

M4 – Morality without Gods

Dear: In this chapter I want to “tie up a few loose ends” [“**A FEW**”, choked the grandchild. Child, behave!]; yet, reading this chapter should be a waste of your time. [“**Well, then...**” started a certain smart-aleck grandchild. Child! I said it SHOULD be a waste of your time.] A reason for my suspecting that it won’t be a waste of your time is something your mother said. I’ve forgotten about how the conversation evolved (it dealt with something about religion and morality), but I haven’t forgotten your mother’s obviously “heart-felt” need to indoctrinate [not her word!] you kids in religion. Her (rhetorical) question was: “**How else will they learn the difference between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?**”

Maybe some people would criticize me for not immediately trying to “straighten her out”. But, Dear, it’s another case of what’s commonly called “situation ethics”: in each situation, to be moral, ya gotta use your brain as best you can. [Pray tell, what else can you do?!] When she made the above-quoted comment, your mother was deep in her own indoctrination: ~35 years worth! She had been thoroughly “immersed” in nonsense such as that quoted in the previous chapter and re-quoted here:

The scriptures clearly and consistently condemn all sex relations outside of legal marriage as morally wrong. Why is this so? It is so because God said so. [Elder James E. Faust of the “Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Mormon Church, 1987]

The highest moral and ethical values are absolute. Anyone who thinks it sufficient to have merely relative standards... won’t see a connection between God and morality... The conclusion stands: without God, anything is permitted. [Professor John M. Frame, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996]

Sadly, we have too often dislodged our morality from its religious foundations... Without this grounding, we have opened the door to the values vacuum... [Senator Joseph Lieberman, Liss Lecture at the University of Notre Dame, 1997]

Without religion, there can be no morality, there can be no law. [Rt. Hon. Lord Denning, a Canadian judge, 1997]

Consequently, if [in answer to your mother’s (rhetorical) question, which in essence was “How can people be moral without God?”] I had responded something similar to “Duh... Whaddya think we have now?”, then would I have been able to “detoxify” her of all such stupidity? In a few minutes?!

Isn't it more likely that the result would have been animosity? Leading to what? Wouldn't it be better to let her comment just pass? You decide – for you! – using your own brain as best you can. All I could do – and can still do! – is use my own brain as best I can. So, I let her comment pass.¹

In any event, Dear, although I hold the opinion that your reading this chapter SHOULD be a waste of your time, I suspect that it won't be – because similar to your mother, ever since you were a baby, you've been indoctrinated in the idea that some giant Jabberwock in the sky (“God”) dictated morality. In contrast, for those not similarly indoctrinated, I expect that the stuff in this chapter will be obvious. In essence, the obvious idea is that the way to teach kids about what's “right” *versus* “wrong” is the same way monkeys and dolphins teach their offspring: by letting them rely on their instincts (“nature”) and by showing them by example (“nurture”), i.e., by showing them the meaning of sharing, helping others, empathy, etc.

Thus, the best way to teach children about morality is not by following “scriptural guidance” (i.e., not by bribing them with heaven and threatening them with hell), but by example – since setting an example has always been (and I expect will always continue to be) the most effective way to teach anybody anything. On the other hand, for those who have been indoctrinated by the clerics of the world, I hope this chapter will help them become comfortable with the concept of “morality without gods” – and thereby, comfortable with a world without clerics.

¹ I probably would have responded differently if subsequent data analyses had been available. I recently encountered such analyses at <http://www.hells-handmaiden.com/2007/09/28/god-sex-violence-immorality/>, which I'd encourage you to examine. That website quotes and references an article by Gregory S. Paul entitled “Cross-National Correlation of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies”, which was published in Vol. 7 (2005) of the *Journal of Religion and Society* and is available at <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>. The following quotation from the first website linked above summarizes Paul's article: “In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD [Sexually Transmitted Disease] infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion in the prosperous democracies.” In the original article, Paul states: “There is evidence that within the U.S. strong disparities in religious belief versus acceptance of evolution are correlated with similarly varying rates of societal dysfunction, the strongly theistic, anti-evolution South and Mid-West having markedly worse homicide, mortality, STD, youth pregnancy, marital and related problems than the Northeast where societal conditions, secularization, and acceptance of evolution approach European norms.” Paul also states, based on his analysis of the data: “The non-religious, pro-evolution democracies contradict the dictum that a society cannot enjoy good conditions unless most citizens ardently believe in a moral creator. The widely held fear that a Godless citizenry must experience societal disaster is therefore refuted.” Actually, though, I think that the data don't support such a strong statement: better would have been to change the last phrase from “is therefore refuted” to “is therefore not supported by the most obvious interpretation of the data.”

1. The Evolution of Morality

That ideas about morality have “simply” evolved seems clear from the “moral behavior” exhibited by other social animals. In earlier chapters, I’ve already mentioned many examples of such behavior in many groups of social animals; therefore, I won’t show you more. Let me just try to remind you of my main point by asking what I wish more people would try to answer for themselves: Can anyone (who is sane) seriously “believe” that some giant Jabberwock in the sky came down and “commanded” dolphins to help wounded cousins, by swimming under them and lifting them to the surface so they can breathe? What did he do, chisel the instructions on some clamshell in “dolphinese”?²

The idea that morality also evolved for humans was well summarized almost 80 years ago by the ex-priest Joseph McCabe in his ~1929 book *The Story of Religious Controversy*, which I’ve referenced before and which you can find on the internet.³ Below, I’ll quote some of his arguments – in part because, thereby, I’ll also be able to “tie up a loose end” that I left dangling in Chapter **Ie**, promising, there, that later I’d address the “silly proof” of God’s existence based on “The Morality Argument”.

One by one the old arguments [“proving” the existence of God] have been discredited. There were the early philosophical arguments, the proofs of a First Cause and Prime Mover, and so on. Modern philosophy entirely rejects them... Then there was the order of the heavens, and modern astronomy has made an end of this argument. The idea that such beauty as there is in nature testified to a God has been equally discredited by evolution. The argument from design has been shattered in the same way.

² Dear: About five years after I posted the first version of this chapter, one of the world’s leading behavioral scientists, Frans de Waal, published an article in *The New York Times* on 17 October 2010 with the title: “Morals Without God?” The following shows similar questions he posed – without the sarcasm!

According to most philosophers, we reason ourselves towards a moral position. Even if we do not invoke God, it is still a top-down process of us formulating the principles and then imposing those on human conduct. But would it be realistic to ask people to be considerate of others if we had not already a natural inclination to be so? Would it make sense to appeal to fairness and justice in the absence of powerful reactions to their absence? Imagine the cognitive burden if every decision we took needed to be vetted against handed-down principles. Instead, I am a firm believer in the Humean position that reason is the slave of the passions. We started out with moral sentiments and intuitions, which is also where we find the greatest continuity with other primates. Rather than having developed morality from scratch, we received a huge helping hand from our background as social animals.

³ Eg., at http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/joseph_mccabe/religious_controversy/index.shtml or maybe it’s still at <http://www.holysmoke.org/an/tan07.htm>.

Moral law exists, and it implies a legislator. We admit it. There are modern writers... who seem to question it, but one finds that they generally mean that some part of the accepted moral code is questionable. Let us say that the race recognizes a law of justice, honor, truthfulness, honesty, temperance and kindness.

You say that God imposed this law, and that in the voice of conscience, we have the faint echo of his thunder. I say that the legislator was humanity, and that the conscience of the individual is an outcome of causation. If the facts of moral life are consistent with my theory, there is no room for yours. A supernatural explanation is superfluous when a natural explanation is possible. Why? For this simple reason: if a thing which actually exists is enough to explain a phenomenon, you have not the least guarantee of the existence of something else, otherwise unknown, which you call in to explain it. It may be more poetic to regard thunder as the voice of God, but, since electricity fully explains it, you give up the idea of a God in the sky or on the mountaintop.

Now, every feature of the moral life is consistent with the theory that moral law is a code of behavior imposed on the individual by the community. The nature of the law, the clauses, and precepts of it, points to this. Justice, honesty, and truthfulness are social laws, obviously. Social life improves in so far as they are observed, and it is disturbed in so far as they are ignored. Nothing could be clearer than that nine-tenths of the moral code represents rules of social conduct.

