

---

# God, Reason, and Ethics: Love and the Good Samaritan

Andrew Fiala

California State University—Fresno  
afiala@csufresno.edu

---

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the relation between ethics and religion in light of Ralph Ellis' critique of religious fundamentalism. It argues against the recent revival of Divine Command ethics. It claims that love is in fact a central value and experience for the ethical life. But it maintains that Ralph Ellis' humanistic approach to love is preferable to a religious approach. This argument is articulated with reference to theodicy and the problem of evil. The paper concludes that the condition of finitude such as described by Ellis provides us with sufficient reason to be a Good Samaritan: since we can relate directly to the suffering of our neighbors. The paper also argues that traditional versions of the Christian religion provide no reason to care about our neighbors other than divine command.

**I**N THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN, a priest and a Levite walk by a man suffering on the Jericho road. These are men who are supposed to be religiously upright. But it is clear that their piety leaves them cold-hearted and without compassion for those who suffer: they appear to love God; but they fail to love their neighbor. Jesus praises the Good Samaritan who stops and helps. As Jesus puts it (Luke 10:33), the Samaritan had *compassion* (*splagchnizomai* or *misericordia*) and *saw* (*oida* from *eido*) the stricken man's need. But why is it that pious religious believers fail to see the needy man? Could it be that their piety distracts them from the real world or that their theology makes ethical obligation insignificant? I will consider these questions here.

Behind these questions is a more fundamental one: whether I should be a "Good Samaritan" *because some religious authority such as Jesus said I should* or *because I just plainly see* that I am the only one who can give the suffering man what he needs. It is important, I think, to note that Jesus nowhere says that the Good

Samaritan was obedient to God. Indeed, the Samaritan had a somewhat different ethnic/religious affiliation. So he was praised simply as a man who did the right thing. Thus Jesus shows that one can be motivated toward ethical action directly, sidestepping, as it were, God's command. I share this conclusion with Jesus and offer it in opposition to those who defend the Divine Command theory of ethics. This story from the heart of the Christian tradition shows that one can understand what the good is and be motivated to do good without any divine intervention.

Defenders of the Divine Command theory of ethics claim that God is both *the source* of ethics and *the motive force* for ethical behavior. Robert M. Adams explains the first idea by claiming that God is the "constitutive standard of excellence." For Adams, this also means that "being excellent in the way that a finite thing can be consists in resembling God in a way that could serve as a reason for loving the thing" (Adams 2002, 36). In other words, God shows us what is excellent and worthy of love. And for Adams, love of God provides the motive for ethical behavior. This friendly reconstruction of Divine Command Ethics is interesting because it downplays the fire and brimstone and emphasizes love. Nonetheless, some religious believers seem to think that it is the threat of God's punishment and the promise of God's reward that leads us to be ethical.

However it is understood, the Divine Command theory is based upon a flawed understanding of moral psychology; and it is ultimately grounded in what I would argue is a pernicious and cynical view of human nature. The basic argument against the Divine Command approach that I would like to articulate here is inspired by Ralph Ellis's insights into psychology, ethics, and love. Ellis reminds us that psychologists agree that the general sort of love of the neighbor that is closely related to Christian *agape* develops from our concrete relations with finite others. As we learn to love a real finite human person, we also learn that other persons need love as well. This is what Ellis calls the "spreading effect" of love. One important implication of this way of thinking is that—contra Adams—we don't really need God to develop general ethical concern. Rather, what we need are loving relationships with real human beings that do not inhibit the spreading effect.

Ellis also reminds us of the negative implications of the fact that religious myth provides compensation for what he calls the "cosmic insult" of our finitude (Ellis 2004, 73). Our basic narcissism makes us want to live in blessedness forever. But Ellis argues that fundamentalist religion actually diminishes our connection to the real world by basically denying the existential predicament. And he also reminds us that as the anthropomorphic God of traditional religion has become less believable, those who once took the God hypothesis seriously may be tempted to view life as meaningless. Ardent theists find it difficult to conceive how it would be possible to give a damn about life or ethics if there is no spectator God who imbues life with infinite significance and commands us to love our neighbors.

