

# Moral Ideas and Religious Beliefs

Stuart W. Mirsky

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

*Drawing on issues considered in the author's recent work, **Value and Representation: Three Essays Exploring the Implications of a Pragmatic Epistemology for Moral Thought**, this article examines the nexus of goodness and faith in order to understand the religious impulse and its relation to the moral dimension of human life.*

*Keywords: morality, spirituality, comparative religion, comparative ethics, faith, cognition, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, self, selfhood, doctrines, science, Golden Rule, Altruism, selflessness*

## INTRODUCTION

Especially in parts of the world that draw their cultural inspiration from the European Enlightenment (and other developments within that civilization), we tend to associate moral behavior with religious belief. Even among those in the west who have shucked off the religious dimension of life, there is still a tendency to look to the religious teachings of the Western World (which, in fact, arose in what we call the Middle East and subsequently spread to Europe) when discussing the idea of moral valuation and to see this as an outgrowth of Western religious beliefs. Indeed, those who reject religion and its traditions for a more secular sense of moral rightness, an increasingly common phenomenon in what may still be called the "Western" world, tend to associate the idea of moral goodness as such with the teachings of spiritual growth which are often taken to be the better elements of religion per se. Dispensing with such outmoded ideas as "faith" and various doctrinal narratives about the nature and origin of the world itself, many still cling to the idea of an intrinsic link between religion and moral value. An examination of religious traditions from other parts of the world shows that, even in these non-Western ways of thinking about the world, the idea of what's right or wrong, that is, of what we take to be moral, connects with the religious enterprise. This connection between religious belief systems and moral valuation is not something solely limited to the "West."

### **The Religious Enterprise as a Source of Moral Insight**

Buddhism and Hinduism, Confucianism and Taoism, while not sharing the monotheistic orientation of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world view, all have a major element in their teachings which address how we *ought* to treat others and all tend to share a common perspective with the Western tradition. Whether we are talking about some variant of the so-called Golden Rule of Christianity (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*) or the Eightfold Path of Buddhism or reading the Analects of Confucius, we find the same principle at work, one that urges us to concern ourselves with others' interests by

recognizing and respecting those interests. This may be expressed differently in different cultures but is present in the teachings of all these belief systems. This seems unsurprising in a sense for the idea of treating others decently, as we would want to be treated, seems universal to us.

Yet not everyone adheres to this notion of a Golden Rule, however formulated, all the time—and we look for reasons to do so when we're motivated not to, or when others seemingly are. Citing the Golden Rule in the West or one of the similar precepts on offer in various other traditions provides a basis for asserting such a reason but to embrace it *as a reason* requires something more. It requires that we also embrace the religious tradition in which the precept is itself a standard. That is, we look for a reason to accept such a precept *as a precept for ourselves or others*. Absent finding such a reason, the precept has no power over us. Only within a tradition, in which the precept is an integral part and which we are moved to accept, does it become a reason *for us*. But the remarkable similarity across so many cultures and belief systems suggests that there is something more compelling at work here than the exigencies of particular traditions which have grown out of different historical circumstances and conditions in different parts of the world.

The idea of concern for the other (at least some of the time), even if acting thus runs counter to our own interests of the moment, or longer term, exerts a powerful pull across many religious traditions. However diverse, on the level of competing metaphysical narratives—how the world is and what aspects of that are taken to be the foundation for the moral teaching to look out for the other guy's interests *as well as, or sometimes instead of, our own*—these various traditions may be, they share some version of this precept that urges us to consider the other's interests when deciding what we will do ourselves.

The fact that there is such a commonality should not be seen as a mere accident of circumstance given how widespread this is, but as an integral thread that runs through them all, binding them together in a way that their diverse narratives about the origin, nature and "purpose" of the universe do not. Whether the moral imperative is expressed as treating our neighbor as ourselves—or, as expressed in other formulations—the sentiment seems roughly the same:

*'That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another.'* - Late Period Egyptian (c. 664–323 BC) papyrus

*'... treat all animals as you treat yourself'* — Hindu Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva 167:9

*'That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another whatsoever is not good for itself.'* -- Dadisten-I-dinik, 94,5; *'Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others.'* -- Shayast-na-Shayast 13:29[17] from Zoroastrianism (pre-Muslim Persia)

*'What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah . . .'* — Shabbath folio:31a, Babylonian Talmud (Judaism)