The evolution of morals quite confirms this. The lowest peoples of the human family have no moral ideas, as we may see, and reviewing the various tribes of savages and barbarians in succession, from the lowest level upward, we see the moral law taking shape in harmony with the needs of the expanding social life of the tribe and the nation. Religious creeds pervert the code. Local circumstances and needs shape it differently in different places. But the general development is clear. Man gradually formulates his moral or social law. Then the priests take it over and ascribe the law to a divine legislator.

Yes, it is a mystery – if you believe in God. It is no mystery in our modern philosophy of life. Nature is unconscious. Out of its dark womb a dull glow of consciousness at last emerges, and living things begin to suffer. But mother nature knows nothing of their sufferings. At last man appears. Still for millions of years he does not differ essentially from other animals. He has no large plans. He knows little of the world about him. He foresees no future. At last self-conscious, civilized man appears, and science is evolved. Then, with a fire of idealism in his heart, with the great powers of the material world at his service, he begins to right the wrongs and blunders which are a legacy from the less-wise past. Is that philosophy not true to the facts of life as you know them?

“The only excuse for God is that he does not exist,” said a witty and wicked Frenchman of the last century. In a sense Henri Beyle’s stinging phrase is a platitude. If God did exist, could you find an excuse for him? No one has yet done it.

The latest plea is that, after all, perhaps God is not infinite in power. Perhaps there are limits to what he can do. Perhaps he could not prevent the pain and evil in the world. We save his benevolence, at the cost of his omnipotence.

Do we? The truth is that this theory, which was adopted by John Stuart Mill long ago and is now favored by Sir Oliver Lodge and others, leaves us in a state of mind of the utmost confusion. What proof do you offer of the existence of this finite God? (English wits called it, when Mill introduced it, a *limited-liability God*.) [The usual answer:] the order and purposiveness of the universe. The finite God is, if not the creator, at least the designer of the universe, the mind guiding the forces of nature.

Very well. Then he directed the forces of life to produce the germs of typhus and cholera, the teeth of the saber-tooth tiger and of the twenty-foot sharks of long ago, the lust for blood of the lion and the wolf... You want to leave the simplest microbes (when they are pernicious) entirely out of the list of things which he guided the forces of nature to produce and to include in that list the fashioning of such complex things as the human brain and heart? Nay, you want to ascribe to your finite God all the good impulses of the mind and heart and leave all the bad impulses as things which his limited power could not control.

Certainly a naive proposal to make to us! It is like saying that all the good things in nature clearly require an intelligent principle to explain them, and all evil things, which are just as intricate, do not require one.

But perhaps you would like to help out the argument with the hackneyed phrase that evil is only negative. So when your nerves tingle with the pain of toothache or headache or appendicitis, the sensation is merely “the absence of good.” The teeth and claws of the lion are as negative as the pain of the deer, perhaps. The toxins which poisonous microbes put in the blood are negative, and, of course, death is only the cessation of life. Poverty is only the absence of wealth. And so on.

Try again, my friend. I feel sure that you have a heart. Face the facts candidly. This world contains a mass of evidence that it was probably not designed by a God, and there is no serious evidence that it was.

But there is another new apology for God, and it is very proud of itself, because it is actually based upon evolution. We admit, it says, that there have been hundreds of millions of years of pain and brutality. We admit that the finger of God is not very obvious in the world today. But a brighter age is coming. A far higher race and better earth will yet appear. The dark tragedy of the past will be crowned by a glorious final scene.

Yes, I believe it. On evolutionary principles, it is certain. We are only just learning the elements of civilization. We shall rise as high above the life of today as it is above the life of the ape.

But the idea that a few million years of happiness at the close justify a process of evolution (if it were consciously guided) which entailed hundreds of millions of years of misery for beings that die before the happiness begins is one of the most flagrant applications I ever read of the pernicious principle that the end justifies the means.

An English writer, H. Mallock, damned this argument twenty years ago. “Whatever be God’s future, we shall never forget his past,” he said.

Let us take it soberly. There seems to be nothing in the whole of nature which now seriously persuades us to believe that a God must have made it. Our telescopes sweep out over a million billion miles of space, and we find no more evidence than we do about us. On the other hand, there is a vast amount in nature that favors Atheism. It is the same with man. Nothing in his nature compels us to assume that the evolutionary agencies which developed him were guided. His imperfections, his age-long brutality, suggests that they were not guided. It is the same with his history. There is no finger of God in it from the first page to the last. [Humanity’s] blundering, evolving intelligence and ideals account for everything, the good and the evil. In the long, torturous, bloodstained process of the evolution of his religions there is no more trace of divine wisdom than elsewhere.

Yet, Dear, let me repeat the obvious: some “divine commandments” (written by various groups of ‘dinosaurs’!) do have some grains of wisdom, e.g., to try to be kind to another. Thereby, these dinosaurs deserve some credit for teaching the dolphins so well! [Sorry, Dear, some times I react to stupidity sarcastically.]

It’s astounding that so many people buy into such silliness. That is, Dear, those of us who have concluded that all the clerics of the world are con artists (running a variety of versions of the same basic con game) consider the scam to be totally obvious. The clerics claim that their god defined morality, that the creator of the universe must be obeyed, that they (the clerics) are the creator’s spokesmen, and therefore, that the people must obey them, i.e., the clerics, e.g., by filling their collection plates. Those of us who consider the scam to be obvious (i.e., roughly 30 million Americans and roughly a billion people in the world) unanimously and repeatedly heave an enormous: “Gimme a break!” To us, the scam is so obvious that we rarely take the time to “spell it out”, but on occasion, some old grandfathers get so upset at such idiocy, in particular, so upset about how such nonsense is polluting his grandchildren (as well as approximately 80% of all children throughout the world!) that they take the time to try to show the children how they’ve been duped.

2. The Likely Source of the Bible’s “Ten Commandments”

As an example of such a scam, Dear, consider again the Bible’s “Ten Commandments”. As I’ll show you in the “excursion” **Qx**, the Bible, itself, states that Ezra and co-editors (or better, as I’ll try to justify in **Yx**, “Ezra and co-conspirators”, which I’ll abbreviate to Ezra & CC) put most of the Old Testament (OT) together. Further, from what Ezra & CC wrote in the Bible, then if the Bible can be trusted (a dubious assumption!), it’s clear that they put the OT together in about 400 BCE (2,400 years ago). Now, Dear, consider a time twice as far back in history, i.e., not 2,400 years ago but 4,800 years ago, i.e., ~2800 BCE. [Please, Dear, stop to think about those dates for a minute. You think that the Bible was “created” a long, long time ago? Indeed it was. But now I’m talking about a date (~2800 BCE) that was as long ago for the Bible’s “editors” as they are “long ago” for us!]

Now, consider what information was available to Ezra & CC. They were living in Babylon, ruled by the Persians, and began adopting the Persian religion (concocted by Zoroaster). North of Babylon at Nineveh (in what is now northern Iraq and now usually called “Kurdistan” but earlier called “Assyria”) were the ruins of the library of the king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal (669–633 BCE). In a terrible blow to humanity, the Persians destroyed his library of clay tablets in 612 BCE (with the fall of the Assyrian Empire). But although resulting fires destroyed the library building, the fires baked the clay tablets, making them almost indestructible (except that the tablets could be – and many were – shattered by blows). Further, based on recent archeological finds, it appears that clay tablets from Ashurbanipal’s library weren’t the only source of “ancient writing” available to Ezra & CC.

Among these writings, almost certainly, were “The Instructions to Zi-ud-sura from his Father”, whose name may have been Curuppag. It appears that a huge number of copies of these “Instructions” were made; perhaps they were used to teach students how to read and write the Sumerian language. If you’ll go to the tremendous web site “The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature” at The Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, <http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/>, you can find a picture of one of the clay tablets with these “Instructions” and dated to be from about 2600 BCE. Below (copied from the above mentioned website) are abbreviated translations of a few of the (280!) lines of the “Instructions”, which I’ve put in bold type. Following each, introduced with an arrow (⇒), I’ve quoted what I trust are obvious parallels to what Ezra & CC wrote in the OT.

