

**The Theology of Isaac Asimov
As Revealed in the Three Laws of Robotics
Derived from a sermon by Robert M. Eddy, M. Div**

Today's discourse is based on a sermon by Bob Eddy. Over the last fifteen years it has undergone a number of title changes. An earlier version was titled "The Aspiration to Tranquility Verses The Temptation to Holiness." A more descriptive version was titled, "Jesus' ethic verses the ethic of Epicurus". The original title was "The golden Rule is Brass." I kept searching for a better title because I did not believe, and I do not want to even suggest that folks who try to follow the teachings of Jesus are in any way inferior to myself. However, their way is not the only way to be ethical and it is no longer my way. I want to explain this morning why I have given up not only the cosmology and epistemology of Jesus but his ethic as well: the ethic that I'm here calling Altruism.

Eddy says he lost his faith in Altruism on a weeklong backpacking trip in the Grand Canyon. He had brought along for rereading a philosophical tome published in 1950 by the late noted science fiction author Isaac Asimov, the title: I Robot. It's really a collection of short Science fiction stories. The heroine of most of the stories is Dr. Susan Calvin, a human who acts as a sort of clinical psychologist for "positronic" robots.

In one of the stories a politician named Quinn accuses his opponent, Buyerly of being a robot. Buyerly is handsome, forthright, intelligent, talented and compassionate--obviously too good to be human much less a politician. Dr. Calvin, the human expert on Robot Psychology is brought in to help determine whether Buyerly is flesh and blood or a robot? Dr. Calvin tells Mr. Quinn, "There are only two ways of definitely proving that Buyerly is a robot:...the physical and the psychological. Physically, you can dissect him or use X-rays. Psychologically, his behavior can be studied...[I]f he is a ...robot, he must conform to the three laws of robotics. A positronic brain cannot be constructed without them.

The three laws of Robotics are:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm
2. A robot must obey the orders of a human being except where such orders conflict with the first law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the first or second laws.

If Mr. Buyerly breaks any of these three laws, he is not a robot. Unfortunately, this procedure works in only one direction. If he lives up to the [three laws] it proves nothing ." Quinn raised polite eyebrows. "Why not doctor?" "Because if you stop to think of it, the three laws of robotics are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems... [for example] every human being is supposed to have the instinct of self preservation.

That's rule three to a robot. ... every good human being ... is supposed to defer to proper authority ... to obey laws, to follow rules, to conform to custom, even when they interfere with his comfort or safety.

That's rule two of the robot. [and] every truly 'good' human being is supposed to love others as himself, to protect his fellow man, to risk life to save another. That's rule one to a robot. To put it simply, if Buyerly follows all the rules of Robotics, he may be a robot or he may simply be a very good man."

It seems to me Dr. Calvin left out one very important word. She should have said, "He may be a robot or he may simply be a very good CHRISTIAN man." Why? Because the ethics embodied in the three laws of Robotics are essentially the ethics taught by Jesus of Nazareth. Another word for the ethic of Jesus is Altruism, which the American Heritage dictionary defines as follows:

Altruism: Unselfish concern for the welfare of others; selflessness.
Another definition might be, "living for others."

Eddy tried for the first fifty years of my life to be an Altruist but while rereading Asimov's story on that backpacking trip in the Grand Canyon a question popped into his mind: "Is what I have considered a very good person simply somebody's idea of a perfect robot?"

The first law of robotics states "a robot may not injure a human being or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm. It is the second part of that law "or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm" that makes Asimov's robots Christians rather than Jews. Like Asimov's robots, true Christians, must not only refrain from injuring others but must also actively intervene to prevent others from coming to harm even to intervene to prevent them from harming themselves.

Jesus' taught, "do unto others that which you would have them do unto you." This teaching is different from what most other religious leaders have taught. Other so-called "versions" of the golden rule are really, when you examine them closely, quite different from Jesus' teaching.

For example: The great Jewish scholar, Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, taught, "Do not unto others that which is hateful to thee." This is much closer to Buddhist and Confucian teachings. Jesus' golden rule, altruism, not only prohibits one from harming another human being. It requires that one take action to prevent a human being from coming to harm. Eddy calls this "the temptation to holiness" and has come to believe that it is the source of many of the world's troubles. Hillel's rule requires only that one refrain from actions that would be harmful to another. They do not insist that one intervene for another person's "own good".

WHY DID I ABANDON ALTRUISM?

