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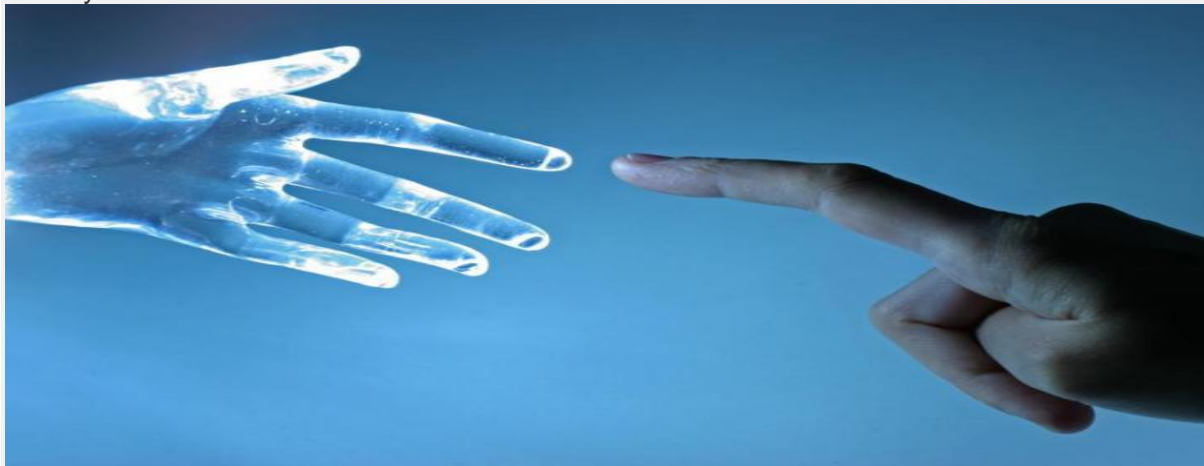
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RELIGION, SCIENCE AND MORALITY: CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OR MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE?

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It was termed a debate on religion, science and morality, and two academics – one a self-declared atheist and the other, a Christian – squared off to give their takes on two questions that have plagued many minds: Can atheists be truly moral, and can a scientist be truly religious?

[Ilya Farber](#), a senior scientist and capability group manager at Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) and a former faculty member at SMU took the side of the atheists. His debating partner was [Mark Nowacki](#), an assistant professor of philosophy at SMU. Nowacki has written extensively about the philosophy of religion, education, and science. He is also the author of *The Kalam Cosmological Argument for God*.

Organised by Singapore Management University's (SMU) [School of Social Sciences](#), the debate started with both Farber and Nowacki agreeing that the atheist can be moral. They diverged, however, on whether faith and reason can co-exist. Nowacki was of the view that they can, while Farber took the view that the concepts are fundamentally at odds.

The moral code

Farber started the ball rolling on the question of whether an atheist can be truly deeply moral by sharing an anecdote from his childhood. He said he knew that he was an atheist since he was 16. Then, he had moved to a new school and made a good friend named Mark. Farber described his friend as deeply religious – a Lutheran, extremely right-wing and conservative. So when Mark learnt that Farber was an atheist, “he was impressed to find that I was a moral person... And the fact that he was surprised made me think about it.”

Farber talked about two versions of morality.

“Without someone watching, you had to be good even though you know it’s good. It’s like driving on the road. When the police are not around, you speed,” he said. “The second version is more

philosophical. Without God telling you right or wrong, how do you determine what is right or wrong? How do you decide? What do you turn to for moral guidance?"

Farber dismissed the first version as weak, seeing as "the only reason you are a good person is because you are scared that God will punish you." The second version, however, comes across as more reasonable, as it says, "Having morality teaches us what is right and what is wrong."

Farber identified two sources of morality: inculturation and human nature.

"Inculturation refers to how your parents bring you up, how society works around you. You learn to do things as being part of culture. But that is not enough," he said. "In terms of our own human nature, the view of humans as being fundamentally immoral is false. It is not just in religious debates." He then referred to the "rational self-interest" theory in economics that has been empirically proven to be false. Farber added that even in the animal kingdom, it is also not the case.