- *You should not speak improperly... You should not curse strongly... ⇒ Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain...*
- *You should not speak arrogantly to your mother... You should not question the words of your mother... The instructions of the father should be complied with. ⇒ Honor thy father and thy mother.*
- *You should not cause a quarrel... You should not pick a quarrel... My son, you should not use violence... ⇒ Thou shalt not kill.*
- *You should not buy a prostitute... You should not play around with a married young woman... You should not commit rape on someone's daughter... You should not have sex with your slave girl. ⇒ Thou shalt not commit adultery.*
- *You should not steal anything... you should not commit robbery... ⇒ Thou shalt not steal.*
- *You should not... [tell] lies... ⇒ Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.*
- *You should not serve things; things should serve you... ⇒ Thou shalt not covet...*

Dear: please think about it. Ezra & CC tell us that some giant Jabberwock in the sky conveyed the “commandments” to Moses. Really? Setting aside until the excursion Yx the likely possibility that Moses was mostly a fictitious character concocted by Ezra & CC to foist the Persian religion on the unsuspecting Hebrews, then which of the following two possibilities seems more likely to you?

1) That ~5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, Curuppag dictated some sensible “instructions for living” for his son [ending his dictation with the following (from the final two lines of the tablet): “Praise be to the lady who completed the great tablets, the maiden Nisaba, that Curuppag, the son of Ubara-Tutu gave his instructions”] and then, thousands (!) of years later, Ezra & CC simply condensed Curuppag’s instructions (or similar instructions, no doubt given by millions of fathers to their sons during the subsequent 2,500 years), claiming that such instructions were from their god, or

2) That ~2,500 years after Curuppag, Ezra & CC just happened to have an exact copy of what the creator of the universe (the original symmetry-breaking quantum-like fluctuation in a total void, HIMself) dictated to Moses as “the Ten Commandments”?

Sorry, Dear, but as you know, sometimes (many times!) I get sarcastic when confronted with such stupidity.

Further, Dear, where do you think that Curuppag got his ideas? Did he obtain his ideas from some giant Jabberwock in the sky? No doubt Milton S. Terry (“Doctor of Divinity”, the author of the book *Biblical Dogmatics*, which I quoted in the previous chapter) would have made such a claim, since he claimed that laws similar to those “given” to Moses were given by God to Manu, Minos, etc., all of whom allegedly climbed mountains and managed to communicate with their respective gods. But surely it’s more likely that Curuppag got his ideas in a manner suggested by what he had “the maiden Nisaba” write in the first 13 lines of his “Instructions”:

In those days, in those far remote days, in those nights, in those faraway nights, in those years, in those far remote years, at that time the wise one who knew how to speak in elaborate words lived in the Land; Curuppag, the wise one, who knew how to speak with elaborate words lived in the Land. Curuppag gave instructions to his son. Curuppag, the son of Ubara-Tutu gave instructions to his son Zi-ud-sura: My son, let me give you instructions: you should pay attention! Zi-ud-sura, let me speak a word to you: you should pay attention! Do not neglect my instructions! Do not transgress the words I speak! The instructions of an old man are precious; you should comply with them!

That is (although I admit that it’s difficult to discern Curuppag’s meaning), doesn’t it appear that he got his ideas from the wisdom of what for him was the past: “In those days, in those far remote days, in those nights, in those faraway nights, in those years, in those remote years...”? Sorry, Dear, but for those of us who consider the god-idea to be stupid, the answers to such questions are patently clear.

3. Some “Pagan” Wisdom Literature Plagiarized in the Old Testament

Further, Dear, and as I already partially showed you in **Ix** (and will show you much more in **Qx** and **Yx**), there are literally hundreds of examples, similar to the above, from which those of us who reject the god idea conclude that it’s “totally obvious” that all the “holy books” ever concocted (the OT, the NT, the Koran, the Book of Mormon,...) are little more than “rule books” for gigantic con games, foisted on the people by the priests (and politicians) for their own power and profits. That is, for those of us who refuse to buy into the clerics’ con games, it’s obvious that no giant Jabberwock in the sky conveyed anything to anybody. Instead, the clerics rummaged through the “wisdom literature” of the past, added the scam that such wisdom came from their gods, and then stung the people with the entire charade.

* Go to other chapters *via*

In the “excursion” **Yx**, I’ll provide you with many examples of how Ezra & CC apparently plagiarized “pagan” wisdom literature and claimed that the ideas were from their (new, Persian) God. Here, as two illustrations, consider again the stories in the Bible about Adam and Eve and about Noah and the flood. As I tried to show you in the “excursion” **Ix**, the origin of both of these myths is clearly “pagan” literature.

Thus, as I began to show you in **Ix** (and will show you more in **Yx**), the myth about Adam and Eve seems to be very old, predating even the Sumerians, possibly having come out of Africa (maybe from Ethiopia), where snakes were common, where people apparently thought that snakes could have “eternal life” (because they slough-off their skins), and where probably the tribal “medicine men” (or women!) knew the hallucinatory power of the fruit from some trees. Similarly, surely everyone except a raving-mad religious fundamentalist (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Mormon, whatever) can see that the story about Noah and the flood was copied (almost word for word!) from the story about the flood given in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (who lived in about 2800 BCE).

4. Some Moral Messages & Concepts in “Pagan” Myths

From what I showed you in **Ix** (and besides, from what you already knew), surely you agree that there must have been thousands upon thousands of stories and myths from which Ezra & CC could choose to concoct the OT. People have probably been telling stories ever since they first learned to talk (who knows how many hundreds of thousands of years ago); in fact, since many animals also use tools, a better definition of ‘humans’ might be “we’re story tellers”! We still do it, not only in the stories we tell each other but also in all the novels and movies ever created. And just as when “story telling started”, still now: no myth, story, novel, or movie has “staying power” unless it carries some important “moral message”.

In the “excursion” **Ix**, I commented on possible “moral messages” in the Adam and Eve myth. Thus, it may be that Ezra & CC used an available “pagan” myth to convey the message (in effect): “Just say ‘No’ to drugs!” (in this case, the “drug” being hallucinogenic fruit, which would give the user “knowledge” or “gnosis” of the “spirit world”). In **Ix**, I also spent considerable time showing you the moral messages in the original version of the Noah myth, moral messages far superior (for reasons already given) than the one in the OT, which is basically: Obey (us clerics)!

In contrast to the moral messages in the myths promoted by monotheistic (i.e., “single-god”) believers such as Ezra & CC, the myths of the polytheists (i.e., those who believed in multi-gods) were rich in common “folk wisdom”, such as all the wonderful fables attributed to Aesop (some of which I’ll get to in later chapters). Another illustration (which I showed you a few chapters ago) was the myth about Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image, which drove him first to madness (truly “madly” in love), then to death, and then into the form of a flower now called narcissus. In general, the polytheists (or what monotheists commonly call “the pagans”) used myths to convey ideas to help people live their lives (such as all the tremendous morals in the Aesop fables and in myths such as the one about Narcissus, showing people the dangers of egomania). In contrast and in general, the fundamental moral of essentially all the myths of monotheists has been: Obey (us clerics)!

If you want to explore detailed comparisons (and consequences) of the differences in the myths of polytheists and monotheists, Dear, then you might want to consider the following suggestions by Francis Clark that he includes in his on-line book entitled *Monotheism and Madness*.⁴ Thus, in Chapter Five (entitled “The Pagan Perspective”) of his book, Clark writes the following (to which I’ve added some notes and italics).

... for the polytheist [e.g., Dear, the ancient Greeks as well as your European ancestors, before they were invaded by the Romans, as well as many still-practicing polytheists], [it is difficult] not to postulate that *the world has been in a state of profound moral decline since the advent of Christianity [and Judaism!] as a mainstream religion*. To the ethical pagan, right actions are a matter of choice. Your moral quality is determined by the choices you make when presented with alternative courses of action. It is not a matter of black-and-white rules as much as a matter of general principles applied to varying situations.

Simplistic rules remove the opportunity for moral choice. They are also not applicable to many situations, since the difficult moral choices, the ones that truly define your nature, are often not clearly defined. If rules come to mean the denial of natural desires in situations that bring no harm to another [or yourself!], they become absurd. If the rules lead to an increase in human suffering or to results that are unjust, morality becomes unnatural. The result is that the concept of morality itself is undermined.

