

Monique Canto-Sperber

Moral Disquiet and Human Life.

Trans. Silvia Pavel.

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Anselm of Canterbury, the 12th century Benedictine monk who developed an ontological argument for the existence of God, is often associated with the expression ‘faith seeking understanding’. Indeed, *fides quaerens intellectum* is widely believed to have been the working title of his *Proslogium*. From Anselm’s pre-modern perspective, there was no inherent contradiction between faith and reason, or between philosophy (moral or otherwise) and theology. Ethical and practical wisdom, for Anselm, could be vigorously sought within the ambit of faith. That was then. This is now.

In the post-Enron era of the twenty-first century, the study of ethics is enjoying a new golden age. Codes of ethics and codes of conduct are not only widely adopted by organizations of all kinds, but are, in some cases and in some jurisdictions, mandated by laws and regulations. Ethics courses of study are required as part of many undergraduate- and graduate-level programs. The acquisition and ongoing maintenance of most professional licenses involves the taking of required courses in ethics. Ethics, Monique Canto-Sperber observes, seems to confer respectability to almost any situation.

Yet this interest in, and widespread discussion of, ethics has a common flaw: it is characterized by a malign neglect of, if not an outright animosity toward, faith and the rich faith-informed intellectual history of moral philosophy. Indeed, to the extent that morality is viewed as being informed by, influenced by, or, more to the point, infected by historical faith-friendly traditions, such moral philosophy is carefully avoided within the cacophony of contemporary ethical discourse. Our preference is to draw from Enlightenment rationality, devoid of notions of God or revelation. It is understanding seeking understanding, without any possible hint of faith. *Intellectus infidelis quaerens intellectum*.

Canto-Sperber observes that most philosophical writings on the modern human condition that have been published during the past few years seem to share the underlying premise that the divine, and the authority of revelation, have withdrawn from the world and that this withdrawal defines the modern condition. We inhabit a universe from which God is absent, and there is no divine word that human beings could obey. They have only their reason, their conscience, and their desires to depend on. Religion is merely the object of private beliefs. This situation has changed the status of morality, which was previously supported by sacred text and which is left now without any transcendent foundation.

We are secularized. We are, in the words of Canto-Sperber, born-again atheists. Or are we? *Moral Disquiet and Human Life* offers a fresh, 21st century look at ethics and moral philosophy. As part of this effort, the author points to a number of hurdles that the ethics project of the Enlightenment has been unable to overcome. First, ethical theory still carries religious traces. It has been impossible to develop ethical norms without emulating, if not drawing from, the efforts of religiously-inspired moral philosophers, East and West. The emphasis on consequences, often associated with utilitarian ethical principles, cannot avoid an intellectual engagement with the wisdom literature of the ancients, or the virtue theorizing of thinkers from Aristotle to Augustine to Aquinas. The deontological inquiries of Kant cannot be completely excised from his own Pietistic roots (and his acknowledged admiration and awe for the ‘starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’).

Second, despite modernism’s near-religious adherence to rational analysis of all propositions, some propositions have actually been exempt from robust critique. Reason has been restricted. Canto-Sperber offers, as examples: the certitude that moralizing intentions or power struggles are always the hidden motivating factors of moral thought; the doctrinaire assertion that moral thought and ethics are opposites, the former representing the law, the latter representing good behavior; the stubborn belief that modern ethics is rational and autonomous or that it has left behind religion, which is seen as the authoritarian and not autonomous; the mistaken belief that only atheists can legitimately engage in moral thinking; the unrealistic conviction that modern man is the product of a necessary and univocal process of emancipation; the illusion that modernity is a singularity and, as such, is homogenous and could not have evolved differently from what it is today; the deluded notion that a phenomenon such as Kantian philosophy has generated a new kind of reasoning, or that Kantian formalism and universalism have defined, by themselves, the “relevance criterion” for modern philosophy as a whole and, finally, that everything preceding the Kantian approach, particularly the thought of Ancients, is therefore out-of-date.