I argue, in the spirit of Ralph Ellis' work, that it is finitude which gives life its significance. And finitude gives us all the reason we need to take ethical relations seriously. Indeed, the presence or the hoped for presence of the infinite decreases our responsibility and distracts us from the concrete needs of the finite others around us. In this paper I want to delve more deeply into the idea that religious ethics can actually inhibit ethical concern.

## The Perils of Divine Command Theory

Phillip L. Quinn defends the Divine Command theory by emphasizing the importance of Divine Sovereignty. Quinn concludes that God's *beliefs* about good and evil are the ground for ethics.<sup>1</sup> Quinn tries to show how God's strong belief is connected to His Will—since in a perfect being there is a conjunction of belief and will. Quinn makes much ado about the nature of necessary truth in mathematics and morality and how that is connected to the will/belief of God (Quinn appears to hold that mathematical truths are true *because* God believes them). Quinn makes it quite clear that he thinks that all of our most basic moral principles are grounded in God's "strong belief" about these things.<sup>2</sup>

One would have thought that this idea would have died out after Plato wrote the *Euthyphro*. But some have disputed the Euthyphro objection by holding that God's Will is not arbitrary or at least that we have good reason to obey even the arbitrary will of God. Baruch Brody argued that just as there can be a special obligation to obey the will of one's parents, there is a special obligation to obey the will of the Creator, since after all, He is the Creator and, as Brody puts it, the "owner" of the universe. The basic idea is that the Creator/Owner permits us to use His property only in ways He sees fit.

What is troubling about the Divine Command theory is the idea that there are no *other* (non-theological) reasons for believing that murder, theft, or adultery are wrong; or that moral behavior can *only* result from following God's expressed permissions and prohibitions. What bothers me, and I believe Ellis as well, is that Divine Command theorists appear to believe that merely *human* love is not capable of establishing true moral excellence. I thus argue that those who advocate Divine Command ethics have a cynical view of human nature. Quinn displays this cynicism in this way:

For most of us most of the time, love of the neighbor is not an attractive goal, and, if it were optional, we would not pursue it. It must therefore be an obligatory love with the feel of something that represents a curb or check on our natural desires and predilections (Quinn 1992, 504).

Quinn defends this claim by arguing that obligatory love transcends the vicissitudes of human life. Love that develops in obedience to divine command is supposed to be an abiding, stable, and universal love that transcends changes of emotions, attractiveness, and time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quinn: "The idea is that moral facts are as they are because God has the beliefs he does about what creaturely moral agents ought and ought not to do; and necessary moral facts, if there are any, are necessarily as they are because God has the strong beliefs he does about what creaturely moral agents ought and ought not to do" (Quinn 1992, 497).

<sup>2</sup> Quinn: "It is the case that murder, theft and adultery are wrong, on this view, because God believes that murder, theft and adultery are wrong; and if it is necessarily the case that murder, theft and adultery are wrong, this is so because God strongly believes that murder, theft and adultery are wrong" (Quinn 1992, 496).

Quinn is right that ethics requires this sort of *agapic* love. But he is wrong that it can *only* come from obedience to God's command. Indeed, the idea that *agape* requires obedience to God is really quite a cynical idea. Quinn's view appears to be that human beings are basically unloving, fickle, and selfish; and the only reason we are good to one another is because we want to obey God's commands. This sort of obedience—which is supposed to require us to act in opposition to our basic instincts—can only be enforced by a system of punishment and reward: the promise of heaven or the threat of hellfire. But this directs the motive for ethics toward our selfish and prudential interests—i.e., our interest in avoiding eternal damnation. It thus seems to ground ethics on motivations that are less than praiseworthy.<sup>3</sup>