⁴ Previously, Dear, this book was available online, but it now seems to have disappeared.

[Although] the pagan viewpoint is not one of strict rules, it is one that contains a clear concept of right and wrong. In its simplest statement, morality can be expressed as: “*If it harms no one, do what you wish.*” This principle is simple in statement and difficult in application, as few human situations offer easy choices. The pagan considers it moral to pursue your own happiness, but one must also assure that this pursuit does not harm others. And, in situations where your own happiness is not involved, the objective is to minimize harm to others. To a polytheist, concepts like honesty, compassion, and truth are moral guidelines. Principles and guidelines allow you to resolve moral quandaries, even when rules don’t apply...

Paganism is the cauldron in which our civilization was created. The stories and legends of those times are still with us. It is a religion that is less forgiving, but more malleable. It has a more human scale. And perhaps of greatest importance, it is “immediate.” [From Latin *in* or *im* meaning ‘not’ and *mediatus* meaning ‘intervening’.] The gods are believed to be all around us. That belief is a strange one in a society in which the divine is separated from daily life, even for the most devout Christians [and Muslims and Jews]. For a pagan, the gods are immanent. They are not “there,” they are “here.” How different this world might be if that perception were true for most of the population. And if it seems impossible, remember that this state of mind was considered normal for much of our history.

From the huge number of stories (or myths) that were available from the “pagan” cultures, clerics such as Ezra & CC could choose whatever they felt could be easily manipulated. Of course, in the writing of their “holy books”, the priestly plagiarists and fabricators changed the morals of the people’s stories (i.e., the “moral message” contained in the stories) – since the primary goal of the clerics seems obviously to have been to get the people to carry the clerics’ useless carcasses.

As illustrations of the above-mentioned ideas, Dear, I wish you’d look again (in **Ix**) at what I consider to be the stunningly brilliant “humanist” messages in Sin-leqe-unnini’s version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (written about 1400 years before Ezra’s time) and in Homer’s two books (written about 300 years before Ezra). In contrast, as I’ll show you in detail in **Qx**, the main message written by Ezra & CC in the OT (a message written so many times that it can drive the attentive reader up the wall!), the same message that also overwhelms the New Testament, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon, is: OBEY (us clerics)!

5. Some “Pagan” Wisdom Plagiarized in the New Testament

Sorry again, Dear, but to those of us who aren’t blinded by religious lunacy, who aren’t cowering in a corner with fear of the clerics’ hideous hell, their scam is obvious. Thus, although many of us (such as I) might consider the

following by Joseph McCabe to be brilliant writing, yet most of us probably think, simultaneously, that his message is obvious. But maybe you would benefit from reading it. It's from the chapter entitled "The Christian Ethic" in his book *The Story of Religious Controversy* (already referenced and to which I've added some italics for emphasis).

It is difficult to see how any man or woman, knowing even the few facts which it is possible to give here, can doubt the modern *theory of moral evolution*. We are not taking a few bones of prehistoric man and guessing how he lived. It is there, all over the earth, today. Religion and morals, and the combination of the two or ethical religion, are actually in the human workshop, being made. We more advanced workers have finished the job and are watching the apprentices.

"Yes," you may say (with a sigh), "it was a natural evolution: unguided, wasteful, replete with the folly of childhood, dark with the awful impulses of the real savage. But the time came. Revelation of a holier law broke gradually upon this world. God made himself known to one or two peoples – why to one or two, or so late, we don't know – and bade them purify the conscience of the world. Stumbling man was taken by the hand and led – at last."

This is as false as the idea that God created man and watched over him. Nothing new or original appeared in Judea. Monotheism was already known. An ethic higher than that of the Hebrew prophets already existed.

Even while I am writing this, in the heart of London, the papers tell that an English clergyman is in terrible difficulties with his flock, because he declines to read certain Psalms in church. You can guess which Psalms – those about dashing the heads of little children on the stones, and so on; and these Psalms were written quite late in the history of Judea! And the English congregation rises in wrath, and says that these things shall be regarded as the Word of God!

Nothing miraculous or new or puzzling happened when Christ appeared. The stream of natural moral evolution just flowed on. I do not say "stood still", remember. It was flowing all the time. In the year 1 CE, it ought to be much further than in the year 1000 BCE. There would be no great miracle if the world were more enlightened in 500 CE than in 500 BCE. It was a thousand years older, and three great civilizations had meantime added to man's heritage. (As a matter of fact, the world was not more enlightened in 500 CE than in 500 BCE.)

The only point here is to complete my story by inquiring if the new religion fits naturally into it. And instead of making a number of general statements for which the evidence cannot appear here, let us take two or three of what are commonly said to be the greatest moral innovations of Christ and Christianity.

The first is, of course, the Golden Rule. Let us take it humanly. Nobody is ever going to love his neighbor as he loves himself. It can't be done. The human

emotions are not made that way. An ideal ought to be something that can be realized. But we need not worry about this. You are, of course, aware that the Golden Rule of life in this sense – “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” – is a quotation from the Old Testament. It is not a Christian contribution to the pretty sentiments of moralists. It was centuries old when Christ quoted it.

And as the Old Testament, as we have it, was written only late in the fifth century BCE, its doctrine of brotherly love is more than a century later than that of Buddha. Moreover, Buddha meant universal love. Every man was not the Jew’s brother or his neighbor... But Buddha, as any work on him will tell you, demanded that every man should love his fellows as a mother – these were his words – loves her children.

Let us take the Golden Rule in its proper and more or less practical form: Act toward others as you would have them act toward you. It is a most admirable principle. It puts the Utilitarian theory of morality in a nutshell. It is so obvious a rule of social life that one is not surprised that few ever said it. *It is not profound. It is common sense.* If you do not want lies told you, don’t tell them. If you want just, honorable, kindly, brotherly treatment from Cyrus P. Shorthouse or James F. Longshanks, try to get it by reciprocity.

Rather a good word, is it not, ‘reciprocity’? Well, the famous and Agnostic Chinese moralist Confucius gave that as the Golden Rule six hundred years before Christ was born, and nearly two hundred years before the Old Testament, as we have it, was written!

You may shake your head, and say that you have heard that Rationalist story before. Confucius, you may say, only taught the Golden Rule in a negative form: Do not unto others what you do not want them to do to you. That statement is found in the whole of Christian literature. Christ went much farther than Confucius.

Well, presuming that you do not read Chinese, and that the translation of the Chinese classics is not available, open that most accessible of books, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at the article “Confucius”. It is written by a Christian missionary and fine Chinese scholar, Dr. Legge, and it has been available to every Christian writer for years. Dr. Legge says, quoting the expression Golden Rule: “Several times he [Confucius] gave that rule in express words: What you do not like when done to yourself, do not do to others.”

At last a disciple asked him if he could put it in a word. He gave the composite Chinese word ‘reciprocity’. Dr. Legge tells us that it consists of the two characters ‘as heart’: let the impulses of your heart be the same as those you want in your neighbor’s. And lest you should still insist that perhaps it was only negative, Dr. Legge goes on: “It has been said (it is said by nearly every other Christian writer) that he only gave the rule in a negative form, but be understood it in its positive and most comprehensive form.” No Chinese scholar differs from that...

“Yes, but,” you say, “there is the counsel to love even one’s enemies. Did any moralist in the world ever urge such a refinement of virtue before Christ?”

Alas, yes. (Pardon the sigh, but I never love my enemies. It would be bad social policy to do so. It rather encourages the mean and unjust.) The Old Testament says: “Thou shalt not hate thy brother.” Perhaps that is not conclusive, but it does not matter, as the counsel had been given quite explicitly long before.

The great Chinese sage, Lao-tse, a contemporary of Confucius and nearly as rationalistic as Confucius, said: “Recompense injury with kindness.” That is near enough; and the doctrine seems to have been common in the humanitarian ethic of China. Later, in the fourth century BCE, we find the chief disciple of Confucius, the great moralist Mencius, who seems to have been the first in the world to condemn war, saying: “A benevolent man does not lay up anger, nor cherish resentment against his brother, but only regards him with affection and love.”