*'A Bedouin came to the prophet, grabbed the stirrup of his camel and said: O messenger of God! Teach me something to go to heaven with it. The Prophet said: "As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them. Now let the stirrup go!" [This maxim is enough for you; go and act in accordance with it!]'* — Kitab al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 146 (Islam)

*'Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.'* -- Udanavarga 5:18 (Buddhism)

*'Zi gong (a disciple of Confucius) asked: "Is there any one word that could guide a person throughout life?" The Master replied: "How about 'shu' [reciprocity]: never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself?"'* --Confucius, Analects XV.24, tr. David Hinton

*Tao Te Ching, Chapter 49: 'Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.' — T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien (Taoism)*

Religions throughout human experience have not only sought to promulgate a narrative about the nature of the universe and existence itself, but also to address how the human being who operates in that universe *ought to be*. And the common thread spanning religious traditions across human history and across the globe is this recognition of the other as a subject like oneself. This recognition generally serves to underlie a whole range of other precepts which can be derived from it but which itself seems to be without rational underpinning, for why ought anyone to act in any way other than that which serves his or her own interests? Surely, we are justified in acting in our own interests some of the time. Why not all the time?

Yet the religious project, which takes so many different forms across human cultures, seems to find unanimity in this one precept: to treat others as we would ourselves be treated. Accepting this as a basis for action underpins much of our moral life and yet it must remain, itself, without underpinning *if we fail to enroll in one of these belief systems*. Without such enrollment, where do we turn then to find a basis for accepting this kind of precept? And if we cannot find one, and have abandoned all such belief systems, are we condemned to a kind of moral relativism (or nihilism which is its logical endpoint)?

Perhaps there's a reason that these religious belief systems, however at variance with one another in many of their assertions, share in common this moral precept and perhaps the best way to see why is to look more closely at what it implies and why it finds its place in so many disparate narratives, both metaphysical and historical, as seen in these widely divergent traditions. How other subjects are understood varies with the metaphysical narratives offered within the different traditions, of course, for some see distinct souls (as Western-based faiths do) and others a single, world soul temporarily fragmented, distorted, seeking restoration to its original unity (Hindu traditions), while still others (like Buddhism) see no soul at all, only the illusion of one, an illusion to shatter or otherwise discard if we are to advance our understanding of ourselves. But all see in common a self, whether real or illusory, a self that exists in a world with which it must come to grips. They see, that is, the condition of subjectness which characterizes selfhood, of being an aware entity, a characteristic of the animate world.

They see subjectness, that is, as such and however interpreted (whether distinct and many or as a myriad refracted from a single source)—and in doing so they seek to elaborate modes of behavior which enable those who adopt and apply their particular accounts to interact with their world.

### **The Self and the Moral**

Here lies the seed of what we call, within Western traditions, the "moral," that is the general idea that there are others besides ourselves and that, if there are, *we should care about them in ways we do not when it comes to inanimate things* (whether we confine this caring to other humans alone or to all creatures with subjective status, i.e., having awareness at some level). To come to a conclusion that others deserve our concern, thus extending the basic mammalian instincts we possess (due to the effects of evolution on our species) from those in our immediate, communal surroundings to encompass something broader (that is, selves as such), we must come to a recognition of others as possessing this special status, a status that is not available to everything. We must come to see the world as a world of selves as well as things. This is only possible when we become aware of selves as such, that is of selfhood and what it means. We must recognize the distinct character of what it means to be a self, a distinct character which consists of being in the condition which some entities are in: subjects in their world.

But to get to this point we must have a grasp of what it is *to be* a self. We must have a notion, based on our own subjective lives, of selfhood as such, and, to have this, we must be able to think about being a self in a conceptual way, abstracted from the experience of selfhood. We must be in a position to make of the condition of subjectness an object of discussion, a referent, a thing in its own right, along with all the other things of the world we can think about (refer to).

We must achieve a level of discourse in which being a self is recognizable as having that status we call selfhood and this status must be recognized as different from the status of inanimate objects. Subjects

do not merely exist in a world, they *have* a world. They relate to it because they see it rather than an agglomeration of impinging phenomena. They can become aware of these phenomena as a world and not merely an environment impinging on themselves. And when they achieve this level of awareness it adds to the world they experience—it adds the self. Thus the world is not just that myriad of distinct things that they come into contact with but also themselves as the one having those experiences.

