Religion's place at the table of 'secular' medical ethics: a response to the commentaries

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'Why religion deserves a place in 'secular' medicine' (*J Med Ethics*, published online 24 April 2014) has provoked three commentaries—one each from Kevin R Smith, Brian D Earp and Xavier Symons. I am grateful to all of these for taking the time and trouble. In the response that follows the constraints of space have precluded me from being comprehensive and required me to be terse.

Kevin Smith objects to my argument in favour of religion's place at the 'secular' table of deliberation about medical ethics on the following grounds: religious ethics are not universal, many of their claims appeal to God's authority rather than to reason, they fail to take into account the possibilities that modern technology offers, when they are rational they cease to be religious, and it is incapable of the give-and-take of rational exchange. In contrast, Smith tells us, 'secular' ethics in general are based on a set of principles that are open to rational analysis, and utilitarianism in particular has the potential to attract universal agreement 'because happiness and suffering … are respectively high valued and strongly deprecated by virtually all agents'.

Smith seems unaware of how controversial his narrow concept of reason is, adopts a simplistic understanding of the relationship between reason and authority, fails to distinguish between popular religion and the academic discipline of religious ethics, writes unfairly about contemporary developments in the latter, neglects to acknowledge the strength of opposition within moral philosophy to utilitarianism, and entertains a utopian view of the possibility of universal ethical consensus. On the other hand, the issue he raises about the relationship between the nature of the religious ethicist's ethical reasons and their relationship to his religious convictions is a crucial one, and it deserves more clarity than I gave it in my article. I shall address this later, but first let me make a start in filling out my rebuttals.

Smith's sharp contrast between philosophy and religion depends, in part, on his narrowly logical and empiricist concept of reason. Such a concept was dominant in Anglo-American philosophy for several decades after World War II, when the cause of metaphysics was largely expelled to Catholic Thomist and Protestant Calvinist circles. Recently, however, metaphysics has made a strong comeback in mainstream philosophy. Smith need not approve of that, of course, but he should at least acknowledge that there are formidable philosophers, not all of them religious, who think that 'reason' can establish knowledge of metaphysical realities.

Second, most religious believers are not very good at articulating the reasons for their ethical beliefs (including the reasons for their deference to certain authorities), but then nor are most atheists or agnostics. Trained religious ethicists (at least, the Christian ones I know), on the other hand, are capable of giving and defending reasons and spend most of their professional time doing it. There are some who base their ethic ultimately on divine commands, but, ironically, they tend to be philosophers rather than theologians. (I think here of Robert Adams, John Hare and C Stephen Evans.) Moreover, as those familiar with late medieval philosophy know, divine commands and ethical reasons need not be alternatives, if they operate at different levels (foundational and normative, respectively): read Marilyn McCord Adams on William of Ockham.

Third, if Smith had read any post-1945 Christian ethics, he would know that many religious ethicists have been grappling intellectually with the ethical implications of modern technology for decades. Forty-five years ago, the American Methodist Paul Ramsey was writing on the ethics of human experimentation and genetic engineering, and since then, Christian ethicists of all kinds have contributed to ethical reflection on such novelties as the reproductive technologies and the possibilities of genetic 'enhancement'.

Fourth, Smith's confidence that utilitarianism can attract a universal consensus is quite implausible, given the strong and widespread objections it has provoked

from philosophers (from John Finnis to Bernard Williams and James Griffin), and the fact that the 200-year argument between utilitarians and Kantians shows no signs of abating.

Finally, while 'reason' does not and cannot prevent serious ethical disagreements even among honest and thoughtful people, it can enable them to deliberate together, to understand their differences and to achieve degrees of consensus and compromise. Utilitarians, Kantians and Aristotelians should be part of those deliberations—as, I suggest, should Christian (and other religious) ethicists.

Brian D Earp is disappointed that I promised something controversial and exciting, only to deliver something unobjectionable and bland, and he therefore finds me guilty of the fraud of a 'bait-and-swap' salesman. He agrees that religious *people* deserve a place at the 'secular' table of negotiation, but since no one has ever denied them a seat, he thinks that I am striving against a straw man. And then, since the contribution that my kind of religious person ends up making from his seat is what Earp considers 'philosophy', religion itself never really makes a showing. In short, I invent a non-problem and then fail to solve it. Not much of an achievement, then.

But *a* problem does exist. While I have never *heard* of anyone being excluded from a 'secular' ethics committee because they were known to be a religious believer, believers are widely stereotyped as being authoritarian, dogmatic and irrational. If Earp doubts it, then I suggest that he read Kevin Smith's commentary on my article. Stereotyping is always unfair, since it reads individual specimens as if they always conformed to the (supposedly vicious patterns of the) species—and it presumes to understand before it has bothered to look and listen (or read). And we all know that stereotyping prejudice covertly shapes judgements, including selections for committees.

The problem becomes more overt in the case of a professional religious ethicist—a 'moral theologian'. I myself know of one recent case where the traditional place of a Christian moral theologian on the ethics committee of a prominent professional organisation was under threat because a very senior member of that organisation objected to the presence of a *religious* voice on what he thought should be a '*secular*' (by which he meant 'religion-free') body.

