

«Foundations of Morality»

Sermon by Pal Palmore, November 22, 2009

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When I was teaching Sociology of Religion at Finch College in New York City, I tried to distinguish between religion and ethics and argued that ethics are not necessarily dependent on religion — that you can be ethical without any religion. Some of my students didn't get it — or wouldn't believe it. They seemed to think that if you didn't believe in a God to punish you for being bad and rewarding you for being good, there would be no reason to be ethical.

There are many people today who believe the same thing: that morality depends on religion; that they are inseparable. Recently in an attempt to counter this belief, a group of Humanists in California rented a billboard and put up a sign that said “Be good without God. Soon afterwards, some fundamentalist vandals painted over the “out”, so that the sign then read, “Be good with God.” In response, the Humanist replaced the defaced sign with a new one restoring the original message.

There was also a flap in Boston over some subway signs that Humanists had paid for that said, “Be good for goodness sake.” Some fundamentalists objected that this was an improper attack on religion in public conveyances.

But now the tide seems to be turning. There have been several books published recently asserting that it is quite possible to be ethical and moral without believing in any god:

Greg Epstein, the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard, has published a book titled *Good without God: What a billion nonreligious people do believe*. In it he shows how nonreligious people do believe in and do practice morality, and do believe in the sacredness of beauty in art and secular rituals.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, a Dartmouth professor of philosophy and legal studies, recently published a book, *Morality Without God*, in which he refutes four arguments used by those who say you cannot have morality without God:

All atheists are morally bad (there are many atheists in history who have been morally good, such as Epicurus, Karl Marx, Descartes, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Jean-Paul Sarte, Albert Camus, Thomas Huxley, my favorite, Bertrand Russell).

Secular societies are bound to become corrupt and depraved (in fact countries with higher religiosity rates tend to have higher homicide rates!)

Moral laws presume a moral lawgiver. (morality based on the five foundations we will discuss does not depend on religion.)

There is no reason for atheists to be moral (immorality seldom pays. And the five foundations provide reason to be moral)

Austin Docey, a philosopher, has published a book titled *The Secular Conscience*, in which he argues that secular people can defend their ethics based on reason and their conscience.

Sam Harris, another philosopher and neuro-scientist, recently published a book titled, *The End of Faith*, in which he argues that science and reason can develop the basis for right and wrong without recourse to a belief in god.

Robert Wright, an evolutionary psychologist, has published *The Moral Animal*, in which he shows how humans have evolved genetic predispositions for moral behaviors based on the same principles of natural selection that govern all evolution.

We will return to some of his insights to conclude this sermon, but first I want to review the five universal foundations of morality described by Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist (and atheist) at the University of Virginia.

Haidt argues that all people in all cultures share beliefs in these five foundations. And particularly in the U.S. he argues that liberals and conservatives should stop demonizing each other and recognize that they share common beliefs in these foundations -- even though liberals and conservatives differ in emphasizing some of them more than others. If you want to see how you compare to other liberals and to conservatives, you can go to www.yourmorals.org to take a quiz that will locate you on his moral map. You can also go to www.civilpolitics.org for further information.

The five foundations are fairly simple: (as I read them off, you might start asking yourself how important you think each foundation is. After I have read them off we will go back and you can vote on how important you think each one is.)

1. **Harm/care.** It is wrong to hurt people; it is good to relieve suffering.
2. **Fairness/reciprocity.** Justice and fairness are good; people have certain rights that need to be upheld in social interactions.
3. **In-group loyalty.** People should be true to their group and be wary of threats from outside. Allegiance, loyalty and patriotism are virtues; betrayal is bad.
4. **Authority/respect.** People should respect social hierarchy; social order is necessary for human life.
5. **Purity/sanctity.** The body and certain aspects of life are sacred. Cleanliness and health, as well as their derivatives of chastity and piety, are all good. Pollution, contamination and the associated character traits of lust and greed are bad.

(At this point ask for a show of two hands if they think it is very important; one hand if somewhat important; and no hand if they think it has little importance. Result was many hands for the first two and few for the last three.)

Apparently you are like me, and most other liberals: we believe strongly in the first two foundations -- preventing harm and ensuring fairness -- but think the other three are less important. Conservatives, on the other hand, are drawn to loyalty, authority, and purity, which liberals tend to think of as backward or outdated. But Haidt argues that they are all essential for good behaviors and for preserving the institutions that make human society possible.

Let's consider why that is so. The first one, harm/care, is obviously important to prevent the "warfare of all against all," and to allow the next generation to survive and carry on the society. Indeed, it is the main basis for my belief that the purpose of life is (or should be) "to relieve suffering and create joy in yourself and in others." It is also the main basis for the nearly universal belief in the Golden Rule.

The second one, Fairness/reciprocity is also important to prevent the "warfare of all against all" and probably contributes to the survival of our species by allowing us to live together peacefully in large and larger groups. This is the "reciprocal" part of reciprocal altruism that allows for division of labor, specialization, the professions, and progress in societies.

The third one, In-group Loyalty, tends to be deemphasized by liberals. They tend to worry that in-group loyalty may lead to racism, religious discrimination, jingoism, and other dangerous social divisions. But it's value is as the cement that holds groups together, that makes self-sacrifice for the good of the group compelling. It also is a motivation to make a big pledge during our pledge drive.

The fourth, Authority/respect is necessary for organized society to function. Liberals like to question authority. In fact, a popular bumper sticker among liberals is "Question authority!" But it is an anthropological fact that all societies have social hierarchies with some people having more power and respect than other. Why this is so, is rather complex, but basically without any authority or respect for the social order, we would have anarchy. When I joined the army after just getting my M.A. in Sociology and filled with idealistic ideas like democracy in industry, and even in the army. Well, I was soon convinced that democracy does not work in the army.

The fifth foundation, Purity/sanctity, is the one that causes the most friction between liberals and conservatives. To modern secular liberals, this foundation seems to be relatively unimportant. However, it was recognized as more important up until the early 20th century, when modern rules of proper hygiene were codified. With the physical properties of contamination understood, the moral symbolism of impurity no longer carried as much weight. But it still persists in certain religious taboos against pork, or beef, or horsemeat, or alcohol, or certain sexual practices. It persists in many rituals of purification, from baptism with water, preparation for worship by washing or using incense, and in our own ritual of lighting the chalice and candles for our joys and concerns. It is the basis for the belief that "we all contain within us a piece of the divine" and that "my body is a temple." It also is a basis for opposition to abortion and to gay marriage.

Origins

So if these five foundations of morality are universal and most people believe in them more or less, where did they come from if not from God? Robert Wright argues that they developed in humans through the same Darwinian evolutionary processes that developed our physical structure and functions: A kind of trial and error process in peoples and societies, in which those with predispositions to behave ethically tended to survive and reproduce more than those without those predispositions.

To oversimplify somewhat, this theory is based on a kind of utilitarian philosophy: that good behavior is that which contributes to the total happiness of the group-- which in turn is based on the assumption that suffering is bad and happiness is good. Wright argues that people and societies that accept this kind of utilitarianism will tend to survive and reproduce more than those that do not.

I do not have time here to go into all the proofs and complexities of Wright's evidence to support this assertion, but I for one find it quite persuasive and invite you to peruse *The Moral Animal*, for yourself. And by the way he has just published another book, *The Evolution of God*, which sounds interesting, but I haven't read it yet.

In summary, I hope I have persuaded you (if you had any doubts), not only that one can be moral without a belief in a god, but that these five universal foundations of morality can create the guidelines for fulfilling what I believe is our purpose in life: "To relieve suffering and create joy in yourself and in others." **Amen!**

References

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