There in the heart of Agnostic China, three hundred years before the Sermon on the Mount was delivered, you have the complete doctrine of loving your enemies as a commonplace of humanitarian morality.

Buddha in India taught the same doctrine. Love was to be universal, he insisted; and in the Dhammapada we read: “*Hatred ceases by love: this is an old rule.*” It seems, in fact, to have been as common in India centuries before Christ as it was in China. In the Laws of Manu, compiled early in the Christian Era, but consisting of ancient Hindu writings, it is said: “Against an angry man let him not in return show anger: let him bless when he is cursed.”

Non-Christian European moralists – Socrates and Plato, Seneca, Pliny, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius – all had the same sentiment. “We ought not to retaliate, or render evil for evil, to anyone,” said Socrates, quoted approvingly by Plato. Seneca wrote a whole treatise on *Anger*, condemning it in every form. It is therefore not in the least surprising that, when Greek influence began to be felt in Judea, as we see in Ecclesiastics and Proverbs, the same sentiment is reproduced. “Thou shalt not hate thy brother” was already written in Leviticus; but, as I said before, the Jew’s ‘brother’ always meant a Jew. The sentiment, however, was now so common in every school of moralists that the finer Hebrews naturally adopted it, and through the school of the Rabbi Hillel, it passed on to the Christians.

Here, then, is a sentiment, which thousands of Christian writers have claimed to be entirely original in Christ, actually found to be a commonplace of moralists for hundreds of years before Christ and in the ‘pagan’ world. I trust the Christian reader will see in this a striking illustration of the way in which he is misled; but I will carry the argument just one step further.

It occurred to no Christian, not even to Christ, that, if this moral sentiment is lofty, it ought pre-eminently to apply to man’s conception of God. On what principle must

Christ as man love his enemies, and Christ as God devise for them an eternity of fiendish torment? And, since God, the ideal, was held to punish transgressors of his law, human and ecclesiastical society everywhere continued without scruple to do so.

We realize today that this is immoral. We inflict penalties to deter would-be transgressors, not as punishment. Who introduced this idea into the world? Plato and Aristotle. They taught the Greeks that the ‘punishment’ of a criminal was “a moral medicine” and a deterrent. Then came Christianity, and the sentiment was lost. Punishment, as such, was more abominable than ever. At last a group of humanitarians won the reform. Who were they? Grotius (a liberal Christian or semi-Rationalist, and the least effective), and then Hobbes, Montesquieu, Beccaria, Filangiere, Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, and (above all) Bentham – all Rationalists, most of them Agnostics.

6. Some Moral Messages from Modern Humanists

Similarly, Dear, although most of us who scoff at “the god idea” probably consider the following quotation to be “totally obvious”, you might profit from reading it – carefully! Incidentally, 1) the footnotes are from the copied text, and 2) I came across this essay on the internet years after I had written these **J - M** chapters for you – demonstrating to me, once again, how much we all can know if we can learn to listen to ourselves.

*The human basis of laws and ethics.
Without God, how can you be moral? ⁵*

by Frederick Edwords ⁶

There is a tendency on the part of many theists to assume that the burden of proof is on the nontheist when it comes to the issue of morality. Thus, the individual who operates without a theological base is asked to justify his so doing – the assumption of the theist being that no morality is possible in the absence of some form of “higher” law.

⁵ This is the text of *The Human Basis of Laws and Ethics* as it appeared in the May/June 1985 issue of *The Humanist* – though footnotes and commentary expanding selected points have been adapted from the longer, original manuscript. The latter was first presented in January 1985 as a paper at, *Christianity Challenges the University: An International Conference of Theists and Atheists*, sponsored by a group of evangelicals and held in Dallas, Texas. The author is the executive director of the American Humanist Association.

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In our culture, people are so accustomed to the idea of every law having a lawmaker, every rule having an enforcer, every institution having someone in authority, and so forth, that the thought of something being otherwise has the ring of chaos to it. As a result, when one lives one's life without reference to some ultimate authority in regard to morals, one's values and aspirations are thought to be arbitrary. Furthermore, it is often argued that, if everyone tried to live in such a fashion, no agreement on morals would be possible and there would be no way to adjudicate disputes between people, no defense of a particular moral stand being possible in the absence of some absolute point of reference.

But all of this is based on certain unchallenged assumptions of the theistic moralist – assumptions that are frequently the product of faulty analogies. It will be my purpose here to take a fresh look at these assumptions. I will try to show the actual source from which values are originally derived, provide a solid foundation for a human-based (humanistic) moral system, and then place the burden on the theist to justify any proposed departure.

LAWS AND LAWMAKERS

Unthinkingly, people often assume that the universe is run in a fashion similar to human societies. They recognize that humans are able to create order by creating laws and by establishing means of enforcement. So, when they see order in the universe, they imagine that this order had a similar humanlike source. This anthropomorphic viewpoint is a product of the natural pride that human beings take in their ability to put meaning into their world. It is, ironically, a subtle recognition of the fact that human beings are the actual source of values and, hence, any “higher” set of values that might be placed above ordinary human aims must emanate from a source similar to, but greater than, ordinary human beings. In short, superhuman values must be provided by a superhuman – there being simply no other way the deed can be done.

But, while such an anthropomorphic viewpoint is an outgrowth of human self-esteem, it is also evidence of a certain lack of imagination. Why is it that the only source for higher morals must be a superhuman being? Why not something totally unfamiliar and incomprehensibly superior?

Some theologians do try to claim that their god is indeed incomprehensible. However, even then, they fail to escape human analogies and use such terms as “law giver,” “judge,” and the like. Clearly, the picture that emerges from religious and even some secular moral philosophy is that, just as conventional laws require lawmakers, morals require an ultimate source of morality.

A related, unchallenged assumption is that moral values, in order to be binding, must come from a source outside of human beings. Again the analogy of law, judges, and police crops up. In daily life, we obey laws seemingly created by others, judged by others, and enforced by others. Why should moral rules be any different?

FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

When a lawmaker is said to be needed for every law, the result is an endless series, since someone must be the lawmaker of the lawmaker's laws. Because such a series is uncomfortable to moral philosophers and theologians, at some point they declare that "the buck stops here." They argue for an ultimate lawmaker, one who has no one who makes laws for him. And how is that done? The point is made that the buck has to stop somewhere, and a supernatural god is thought to be as good a stopping place as any.

But still the question can be asked: "From where does God get his (or her) moral values?" If God gets them from a still higher source, the buck hasn't stopped, and we are back to our endless series. If they originate with God, then God's morals are made up and hence arbitrary. If analogy is to be used to establish God as a source of morals because all morals need an intelligent moral source, then, unfortunately for the theist, the same analogy must be used to show that, if God makes morals up "out of the blue," God is being just as arbitrary as are human beings who do the same thing. As a result, we gain no advantage and hence are no more compelled philosophically to obey God's arbitrary morals than we are to obey the morals established by our best friend or even our worst enemy. Arbitrary is arbitrary, and the arbitrariness is in no way removed by making the arbitrary moralizer supernatural, all-powerful, incomprehensible, mysterious, or anything else usually attributed to God. So, in this case, if God exists, God's values are just God's opinions and need not necessarily concern us.

While this first assumption – the need for a lawmaker – fails to solve the problem which it was intended to solve, the second assumption – that the source of moral values must lie outside of human beings – actually stands in the way of finding the answer. The second assumption is based upon the superficial awareness that laws seem to be imposed upon us from without. And from this it follows that there needs to be an external imposer of morality. But what is so often forgotten is that those human laws that appear externally imposed are actually, at least in the Western world, the product of a democratic process. They are the laws of the governed. And, if it is possible for people to develop laws and impose those laws upon themselves, then it is possible to do the same with morality. As in law, so in morals; the governed are capable of rule.

AN ABSOLUTE POINT OF REFERENCE

At this point, it can be asked: how is it possible that the governed are able to rule themselves? Might they not all be tapping into some ultimate, higher, or absolute point of reference? Might not human laws and conventions simply be specific applications of the laws of God? Let's look and see.