"Many things that we think of as 'learned morality' are actually deep within us," he said. He referred to things like sympathy, heroism, fairness and instinct to protect your loved ones.

Even monkeys exhibit fairness instinct, said Farber. He referred to an experiment conducted on monkeys in cages. The monkeys were given cucumbers or grapes depending on the complexity of tasks they had to perform, with grapes being the 'higher value' reward for more complex tasks. What the researchers found was that when the monkeys perceive another monkey being rewarded grapes for a task that was easy, they protested. Conversely, when they see another monkey being rewarded cucumbers for a task that was hard, they also protested.

"The foundations of morality are built in. Things like sympathy and the sense of fairness," he added. "They act as the basis to build on. Atheists and religious people are getting their morality from the same place."

But there is a difference between 'religious morality' and the 'non-religious morality', noted Farber. "We (atheists) don't like taboos. We don't like to be told certain food is unclean, therefore, we shouldn't eat them, for example," he said.

Responding to Farber's arguments, Nowacki said there is "a fair amount of misunderstanding on the issue of morality in the various religious traditions". He added that he has heard similar reactions to what Farber had experienced at 16. "I think it is deplorable," said Nowacki.

He explained that the tradition of morality was grounded in the Greek traditions of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Nowacki then made a reference to the ring in the J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It renders the wearer invisible and hence can do anything and escape with it. "Tolkien got the idea from Book 2 of Plato's Republic – the ring of Gyges," he said. Plato used this mythical ring to discuss whether a typical person in possession of such a ring that would render him invisible can remain moral since he would no longer have to fear the consequences of his actions.

But Nowacki agreed with Farber that people can be moral even without the fear of consequences. If religious people think that it's religion that makes them want to be moral, it means that they're not afraid of being bad, but they're afraid of being bullied. "But, God is not a cosmic bully," he said.

Nowacki also did not dispute Farber's view on inculturation. "There are various variations... If you grow up in a warlike society, you develop warlike virtues."

Science and religion

Nowacki said that the three great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam see God as the creator and the author of the universe. But they also see God as the author of human nature, which includes our capacity to reason. Hence, “we are supposed to reason”, he said. But, along comes the matter of faith. “Some people say faith can conflict with reason,” he added. “The standard view is that you must believe that faith and reason are compatible. Otherwise, you make God a liar.”

Drawing an analogy of the landscape at sunrise, Nowacki said that when the sun rises, everything that is in the landscape gets bathed in that light. “So, religious folks don’t see God as ‘extra’ but it’s all these things that are bathed in God’s light,” he said. The benefit that falls on these is seen as an “act of love”.

Nowacki also commented on the limitations of science. “Science will not tell us everything. There are no such things as a ‘theory of everything’,” he said. “Sometimes the debate between the atheists and the theists is the failure of imagination.”

Imagination is a sensory manipulation. We imagine scenarios, said Nowacki. “But not everything that’s conceivable is imaginable. The stuff that falls out of the conceivable falls out of the scope of science.”

For Farber, he felt “a real conflict between religion and science”.

“It is increasingly clear that we are not special. The universe doesn’t show signs of being made to supply things for us. We found ways to get things,” he said. “Then, there are also poisonous plants and creatures that try to eat us.”

Farber said that in the olden days when people used to believe in animism, they tended to attribute anything that could not be explained to the supernatural. “The spirits get angry. If they’re sick, they think the spirits cursed them,” he said.

Yet, such explanations are neither useful nor satisfactory in explaining things today. But he added, “I’m not saying that religion is false. It just can’t do the things that it used to do.”

“We hate to admit that things happen for no apparent reason,” he said. “We often want to know why.” In the past, religion may have helped us to make sense of the things that we could not wrap our minds around. But now, we can have better explanations than what religion used to provide, he concluded.