

POINT

We need to communicate the basis of our beliefs

DR. DAN REILLY



GOD'S WILL AND DESIGN for our lives are very important topics. In my line of work, discussions about God's will usually concern contraception, sex, artificial reproductive technologies, abortion, and other aspects of human sexuality and relationships. Everyone seems to have arrived at conclusions about God's will in these areas. Conclusions are usually expressed as rules. "You shall do...." or "you shall not do..." The lack of depth in discussions about rules frustrates me. While people are willing to list their rules and the harms of violating them, most are reluctant to discuss how the rules have been determined. If you wish to convince me of your conclusion then please lay bare the process by which you came to that conclusion. In my experience there are four sources of knowledge about

what behavior is appropriate and exploring them always helps me understand why someone believes what they believe.

All of us have things we "just know to be true". These are truth claims we have absorbed from family, culture, and other sources of experience. Unless someone challenges these truths we may never examine or question them. If you have no clue how someone can believe something, the root is probably a difference in belief about the world that neither of you are aware of.

Many Christians claim that everything they believe is based on Scripture. But none of us follow all scripture literally. We all follow some portions very closely, use other portions to derive general principles we apply to modern realities, and (usually unconsciously) ignore other portions. Discussions

about how we each choose to apply scripture to moral choices gives valuable insight into why we disagree.

Christian philosophers and ethicists rely heavily on "natural law" to determine moral rules. I have always been very uneasy with this reliance but have found zero interest in questioning natural law as a source of moral truth. David Bentley Hart articulated some of my concerns well in the March 2013 issue of *First Things* (see www.firstthings.com/article/2013/02/is-ought-and-natures-laws-1). He states "I certainly believe in a harmony between cosmic and moral order, sustained by the divine goodness in which both participate. I simply do not believe that the terms of that harmony are as precisely discernible as natural law thinkers imagine."

A final source of rules is those whose mortal authority

we respect. We may simply adopt their rules without much thought. Who are those people in your life?

As Christians living in a particular society at a particular time, our beliefs are based on a complex mix of scripture, interpretation of scripture, experiences, cultural beliefs, philosophy, and tradition. We are aware of some of these and unaware of others. Before I accept your conclusions about proper behavior I need to have opportunity to question how you have interpreted scripture and applied tradition, experiences, and other influences. Before you dismiss my conclusions please take the time to understand how they were arrived at. Don't just assume you know how I came to disagree with you. ❗

COUNTERPOINT

“Knowing that we know” can be sufficient

DR. JOHN PATRICK



AND SO THIS COUNTERPOINT is about the knowledge upon which we take decisions in our life.

How do we know what we know is a question that has always troubled philosophers but never ordinary folk. From the establishment of the institution of the church until the 14th Century, the moral authority of the church was not attacked philosophically, although various rulers resisted it politically.

Ockham, Descartes and Bacon ushered in a new world for science and the artists and philosophers did the same for the arts. The two are often assumed to unite in the enlightenment but that is not true. The roots of modern science lie in the 12th and 13th Centuries. The reductionism that underlies the experimental approach has been very productive for the knowledge and understanding of the physical world but, in the world of the arts,

it led to a misplaced rationalism which privatized religion and encouraged the atheism of the 18th and 19th Centuries.

The problem is easily summarized by looking at the practice of law: if there is no divine authority to whom we all bow the knee, then how can the law be about justice? If judges do not recognize the authority of God, on what basis do they make the law? Western law has its roots in Judaism and the children of Israel knew what happened at Sinai. With our loss of this knowledge and understanding, we have drifted to an “I did it my way” society without basis or history.

Fortunately, even the most post-modern academic who denies the existence of objective moral truth, demands justice when he or she thinks they have been passed over for promotion! Physical facts do not tell us

what we ought to do and claims to be “oughted” by our own commitments are naïve at best, and cynical at worst; divorce being an example based on “oughted” behaviour based on our own desires and the painful consequence for nearly half the children in Canada.

At present we are in the midst of a steady erosion of our historical roots. The days when “thus saith the Lord” would require serious effort to deny have been replaced by demands for autonomy to be accepted without question. To command the word “choice” is to win the argument for at least 50% of the population.

The most profitable conversations I have on this topic are when someone does what is good under the old rules. Instead of merely complementing them, I ask why they would pass up an opportunity to advance their own gene pool. Most people, having

accepted Darwin as God, are stunned to realize that they have no rational basis for altruistic acts. It was, naturally enough, predicted by CS Lewis. If you have never read the first chapter of *The Abolition of Man*, find a couple of quiet hours to do so and don't be put off by the fact that the book begins with how to teach English. By the end of the chapter you will read, “We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the gelding be fruitful.”

If there are not things in this life that we know intuitively because we are creatures of a Creator, we are doomed to conflict. And yet there are things we know that should bring us to our senses: when your two year old, for example, says, “Not fair!” Where did he get that idea from even before he can frame a complete sentence? 🍷