In becoming aware of oneself as experiencer, one recognizes that this, too, is a part of that world. And achieving the capacity to think about what it means to be in one's world in this way is to think about what it means to be a subject. Selfhood is only possible with subjectness, i.e., having the status of an observer and recognizing that status in the act of observing. But if subjectness is in the world as an observable phenomenon, it is not the individual self alone but the condition of observing that is being recognized. In recognizing the condition, we can come to see, given a certain cognitive capacity, that that condition is not limited to observer alone. It is recognizable abroad in the world.

Subjectness is general while each self is particular and it is the fact of being general rather than particular that the realization of one's self *as a self* leads us to. Selves are recognized through certain observable behaviors and, seeing these, we see ourselves. We recognize ourselves as part of our world no less than the things of that world and realizing this leads us to the general concept of the self as subject, as having or being in a state of subjectness. This represents a recognition of what it is *to be* a self, that is, of how selfhood differs from thinghood. It involves recognition that subjectness—the very basis and nature of selfhood—is a condition worth pondering.

And, pondering it, we come to see that it requires a different manner of behavior on our part, a behavioral relation characterized by our actions towards other selves. Not only do we come to see this form of relation as different from our relationship to inanimate things but, in doing so, we find, on reflection, that we must also recognize this difference by behaving differently towards others than we do towards what is merely inanimate.

Words divorced from the world in which they have meaning hang empty in the air. To have meaning they must be part of all that we do. Words that express our acknowledgement of selfhood *as a phenomenon in the world* must be united with actions that do the same. We treat things in the world as *our things* when we decide to take them up and use them, but insofar as the world also contains subjects, such as ourselves, when confronting them we are also confronting entities which see the world *and us* as part of it, just as we see them as part of our world. To see subjects as subjects we must recognize that they are also seeing us.

Here a new kind of relation arises, made possible by the achievement of a certain cognitive capacity which enables us to have a world at all, and so to see ourselves within it, and which, when we become aware of this (for we are not always aware of selfhood as such, at least not in such an explicit way), requires a different sort of response than the response reserved for inanimate phenomena. It is the response of recognition, of mutuality.

### **Concern for Others**

This recognition already lies deep within our animal selves for we are creatures equipped with certain capacities, including the capacity to recognize and work with others of our type. But type need not be defined narrowly, as merely consisting of shared physical characteristics. What characterizes "type" in its broadest sense is the capacity available to the entities involved, a capacity to see a world rather than a mere agglomeration of incoming sensory inputs which make up our immediate environment. When this capacity is present, because of a level of cognitive sufficiency, the groundwork is laid for self-awareness as well, and when this occurs in a creature or species, selfhood joins the other elements of their world. With selfhood comes the recognition of needs and wants and with an awareness of these comes something more: the understanding of what it is to be a subject in a world, i.e., that needs and wants are not exclusive to the observer. This brings recognition of subjectness as a phenomenon of the world and with it comes an interest in it, a realization that to be a subject is to have and strive to satisfy needs and wants. It is the recognition of this level of existence, of having interests, that manifests as valuation. Only a creature capable of recognizing its own needs and wants, and defining them in terms of the effects things

outside itself can have on them, can be said to engage in the activity of valuing, i.e., of sorting what it encounters in relation to itself. Only a subject can have needs and wants because only the capacity to need and want makes a subject what it is. Subjects have a special status in the world because of these capacities—it is possession of such capacities that makes them subjects. And possession of these enables valuing to occur.

Being a subject, having interests, is not, however, dependent on physical conformation or behavioral manifestations alone though it may just be the case that only creatures of certain conformation and manifesting certain kinds of behaviors will be subjects in fact. What it takes to be a subject is to have awareness which includes having needs and wants in relation to the observed world, an awareness that is action-motivating. In principle at least, one can have such an awareness (of needs and wants within the framework of a world) and yet have very different physical and behavioral characteristics than what we are familiar with in ourselves. Creatures quite unlike ourselves in physical conformation or behavioral practices could well share the same level of cognitive capacities we possess, i.e., the ability to see their world in terms of needs and wants, as subjects see a world but inanimate objects do not. But being a subject and having a world is not—whatever the contingencies of nature and whatever form the subject has—limited to particular forms and behaviors. What is required to be a subject is only possession of wants and needs and the cognitive capacity to recognize these as such and act on them. When this is grasped it is also seen that the issue is not the physical nature of the entity in question but this very capacity that determines subjects' ability to engage in valuing activity. Talking about such a capacity is to talk about subjectness itself, not just this or that subject, this or that self.