Suppose I am driving in my car and I come to a red light. If I wish to turn right, and it is safe to do so in this situation, then in most states I can proceed without fear of punishment. But what if I do it where it is not legal or safe? Then it is possible that a police officer will ticket me. Is the police officer, and the court system backing up

the ticket, an external imposition on me? Yes, but ultimately, the laws affecting traffic were made by people much like me and can be changed by me and others working in concert. So, the law regulating how I operate when wishing to turn right on a red light is totally a human invention to solve a human problem.

But could this human convention be based upon a higher law to which I and others must refer? I can't see how. None of the ancient and venerable holy books discuss turning right on a red light or offer some higher principle from which all traffic laws are to be or can reasonably be derived. Not even the golden rule offers any guidance here, since that merely tells me to obey whatever the law is, if it is a law I want others to obey. It doesn't tell me if turning right on a red light should be legal or not, or if the light for "stop" should be red and not purple, or anything else useful here. When it comes to traffic regulations, human beings are on their own with nowhere to turn for super-natural guidance in how best to formulate the rules of the road.

(This does not mean that traffic regulations are totally arbitrary, however. They are, after all, based upon considerations of survival. They exist because of a human concern for safety. As a result, a number of important discoveries of physics are taken into account when setting speed limits and the like. The facts of nature, in this case, become an external point of reference, but a God still does not figure in the process.)

Now why, if human beings are not supposed to be able to function well without an external and supernatural basis for their conduct, are so many people so capable of obeying and enforcing traffic regulations? It should be obvious from the most casual observation that human beings are quite capable of setting up systems and then operating within them.

Once this is seen, it can be asked what grounds exist for the belief that human beings cannot continue to operate in this fashion when it comes to laws and moral teachings regulating such things as trade and commerce, property rights, interpersonal relationships, sexual behavior, religious rituals, and the rest of those things that theologians seem to feel are in need of a theological foundation. The mere fact that ancient and revered holy books make pronouncements on these matters and attribute such pronouncements to divine moral principles no more makes theology a necessity for law and morality than it would make it a necessity for playing baseball had those rules appeared in these ancient works.⁷

⁷ Baseball is also a useful case in point. Suppose I am playing this game and I have three strikes against me. The umpire calls me "out" and I must leave the plate. This seems like an imposition from without. But the rules of the game were invented quite arbitrarily by people like me, and I entered the game with the tacit agreement that I would play according to those rules. Thus the rules are a completely human convention, having, and in fact needing, no metaphysical or theological base. Yet I and the other players easily abide by them, sometimes doing so quite "religiously." This latter situation would suggest that human beings are inherently a rule-making species.

If we can obey our own traffic laws without the need of a theological or metaphysical base, we are as capable of obeying our own rules in other areas. Comparable considerations of human need and interest, in harmony with the facts, can be applied in both cases to the inventing of the best laws and rules by which to live. Therefore, we can apply to laws what the astronomer Laplace said to Napoleon: in the matter of a god, we have “no need for that hypothesis.”

LAW AND MORALITY

Law, however, is not necessarily the same as morality; there are many moral rules that are not regulated by human legal authorities. And so the question arises as to how one can have a workable set of moral guidelines if there is no one to enforce them. Laws and rules are generally designed to regulate activities that can be publicly observed. This makes enforcement easy. But breeches of moral principles are a horse of a different color. They often involve acts that are not illegal but “simply” unethical and can include acts that are private and difficult to observe without invading that privacy. Enforcement, therefore, is almost totally left to the perpetrator. Others may work on the perpetrator’s emotions to encourage guilt or shame, but they have no actual control over the perpetrator’s conduct.

To solve this problem, some theologians have given God the attribute of “cosmic spy” and the power to punish the unethical behavior which the law misses – a power that extends even beyond the grave. So, even if God’s arbitrariness is granted, there would be no denying God’s power to enforce his (or her) will. Thus, to the extent that this God and this power were real, there would exist a potent stimulus – though not a philosophical justification – for people to behave according to the divine wishes. And this would at least take most of the uncertainty out of the enforcement of moral, but not unlawful, behavior.

Unfortunately for those advancing this proposal, the existence of this authority is not so apparent as the existence of human authorities which enforce public laws. Thus, in order to control lawful but immoral behavior, clergy through the ages have found it necessary to harangue, cajole, browbeat, and in other ways condition their flocks into belief in this supreme arbiter of moral conduct. They have sought to condition children from as early an age as possible. And with both adults and children, they have appealed to the imagination by painting graphic word pictures of the tortures of the damned.

The ancient Romans claimed some success with these measures, and the ancient historian Polybius, comparing Greek and Roman beliefs and the levels of corruption in each culture, concluded that Romans were less inclined to theft because they feared hellfire. For reasons such as this, the Roman statesman Cicero regarded the Roman religion as useful, even while holding it to be false.

But do human beings really need such sanctions in order for them to control their private behavior? Almost never. For if such sanctions were of primary importance, they would almost always be used by moralists and preachers. But they are not.

Today, when arguments for moral behavior are made, even by the most conservative of religious preachers, the appeal is rarely to God's present or future punishments. The appeal is more frequently to such practical considerations as psychological well-being, good reputation, effective reaching of one's goals, and promotion of the public weal. Appeals are also made to conscience and natural human feelings of sympathy. In Christianity, sometimes fear is replaced by the motive of imitating Christ's ideal, a general approach established earlier in Buddhism. It is significant that all of these appeals can influence the behavior of the nontheist as well as that of the theist.

But suppose that theists were to cease such practical and humanistic appeals and return to basing every moral preachment on God's will. One disturbing irony would remain: there are many different gods.⁸ The simple fact that religions the world over are capable of promoting similar moral behavior puts the lie to the idea that only a certain god is the one "true" dispenser of morality. If only one of the many gods believed in is real, millions of people, though behaving morally, must be doing it under the influence, inspiration, or orders of the WRONG GOD. Belief in the "right" god, then, must not be very critical in the matter of moral conduct. One can even stand with Cicero and avow hypocrisy and get the same result. And when one adds that nontheists the world over have shown themselves to be just as capable of private moral behavior as theists (Buddhists offering perhaps the best large-scale example), then belief in God turns out to be a side issue in this whole matter. There is something in human nature operating at a deeper level than mere theological belief, and it is this that serves as the real prompt for moral behavior. As with laws, so with morals: human beings seem quite capable of making, on their own, sensible and sensitive decisions affecting conduct.

THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

But does this completely solve the problem posed by the theist? No, it does not. For the question can still be raised as to how it is possible for human beings to behave morally, agree on moral rules and laws, and generally cooperate with each other in the absence of any divine impetus in this direction. After all, haven't modern philosophers, in particular analytical philosophers, argued that moral statements are basically emotional utterances without a rational base? And haven't they split "is" irrevocably from "ought" so that no foundation is even possible? In the light of this, how is it that human beings manage to agree, often from culture to culture, on a variety of moral and legal principles? And, of more interest, how is it possible for legal and moral systems to improve over the centuries in the absence of the very rational or theological footing that modern philosophers have so effectively taken away? Without some basis, some objective criteria, it isn't possible to choose a good moral system over a bad one. If both are equally emotive and irrational, they are both equally arbitrary – making any selection between them only a product of accidental leanings or willful whim. No choice could be rationally defended.

⁸ People of other faiths, continuing to preach the will of other gods, would find themselves morally benefited in essentially the same way as Christians.

And yet, seemingly in spite of this problem, human beings do develop moral and legal systems on their own and later make improvements on them. What is the explanation? From whence do moral values come?

Let's imagine for a moment that we have the earth, lifeless and dead, floating in a lifeless and dead universe. There are only mountains, rocks, gullies, winds, and rain, but no one anywhere to make judgments as to good and evil. In such a world would good and evil exist? Would it make any moral difference if a rock rolled down a hill or if it didn't? Richard Taylor in his book, *Good and Evil*, has argued effectively that a "distinction between good and evil could not even theoretically be drawn in a world that we imagined to be devoid of all life."

Now, following Taylor, let's add some beings to this planet. However, let us make them perfectly rational and devoid of all emotion, totally free of all purposes, needs, or desires. Like computers, they simply register what is going on, but they make no moves to ensure their own survival or avoid their own destruction. Do good and evil exist now? Again, there is no theoretical way in which they can. These beings don't care what goes on; they merely observe. And thus they have no rationale for declaring a thing good or evil. Nothing matters to them and, since they are the only beings in the universe, nothing matters at all.

