievement complete in itself, with its own value in the art in living it displays?"

The two are similar in some of their aims and conclusions: both want to reconcile aspects of religion with atheist belief, and both refer to the sense of awe in the face of natural grandeur (as well as Spinoza's holism). But they differ widely in their starting-points: where de Botton is pragmatic, seeing needs to be met, Dworkin is transcendent, making metaphysical claims. In order to judge each, therefore, different standards are applicable: one needs only to agree with the modern malaises listed by de Botton and the potential for remedies religious tradition supplies (ignoring the potential for harm) to examine his recommendations sympathetically.

Dworkin offers a bigger hurdle (though I am not sure that he needs to): the leap of faith to a belief in value(s). His justification is that only such a leap, or assumption, explains both religious and atheists' attitudes to the business of living. Values must underlie religions as we know them, but religions do not have to underlie values.

(There is a danger of circularity here: the religious might claim priority in having started this 'values' idea originally, atheists being merely johnny-come-lately copycats in inventing religion-free values. Dworkin's claim that values run 'deeper' than god-notions – what he calls the 'science' of religion – does not defeat that history of ideas. But then, neither does the history defeat his claim.)

In spite of his transcendental claims Dworkin the jurist, in discussing the status of atheist values under the law, uses frankly consequentialist criteria. Laws are justified by their effects, desirable or not (desirability being judged according to values). I guess any law that proceeded on principle alone, ignoring the effects, would be absurd. In general, the interplay in, and between, the ideas of these two authors throws up interesting tensions between principles and pragmatics.

ETHICS AS *A PRIORI* OR *A POSTERIORI*

In one sense, ethical principles are by definition *a priori*, in that that they precede choices. But their derivation, or foundation, may be either. Deontological principles, for example, are founded in the *a priori*: they are justified by revered texts or man's condition. Indeed, all the usual schools of ethical thought – utilitarianism, virtue ethics, biological determinism for example – are based in some conception of what already *is*.

Pragmatic 'shoulds' (sometimes called 'prudential') are more often based in what we have learned, either as individuals or as society – *a posteriori*. They are means to ends that we seek, or set up as ideals, the result of our choices. They are therefore at our discretion, our responsibility.

At first sight, it appears that de Botton's ideas are of the latter kind, results of our experiencing problems or malaises, and in need of remedy. Or it may be held that they are dependent on an ideal of human well-being to which we aspire - *eudaemonia*. Or it could be that we cannot but aspire to betterment. Dworkin's prescriptions on the other hand explicitly set up a necessary *a priori,* the existence of *values* – in his terms, an act of faith.

A posteriori principles have as their foundation the individual's own experiences (and goals), which are not necessarily the same as that of others. The move to any universal principles is therefore difficult: it will depend on a discovered universality of goals and experience of approaching them.(*How* we go about discovering these things may also be contentious.)

Dworkin is insistent that values must have independent existence. My own view is that, for his other conclusions to hold, such a leap of faith is not necessary. All that is necessary is to accept that we make choices, and that we can, and do, think about the consequences of those choices. We therefore have preferences: these are not merely specific to occasion and circumstance, they apply also to qualities, associations and connotations, and contribution to larger ends and consequences. I call these values. We apply our values via principles.

I conclude, therefore, that a complete ethical system can be derived *a posteriori,* by learning how best to approach our goals. To the extent that our overall goals coincide, so will our ethical principles. To the extent that they don't, we shall struggle (unless we agree that our goal is to avoid struggle).