Adams acknowledges this by noting that when fear of punishment is the only motive for ethics, the ethical obligations must not “fully fill the emotional and motivational role that we expect of moral obligation” (Adams 2002, 252). This is why Adams proposes that God's Will and human will should be viewed as united in the common love for good things. Adams is thus less cynical than Quinn when he makes our “obedience” to God's Will more like the loyal obligation of friendship. “If God is our creator, if God loves us, if God gives us all the good that we enjoy, these are already reasons to prize God's friendship” (Adams 2002, 252). And this is supposed to be the reason to “obey” God's will. But Adams also holds that we can love things for their own sake and that we can be ethical for reasons other than strict obedience to God's Will (e.g., 275). The point seems to be that a loving creator gives us good objects to love. But the difficulty is that if we can love these things directly, then we don't need God's command to tell us this. The risk is that the more we look to Creation as the source of value—as opposed to the Creator—the less reason we have to focus on obedience to the Creator's will. If one wants to remain a theist, despite taking this line, then God is a being we worship and thank; but it is not clear why God needs to be viewed as a source of obligation to be obeyed. In other words, as Socrates might have said in the *Euthyphro*, if ethics is intrinsically rewarding for human beings, then we don't need God to tell us to be ethical. And, as Adams suggests, one would suppose that a loving God—if there were one—would have made ethics intrinsically rewarding. Thus, if we believe in a loving God, we don't really need this God as a *motive* for ethics. The question of whether God is the source of ethics then becomes a purely metaphysical question *without* ethical import.

But theists appear enamored of that famous phrase that might be called “Dostoevsky's maxim”: “If there were no God, everything would be permissible.”<sup>4</sup> The fear is that if there were no God, there would be no way to make distinctions between good and evil; and there would be no reason to be moral, no reason to love your neighbor. Ivan Karamazov claims, for example, that he has no clue about why or how to love his neighbor; and his conclusion is that he “really does not give a damn about anything.”<sup>5</sup> In Dostoevsky's novel, *Devils*, the atheist Kirilov states that he has discovered that everything is good including death by starvation, suicide,

<sup>3</sup> This sort of critique is made by Kant, Russell, and many others. For a succinct account see Williams.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase is not directly attributable to any one of Dostoevsky's characters. But it is the basic idea of his atheist characters: Ivan Karamazov in the *Brother's Karamazov* and Kirilov and Stavrogin in *Devils*.

<sup>5</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Book V.

and child-rape. Without God to support the distinction between good and evil, everything appears the same. Without some story about other-worldly punishments and rewards, it is supposed that there is no reason to give a damn about anything. This reasoning is grounded in the quite cynical moral psychology that holds that without God's command to keep us in check, we would all give in to cruelty and self-interest.

Some theists further claim that atheists delude themselves when they claim to have found a naturalistic substitute for God. Jacques Maritain follows Pascal, Kierkegaard, and others who accuse atheists of an unacknowledged religiosity. The atheist is accused of denying God from within "the God-shaped hole" that lies in his heart. For Maritain, naturalistic world-views mistakenly substitute "the god of nature"—what Maritain calls "Jupiter"—for the one true God. Atheists who claim that life without God is meaningful do so, according to this sort of view, because they are actually committed to an incipient form of theism. Maritain concludes with a claim that complements Dostoevsky's maxim; he says that "to believe in God must mean to live in such a manner that life cannot be lived if God does not exist" (280). In other words, for the theist, if there were no God, not only would everything be permissible but life itself would have no meaning.

### **The Promise of the Humanistic Alternative**

The most obvious candidate for a replacement for God in thinking about ethics and the meaning of life is something like "Happiness." But happiness here cannot mean "eternal blessedness" or anything like that. Rather, it is a finite form of happiness that should properly include physical pleasure, psychological stability, virtue, social relationships, economic well-being, intellectual stimulation, etc.<sup>6</sup> This form of happiness is enough to make life meaningful. And in recognizing the importance of this sort of happiness, it is easy to see that that when others lack it, it is good to help them obtain it. This is the source of the idea of loving the neighbor as oneself: we suppose that our neighbors desire some of the same things we do; and we see that that they deserve to some extent to be helped in obtaining some of these things.

