Response to presentation: Dr. Elliot Dorff, Rabbi, Ph.D. Conservative Judaism

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My name is Elliott Dorff. I'm a Conservative Rabbi. Conservative is the middle movement in Judaism, and I'm a Professor of Philosophy at American Jewish University in Los Angeles. I teach a course in Jewish law at the UCLA School of Law. (00:40) I also read this chapter from [Neil's book] so the first comment... I want to make two comments. The first one you didn't hear, but it's in his book sounds to say it, okay. And then the other one very much was in his presentation. (00:59) Towards the beginning of this chapter, he talks about the differences between morality and ethics and he uses one particular philosopher, Bernard Williams, as the way to do it. Let me just say that by the way, my doctorate's from Columbia University in philosophy with a dissertation in ethics, so I've done some thinking about this stuff. (01:21) The terms moral and ethical are very confused in contemporary speech and in the vernacular they're actually interchangeable and sometimes they could even be used to reinforce each other. This person is a very moral and ethical person, right? but what you mean by that is that ethics really matters to this person, both in thought and in motivation and in action. (01:53) But when philosophers talk about these terms, they distinguish them in the following way. Morals refer to concrete directions for action. So, a moral norm would be something like you have a duty to help the poor. Another moral norm would be you a duty not to rape anybody. Those are concrete, moral norms, and they are what we call morality. (02:23) Ethics is used in two completely different ways. One way it's used is in regard to codes of professional norms. You talk about medical ethics, you talk about business ethics, engineering ethics, legal ethics, all of that kind of thing. There, you're talking about codes of norms for professions. (02:45) In philosophical terms, though, what you're talking about when you're talking about ethics sometimes called metaethics is theories of morality. My dissertation, for
example, was an ethical dissertation in which I was talking about what do you mean by right, and what do you mean by good, a whole variety of different understandings of those two terms. And then how do you justify those kinds of judgments? (03:14) Those are, those are ethical questions. They're one level above, not in importance, but in abstraction. They're one level above moral concerns. I think that's a much more common use of the distinction between the two terms than the one that you have in your book, so let me just say that and we're done. (03:38)

I do want to say that I think the virtue theory in ethics is exactly the right theory to use for what's coming. I read it here, what's coming even more in the future. I live in Los Angeles. We're now in our fourth year of drought. Real questions as to whether people are going to be able to live in that area of the world. By the way, same thing is going on in Sao Paulo, the largest city in Brazil, right now. Major problems that we're facing as a result of the climate changes that are already upon us. I very much think that the way that you deal with it, is exactly as Neil says, you have to inculcate new kinds of appreciations of ethical norms. (04:27) My problem with him with this, is that when he talks about preservation... You saw the slides. Preservation of norms, rehabilitation of norms, that is applying norms in new ways, and then creation of norms. I have to say that as a representative of Judaism, which I think is the oldest tradition on this panel, and I may be the oldest person on this panel... it's all right, I'm only 20, despite the fact that I have eight grandchildren, but that's all right. (05:03) The thing is, [inaudible 00:05:04], it seems to me that the examples that you gave of new norms being created are not new at all. They exist in my tradition from a long, long time ago. Mindfulness, for example. The rabbi say, when it's supposed to say a hundred blessings each day in gratitude for what you have, there is a very strong sense in the liturgy... Prayer is an English word and English is a language that was created by Christians and therefore still to this day, 90% or so the people who speak English as their native language are Christian. (05:46) Therefore, if you look at what does prayer mean? Do this I pray... Pray means to ask for something, right. So, you think in the word prayer, that what prayer is all about is petition. (06:00) But then if you look at the Jewish prayer book, there are some petitions, but the vast majority of
the Jewish prayer book is praise of God and thanksgiving for God. That's mindfulness, right. That's thinking through what you're doing and recognizing that you're dependent upon God, you're dependent on however you want to say God, but certainly something beyond you and that you are not the be-all and end-all of the universe, that you have to recognize that your place in the universe is one of being dependent upon it and of having the responsibility to preserve it. (06:39) As a matter of fact, in the second chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve, they're put into the garden [foreign language 00:06:47], to work it and to preserve it. That's Genesis Chapter Two, that's not new at all. That's preservation, you did mention that before, as is preservation of some of our values. (07:02) The second thing, co-operativeness. The rabbi say, "[foreign language 00:07:04]. Do not separate yourself from the community". And they get that and a lot of the obligations in Judaism are communal obligations. In other words, whether you like it or not, you have obligations to care for the poor. You have obligations to care for the sick. You have obligations to make sure that your agricultural work, if you happen to be a farmer, does not impose upon your neighbor, who is also a farmer, bad ecological practices. (07:42) The next one, respect for nature. The Torah itself, the five books of Moses itself, says that once every seven years you have to let the land lie fallow so that nature can recoup. Deuteronomy Chapter 20, if you're in a war, you may cut down the trees that are not fruit bearing trees in order to build siege works and the like, but you may not cut down the fruit bearing trees. (08:11) A whole series of rules in the Torah itself about respect, about trying to diminish pain to animals. For example, you're not allowed to yoke an oxen and donkey together because they have very different levels of strength, and you're going to be causing a lot of pain to the donkey. You may not muzzle an ox on the threshing floor, because then the ox is going to see all this grain that he can't eat, and it's going to cause him psychological pain. They were even aware of psychological pain and not just physical pain. (08:43) My point here is that, my guess is that you have yet to show me a value that's going to be a new value in this, and I think what instead you have is new applications of old values. (08:58) One last thing is that when you are talking about something that is distinctively new, when an old
tradition, whether it be a secular one or a religious one, is facing things that the people who had that tradition in the past could never have even anticipated, let alone dealt with. For example, if you're using... I do a lot of bioethics. If you're using the Jewish tradition to talk about heart and lung machines, the tradition didn't know about heart and lung machines. Nobody did until they were invented in the 1970s I think, or '60s. Or if you're talking about some of the assisted reproductive techniques that we have now, in vitro fertilization and all of that. The tradition didn't know anything about that. So, then what do you do? (09:51)

Well, you use whatever precedent seemed to be applicable. You apply by analogy to the extent that you can. But then when the analogies are really forced, what you have to do is what I call depth theology. You have to go to the underlying concepts and values of the tradition and applying them to these new things. Now what you do have in the time to come, and frankly, in our own time as well, is a world that has far more people than it ever had before. There was not even a billion people on the planet until 1800, and we're now seven billion people. (10:35)

I'm old enough to remember, I'm 71. I'm old enough to remember, you don't have to guess. In my college days in the early '60s, ZPG, Zero Population Growth was the big call to action because we were 3 billion people on the planet and we were convinced that it could not support any more than that. We're now more than double that, and that has caused immense pressure on the planet itself. And we are seeing the results of that in terms of the climate changes that are happening and the loss of potable water, all kinds of stuff. (11:15) I think both the values that we already have in our traditions are used sometimes in new ways, but still the same values, and some of the underlying concepts of those values will be really important resources for creating an ethic for the time to come.

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