Enter Adam. Adam is a man who is fully human. He has deficiencies, and hence needs. He has longings and desires. He can experience pain and pleasure and often avoids the former and seeks the latter. Things matter to him. He can ask of a given thing, "Is this for me or against me?" and come to some determination.

At this point, and only at this point, do good and evil appear. Furthermore, as Taylor argues,

"the judgments of this solitary being concerning good and evil are as ABSOLUTE as any judgment can be. Such a being is, indeed, the measure of all things: of good things as good, and of bad things as bad... No distinction can be made, in terms of this being, between what is merely good for HIM and what is good ABSOLUTELY; there is no higher standard of goodness. For what could it be?"

Apart from Adam's wants and needs, there is only that dead universe. And, without him, good and evil could not exist.

Now, let's bring another being into the picture, a being who, though having many needs and interests in common with Adam, has some that differ slightly. We will call her Eve. Interesting things begin to happen at this point. For, on the one hand, we have two people with similar aims who are capable of working together for a common cause. On the other hand, we have two people who need to compromise with each other in order that each will be able to satisfy the other's unique desires. And so a complex interpersonal relationship develops, and rules are established to maximize mutual satisfaction and to minimize the effects of evil. With rules, we now

have right and wrong. And from this basic recognition of the need for cooperation ultimately come laws and ethics.

But now let us suppose that these two people come to a fierce disagreement over the best way to perform a desired action. The two argue and seem to get nowhere. And then Adam pulls his trump card. He says to Eve, “Wait a minute. Aren’t we forgetting about God?” And to this Eve replies, “Who?” Adam now has his opening and proceeds to go into a long explanation about how all moral values would be arbitrary if it weren’t for God; how God was the one who made good things good and bad things bad; and how our knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, moral and immoral must be based on the absolute moral standards established in heaven. Well, this is all new to Eve, and so she asks Adam, who seems to know so much about it, to provide a little more detail on these absolute standards. And so Adam goes into another long explanation about the laws of God and God’s punishments for disobedience, until he arrives at the issue which started the whole discussion in the first place. And thereupon Adam concludes, “And so you see, Eve, God says to do it MY way!” Such is the manner in which appeals to divine absolutes settle moral and other disputes between people.

LESS THAN ABSOLUTE POINTS OF REFERENCE

So we can see that, without living beings with needs, there can be no good or evil. And without the presence of more than one such living being, there can be no rules of conduct. Morality, then, emerges from humanity precisely because it exists to serve humanity. Theology attempts to step outside this system, even though there is no need (beyond coercion) for such a move.

When theologians imagine that human beings, without some theologically derived moral system, would be without any points of reference upon which to anchor their ethics, they forget the following factors which most humans share in common:

1. Normal human beings share the same basic survival and growth needs. We all belong to the same species and reproduce our own kind. So, it should come as no surprise to anyone that we can have common interests and concerns.
2. Sociobiologists are learning that important human behaviors which seem to persist across cultural lines may be rooted in the genes. Therefore, many of the most basic features of culture and civilization could be natural to our species. Certainly paleoanthropology helps to bear this out when it is recognized that the oldest hominids known show evidence of having been social animals. And our similarities to living apes involve more than mere appearance. Many of our behaviors are similar as well. The existence of certain genetic behaviors, therefore, makes agreement between people on laws, institutions, customs, and morals far less surprising. We humans are not infinitely malleable, and hence our laws and institutions are not so arbitrary as once thought.

3. Most normal human beings respond with similar feelings of compassion to like events. Our values are not all based on simple individual self-interest or egoism. There are clear cases in which our self-interest would not be served by, say, helping a suffering animal, and yet we often respond to such a situation and applaud others who do likewise. These normal compassionate responses repeatedly crop up in our literature, institutions, and laws. Thus it is clear that our morals are in large part a product of our common emotional responses, thereby allowing us to propose improvements in those morals by making appeals to the feelings of our fellows.
4. We share the same planetary environment with other humans. If we add the fact that we already share needs in common, we are fraught with common problems and enjoy common pleasures. We share similar experiences and therefore can easily identify with one another and share similar goals.
5. We share the same laws of physics, and those laws affect us in common ways. In particular, they affect us when we wish to do something. We find that we all have to take into account identical problems when building a structure, planning a road, or planting a crop.
6. The rules of logic and evidence apply equally well to everyone, and so we have a common means of arguing cases and discussing issues – a means that allows us to compare notes and come to agreement in areas as varied as science, law, and history. We can use reason and observation as a “court of appeal” when setting forth opposing viewpoints.

For these and other reasons, it should not appear strange that human beings can find common ground on the issue of moral values without having to appeal to, or even have knowledge of, a divine set of rules. In fact, ironically, once religiously based rules are brought into any dispute, especially if there is more than one religious view present, the more the religious arguments are used, the less agreement there is. This is because many religiously and theologically based values do not relate to each other or the actual human condition or the science of the world. Such values are said to come from a “higher” source. And so, when these “higher” sources disagree with each other or with human nature, there is no way to adjudicate the dispute, because the point of reference is based upon a unique faith-commitment to something invisible, not to a common range of experience.

It is theological values, then, and not human-oriented values, that are the most baseless. For, with theological values, an arbitrary leap of faith must be taken at some point. And once that arbitrary leap has been taken, all values so derived are as arbitrary as the leap of faith that made them possible.

THE BURDEN OF PROOF

So, it is not the humanist who needs to offer an explanation for value. What explanation could be needed for the fact that people naturally pursue human interests and thus relate laws and institutions to human concerns? It is only when someone

seeks to depart from this most natural of pursuits that any questions need be raised. It is only when someone posits a law higher than what is good for humanity that doubts need be expressed. For it is here than an explanation or justification of a moral base makes sense. The burden of proof belongs on the one who steps outside the ordinary way in which morals are derived – not on the one who continues to keep his or her morals, laws, and institutions relevant, useful, and democratically produced.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

Moral Education

To the extent that the points in the above article are either consciously or unconsciously understood, it becomes possible to directly formulate improved ways of promoting moral behavior. That is, when people agree on how human values are actually derived, they are better able to stimulate relevant areas and develop curricula in moral education that can prove increasingly useful and effective.

In particular, by understanding that the survival of our species is a common interest, and that we share common requirements for survival, we can go a long way toward promoting cooperation. We are further enabled to educate others about relevant survival factors, such as health and hygiene.

The study of anthropology and biology teach us our interconnectedness with varying human cultures and the whole animal kingdom, thereby allowing us to learn things about ourselves that inform the development of our ethical, moral, and legal systems. Such systems, when so derived, then meet our needs more effectively and reduce strife.

Because we share common passions, the role of moral education need not limit itself to focusing on useful and practical rules of conduct. It is enabled to turn itself additionally to the development of helpful emotions. For example, compassion is fostered and developed through educational programs where students have opportunities to experience what it's like to be, say, paralyzed, blind, or deaf. A good part of compassion seems to be the ability to identify with those who suffer – so this ability, if developed further, can enable society to produce a generation of young people who are more respectful of the rights of others, more helpful in situations calling for altruistic behavior, and more just in their dealings with people in general.

Science that provides improved knowledge of our world allows us to come to more informed decisions about dealing with the environment. Rational laws and practices are thus more likely.

Education in logic and other aspects of reasoning allows people to better analyze situations and to come to less biased decisions on matters of policy.

In short, a liberal education appears to provide excellent moral training because it offers the knowledge and sophistication necessary to continue the ongoing trial-and-error process of finding better ways to live and cooperate.

Situation Ethics

Since the process of improving ethics IS a trial-and-error one, then it is reasonable to keep ethical principles flexible. After all, if a given principle is rigid and absolutistic, it tends to foster a kind of idolatry, where people worship the rule instead of its intent. Since good and evil are ultimately judged from human need and interest, then it only makes sense for all moral principles to work toward meeting human needs and serving human interests – as opposed to becoming ends in themselves.