This humanistic approach to happiness is sufficient to produce both a profound ethical commitment to the well-being of others and a deep source of meaning in life. Moreover, this recognition of finitude and the finite nature of happiness is actually an essential component of any ethics that claims to care about "loving the neighbor." The idea that we should love our neighbors as ourselves is one that aims at some sort of happiness for the neighbor. Love should be concerned with the well-being or happiness of the one who is loved. But to genuinely love your neighbor and care about his/her happiness, one must approach the neighbor directly, without the mediation of God. Moreover, one must take the neighbor's finitude seriously. The ground and the motivation for ethics must be found directly in the

---

<sup>6</sup> There are many detailed accounts of this sort of happiness. One source is Paul Kurtz, who defends both humanism and this sort of happiness in several of his works.

face-to-face encounter with the neighbor.<sup>7</sup> The reason to love the neighbor is because we can *see* that the neighbor is a human being like us who wants and deserves happiness. We don't need God to see this. And indeed, a certain sort of faith can actually lead us to ignore the concrete needs of our neighbors.

The difficulty of the religious view which focuses on the commands, rewards, and punishments of the spectator God is that it actually leaves us with no good reason to love the neighbor because a benevolent spectator God takes away any need for us to be responsible for other humans. Said plainly, if there is a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, then there is no need *for us* to do this to one another. And if God's benevolent love provides us with what we need, there is really no concrete reason for me to love my neighbor. Jesus suggests as much in Matthew 6: the heavenly Father "knows that you need all these things" (6:32); and if you seek God, these things shall be provided. God loves each of us and God's love is infinitely better than mine; and his eternal justice will ultimately give each of us what we need and deserve. Thus for the theist, love of the neighbor really is grounded *solely* in God's *command*: since my loving actions toward the neighbor cannot really do anything to satisfy his deep metaphysical needs, and since God is the only one who really understands and is able to provide what is really needed, there is simply not much I need to do. Since God's love is infinitely more powerful than my love, my love of the neighbor is utterly insignificant. God can give my neighbor eternal blessedness, while I can only give him food, water, or a warm place to sleep. From within the theistic worldview, my paltry gifts have no lasting value. So, one might conclude, in a parody of Ivan Karamazov, that if there is a loving God, then there is no reason to give a damn about my neighbor at all.

Jesus once summarized the moral law by claiming that there were two commandments: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>8</sup> Jesus derives these basic commandments from the Jewish tradition, echoing claims that were made in both Deuteronomy (19.18) and Leviticus (6.5). Christians believe that the two commandments are so closely connected that they might actually be one commandment. As the current Pope, Benedict XVI, said in his recent encyclical, *God is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*: "Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment." The idea is that we develop the strength and the will to love our neighbors by learning to love God; and we learn what love is by receiving the love of God and by contemplating the love that we see in the life and works of Jesus. But there is a structure of priority here. It appears that ethical love is made possible by proper devotion to God. For Christians, love of God seems to be a prerequisite for love of the neighbor. The structure of priority is as old as the book of Genesis where obedience to God is the first and only commandment given to Adam; and it is reiterated in the 10 Commandments, which begin with an extensive set of religious obligations.

---

<sup>7</sup> One might think of Levinas or Buber here; but only if these thinkers are interpreted without their theological baggage. A better source is Thomas Nagel's argument about ethics as beginning from the question, "how would you like it if they did it to you."

<sup>8</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the laws and the prophets [Matthew, 22.37-40 (also see Mark 12.29-31; Luke 25.27)]

One difficulty here is that love of God can easily distract us from the ethical task. We see this in those who are so concerned with purity and religious orthodoxy that they forget about love of the neighbor altogether. This kind of self-absorption that breeds intolerance is written into the Judeo-Christian tradition insofar as love of God is prioritized above love of the neighbor. This may be the problem of those godly men who walked past the suffering one on the Jericho road. And one could read the parable of the Good Samaritan as a place where Jesus himself condemns piety without ethics.