For many reasons, only one of which I will address this morning, Jesus' ethic does not address the diversity of human wants. George Bernard Shaw put it precisely: "Don't do unto others what you would have them do unto you. Your tastes may be different." For example, what does a masochist do with the golden rule? Does he go about torturing others so that they may, like the masochist, feel pleasure by suffering? Shaw was being facetious, but "many a true word is said in jest." When Eddy was a Methodist minister, he used to say, "Christianity hasn't failed, it's never been tried." But he came to realize that in fact Jesus' ethic has been tried. Western civilization justified its behavior by Jesus' ethic. The ethic of Altruism, combined with belief in a life after death and the conviction that belief in dogma determines one's fate in that afterlife, resulted in the practices identified with the Inquisition though in fairness I should point out that those practices were equally common

where Calvinists, Lutherans and Anglicans held power. Calvin, Luther and the popes all reasoned that the only way one can be loving to a person destined for hell by heresy or disbelief is to make that person believe correctly. Torture and painful execution were designed to "save the soul" of the heretic from eternal suffering. It was done out of unselfish love. The Grand Inquisitor was a great altruist. Consider: if you knew that your beliefs would condemn you to hell forever, wouldn't you want someone to torture you into heaven? Altruism became the justification for the burning of heretics, the conquest of Asia, Africa and America by the Christian nations and the forceful and sometimes successful attempt to destroy native cultures "We did it for their own good. It was our Christian duty!"

"But", you protest, "that was centuries ago!" Not so! Yes, the Inquisition is long past. Imperialism, at least in its most blatant form, is dead. But what of the actions of the United States in Vietnam? We did not say, "We do this for our benefit." We said, "This is for your benefit." We did it for "Democracy" or for "self-determination" or "to fight Communism." Many of us in this room remember when an American officer commented in Vietnam, "We had to burn the village to save it." For many reasons, I have come to the conclusion that Jesus' ethic as expressed in the "Golden Rule", is a dangerous guide for either personal or group behavior. When required to prevent harm from coming to others, we often do more harm than if we were indifferent or selfish. Now, let me be clear, I propose neither indifference nor selfishness. But you must wait for the first law of "human being" to hear the alternative.

The second law of robotics is: "A robot must obey the orders given it by a human being except where such orders would conflict with the first law." This too is a part of Jesus' ethic. Jesus left no doubt that his disciples should follow even outrageous orders. They lived in an occupied country where the law required a native to carry a Roman soldier's pack for a mile when so ordered. Jesus told his followers to carry the pack not just one, but two miles. He taught that if someone asks for your coat you should give him your shirt as well. This is passivism, p-a-s-s-i-v-i-s-m, non-resistance to evil. It is very different from the pacifism, p-a-c-i-f-i-s-m or nonviolent resistance to evil as recommended by Thoreau, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Many Americans confuse the two and think that non-violent resistance was devised by Jesus of Nazareth. It was not. Jesus did teach love of enemies as did Gandhi and King, but he also taught non-resistance to evil. Non-resistance to evil makes robots of those who practice it.

The third law of robotics is: "A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the first or second law." The important part of this law is its subordination to the first two. It boils down to this: "put yourself last". Despite attempts to alloy Jesus' teachings with the insights of modern Psychology, this teaching--put yourself last--is central to what he taught. The true Christian saint is one who, like Jesus, would be first by being last, leader by being servant.

The true follower of Jesus' ethic is one who would literally give up his life to save not only his friends, but even his enemies. It is an ethic for martyrs as Jesus' earliest followers realized. We, as products of a nominally Christian culture are so used to looking at Jesus' ethic as a desirable, even if impossible, ideal that we hardly examine what actually happens when people attempt to live by it. As Isaac Asimov subtly pointed out, the ethics of Jesus are ethics for robots.

This negative dissection of Jesus' ethic is not new. Nietzsche did something similar more than a century ago. But Nietzsche's alternative, the ideal of the Superman, as interpreted by Adolf Hitler at least, resulted in a horror worse even than the excesses of the Inquisition. The Nazi attempt to exterminate all "lesser" breeds makes suspect anyone who fails to give at least lip service to the Christian ethic so let me be very clear: I reject the Nietzschean "superman" as thoroughly as I reject the Christian "saint." Selfishness turns to sadism as quickly as selflessness turns to masochism.

Fortunately, we are not required to choose between Christian passivism and Nazi barbarism. There are many alternatives to the ethic of Jesus of Nazareth as expressed in the three laws for robots. I'd like you to consider one of them this morning. It is the ethic of Epicurus, not as caricatured by his Stoic and Christian detractors, but as Epicurus himself developed it approximately three hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The ethic of Epicurus flourished for seven centuries and had a brief revival during Europe's so called age of reason. Isaac Asimov summarized Jesus' ethic in the Three Laws for Robotic beings. Eddy summarizes Epicurus' ethic in three laws for human beings.

THE FIRST LAW FOR HUMAN BEINGS:

Insofar as humanly possible, do no harm.

This law does not forbid doing good to your neighbor but it does prevent you from imposing well intentioned but unwanted "benevolence" upon others. It would prohibit genocide, exploitation, pollution and cultural imperialism. While it does not assume that each human being is responsible for all human beings it does require one to be kind and considerate to those human beings upon whom one has some impact. In today's world that can be a very wide circle indeed.