Subjectness may, as a matter of fact, exist in no more than a single individual in an entire universe, but because it is subjectness that is our concern, not individuals, we must recognize it when it occurs within or outside ourselves regardless. To be a subject at a certain level of understanding is to see subjectness as a phenomenon in the world, too, because it is not limited to oneself but observable in other quarters. Here it is subjectness that concerns us on a moral level, not individuals, even though moral choices are made by and with regard to individuals. They are made, that is, with regard to the subjectness of each individual. And subjectness, of course, concerns the religious project in its many manifestations, as well.

When we reach a stage where we begin to see the world with subjects in it, with entities in it like ourselves, the idea of concern for others *just because they are subjects as we are*, comes to the fore. We recognize subjectness in others through the recognition of a shared capacity to have interests but it's not enough to recognize subjectness in another through our words alone, for words hang empty unless part of a continuum of behaviors. Words are entangled with what we do and so, in seeing other subjects, which is to say labeling them as such, we will also be moved to treat them in a certain way—and doing that implies recognition of their interests *as their interests*, just as ours are ours, a recognition that cannot be realized without accompanying behaviors on our part that *acknowledge and make room* for those interests.

### **Realization and Motivation**

There is a reason human recognition of the other as like him or herself is not, strictly speaking, culturally delimited, even if it has not always been fully realized in human history. This realization grows with the growth of human discursive capacity to conceptualize a world, a world characterized by geographic and temporal extension within which objects are formed from the impingement of raw sensory information upon us and conceived of as occurring in time and in space. Objects as referents for us are formed when the bombardment upon ourselves of a myriad of sensory inputs is organized by our cognitive capacities, thus taking on different characteristics for us, according to our means of organizing our inputs. Within this organizing framework these “objects” behave in ways that resonate for us in terms of their effects upon us, inanimate objects to be used, animate ones, however, occupying a different place in our understanding of the world. At least some of these animate objects (to some extent depending on our variant traditions) will resonate with our own forms of behavior in different ways, becoming recognizable to us as subjects in the way we are.

When our linguistic capacities rise to the level of making such distinctions, of organizing our immediate experiences into a world consisting of a wide array of objects and types, so, too, do we recognize the occurrence of subjectness in the presence of other selves. And when we reach the stage where we can think about other subjects *in terms of their subjectness*, grasping the features of this condition, which makes them subjects as we are, we are prompted to reorient our mode of thinking about them and so our actions in regard to them. Other subjects do not simply move and are moved in reaction to that which acts upon them. They look and see, as we do, and it is in seeing this capacity that our recognition of their subjectness resides.

When they act by choosing their actions according to their interests, as we do, they are recognizable as subjects of the sort we are, their status being defined by their possession of wants and needs *and the ability to think about and act on those*. This we recognize through contact with them. Selves, by their nature, have interests—and, being selves, are aware of having them. When we confront the idea of being a self, an entire range of relations is already entailed, built into the recognition we have of those who are like us in this salient way.

It is here that we find a role for the religious enterprise, construed as the project of selves coming to grips with their world, a role that is not simply replaceable by science (those disciplines that seek to explain the world and its nature) whose increasing sophistication and capacity for exploring and explaining the world has pushed the religious enterprise to the sidelines in our time. While the sciences have peeled away the explanatory role concerning the universe within which we exist from the labors of religious thinkers who once claimed this for their own, they have not similarly absorbed the role of explicating selfhood and establishing *its* role in the world, the role, that is, in which an understanding of who and what we are matters.

It is for this reason that religions, whatever their provenance in history and across the globe, have tended to develop a story about what it means to be a person, a self, a subject. And it is for *this* reason that moral focus is sharpened within the religious context for it is through religion that subjectness, itself, is explored and grasped.

### **The Search for Selfhood**

It is not that religious teaching is essential to the moral impetus in humans—or that it defines it. It's that these teachings arise from the effort to explain the world to ourselves *as selves*. The moral impetus is determined by the increasing awareness of (and thus our growing connection to) our own selfhood, something which individual selves achieve through increasing focus on who they are, on *what they are*. As we become increasingly interested in, and thus aware of, the subjectness which characterizes the human way of being in the world, recognition grows within us of the difference between subjects and objects as such, and that recognition obliges us to pay attention to an aspect of the world not available to all living things but which is available to those with the capacity to conceptualize a world out of the environment in which they are embedded.

