

Title: The Ethical Imagination: Journeys of the Human Spirit
Author: Margaret Somerville
Publisher: House of Anansi Press, 270 pages, \$18.95

Ethics the Way Nature Intended

Arthur Schafer

Margaret Somerville doesn't do wishy-washy. It's no surprise, therefore, that this book – the CBC-radio Massey Lectures for 2006 – is chock-a-block with sharp-edged opinions.

A sampler. Somerville is opposed to gay marriage. She wants abortion back in the Criminal Code. Neither single people nor homosexual couples should be permitted to adopt children. Embryonic stem cell research and therapy should be banned. Euthanasia and physician assisted suicide are inherently wrong. She opposes technologies which would dramatically extend the length of time we live and she's against the use of modern genetics to enhance the intelligence of our children.

This package of views is fairly standard for someone who is, like Somerville, anchored in Catholic natural law tradition. It also corresponds closely to the prescriptions favoured by "Bible Belt" Protestantism.

In an effort to persuade us of the correctness of her views, Somerville adopts what she calls a "secular-sacred" moral framework. Nature and the natural are "sacred", she claims, and will yield a harvest of "innate fundamental principles". These, in turn, will serve us as absolute guides towards the moral truths she is propounding. Her declared goal is to define a way of doing ethics which will appeal to almost everyone, thereby producing "a shared ethics".

The methodology she champions works something like this. Begin with the assumption that we live in an harmonious universe, one which has been designed according to a benevolent plan. God or Nature has things under control and we will only create chaos if we disturb the natural order. Our job as human beings is to understand our place in the grand scheme and then keep to it. Once we understand "where we fit in the cosmos" we will understand the "meaning of life".

Evolutionary biologists, of course, tell a somewhat different story: The universe consists of atoms bouncing around in the void, and it is only through a process of natural selection and genetic mutation, *not* divine planning or "intelligent design", that order makes its appearance. Accordingly, if we accept the findings of biological science then knowing what the world is like does not tell us automatically how the world ought to be. Indeed, one doesn't need to be a Darwinian to recognize that malarial mosquitoes and devastating earthquakes, though part of nature, are scarcely carriers of inherent goodness.

To see what's wrong with Somerville's "secular-sacred" ethics a bit of historical perspective will assist. Throughout the medieval period most Europeans were confident that the divine right of Kings was an absolute principle of nature. Slavery was seen as the natural condition of Black people, and subordination of women to men was recognized as exactly what nature intended. That is, appeals to the sanctity of nature, like appeals to the will of God, can be made to yield any conclusion that dominant groups wish to defend.

Somerville's argument that same-sex couples should be denied the right to marry - because they do not represent "a naturally, inherently procreative relationship" - would lead us, by parity of reasoning, to deny marriage to opposite sex couples who are infertile, or to couples who intend to remain childless. These absurd implications of a "secular-sacred" ethics suggest that there is something wrong with the moral compass it provides. Somerville's anti-gay-marriage argument is also dangerous because it puts us on a slippery slope. Somerville herself favours "civil unions" for gays, but religious fundamentalists, in both Canada and the USA, having labeled homosexuality as "unnatural" then use this label to justify the criminalization of all homosexual conduct. Small "l" liberals might agree with conservatives that the vagina is, sexually-speaking, the "natural" place for penis-insertion; but, if consenting adults wish to explore other orifices then where's the harm? Pierre Trudeau, himself a believing Catholic, made precisely this point when, as Justice Minister (in 1967), he eliminated Canada's sodomy law, arguing that "[t]he state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation".

Somerville cudgels her opponents with the accusation of "relativism" but, ironically, the method of ethics she defends is capable of leading to the worst kind of bigotry and, yes, relativism. An ethical system that appeals to stories, myths, deep intuitions and mystical emotions can be generous and enlightened but it can just as easily be a cloak for ignorance and prejudice. The total subordination of women seems utterly natural to the Taliban today, as it seemed utterly natural to most of the world's Great Religions over thousands of years. That does not make it ethical. "Conscience" is not always a reliable guide, especially when it is the conscience of a religious fanatic.

Science and technology have given to humankind hitherto undreamed of powers: to cure disease, feed and clothe the world, ease the burden of human toil. Wisely used, technology could help to reduce suffering for the majority of the world's population, who currently live in abject poverty.

That's on the one hand. But, as everyone is aware, this same science and technology can be employed by powerful elites to exploit, dominate and oppress their fellow citizens at home and abroad.

In the modern world, neither technophilia nor technophobia makes much sense. Instead, what we need is careful regulation of powerful technologies. The key question to ask is not what is inherently natural but, rather, how we can use our technologies so as to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. For example, the virtual ban on condoms in large parts of Africa - resulting from the religious conviction that sex is only permissible

for procreation – has led to millions of unnecessary AIDS deaths. This illustration proves, if proof were needed, that how we do ethics matters. It matters a great deal.

Although Somerville's book defends many highly illiberal positions and offers a creaky and confused ethics to guide our thinking, it also offers a number of points on which liberal and conservative moralists should be able to agree. For example, she understands that marketplace forces and the greedy materialism they promote can easily lead to empty lives for the winners and terrible oppression for the losers. She also understands that if we are to flourish as a species we must develop a much stronger sense of community and social justice.

What Somerville doesn't understand is that ethics is about making the world a less terrible place for humans and other sentient creatures. It's not about keeping everything in its ordained place.

Arthur Schafer is Director of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics and a professor of philosophy at the University of Manitoba.

21st October, '06