Good Without God

What a Billion Nonreligious People *Do* Believe

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Where Do Our Ethics Come From, If Not from God?

The simplest way to put this is: our ethics come from human needs and interests. What do human beings need to flourish? As the Humanist Manifesto puts it, "Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience. Humanists ground values in human welfare shaped by human circumstances, interests, and concerns and extended to the global ecosystem and beyond. We are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity, and to making informed choices in a context of freedom consonant with responsibility." But where do this inherent worth and dignity come from? It's an important and fair question—one that neither the average religious or nonreligious person has thought a lot about.

Rebecca Goldstein cited her mentor Thomas Nagel, Princeton philosopher and author of the classic *The Possibility of Altruism*, as the best contemporary thinker on this question. Goldstein and others have called Nagel the most important ethicist since Kant.

Essentially Nagel argues that there are certain natural attitudes that already commit us to valuing our own lives—we all know what it is like to feel moral outrage when we are wronged, insulted, beaten, discriminated against. Nagel says that logic commits us to universalize from here—to reason that we all know for ourselves that there is a right and a wrong, and we know that we cannot exist alone, so from there only radical selfishness could prevent us from understanding that these concepts are universal—and radical selfishness leads to great unhappiness, so that's not an option either.

As Rebecca says, that is the basic intuition of Kant, and of all ethics—"ethics really isn't all that complicated."

Still, the idea that our entire concept of goodness is based on human needs can take a little getting used to. When I was first learning about this aspect of Humanism, it seemed a bit offensive to the part of me that had been taught, by the Holocaust survivors in my Jewish community, that we should never again make the mistake of treating any group as inherently inferior—whether the group was Jews, blacks, gays, Palestinians, the Sudanese, or anyone else. What about nonhumans, I wondered? Does Humanism, with its semantic focus on humans, leave a door open for the mistreatment of animals? Of nature in general? Is it . . . anthropocentric? Or even "speciesist"?

But no matter how much we may value animals such as monkeys or dogs—and we should indeed concern ourselves with behaving ethically toward them, lest we lose our own humanity in treating them with fecklessness or disdain—I had to admit it would be absurd to ask the question: "Is it *ethical* for monkeys to scratch themselves in public?" I realized it would also sound a bit strange to suggest that it was loose morals for dogs to go around having sex with so many bitches.

Likewise, it is incredibly important for human beings to deeply value the whole environment, from the oceans to the forests to the atmosphere. We have no right to steal the clean air and water and the diversity of plant and animal life that we know future generations will desperately need. No one appointed us Kings of the Universe. But we also don't ask questions about whether the oceans are behaving ethically toward *us*. We could rightly be accused of madness if we were to accuse the rain clouds of attempting to drown us or the ozone layer of not being sufficiently tolerant of our skin's needs. (Though of course these are very close to the kinds of value judgments we used to make in older times, when we had no scientific reason to doubt that the natural world was as animate as we are.)

No, values and ethical behavior, until such time as other similarly sentient beings make themselves known to us, can only really be found in human beings. Our focus on human beings in choosing the term *Humanism* is nothing more nor less than the acknowledgment of this fact.

Keepers of the Question

Our morality is based on human needs and social contracts, and these things are not perfectly, eternally objective. After all, slavery was once considered morally acceptable by almost all religious people, including Christians. If values were timeless and objective, either the early Christian saints who believed in it were horribly wrong, or values change.

But the point is that some social contracts are much better than others. Not only do we not need "objective" values to condemn heinous crimes and uphold ethical standards, we cannot ever be confident that objective values exist. We can postulate them, but there is no way to prove them right or wrong, existent or nonexistent. What proof would suffice? You'd have to

have divine revelation—in which case, if it comes, we Humanists are perfectly willing to change our minds. But we're not holding our breath.

Meanwhile, there will always be competing systems of proposed "objective" values, meaning that we will be at the mercy of their earthly representatives. If you sign on for the idea that we need objective values, you are signing on for a lifetime of placing great importance on the often petty bickering among ministers, priests, rabbis, imams, swamis, and other gurus, as to which one of them possesses the *truly objective* values and why *all the others* possess only false words and ill-begotten human inventions. Is that what we want? To submit our psyche—the only brain, the only intelligence we will ever possess—to the mercy of one holy man after another parading various subjective arguments for why we should obey them on the basis of their supposedly objective truth? If this were the only way, maybe we would. If there were no other way to feel that life was worthwhile or that we could be part of a community, maybe we'd sign on for all this despite its flaws. But there is a better way. Humanism (or whatever other word you prefer to use for goodness without God) is that way.