THE SECOND LAW OF HUMAN BEING:

Insofar as humanly possible, do that which gives you the most happiness except where, in so doing, you would violate the first law.

It is this second law that is the truly controversial one, the one that gave Epicurus a bad name. The reason is partly semantic. The Greek word Epicurus used is usually translated "pleasure" but what Epicurus meant is very different from what his critics accused him of meaning. He meant something closer to our word "happiness" than to sensory pleasure.

The second law for human beings assumes that a human being will seek and has a right to seek happiness. It is no accident that Jefferson substituted the right to "the pursuit of happiness" for John Locke's "property" for he realized that acquiring property was only one way to pursue happiness, and a rather unreliable way at that. In fact, Jefferson considered Epicurus the greatest of the Greek philosophers. Epicurus recognized that we are a part of rather than separate from nature.

More than two thousand years before Freud, he pointed out that the pleasure principle is central to life. Epicurus pointed out that all living things repeat behavior that results in pleasure and all living things avoid situations that have, in the past, resulted in pain. Even a worm will follow that rule. Of course, happiness for human beings is not as simple as it is for a worm, so Epicurus wrote extensively on the nature of happiness.

Epicurus distinguished between natural and unnatural pleasures: Natural pleasures are those which are self limiting and thus attainable; Unnatural pleasures are those which are not self limiting and thus unattainable. Most of the pleasures that one must buy are unnatural pleasures. Industrial economies promote unnatural pleasures through exploitation of avarice, ambition and hedonism. Avarice is the desire for more and more and more things. Ambition is the desire to excel over other people. Hedonism is the search for the ever more perfect sensation, the ultimate orgasm, the ultimate high.

Epicurus taught his followers to avoid the unnatural pleasures and to seek the natural pleasures. He divided natural pleasures into the active natural pleasures and the balanced natural pleasures. Let's expand on that. Among the active natural pleasures, I would include: eating when hungry, exercising when healthy, thinking when curious, sharing when lonely, enjoying sex when aroused, and a few others. Taken together they might be called "delight." Among the balanced natural pleasures I would include: rest when weary, meditation when confused, solitude when hassled, fortitude when afraid, and a few others. Together they might be designated "tranquility."

So the second law of human being might be restated:

Do that which gives you the most delight and tranquility except when in so doing you would violate the first law.

Epicurus taught that what is necessary is easily obtained and that which is difficult to obtain is not necessary. Epicurus lived a very simple life. He once wrote a friend, "send me some preserved cheese, so I can have a banquet whenever I feel like it." He wrote another friend, "rather than giving your friend more gifts, teach him to enjoy what he has." Epicurus cultivated the art of delighting in little. The realization that what is necessary is easily obtained and that what is difficult to obtain is not necessary frees us from the fear that our needs will not be met. Epicurus taught that the greatest of the balanced pleasures is freedom from fear. His disciples called him "savior" because he showed them the way to escape the fear endemic in his world. The greatest fears afflicting the Greeks of 300 BCE were the same two fears that afflict Americans today: the fear of suffering in this life and fear of divine punishment in a life after death. Epicurus dealt with the first fear by teaching that one could be happy despite suffering and that suffering which could not be born could always be ended by self deliverance -- suicide. He addressed the second fear by teaching that there is no life after death; no gods or god who interferes in human affairs. Epicurus would be as much a heretic today as he was in the Athens of 300 BCE!

THE THIRD LAW FOR HUMAN BEINGS IS:

Do that which another human being requests except where, in so doing, you would violate the first or second laws

Epicurus considered affability essential for happiness. He made a careful distinction between friends with whom one could be entirely candid and the stranger or adversary from whom one should seek only to be left in safety.

The Stoics and Cynics accused the Epicureans of being insincere because Epicureans sought always to be accommodating. But Epicurus recognized that it is necessary to be civil, to comply with reasonable requests, if one is to live in community and he considered living in community one of

the greatest of pleasures. He knew, as we know, that ostracism, being excluded from one's community, is one of the most painful experiences human beings can have. Ostracism can be fatal. Even as self-sufficient a man as Socrates chose death over exile. He also considered friendship one of the greatest of pleasures.

IN CONCLUSION

The three laws of human being might be summarized:

BE HARMLESS, BE HAPPY, BE HELPFUL in that order!

Epicurus realized that most of our pettiness and much of our hate rises not from some inherited desire to harm members of our own species but out of fear. I believe with Epicurus that if we learn to seek pleasures that can be satisfied and if we learn to overcome unnecessary fear, the natural consequences will be concern for our fellow human beings. If we cast out fear and abandon unnatural pleasures, love may at last prevail. If we must look to the past, let us look to the clear eyed Epicurus who first set human feet on the path away from fearful reliance on miracle, mystery and authority. Let us seek, as he did, harmlessness, happiness and helpfulness. Let us, like him, aspire to civility, tranquility and delight. And let us forswear forever the temptation to holiness, which has produced such disaster in the past.