

Morality and Conscience
A Debate on the Foundations of Ethics
By Bill Fortenberry

This is a conversation which took place between myself and an atheist (M) regarding a question asked by a Christian talk show host. The commentator simply asked if we thought the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell would be good for America and our military, and the conversation very quickly turned into a discussion on the foundations of morality.

A few of M's comments had to be edited for content, but this debate provides a great example of the course of most of my discussions with atheists on the topic of morality. The atheist generally begins with open contempt for the Bible and anyone who believes it, and occasionally, one will present a decent argument to support his contempt. I usually begin by overlooking these arguments and asking the atheist to provide an alternative foundation for human ethics. This invariably produces a response similar to the one which follows below.

BILL: The repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell could be very dangerous for our country. According to the Bible, increased toleration of homosexuality within a nation is cause for serious alarm. Please consider my article "What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality" which is available at:
<http://increasinglearning.com/articles.aspx>

M: You simply regurgitated what I've read many times without original thought or commentary on the verses mentioned . . . I've read the Bible many times, and I know what it says - and doesn't say - about homosexuality . . . I'm also intelligent enough to realize when it was written, by whom it was written, and the social context in which it was written.

BILL: Ah, I see. It's not that you are unaware of the Bible. You just disagree with it. May I ask then by what guide you determine the difference between right and wrong?

M: [I follow my conscience.]

BILL: If you follow your conscience, then I suppose that you believe that I should have the same freedom. In that case, what should we do if our consciences come to opposite conclusions? What if my conscience tells me that I should be free to take something of yours or even to take your life? I assume that your conscience would disagree, but whose conscience should prevail? Which one is right?

M: If our consciences differ, we shall, of course, defer to our societal laws . . . Still, this was a moot question in context of this thread about our views - on the repeal of DADT . . . Why should what happens in the privacy of a soldier's bedroom determine his ability to serve his country?

BILL: Ah, but you see Don't Ask Don't Tell was a societal law as are laws against murder and theft, and yet you apparently believe that law was wrong. Is it possible for societal laws to be wrong?

M: Of course . . . And when they're wrong, we change them - like DADT . . . That was a stupid law . . . Not as stupid as God's forgetting to include Thou Shalt Not Rape in his commandments, but stupid nonetheless.

BILL: So, that brings me back to the original question. Apparently, your conscience tells you that Don't Ask Don't Tell was wrong, and it is just as apparent that there are people whose consciences tell them the opposite. How do we determine whose conscience is right?

M: DADT has been repealed. It has been signed into law. Bleed out.

BILL: I'm not trying to be hateful. I simply want to understand your perspective. You have stated that certain things are wrong, and I want to know why. At this point, it seems that you have absolutely no logical reason for your position. You just expect us to obey your request that we shut-up and butt-out without question. I certainly hope that this is not the case, but you're not doing much to change my mind. It would be helpful if you would explain your foundation for determining right from wrong.

M: DADT permitted you a seat - uninvited - in a gay soldier's bedroom . . . My position is that *you* have no logical reason for demanding the seat . . . Yes, you should shut-up and butt-out without question!

BILL: But what if my conscience tells me that I have both the right to be aware of a person's conduct within the privacy of their own home, and the right to join this conversation? Should I not follow the dictates of my own conscience?

M: No, you may not! And I promise not to ask to watch you in your bedroom, either . . . And I have to believe that your conscience knows that would be an encroachment . . . Honestly, Bill, do you not think it is? . . . Do you not think your interest in another's private life is a breach of his personal liberties? . . . Indeed, I know you know . . . DADT was wrong, should have been repealed, and you know it!

BILL: Ah, I see. You believe that everyone should be free to follow his own conscience until his conscience disagrees with yours. By what right do you claim this final authority?

M: Quite sure that I never said everyone should be free to follow his own conscience! Don't put words in my mouth, sir . . . I do believe that a magnificently large percentage of us - as in, unless you're some kind of genetically damaged human - could follow our consciences, making most laws moot . . . But that's another discussion . . . On this thread, we have established that if we all play by the same rules of conduct, DADT was unnecessary . . . If we all expect to play by the same rules of respect, DADT's repeal is good for America & its military - without question! . . . Merry Christmas, Bill.

BILL: But you did say that your conscience is the standard by which you determine what is right and what is wrong, and you did reject my reliance on the Bible as that standard from being acceptable, and you have also said that I am not free to use my own conscience as such a standard. The only option which remains is that I must simply follow whatever you say, but before I do, it would certainly be nice to know how you obtained such authority. Perhaps your claim is false. Perhaps everyone should be following me instead. If you would be so kind as to simply explain why I must accept your word as the final authority, then I am sure that it will all make perfect sense.

M: Yes, I said that I follow my conscience . . I never asked for any authority over you or anyone else! I did state and strongly believe it is wrong of you to demand different rules than what you expect . . Golden Rule is a good one . . My support of the repeal of DADT is straight-forward . . If it doesn't make sense to you at this point, then I will stop trying to explain my position . . Thankfully, at this point in our history, it doesn't matter what you think as regards this issue . .

BILL: Hmmmm... So let's see if I've got this right. You believe that the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell is a good thing because some inexplicable firing of neurons in your brain tells you that it is. I believe that it is not a good thing because the Word of God warns us against such actions and because that same inexplicable firing of neurons in my brain tells me that it is not. This seems to be where we stand at the moment, but for some reason you've concluded that your inexplicable firing of neurons is more valid than mine, and that I must be genetically damaged.

Forgive me if my poor genetically damaged brain is unable to follow your logic, but it seems to me that you really have no grounds whatsoever for anything that you have said other than that you are the one who said it. I see absolutely no reason to accept your position as valid, and until you can present such a reason, I will reject your position and continue to follow the Bible. When you are able to present a more viable alternative, I promise to give it my full consideration.

M: [Response was not worth reprinting]