Besides, if there are objective values, then anything can be justified in their name. If no values are eternal, then no matter who tells us what to do, we must always question. No order to murder can be blindly obeyed, blithely excused: "I was just doing what I was told." Who told you? Why listen to them without also applying your own reasoning, your own heart? If no morality is absolute, no war can be justified by the fact that the one true God is on our side—and this notion of absolute morality favoring one side of a conflict has been used to justify almost every war ever fought. Will people then be less motivated to fight? Yes, most likely—and isn't that a good thing? Shouldn't we be slower and more hesitant to ship our sons, and now our daughters too, into bloody battle? If there are really good reasons for defending ourselves, reasons beyond the idea that God says so, then people will rally behind them. God is not necessary for such things and can be a hindrance to clear thinking.

And if no morality is timeless and eternal, then we will never be able to fool ourselves into thinking that there is one set of easy and obvious answers to questions about euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, or other such issues. We'll have to argue them out, with neither conservatives

nor liberals ever able to say they are right in every case, without thought. What is so wrong with this? Indeed, we Humanists can take pride in our passionate belief in a morality based on unfettered inquiry, on compassionate questioning. Call us "the keepers of the question." We are proud to welcome a future of permanent debate and discussion about moral issues, a world in which we will never stop refining our views, never stop exploring how we can promote human dignity more effectively, never stop trying to better understand and more effectively eliminate human suffering.

And are there religions that understand the need for debate, discussion, and critical thinking? That can't be painted with this cynical brush? Of course, most progressive churches and synagogues in this country don't fall prey, at least not entirely, to magical or fundamentalist thinking. But they also don't have any more "objective values" than we Humanists do. Not Unitarian Universalist or United Church of Christ churches. Not most liberal Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or Methodists. Not Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist Jews. And not progressive or liberally religious Muslims either. Such folks wouldn't be caught dead trying to persuade you that it's their way or the highway. They are to be admired for this—and they are the allies of Humanism. Therefore, if you subscribe to one of these religions, you are no more involved in the enterprise of "objective values" than I am. You are a living example of the fact that subjective values can be wonderful values.

The Golden Rule

There is a story about an Ivy League philosophy professor who was sitting and having a coffee on a stairway in a busy street in New York City, near where a big political protest was taking place. A policeman walked over and informed the man that he wasn't allowed to sit on those steps—that he was blocking the flow of traffic in and out of the building. The professor turned his head to look from side to side and raised his eyebrows quizzically in one exaggerated motion, as if to say, "I don't see anyone here to block!" The cop, annoyed by this reaction, pointed to the protest nearby and asked, "What if everyone did what you're doing?" The nonplussed professor muttered under his breath, "Who are you, *Kant*?"

A couple of hours of jail time later, the professor finally succeeded in explaining that he wasn't calling the officer a nasty name, but rather referring to the philosopher Emanuel Kant and his most famous idea, the categorical imperative: the idea that actions can only be considered moral if they could be imitated by anyone else and produce good results.

If Kant's categorical imperative sounds somewhat familiar even to those who've never quite made it though every jot and tittle of his page-turner *The Metaphysics of Morals*, it's probably because the notion is so similar to another shot-glass-sized concept of how to be good that shows up all over the map of human intellectual history, especially in religions—often referred to as the "golden rule."

For many self-respecting secular intellectuals, the idea of a golden rule is enough to make one nervous—maybe even a little twitchy. It might conjure up images of crotchety Sunday school lectures, or TV commercials about Mormons with clip-on ties and short-sleeved dress shirts. More relevantly, it might smack of moralizing, and as my friend Scott Brewer, a philosophy professor at Harvard Law School, likes to say: "Where moralism goes, hypocrisy

will surely follow." (He admits he's got a long way to go to catch Nietzsche in the pithy aphorism department, but nonetheless his point is well taken.) The well-justified allergy we have to hypocrisy is the reason George Bernard Shaw said, "The golden rule is that there are no golden rules."

