

Religious and Secular Know Moral Harmony

By

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London Free Press, May 11, 2013

Morality is a system of conduct and beliefs designed to guide people in the customs, taboos, and cultural norms of a society. While the moral codes of one society may differ from those of another, there is considerable overlap in the moral ideals of most civilized societies. For example, compassion, care, trustworthiness, and honesty are valued moral principles in most societies, while murder, deceit, greediness, and violence are moral taboos in most societies.

Many philosophers and moral thinkers use the terms morality and ethics almost interchangeably. For those who use the terms differently, moral principles arise from the everyday working out of situations that will result in harmony within a society. For example, honesty and sharing are morally good because they work out best within most societies most of the time. On the other hand, ethics takes a more cerebral approach in determining which principles are the best ones to follow. In ethics the goal is to seek out more abstract universal principles such as justice, truth and equity, while morals are more concerned with the everyday codes and rules which are necessary and useful in keeping societies harmonious. The ethical principles of Plato and Aristotle differ in their emphasis from the moral imperatives of Immanuel Kant. In simpler terms, morality comes into play in the practical day to day choices we make when we deal with other people in our society. On the other hand, the pursuit of ethical principles are frequently the concern of theologians and philosophers who tend to think about values in more abstract terms. However, in the end, these differences are sometimes more matters of approach than of substance.

Immanuel Kant's moral system emphasized duty, responsibility, and obligation, a view that ties in well with the moral codes of traditional religions that also emphasize duties, sanctions and rewards. Kant's view concerning his *categorical imperative* also closely parallels the "Golden Rule" which is at the heart of most world religions. Religious believers, rather than concentrating on a strictly cerebral quest for higher ethical principles of justice, equity, and truth, are often encouraged to look to God through scriptures or prayers to guide them in finding good morals.

A more secular view of morals can be found in some philosophies such as Utilitarianism, Pragmatism and Humanism. The goal of these three philosophies is to bring about the greatest social harmony, the greatest happiness, or the greatest good for a society. The emphasis here is to arrive at good morals by observing and practising those actions which will result in a benefit to society. Humanists believe that, while sacred scriptures can guide people in moral principles, these scriptures can sometimes be divisive and destructive as in the case of justifying holy wars, rejection of blood transfusions in saving lives, or the belief that God favours one religion or ethnic group over another. So while sacred scriptures are a guide to moral behaviour, religious believers need also to be aware that too literal or too narrow an interpretation of scripture can occasionally result in immoral behaviour.

One of the great gifts we have as human beings is our ability to reflect upon our own human condition and to use our freewill to make choices about our actions. The wise use of freewill also carries responsibilities which we share with others. Humanists take this moral responsibility conscientiously. We have a moral obligation to consider how our actions and choices affect the planet and our fellow human beings. For both secular and religious people, problems such as climate change, poverty, pollution or starvation or avoiding war can be understood and may often be addressed through respect for scientific knowledge and a caring attitude towards people of all races and religions. A good start in following moral principles is the recognition that the problems others have are also our problems. And in the end, it is helpful to realize that we are all in this search for moral harmony together.