

## RELIGION AND MORALITY: AN HISTORICAL CONFIDENCE TRICK

Paul Anderton



*Moses with the Ten Commandments by  
Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674)*

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### How Do We Know?

When I was at school, in the late 1940s, one of my classmates asked the maths teacher why exactly “two plus two equals four?” This was not, as you might suspect, a silly question designed to initiate amusement or disruption, but followed from some previous discussion. The teacher’s serious attempt to answer boiled down to “its must be because if you though it was five then it would just mean that you meant by five what everybody else meant by four.”

That was the end of any discussion, but to me the answer seemed unsatisfactory. After many years I discovered that the answer was, in fact, unsatisfactory and also that no coherent answer could have been given by anybody before 1884 when Gottlob Frege published *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*. This was never a ‘best seller’; in fact it was unnoticed until Bertrand Russell drew attention to it in 1901. It effectively defined number logically and inspired Russell and Whitehead to put the whole of mathematics on a sound logical basis in *Principia Mathematica*.

The interesting point about this is the observation that numbers and arithmetic had been used for thousands of years before anybody knew exactly what they were doing in the strict logical sense. In other words they must have applied what can only be described as ‘subconscious reasoning’ or ‘intuition’, as it is often known, to calculation problems.

Well, you might ask, what has that got to do with freedom and all that which is what we are interested in? It is very relevant because a similar process is at work on what are usually called moral questions which are crucial to considerations of freedom. It is quite usual to assume that any questions considered ‘moral’ should be referred either to religion or ‘individual conscience’. The belief that religions were the basis of morality is perhaps the biggest confidence trick in history.

### The Ten Commandments: Common Sense and Dogma

To illustrate this let us look at what is usually regarded in the West as a concise distillation of religious wisdom, namely the ‘Ten Commandments’.

(In case you can’t recall them they boil down to (1) Worship no other God (than the Christian one, of course, in modern interpretation), (2) Do not worship graven images, (3) Do not take the name of God in vain, (4) Keep the Sabbath holy, (5) Honour your father and mother, (6) Do not kill anybody, (7) Do not commit adultery, (8) Do not steal, (9) Do not tell lies, (10) Do not covet other people’s property.)

The religious interpretation is that these were handed down by God as basic golden rules for civilised living. So far as personal relationships are concerned the last six will usually be described as ‘common sense’ anyway: illustrating the wisdom embedded in religion, Christianity in this case. But if they are common sense, why not just rely on common sense for guidance independently of religious dogma? The clue to this is in the first four commandments. These serve to establish the elite of the time (i.e. the priesthood) as morally justified in exercising control on an equivalent basis to the common sense rules. (In modern times ignoring number 7 has become almost compulsory as a rite of passage to the chattering classes, but that only goes to show that common sense can change with time in response to changed conditions, in this case the availability of the pill, women’s rights, and social security.)

In fact it does not take much intelligence to work out that adherence to the last six commandments by everybody would make life and civilised living much easier than unrestrained pursuit of self interest (*rationaly* restrained self interest is what we call ‘freedom with responsibility’).<sup>1</sup> The problem is not to work out the rules, but is getting people to adhere to them when they can see some benefit to themselves from not doing.

When religious belief was virtually universal it was possible to encourage compliance by the invention of heaven and hell and rewards after death for compliance with the rules if temporal rewards and punishments were somehow ineffective. The decline of religion, chiefly as a result of rational criticism, has largely removed the incentive to virtue dependent on the tenets of religion.

Nevertheless most people do roughly comply with common sense morality: presumably including everybody reading this. The reason is very similar to why we believe in mathematics even though it is unlikely that we have studied *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* or *Principia Mathematica*. It is a result of 'indoctrination'.

### Indoctrination: Good and Bad

Indoctrination is generally perceived as bad—particularly by libertarians—and so it can be, and often is. As usual whether it is or not depends on what you mean by it. A definition which can withstand, I believe, any critical conceptual analysis is "propagating an idea or belief independently of truth". Instead of "independently of the truth" perhaps "without specific reference to truth" is more appropriate in some cases. At one end of the scale indoctrination can be quite benign as in teaching mathematics, or geography, or science, where the truth is clear, but to establish it by detailed demonstration would be incredibly tedious and militate against achieving useful results in practice.

For instance a geography teacher might pre-empt a conversation such as "Have you been to Australia, Sir?" - "No" - "Then how do you know it is there?" by starting with a detailed consideration of the justification and verification of third party reports and testimony. But that would be not only a boring waste of time but quite unnecessary because if he just got out the maps and took their validity for granted, nobody would think of questioning it. Though such instruction has the characteristics of indoctrination it is certainly benign.