Healthy skepticism aside, though, there is a concept of how to be good that may be worthy of the nickname "golden," because it really does show up again and again in basically every religion. As Lloyd and Mary Morain point out in a book called *Humanism as the Next Step,*

> Throughout the ages religions of many kinds have contained a common spirit. We can see this in parts of their scriptures.
>
> In Brahmanism we find: "This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you" (*Mahabharata*, 5, 1517).
>
> In Buddhism: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful" (*Udana-Varga* 5, 18).
>
> In Christianity: "All things whatsoever ye would that man should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets" (*Matthew* 7, 12).
>
> In Confucianism: "Is there one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one's whole life? Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you" (*Analects* 15, 23).
>
> In Islam: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself" (*Sunnah*).
>
> In Judaism: "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellowman. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary" (*Talmud, Shabbat* 31d).
>
> In Taoism: "Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss" (*Tíai Shang Kan Ying Pïen*).
>
> In Jain scriptures: "The essence of right conduct is not to injure anyone."[2]

But varying religious practices and diverse theological beliefs have been built upon and allied to this common ethical basis.

The point is obvious but achingly, embarrassingly important: the very

first thing we have to do in order to be a good person is learn to look inside ourselves, understand what we love and hate, and use this information when deciding how to treat others. I say it is achingly important because it hurts to think about how often people brush us aside, ignore us, or get angry or wrong us because they are thinking of us only as little pink and brown objects in their way, not as human beings who will feel the same way about their behavior as they would if they had to endure it. And the golden rule is embarrassingly important because it is humiliating to think about how often we ourselves often buzz right past our kids or our spouse or our best friends, eyes distracted, focused on some goal or fantasy we have about how our day ought to be going, forgetting that these people too are struggling not only with petty everyday problems but with their own fears about aging, sickness, and death. Our dignity begins to slip away when we lose sight of our ability to stop and acknowledge their existence, and their struggles, for a moment.

The golden rule shows up in every religion because, for the reasons we discussed in chapter 1, religion has shown up playing a prominent role in just about every society. You can have a society that doesn't have Krishna, Jesus, or Buddha and it will be fine. Eliminate multiple prayer sessions per day, gift-giving around the winter solstice, or candle-lighting every Friday night, and things will work themselves out.

But if you have a society that lacks this principle? Then all hell really will break loose. Then you don't have a society. You have chaos.

In the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda during their genocides, religion was not absent, but the golden rule was as hard to find as a respite from death. People were thinking only of their own pain and their own wants, and the pain and wants of others—*the lives* of others—were worth less than the piles of feces and blood that those entire countries were nearly reduced to. In general, once people start stabbing or shooting one another, you won't find a lot of worry about golden rules. When the Palestinian suicide bomber is thinking about Israeli civilians, he's not thinking about it. When the Israeli settler is thinking about bulldozing the olive trees around hunger-stricken Palestinian villages, he is usually weighing neither Kant nor *Ethics of Our Fathers* nor *The Analects*.

Humanism is not, nor am I, offering anything entirely *new* here.

But while the golden rule may be simple, it is hard to follow. Religious and secular people alike fail at it all the time, and then we wonder why our

lives and our countries are such a mess. And one of the reasons religion still has such a seemingly irresistible pull, to this scientifically and rationally advanced day, is that it is one of the only forces in the world whose leaders can still give themselves permission, without irony or embarrassment, to go about spouting such an obnoxiously simple—but achingly and embarrassingly important—message.

We idolize rock singers and rappers for their detachment and defiance, but rarely do they sit down with us and take the time to explain why we shouldn't get so annoyed with our mothers when they do that thing they always do to make us feel guilty. We learn Big Ideas from philosophers and other public intellectuals, but how often do they help us find the strength to be more loving husbands and wives? Psychologists and therapists will talk to us about all our problems, but they don't give warm, supportive hugs; they don't make judgments even when we want them to; and they don't come out with us into our communities and offer us positive, healthy ways to get involved with others. Clergy are among the precious few individuals in our society whose job description it is to do these things that our other heroes and guiding figures won't or can't do. A good priest, minister, or rabbi—and we've all known one or two no matter how much we might resent the religious institution that sent them our way—takes it as a professional responsibility to find ways to poke, prod, and nudge us against our will toward the golden path.

Yes, "do unto others" (or better yet, its counterpart, spoken by Rabbi Hillel—the more modestly phrased and more realistic "That which is hateful to you, *don't* do unto others; the rest is commentary") is a concept that essentially no religion misses entirely. *But not a single one of these versions of the golden rule requires a God.*