

Why Be Moral?

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This is a question that can be interpreted in a number of ways. To those approximately 5% of the population described by the Harvard University professor, Lawrence Kohlberg, as “principled” people or people with totally integrated personalities, the question of why should one be moral seems so self-evident it is scarcely worth further consideration. To such moral giants as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Junior or Mahatma Gandhi, asking why we should be moral is like asking why do we want to be happy or why would one wish to be healthy.

But to those of us who are less driven by principled behaviour, the question of “Why be moral?” is often interpreted to mean what would I gain by moral behaviour. What rewards or punishments would motivate me to act in a moral manner? What would my friends think? What would my family say if I were to act according to my moral principles?

Religion has often assumed for itself the role of the protector, the keeper and the arbiter of moral values in society. Religion has long recognized that many, in fact, most people have

gaps between knowing what they ought to do in a moral sense and what they may in fact end up doing. Because of this recognition most organized religions build moral motivators into their systems. Religious moral systems use a wide variety of motivators. Some of these motivators are rather negative and some are quite positive. On the negative side, the motivators range from fear, guilt, shaming, ridicule, punishment, legal sanctions, and in some religions, shunning and isolation, to more kindly approaches. Inspiration, rewards, approval, acceptance, gratitude, compassion, hope and even sainthood are offered on the positive side. In Christianity and Islam, though less so in Judaism, there is even the promise of eternal life.

Some Christian and Jewish theologians state without reservation that it is entirely possible for atheists and non-believers to act in morally correct ways. Of course this is not a new idea to humanists. Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth and Martin Buber are among some noted theologians who would agree that atheists frequently can and do act with conviction and ethical correctness and often serve society well in bringing



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socially relevant morality to the attention of the religious community. Then religion plays the “catch-up” game of attempting to bring these ethical issues into its belief systems without causing too much disruption to its long established ways of thinking. For example, the matter of equality for women, concern for our environment or for endangered species, stem cell research, or for the acceptance of homosexual preferences have often caused much angst in religious circles. But the question for these theologians is not “Can non-believers be moral?”, but rather *why* would they act morally? That is, what would motivate them to act morally if they didn’t believe in God? This is a question that is also of some interest to Humanists and it is one which we are called upon to answer from time to time in talking to our religious friends and acquaintances.

Science offers some interesting answers to this question. Not long after Charles Darwin wrote, *The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*, in 1859, many writers applied his theory of evolution to social behavioural tendencies. For some time, the ideas of

“Social Darwinists” such as Herbert Spencer had wide popular acceptance. Social Darwinism as proposed by Spencer and others tended to over-emphasize the competitive nature of the human species while using Darwin and his contemporary and compatriot, Alfred Russel Wallace, and their parallel theories of evolution as a justification for the idea that those societies which were the most aggressive, competitive, assertive and dominant would be the societies that would prevail over others. This emphasis on competition was a perversion of Darwin’s and Wallaces’ theories of evolution. In particular it over-emphasized aggressive competition and under-emphasized the importance of co-operation as a technique for survival.

When a Russian geographer, Peter Kropotkin, in 1902, wrote *Mutual Aid: A Force for Evolution* opinions were slowly modified to include a more co-operative view of human behaviour and indeed of that of other higher mammals which live in social groups and develop a “dependency-reciprocity” relationship as part of their survival mechanism.

Experiments with primates and with herd animals such as elephants, convinced social scientists that within the animal world and especially among animals that live in families, groups, tribes and social groupings which develop dependency relationships for food, procreation, defence against predators, and for the rearing of off-spring, that there also develops a social reciprocity. Consider for a moment the case of a herd of approximately thirty elephants being guided by their matriarchal leader to a new feeding ground over two hundred kilometres distance where the leader remembers that food and water were more abundant some twenty years earlier. As they proceed along one of the young mothers is about to give birth. Rather than continuing without her and exposing the new mother and her offspring to the risk of falling prey to predators, the matriarch stops and the whole herd gathers around the mother. They behave as though they sense the importance of this event to the survival of the herd. After a few days, when the matriarch observes that the newest offspring can walk along at a reasonable pace beside its mother, the herd continues its search for new feeding grounds.

Of course, within the human species this dependency-reciprocity relationship is more highly developed and better understood. Recently a Canadian anthropologist, Harold Barclay, suggested that our facility with language and with higher order abstract thought enables us to develop rules, social norms, laws and moral codes which arise out of basic survival mechanisms of our distant past. That is, we are not so far away from other animals in our behaviours as we might think. While competition is still an important motivator, there is within us the drive to follow understood ethical codes that enable societies to work in safety and in harmony. This is especially true of humans who see other humans as part of their own group or their own family. Ideally, we can learn to encompass a much larger group of fellow humans including those of different racial origins, religious preferences, and geographic areas. If science can help us to take a broader view of those whom we will accept as part of our group, or our tribe,

or our family, morality will have taken a giant leap forward.

In 1995, a scientist, Daniel Dennett in his book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, put it this way. "One day, when yet another conflict arose just like all the others that had come before it, something new happened to happen. Instead of persisting in the myopically selfish policies of mutual defection and distrust that had reigned before, these particular lucky competitors hit upon a new idea of cooperation for mutual benefit. They formed "a social contract". Whereas before there had been families, or herds, or tribes, this was the birth of a different kind of group, a society. This was the birth of civilization, and the rest, as one says, is history".

Perhaps religion has over-emphasized the notion of innate sinfulness and aggressive competition as the essence of human nature. Social scientists suggest that we also have certain drives to develop opportunities for sharing and for protecting and creating safe and dependable societies which have moral codes as an important survival component. These drives and needs for co-operation, harmony, reciprocity, established norms and moral guides may be a very real part of basic human nature that has been with us for a long time. If science can help us to see and to understand this good side of humanity it will have given us a reason to nurture the best within us and to act with hope and moral integrity.

In conclusion, let us return to the original question of "Why be moral?" The answer is that while we have a certain competitive nature within us, we also have within us a basic nature to be co-operative, to develop codes and norms and morals that are even more basic to our nature and more important to our survival.

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