The third hurdle facing the Enlightenment project, including its post-modern after-mood, has been its inability to establish a clear, unambiguous differentiation between moral philosophy and ethics. There are differences: morality points primarily but not exclusively to normative rules, whereas ethics is closely linked to concepts of goodness, virtue and custom. But it has not been possible to reduce morality to sets of rules, and ethics to mores and social etiquette, for the purpose of driving a wedge between them (and jettisoning moral philosophy in favor of ethics). Canto-Sperber suggests that attempts to impose a bright-line distinction between morality and ethics are doomed by their own inconsistencies and contradictions, especially whenever ‘moralistic’ value judgments are relied upon in order to proclaim that ethics is okay but morality is not.

Finally, Canto-Sperber observes that the secularization project of the

Enlightenment has been largely unsuccessful at precluding, or explaining, the ‘reabsorption, overhaul and re-working’ of religious beliefs. In part, she suggests, this is because there has always been a proximity and a tension between morality and human rationality, and any effort to eliminate either one in favor of the other will fail. In this sense, morality and religion are similar to the dialectic relationship between the exterior (revelation) and the interior (awareness of the revelation) as seen by most authors belonging to the Judeo-Christian tradition. After all, religion has never made morality into an open book within everybody’s reach. Nor has it ever been able to relieve the disquiet induced by human existence and the inevitability of death. The question of the meaning of life has neither an exclusively cognitive sense, or an exclusively faith-driven resolution.

Canto-Sperber sees morality as being grounded in reason, and she believes that reason is the same for the religious and nonreligious (i.e., that believers and unbelievers have equal access alike to rational contents, principles, and reasoning). Claiming to be a believer or an atheist does not count for much when the philosopher has to reason about moral questions. On the contrary, she makes the case that so long as debates about ethics are framed so that moral validity can be acquired only through rejection of religion, moral reflection has no chance of reaching a mature stage. Declared atheism is not a precondition for the validity and pertinence of moral deliberation. Morality has its rational believers, just as over-moralizing superstition has its atheistic representatives.

Moral Disquiet, then, serves as an invitation. Canto-Sperber offers both faith and the entire intellectual history of moral philosophy a seat at the table of ethical discourse. Not that she would want faith, or the Ancients, to be given any special privileges. But for her, the enemy of moral reflection is over-moralizing (be it informed by faith, by political correctness, or by any particular perspective), not religion or intellectual history.

Canto-Sperber not only holds up the history of moral philosophy as relevant and insightful, but she retells the grand story in her own fashion. Anglophones will find her narrative of the Ancients, her homage to the pre-Moderns (like Anselm), her ‘inside story’ approach to the existentialists, and her comparisons of French philosophers to non-French thinkers, both entertaining and revealing. But her incisive critique of the Enlightenment project of secularization, written in a dramatic and ever-surprising style of prose, is what makes this work unique and provocative.

A fundamental proposition proffered in *Moral Disquiet* is that morality and religion do not replace each other, but instead can both contribute to a robust and honest ethical discourse. Morality is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, and so it is quite natural that more than one moral perspective is required for its analysis. Canto-Sperber proposes two mind-set changes that would have a cathartic effect in this context. The first would come from abandoning the erroneous thesis that, before the modern age, morality had an exclusively religious content. The second would come from ceasing to believe that today’s morality is entirely detached from religion. A view of morality as

wholly grounded in religion is as mythical as the currently popular view of secular ethics, according to which morality is built on the awareness of God's absence. Moreover, it is incredibly naive to think that ethics could accomplish today what one assumes religion accomplished in the past. The author suggests that it would be more appropriate to say that the Ancients had religion and also morality, and that we, the Moderns, have morality and also religion.

This book essentially serves, then, as a reassertion that moral philosophy is properly an intellectual and rational field of research with a rich history and with long-standing credible interactions with faith-based propositions, arguments and truth-claims. That tradition should, therefore, be approached with, and accorded, a certain amount of respect. From this more inclusive perspective, scholars can evaluate points of view (including both secular and religious world-views), criticize theses (including those that reach toward, or that avoid altogether, metaphysical notions), suggest counter-examples, or make objections—all without the risk of being bludgeoned in return with gloomy overstatements, and all without the almost perfunctory conjuring up of, in Canto-Sperber's words, 'horrible consequences such as the loss of all human dignity, the inescapable genocide, or various combinations thereof, and, to cap it all, [allusions] to Hitler and the Nazis.'

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