Now I expect that Earp, who seems to me to divide the ethical world neatly into rational 'philosophy' and irrational

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'religion' and not to recognise the possibility of religious philosophy, would also object to the public presence of an overt moral theologian (as distinct from a private religious believer), since, if a theologian *really did* theology, he would necessarily be breaking the rules of rational discourse.

Here, Earp raises the same important issue as Smith: the nature of the religious ethicist's ethical reasons and their relationship to his religious convictions—that is, the nature of his ethics and its relationship to his theology. Earp says that what I call 'religion' ends up meaning something 'not so very different' from 'philosophy', in so far as it uses 'all the ordinary tools of philosophical debate'. But of course. What else could it do? Bash interlocutors with Bibles? Relay divine commands and demand obedience on pain of eternal damnation? I made it clear in my article that such zealous, authoritarian and intimidating behaviour is morally unacceptable—whether it comes from religious believers, political ideologues or totalitarian utilitarians.

So, of course, morally responsible religious ethicists use the standard tools of reason and techniques of persuasion. They also use standard ethical concepts, such as human flourishing, goods, virtues, obligations, rights, intention and consequences. But their religious convictions about such things as the existence of God, the ordered nature of the world, the sinful condition of human being and post-mortem reward for self-sacrificing virtue nevertheless shape their understanding of those ethical concepts in relatively distinctive ways—as I sought to illustrate in my original article. Earp is correct: a responsible religious ethic is not *so very* different in method. But it is different in content nonetheless.

He is also correct to observe that non-religious philosophers can (sometimes) reach the same conclusion as moral theologians, without having to avail themselves of religious premises. That would not surprise the theologians, believing as they do in an objective moral order that is graspable by human intellect, insofar as it is undistorted by vicious loves. They do not claim that *every* feature of their ethics is determined by their religious convictions. Even so, agreement on a general concept or a norm can cover a multitude of subtle, sometimes important, differences. What is more, if the non-religious philosopher happened to be a Nietzschean rather than a Kantian, then those differences would be a lot starker.

Earp comments that the fact that Christianity sometimes entails (loosely speaking) a moral position with which a non-religious philosopher agrees, gives the philosopher little reason to think that Christianity is true, since lots of other worldviews entail the same position. That will be true in some cases, but in others, of course, it is quite possible that one route to a common conclusion is better than others (because more cogent or more illuminating). But this is strictly beside the point because we are talking about the place of moral theologians in a forum of public deliberation about *ethics*. In that forum, the theologians' proper aim is to persuade others to their *ethical* position. Once that is achieved, their job is done. The question of whether their religious views make better sense of that position or offer it stronger support is important, but is best addressed afterwards in the bar or in a philosophy of religion seminar.

I am very pleased that Earp recognises that the moral theologian's *modus operandi* is 'not so very different' from that of any decent moral philosopher. That is my point: the theologian *reasons too*. Nevertheless, he and the atheist philosopher will not share all the same premises, they might adhere to somewhat different concepts of reason (empiricist or metaphysical), and they will certainly have (some) different views about what conclusions it is most rational to reach. So 'reason' takes different and sometimes controversial forms. A genuinely liberal public forum will recognise that, and not confuse a particular, substantively atheist position with reason itself. Of course, atheists think that *their* view is the *true* one, but they ought to have sufficient humility and liberality to recognise that theists think exactly the same, and so not to colonise 'reason' and dismiss their opponents' views as simply 'irrational'.

Xavier Symons objects to my abandonment of 'the standard rationalistic conception' of the 'secular' realm and to my seeing it instead as a 'forum for the negotiation of rival reasonings'. He attributes this to my allegedly distrustful, 'Augustinian' view of human reason as blinded by sin. Instead, he argues that, while religion (as a system of divine worship) should have no place in 'secular' medical ethics, theistic moral philosophy should have. This is because theism grounds its ethics ultimately in rational assertions about God and proximately in the moral order embedded in the teleological structure of human nature, of which God is the creator. Thus, theism

provides coherent philosophical justification for 'ostensibly faith-based' positions in medical ethics.

Symons is correct to imply that my use of the word 'religion' is too broad for my purpose: what I meant by it was, more specifically, a rationally developed ethic that is ultimately based on beliefs about religious realities. I agree with him that these beliefs are rational, and can be defended as such, that they entail belief in a given moral order that consists basically in the various goods that compose human flourishing (a.k.a. 'natural law'), and that this is what grounds, proximately, a religious ethic of healthcare. To call this 'theistic moral philosophy' has the advantage of making clear that religious belief and philosophical *method* need not be alternatives.

Nevertheless, I think that theism does more than just provide a theoretical ground for a religious ethic: it also shapes its construal of given, created moral reality. I also think that Symons underestimates the degree and persistence of ethical disagreement in the 'secular' forum: many philosophers do not believe in an objective moral reality, and those that do, do not always understand it in the same way as theistic philosophers. To some extent, ethical disagreement persists because different interlocutors grasp or emphasise different aspects of the truth: human reason is finite. But to some extent, we disagree because some of us love the wrong things altogether or love the right things wrongly, and because our contributions to public discussion are therefore corrupted by such vices as cowardice, impatience, arrogance and the sheer love of domination: human reason is vulnerable to sin. If that view marks me as 'Augustinian', it marks me as a disciple of Thomas Aquinas too. It also marks me as empirically observant.

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