Believing, on the other hand, that moral values come from God has inspired many throughout history to practice idolatry with moral principles. For example, in an effort to follow the commandment to keep the Sabbath (wherein the Bible specifically declares that one shall not do work on that day nor have any servants or animals work either), many have supported Sunday closing laws. Yet, even when such laws are in effect, vital services, such as those of medical and law enforcement, are kept operative. A truly absolute practice of this commandment would require that even THOSE services be shut down and given a day of rest. This inconsistency is clearly in response to actual human needs, which become, in practice, more important than the absolute rule. A position that is therefore both consistent and moral is one where Sunday closing laws are abandoned altogether, such laws being, at best, useless and at worst, harmful.

The simple commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” admits of numerous exceptions, which believers readily embrace, such as self-defense, killing of animals, killing of germs, and so forth. Re-translation of the commandment, so it reads, “Thou shalt commit no murder” doesn’t solve the problem because the commandment fails to define “murder”, which in ordinary language, is just whatever form of killing happens currently to be unlawful. By this criterion, abortion, not being legally declared murder, could not constitute breaking the commandment. So, there is no getting around the fact that differing denominations of Christians and Jews variously interpret this command to allow and disallow capital punishment, vivisection, war, self-defense, abortion, euthanasia, and vaccinations. A simple rule to never kill cannot be followed and the result is always a catalogue of cases where it is and is not all right to take a life. This is, in effect, situation ethics, meaning that the rule has *de facto* already been abandoned.

“Thou Shalt Not Steal” is a similar rule. It isn’t practiced absolutely, either. For example, in wartime, and even in peace, national secrets are constantly stolen from one nation by agents of another as part of security efforts. And these thefts are supported frequently by believers in this commandment. Further, we can ask if kleptomania [“a recurrent urge to steal, typically without regard for need or profit”] constitutes a breaking of this rule, since we may be entitled to excuse the action on the ground of emotional illness.

But the most telling problem of absolutistic systems like the Ten Commandments is that any time there is more than one absolute rule, conflicts between the rules are

possible. Thus, one can ask if it is appropriate to kill to prevent a theft. Can you rob to prevent a killing? Should you lie if you have good reason to believe the truth will cause the recipient to die of a heart attack? Is it appropriate to lie to keep from being killed? Can you break the Sabbath to save someone's life? Would you steal a car if you knew it would prevent the owner from working on the Sabbath or killing someone? Should you honor the request of your father and mother if they ask you to break any of the other commandments? Would you rob from your father and mother if doing so could prevent a murder? All kinds of dilemmas like this are possible.

Which shows that we cannot live by absolute, abstract principles. We need to relate them to life and human needs – and our best judges and juries do just that. This is where human compassion comes in. This is why there exists within the law varying degrees of murder, and why motive is such an important issue in deciding criminal penalties.

These practices are reasonable, because the nature of the world doesn't lend itself easily to bipolar, either-or, types of determinations. Things admit of degrees. Absolute morals attempt to ignore such distinctions. Applying what perhaps could be termed a “digital” (yes, no) moral system to an “analog” world can only result in a poor fit. The two don't go well together. Of course, either-or laws DO exist in such areas as traffic regulations. This is because they have proven themselves useful in being easy to remember when reflex action is a common necessity. But inappropriate traffic laws HAVE been changed when they proved unworkable. I would suggest that the overriding principle is the long-range service of humanity – and this is true even when people apply what they imagine are “absolute” standards.

In sum, there is nothing to be feared from the loss of absolutes. They never really existed. Chaos does not reign. Instead, trial-and-error efforts to sharpen laws, render institutions more effective, and fit moral principles better to improved knowledge of human nature continues. The genuine human needs and concerns that led to the formulation of the Ten Commandments and other such supposed absolutes has also fueled their greater sophistication within our vast body of changing laws and ethics.

The Goal

When we realize that right and wrong cannot exist without beings with needs, and that human beings have proven themselves capable of devising and then abiding by their own rules, then there is no longer any way to deny that the pursuit of human interest, for the individual and for society, for the short and for the long run, is the broad goal of laws and ethics. Further, this does not really need an explanation or justification, except to those who have lost sight of the actual basis for their own values. That is, no one needs to be asked why he or she pursues his or her own interests, and no planet of people needs to be asked why it seeks to pursue common goals. Only when people try to depart from this most automatic of pursuits, only when someone posits a law higher than what is good for humanity, need any questions be raised – for it is only THEN that an explanation or justification of a moral base is necessary.

7. Some Provisional, Interpersonal Moral-Principles

Again, Dear, most of us who have consigned “the god idea” to the trashcan of human mistakes probably consider the above essay by Edwords to be obvious – but written well! What isn’t so obvious is how to identify a group of “general moral-principles”, on which essentially everyone in the world would agree. Yet, in his 2004 book entitled *The Science of Good and Evil – Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* (Holt & Co., New York), Michael Shermer provides suggestions for his own “provisional ethical system” or “provisional morality”, which are quite good. He lists his “principles” as follows (p. 186 et seq.):

1. *The Ask-First Principle*: We need to take the Golden Rule one step further, through what I call *the ask-first principle*. There is one sure-fire test to find out whether an action [dealing with another person] is right or wrong: ask first...
2. *The Happiness Principle* states that it is a higher moral principle to always seek happiness with someone else’s happiness in mind, and never seek happiness when it leads to someone else’s unhappiness.
3. *The Liberty Principle* states that it is a higher moral principle to always seek liberty with someone else’s liberty in mind, and never seek liberty when it leads to someone else’s loss of liberty...
4. *The Moderation Principle* states that when innocent people die, extremism in the defense of anything is no virtue, and moderation in the protection of everything is no vice.

Now, Dear, of course I agree with Shermer that his “provisional ethical principles” are good rules of thumb, but again, sometimes fingers get in the way. For example, with respect to his “Ask-First Principle”, what if you can’t ask people who might be influenced by your acts? As a case in point, how do you ask future generations about the morality of your burning so much fossil fuel? Similarly, what if someone else’s idea of happiness conflicts with yours (e.g., an adversary who is happy if you’re unhappy!), and so on? Consequently, Dear, as far as I can make it out, there is only one principle that isn’t just “provisional” but as “absolute” as any (personal) moral principle can be: always use your brain as best you can!

But in any event, Dear – and if you agree with me – you might want to consider how you might want to respond to critics who complain with something similar to:

You're advocating a godless morality! Pandemonium will result! Without God, there can be no morality!

If you feel the need to respond (although, once again, remember: you don't have to answer the phone!), then I recommend that you don't buy into the petitioner's premiss, namely, that any god ever defined any morality! Thus, Dear, you can entirely dismiss complaints about promoting a "Godless morality" with the response: "Whaddya think we have now?!" On the other hand, if you would prefer to be more diplomatic than your old grandfather, then maybe you'd like to quote the Finnish anthropologist, Edward Alexander Westermarck (1862-1939):

Could it be brought home to people that there is no absolute standard in morality, they would perhaps be somewhat more tolerant in their judgments, and more apt to listen to the voice of reason.

In any event, Dear, my main point is that all the "rules of absolute morality", such as those advocated by all clerics of all religions and as given in all their "holy books", are rules "invented" not by any gods but by people! As Einstein said (in which I've taken the liberty to invert his last two clauses):

I cannot conceive of a personal God who would directly influence the actions of individuals, or would directly sit in judgment on creatures of his own creation...
Morality is of the highest importance – but not for God, for us.

Now, Dear, probably obviously, much more should be addressed: if you agree that all "values" (including all "moral values") have meaning only relative to some objective, then to examine "Morality without Gods", again it's necessary to consider objectives. In subsequent chapters [e.g., in **O** (dealing with Objectives), in **P** (dealing with Purposes), in **V** (dealing with Values), and in **X** (dealing with EXamining Goals)], I'll try to tie up most of the remaining loose ends. Here, to close this multi-chapter "introduction" (to morality), let me show you what I review for "M" when I'm walking:

M: Morality.
My morality: use my brain as best I can. Evaluate!
The morality of the mystics: Obey!

In the next chapter, **N**, I'll show you another small part of what I review for "M" when I'm walking (dealing with "masks"). But that can wait. On the other hand, do you really think it's moral to postpone your exercising?!