Box 1. Reflective notes

- Humans tend to huddle safely within their own tribes and throw bricks at others. Morality depends upon mutual respect. There is a morality of intellect also — do we respect the 'evidential golden rule' of evaluating the evidence of others' beliefs by the same criteria by which we test our own beliefs?
- How much do we promote an ethic of peace and respect towards all?

The Euthyphro dilemma

The first recorded moral codes that we possess, such as the Code of Hammurabi (1760 BCE) or the Ten Commandments of the Mosaic Law (1400 BCE) rely on the authority of divine commands. Some still debate today whether there can be morality without God. In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoyevsky famously states that 'if God does not exist, everything is permitted'.

However Socrates demonstrated that authority, divine or worldly, is never enough by itself. In a dialogue recorded (or imagined) by Plato, Socrates asks Euthyphro 'is an action right because it is commanded by the gods, or do the gods command it because it is right? So, for example, would gratuitous cruelty be wrong only because God forbids it, or does God forbid it because it is wrong? Can right or wrong be known by divine revelation only, or may we be able to know them by examining the human world? Unless you take a very hard line for the first option then we cannot only appeal to religious traditions to define right and wrong. If we believe that there is some reason why a particular act is right or wrong then we must look for the general meaning of right and wrong by means of such reasons.

We live in a world of theists, atheists, and plenty in between. A marketplace of many religious and secular worldviews. At first glance the Euthyphro dilemma may seem a challenge to the value of religious traditions. In fact it is a question that unites the religious and the secular in the need to seek right and wrong within the human world, whether or not we also choose to seek them in God. Instead of the religious disparaging Godless morality and the secular disparaging the notion of faith traditions we should recognise that any proper morality exists equally for all. Just as the universe (according to Hick) is ambiguous and can be interpreted validly as either a God breathed or a solely material place, so the fundamentals of morality can be conceptualised within either sort of worldview. There is no need for the faithful and the secular to build brick walls between themselves when discussing ethics.

John Hick points out that 'the golden rule' of Jesus 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' actually occurs in the Hindu, Confucian, Taoist, Zoroastrian, Jain,

Buddhist, Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim scriptures. But it is also the basis for Kant's Categorical Imperative:

'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.'

So, good news: the atheist and the faithful may interpret the deepest realities of the universe very differently but they can join together in campaigning for a better world because they can recognise that we all share the same world. Socrates showed the way.

I have two conclusions. First ethics, indeed all morality, depends on reciprocity and mutual respect. We all, the faithful and the secular, would do well to remember this. Second, Jesus had a snappier turn of phrase than Kant.

CPD further study and reflective notes

The notes in Boxes 1 and 2 will help you to read and reflect further on any of the brief articles in this series. If this learning relates to your professional development then you should put it in your annual PDP and claim self-certified CPD points within the RCGP guidelines set out at <http://bit.ly/UT5Z3V>.

If your reading and reflection is occasional and opportunistic, claims in this one area should not exceed 10 CPD credits per year. However if you decide to use this material to develop your understanding of medical philosophy and ethics as a significant part of a PDP, say over 2 years, then a larger number of credits can be claimed so long as there is evidence of balance over a 5-year cycle. These credits should demonstrate the impact of your reflection on your practice (for example, by way of case studies or other evidence), and must be validated by your appraiser.

David Misselbrook,

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Box 2. Further reading

Primary source

Plato. *The last days of Socrates: Euthyphro*. Tr. Tredennick H. London: Penguin, 1954.

Further study

Hick J. *An interpretation of religion: human responses to the transcendent*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989: chapter 15, section 5..