But if the same teacher took a group of children on a field course where they canoed up rivers, swung on trees, swam in lakes and generally had a good time including excellent food and spent the evenings on excitingly presented Bible study so they returned home 'sincerely' believing that Jews,

Muslims, Pagans, New Agers, and anybody who had the chance to know Lord Jesus but had rejected him, were destined for eternal torment, then that would certainly not be benign; it would be deeply pernicious. Nevertheless such methods are used world-wide to propagate religious notions: not only Christianity of course but also many other religions, and some political notions which are held with quasi-religious fervour.

It is quite likely that the some person, or somebody equally prestigious in the same institution, will employ virtually the same methodology discussing morality, taking it for granted that some text, Bible, Koran, *Das Capital*; or some individual, Christ, Mohamed, or some Guru or Celebrity, is a suitable and reliable source of information on the subject. Such use is not benign, and can be quite pernicious.

The trouble is that the process used is psychologically identical in each case. For indoctrination through personal contact there are usually four characteristics. First there is an authority figure who is believed to have special knowledge of the ideas to be indoctrinated. Secondly the audience of subjects must be motivated to pay attention and learn. Thirdly there is a system of reward for understanding and compliance. Lastly there is some idea or belief which is taken for granted without specific reference to it which is not noticed by the audience.

The classic situation is, of course, the school lesson. This has changed somewhat over time, but still retains the basic structure. Traditionally the teacher established authority by threat and punishment which commanded attention and acceptance of the veracity of the information by success in examinations.

Before mass communication, personal contact indoctrination was virtually universal. Religious observance was effectively compulsory and the priest was the unquestioned authority figure with an assumed 'hot line to God'.

So it might appear that, as such performances are no longer common, indoctrination is defunct particularly with the development of democracy and mass communication in a competitive market. There are, however, interesting parallels between the traditional face to face indoctrination and the

transmission of ideas and opinions in modern democracies.

### The New Indoctrination

The media are generally recognised as authorities in the sense that it is assumed that their content is broadly true. Most confidence is placed in the broadcasting authorities, particularly the BBC, which is still living, to some extent, on the reputation for reliability it gained in the Second World War.

The ‘audience’ in this case is the totality of consumers, which is very nearly the whole population. The media in general therefore occupy a position of authority about information and ideas in relation to the general population similar to that of an individual ‘authority’ relative to a live audience. The main difference is that the media audience are separate individuals rather than a crowd all of whose members are concentrating on the same subject. They cannot therefore be given a reward for conforming as a teacher can reward correct answers with praise and high marks. There is, however, scope for rewards of sorts in the sense that much media output, such as ‘soap operas’ and political reports, is a subject of discussion and conversation. So there is a social disadvantage in not being aware of some media output, and a reward for familiarity in the form of ‘social inclusion’.

So the operation of the media simulates to some extent the basic indoctrination situation, with the main exception of not being able to distribute a positive reward for conformity.

Their treatment of the fourth characteristic of indoctrination is the most revealing. Some beliefs are just taken for granted virtually universally across the media. This set of beliefs can be fairly described as the ‘establishment view’. Examples are: there is no ‘absolute’ morality—everybody can decide for themselves, health is of paramount importance, smoking must be discouraged, drugs cause crime, government spending is generally beneficial, England and Englishness no longer matter.

The doubt about religious authority for morality, when this authority had been taken for granted, left an apparent ‘vacuum’ which implied that morality was just another personal decision. But, as

indicated above, the idea that religion determined the morality was a confidence trick and an illusion. In fact morality had always been the result of individual decisions which generally had a common factor. The common factor arose directly from the common experience. The usurping of the universal ideas by the priesthood and their attribution to God was facilitated because agreement by the majority was highly probable. The incorporation of most of the ‘rules’ in law, with a system of sanctions for transgressors, increased likelihood of compliance.

### Conclusion

In practice in Western countries democracy has replaced religion as the basis of laws and sanctions. The basic moral laws are still thought by many people to have some sort of religious basis, even if their own religious ideas are a bit vague. (There is of course a considerable body of laws which are purely technical in that they enable modern technology to be used effectively, e.g. broadcasting regulations, transport laws, consumer protection, about which there might be some disagreements but not on ‘moral’ grounds.) The apparent abandonment of religious moral absolutism seems to have resulted in general ‘moral’ decisions being based on some sort of assessment of ‘the feelings of the nation’ or ‘general opinion’ together with trends in actual behaviour. This is certainly a better basis in logic, but there is the danger that a significant minority take the ‘it’s all a matter of individual decision’ much too literally. If the obviously necessary basic restraints were embedded in belief by a process which was effectively indoctrination, then that could legitimately be classified as ‘benign’. For the benign classification to be completely justified then care should be exercised in not applying anything resembling indoctrination to propagating the current establishment views.

### Note

(1) “The motto/aim of the Society for Individual Freedom is “To promote responsible individual freedom”.