But again, one wonders why a truly pious theist would concern himself with ethics. If there is a loving God, then everything will work out well in the end, at least for the innocent ones who suffer. So why should we stop and help? Aborted fetuses, raped children, and those others who die and suffer through no fault of their own will each be compensated in the afterlife. Moreover, there is an idea in Christian thought that, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it in his “I Have a Dream Speech”: “unearned suffering is redemptive” (King 1963). The model here is Jesus—the innocent one, or lamb of God, who was sacrificed for the greater good. In a universe that is governed by a loving God, there is no reason for us to care overly much about the suffering of our neighbors because their suffering will be redeemed. Indeed, some appear to think that suffering is the catalyst which produces spiritual excellence, so that we should leave others to suffer so that they might develop greater faith and come closer to God.

There is something obscenely immoral in this way of thinking. Indeed, it may seem that this is so obscenely immoral, that it cannot possibly be part of the Christian tradition. But it does appear to be central to Christian belief. Indeed, the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount promise a variety of compensations for injustice and suffering, which makes one wonder why *we* need to do anything about such suffering. Moreover, the story of Jesus’ execution shows us the story of a man who longed for suffering: the story shows us several opportunities in which Jesus could have easily avoided his crucifixion. And Jesus even rebuffs those who offer to help him, as he rebuffs the assistance offered by the disciple who drew his sword in an effort to help him escape. The model of Jesus does not provide us with a good reason to help those who are suffering or who are being oppressed. They do not really need our help for in the end there is resurrection and reward.

A similar view has been expressed, for example, in a discussion of the death penalty by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia—published in the conservative Christian journal *First Things*: “for the believing Christian, death is no big deal. Intentionally killing an innocent person is a big deal: it is a grave sin, which causes one to lose his soul. But losing this life, in exchange for the next?... For the nonbeliever, on the other hand, to deprive a man of his life is to end his existence. What a horrible act!” (Scalia 2002). We have an obligation to avoid killing the innocent. But if you are innocent and you are inadvertently killed by the misapplication of the death penalty or by a war or what-have-you, your unjust suffering will be redeemed by God’s final justice. Scalia’s remarks are deeply Christian, for it is Jesus himself who reminds us that “death is no big deal.”

Augustine says something similar about death in war in his *Reply to Faustus* (para. 74): “What is the evil in war? Is it the death of some who will soon die in

any case, that others may live in peaceful subjection? This is mere cowardly dislike, not any religious feeling.” Augustine downplays the importance of death that occurs in war—since death comes soon enough to everyone. Christian religion makes death insignificant and a doorway to a better life. So one wonders why we should really care about preventing others from suffering or dying.

My point here is *not* the usual Nietzschean claim that the Christian tradition holds that it is good to suffer (although this is related). Rather, I am arguing that in a system in which God compensates unjust suffering even to the point of resurrecting those who are unjustly murdered, there is no reason—independent of God’s will—for me to act to prevent suffering. Thus, there is no reason to be a Good Samaritan within the Christian world-view—except that God commands it. After all, if God will reward the man who suffers on the Jericho road, why should I bother to care for him? If God will resurrect the man unjustly hung upon a cross, why should I bother to do anything to help him? But, in a world of finitude—in the world that Ralph Ellis and I inhabit—there clearly is a reason to help suffering others: because there is no other help in this world but the help that you or I can give.

The deep problem of the Divine Command approach is that it maintains that the reason to be ethical is because God commands it; and *not* because of the need of the neighbor who you are supposed to love. When ethics is mediated by God, the imperative force of face-to-face relations is lost. From a religious point of view it is easy to ignore real suffering because present suffering is always viewed within a larger structure of other-worldly compensation. This may be why religious fundamentalists have such a hard time seeing the suffering that is caused by absolute prohibitions against homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, and the like. As Ellis puts it, fundamentalists “deal with the problems of finitude by literally denying their existence” (21). For the fundamentalist, the unhappiness of a homosexual who is persecuted for his sexuality or of a teenager who is pregnant from rape and who wants to take measures to end her pregnancy is fleeting compared to the eternal blessedness that is supposed to follow from obedience to the will of God.