Such a world consists of an awareness of the presence of things which persist in time and space, distinct from us and from each other, and which, when we achieve a level of discourse that enables us to recognize the presence of subjects in that world, as well, includes objects that are different from other objects we conceive of. They differ by being able to look at and see a world, too, just as we do, and in being able to choose their actions within it, in accord with their own interests. Subjects have interests *precisely because they are subjects*, though those interests may differ according to the nature and type of creature the subject is. But it is having interests that matters and which characterizes them as subjects.

When we have achieved a level of discourse that enables us to become cognizant of subjectness as part of our world, as it is expressed by other entities as well as ourselves, the world in which we stand is enlarged. Here, through abstract thinking, an awareness of subjectness as a phenomenon arises to allow us to operate in a world and not just in an environment—in a world, that is, of things and of other subjects like ourselves. It is this realization of the presence of other subjects, and of the shared subjectness which makes them what they are, that forms the soil out of which our moral thought springs for moral thought rests on the recognition of selfhood and not merely on the ability to recognize others who behave in ways that resonate with us, the way animals encounter others of their species. Recognizing selfhood is to

recognize subjectness as such, the state of being a subject and not just an object, a thing. It is the experience that finally informs our understanding of our world—and our place in it.

We see, and in seeing recognize, other subjects around us, and that they see and recognize us. But we cannot recognize others as subjects without also treating them as subjects, too, for recognizing is behavioral, not merely verbal. Recognizing means acting in ways that match our words. Here religion, the enterprise we ascribe to attending to what is special in humans, the human spirit, enters the fray.

The sciences give us no tools for relating to persons. They only enable us to work out what will cause what, to predict phenomena and understand them when they occur. But subjectness is not phenomenal, even if it is encountered only through phenomena. Subjectness is part of how we see our world, in terms of selfhood, the selves we are and which we encounter around us when others act intentionally and not merely in response to causal forces. For an understanding of the self as such we must look elsewhere than to science. We must forge a means to explore what it is to be a subjective creature in a world. Here the discursive capacities of the human animal, which enable us to not only respond to, but to *think about*, the sensory phenomena which impinge upon our consciousness—and so to form these into a world—enables us to recognize the presence of other selves, too. And it is here that religion, in its myriad forms, provides a path to further, and much sought for, elaboration.

### **Spirit and the World**

In this sense the moral precedes the religious, which is only a manifestation of the former, a flowering of the effort of selves to come to grips with subjecthood in their world, something science, as a panoply of observing and testing strategies directed at the world, is not equipped to do. To grasp selfhood, we must discover and so come to grips with the subjectness that underlies it. And to do *that* we must focus on and elaborate those relations which subjectness implies for a subject. We must, that is, observe in ourselves what we are *and acknowledge* the ways of relating to others that affirm their subjective status along with our own. It is *that* affirmation that characterizes the recognition of our own selfhood.

Selves see and *recognize* selfhood in others (though not always to the same degree which is why it's the job of moral inquiry, whether through religious systems of belief or otherwise, to explore and enhance that recognition). And seeing and recognizing another as a subject implies *treating* the other as a subject, too. Speech without action, words without deeds, spin frictionless in the void. So, the very fact that we recognize our selfhood, however we strive to explain it in whatever religious vocabulary we choose to adopt or have been inducted into, implies that we must also act in ways that express and are consistent with our words of recognition. If not, no recognition has, in fact, occurred.

To treat others as ourselves is to recognize others as *like ourselves* and to fail to do that is to fail to fully cognize our world. It's to remain embedded in a pre-conceptual existence of the sort in which non-human animal life is mired, a context characterized by a bombardment of sensory inputs and the animals' momentary responses to them, a condition in which we fail to attain that which our cognitive capabilities—which enable us to live in a world rather than a mere environment—make possible. But it remains for each of us to see this for him or herself which is why it takes insight and methods like those which religions offer to provide a pathway through which this unity of shared subjectness can be realized. In this important sense we can say of these varied religious traditions that they are not the source or cause of our moral beliefs but a milieu within which such beliefs can be discovered and expressed.

Religion in its many manifestations may thus be seen to be a kind of shared language within which moral insights can be gained, a lingua franca of our moral life. It is for this reason that religion lingers still in the human world, despite having long since been sidelined, as a means of explaining that world, by the sciences which arose from it.

### **REFERENCE**

Mirsky, S. W. (2019). *Value and Representation: Three Essays Exploring the Implications of a Pragmatic Epistemology for Moral Thought*. New York, New York.