

A brief history of morality

These are just a few examples collected from world history:

2040 BCE: Ancient Egypt

- An early version of the “Golden Rule” appears on papyrus

1790 BCE: Mesopotamia

- Hammurabi’s code outlaws murder, theft, and rape

1650 BCE: Hittite Empire

- Code of Nesilim outlaws murder, assault, and sets punishments for rape

1075 BCE: Assyrian Empire

- Code of Assura provides punishment for certain cases of rape, assault, and murder

1000 BCE: China

- Law prevents murder, rape, and dishonourable assault

539 BCE: Babylon

- The Cyrus Cylinder: viewed by some as the world’s first charter on human rights:



451 BCE: Roman Empire

- The Twelve Tables outlaw theft, vandalism, tax evasion, assault, and sets basic property laws

150 Common Era

- The New Testament is written

(BCE: Before the common era.)

“The greatest tragedy in mankind’s history may be the hijacking of morality by religion.”

-Arthur C. Clarke

“I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality.”

-Mahatma Gandhi



Humanists, Atheists, and Agnostics of Manitoba

The standard of living in the world’s most atheist countries—like Scandinavia, Hong Kong, Australia, Japan, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom—demonstrates that atheism is perfectly compatible with the basic aspirations of a civil society.

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Morality: Just be good for goodness’ sake



The science of morality is about maximizing psychological and social health. It’s really no more inflammatory than that.

– Sam Harris

Morality in the Bible

Many people turn to religion in their search for morality because they can't imagine how someone could be good without it. They have difficulty conceiving a world or a society that has no ultimate lawgiver to guide behaviour. They believe that without rules and commandments, we would all descend into anarchy and various forms of depraved acts. The Ten Commandments are often held up as the cornerstone and foundation for our justice system, and many believe that they can rely on Biblical teachings to guide them when deciding what is right or wrong.

However, it only takes a brief look at the Bible to see that, in reality, almost no one uses this book as an ethical guide for their moral decisions. The Bible is filled with laws and behaviour that almost everyone, including most Christians, would find reprehensible today. Examples include stoning children for disobedience, forcing one's daughter to marry her rapist, beating slaves, and imposing the death penalty on those who work on the Sabbath. When believers say that this book is their guide to good behaviour, it is clear that there is some serious cherry-picking going on.

In addition, the God of the Bible has apparently not made it clear to all of His followers exactly what is the correct moral position to hold on any given topic. Various branches of Christianity all use the same book to defend contradictory positions on just about any issue imaginable. Some examples that come to mind are divorce, capital punishment, the role of women in the church, same-sex attraction, abortion, dancing, or consuming alcohol. Believers would be hard-pressed to find even one other person in their chosen faith who agrees with them on every moral question, not to mention that people of other faiths are just as convinced that their holy book is the right path to follow.

What is "good"?

How do Christians determine that in fact God's commandments are good? Is what is morally good commanded by God *because* it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is *commanded by God*? This question, known as "Euthyphro's Dilemma", has been debated by many philosophers. Does goodness come from God, or from somewhere else? Christians believe that part of their God's nature is goodness, but in that case, what standard are they using to judge what is meant by goodness? God could command anything and they would be obliged to call it good.

The origins of morality

As humanists we approach morality from a different perspective. We can look to science and to our human experience to help us understand moral behaviour. Neuroscience has shown us that our brains are hard-wired to feel empathy. Data from other scientific disciplines like sociology and psychology have demonstrated that it is part of our basic nature to care about fairness and justice. Even very young infants demonstrate these capabilities. We all feel pleasure and pain, and this innate ability to empathize allows us to see that others share these feelings.

Humans have evolved with the very successful survival strategy of living socially. In order to make this work, we have found ways to negotiate group living that benefit ourselves and each other. It seems obvious from our history that in order to survive, we need to work together and have developed codes of conduct, both formal and informal, that allow us to do just that. It can be as simple as treating others as we would like to be treated. Known to most of us as the Golden Rule, this basic guideline has existed in varying word forms since ancient times and in many cultures including Babylon, China, Egypt, Greece,

Rome, and India; and in many religions including Baha'i, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Confucianism, in addition to Christianity.

When faced with any situation, we use our innate senses of fairness, empathy, equity, and compassion to decide what is the best action to take. To ignore these tools of evaluation in favour of following some entity's commands is simply following orders, in effect ignoring the only moral compass we have.

Why be moral?

Religion has inspired great acts of charity, beautiful music, art and architecture, and human kindness and compassion. It has also inspired horrific, bloody wars, brutal inquisitions, tyrannical theocracies, fanatical campaigns of terror, and discrimination, prejudice, and bigotry. Far from being a force that pulls ceaselessly toward the moral good, religion is more like a megaphone, amplifying both the good and the bad of human nature in equal measure.

Although believers claim that God is necessary to keep us from committing immoral acts, most people do not need the threat of punishment to know right from wrong. "Thou shalt not rape" is not one of the Ten Commandments, yet we would all agree that it is wrong.

On the other hand, we could also agree that acts that contribute to the sum total of human happiness are right, while those that have the opposite effect are wrong. We who espouse Humanism rejoice to be alive in this complex, awe-inspiring world, and are grateful for interactions with our fellow human beings. The knowledge that our lives are finite does not make them less precious, but infinitely more so, as we know that we must seize this one opportunity while we possess it and share all that it has to offer. We are all equal and deserving of basic human rights. No gods required.