## Conclusion

In a God-governed universe, there is no good reason to love the neighbor other than because God wills it, since God’s infinite love should be enough to satisfy the needs of our neighbors. Divine command theorists will agree: for the divine command theory, the reason to be ethical is because God says. Thus theistic ethics has very little to do with the actual needs of others. Rather, for divine command ethics, ethical obligation is a test of faith just as Abraham’s suspension of ethics was a test of faith. A theist’s obedience to God is tested everyday when he is confronted by suffering others on the metaphorical Jericho Road because a true believer has no good reason to stop and help, other than the fact that God says he should.

Non-theistic ethics is not susceptible to this problem. It is possible within a non-theistic approach to simply say that we should love the neighbor because we can see that he/she needs our love. And, as Ellis reminds us, it is through experiences of finite love that we develop greater insight into and care for the needs of others. The

more deeply we love a concrete other, the more deeply we understand the fragility of human life. And thus loving intimate relationships tend to breed ethical behavior. In other words, we do not need God to convince us to love others, we only need to love a friend in order to understand the importance of love for everyone.

Moreover, a non-theistic approach to ethics can admit that ethics requires sensitivity to the concrete needs of individuals that allows for a degree of situational variety. Theists might claim that this smacks of the arbitrary and relativistic. But the divine command theory is at least as arbitrary as this, for it relies on the arbitrary will of God. And, as I would argue here if I had more time, it relies upon the arbitrary interpretations of those who claim to know what God's will actually is. It is important to remember that a deep root of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the story of how Abraham was tested by a God who arbitrarily commanded Abraham to violate one of the most basic of all moral relations: the love of a father for his son.

At the very least, I hope to have shown that those who claim that God is the source and motive for ethics fail to see that the needs of others can be a direct source of ethical obligation. I suggest that Jesus himself recognized this problem when he articulated the parable of the Good Samaritan. And Jesus also seemed to recognize that excessive piety can lead to immorality. At the very least, it should be clear that Ralph Ellis and other humanists provide us with a much richer and ultimately more convincing source of love for the neighbor.

### Works Cited

- Adams, Robert M. 1987. *The Virtue of Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Adams, Robert M. 2002. *Finite and Infinite Goods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Augustine. 2008. *Reply to Faustus the Manichean*. From New Advent website texts of Church Fathers. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140622.htm>.
- Brody, Baruch A. 1981. "Morality and Religion Reconsidered" in Paul Helm, ed. *Divine Commands and Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, Ralph. 2004. *Love and the Abyss*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1990. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. New York: MacMillan.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1960. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- King, Martin Luther Jr. 1963. "I Have a Dream" Address Delivered at the March on Washington (August 28). King Papers Archive: [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/address\\_at\\_march\\_on\\_washington.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/address_at_march_on_washington.pdf)
- Kurtz, Paul. 2000. *Embracing the Power of Humanism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kurtz, Paul. 1988. *Forbidden Fruit*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Maritain, Jacques. 1949. "On the Meaning of Contemporary Atheism" *The Review of Politics* 11:3 (July), 267-280.

- Quinn, Phillip L. 1978. *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Quinn, Phillip L. 1990. "The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 Supplement (Fall), 345-365.
- Quinn, Phillip L. 1992. "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics" *Philosophical Perspectives* 6: Ethics, 493-513.
- Scalia, Antonin. 2002. "God's Justice and Ours" *First Things* (May). Available online: [http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id\\_article=2022](http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=2022).
- Sullivan, Stephen J. 1993. "Arbitrariness, divine commands, and morality" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 33: 1 (February), 33-45.
- Westmoreland, Robert. 1996. "Two Recent Metaphysical Divine Command Theories" in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 39: 1 (February), 15-31.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. "God, Morality, and Prudence" in Paul Helm, ed. *Divine Commands and Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.