

From Where Do Ethics Originate?

Goldwin Emerson gandjemerson@rogers.com

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Within most religious beliefs, it is held that ethical principles originate from God. Religion usually affirms that God has planned and created the universe. God has designed the world so that humans who follow God's plans will be happier, their lives more fulfilled, and after death, some but not all, will be united with God in heaven. Of course, this is a simplified version of how religious believers accept ethical principles but it is generally the account that many religious believers hold.

Many secular philosophers think ethical values originate in the minds and everyday social and cultural experiences of people who think about ethics such as Emmanuel Kant over 225 years ago. Conscientious secular thinkers are more likely to think about where their beliefs and ethics originate. Does this mean that non-religious believers are more intelligent than their religious counterparts? No, it doesn't mean that but it may mean that secularists are more likely to reassess which ethical principles are workable in everyday society than to remain steadfast believers attached to religious ethics which have origins in God's unchangeable ethical codes (Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason, Emmanuel Kant, 1793).

For conscientious secularists the core of ethical values resides in all things human. That is human rights, human well-being, and the study of humanities (as in early Greek and Roman classical literature). As social beings, conscientious secular thinkers seek to act with compassion towards their fellow humans and to make life better for humankind. This is a tall order and one that is taken seriously by both thoughtful religious believers and by conscientious secularists.

Do ethical values change from time to time? Yes, they do whether people stick to religious doctrine or more closely to secular thought. There are many opinions now accepted in religious circles that were once regarded as unacceptable moral codes. That is, religious believers also change their social concepts of what God is

telling them. There exist many hundreds of religious denominations throughout history and into the present. This variety of religious thought is evidence of how difficult it can be for religious believers to agree on what God is telling them in their prayers, scriptures and devotions.

People no longer expect that women ought to wear hats in church services. Nor in modern societies do we expect stores to remain closed on Sundays. Religions have gradually shifted their thinking about polluting our air or water, stem cell research, the use of anesthetics in medical operations, acceptance of racial diversity, inter-racial marriages, acceptance of cremation, common law marriages and variations in sexual orientations. These, and many other social shifts in ethical codes have come about, not because there are more secularists but because both religious and non-religious values gradually shift in spite of efforts of some religions to hold onto constant and unchanging values.

One of the frequent criticisms of secular ethical principles is that they are relativistic. That is, they change from culture to culture and from time to time depending upon current social situations. What may be viewed as ethical at one time may later be seen as without ethical value in another place and time. But it is also true that religious thinking is subject to similar ongoing changes according to cultural and social ethical shifts.

Consider for a moment the varieties of religious thought throughout history. There are currently about twenty major religions. Examples are Christianity, Muslims, Judaism and Hindus. But each of these major religions subdivides into many branches. In fact, there are so many subdivisions that the estimate ranges from many hundreds of religious subgroups to numbers even higher. This large number is evidence of a great variety of religious interpretations of God's ethical codes and of religions' gradual acceptance of social shifts.

Ethical heroes, like Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. have been united in their quest for ethical social concepts rather than in their agreement on their different theological beliefs. Their philosophical principles of justice, equality, compassion and caring for their fellow humans is what sets these moral leaders apart as ethical giants. Today there are both

religious and non-religious thinkers who struggle in their search for ethical values. Both groups are affected by the currents of social shifts in ethics.

Editor's Note:

Goldwin Emerson is Professor Emeritus, Philosophy in Education at Western University. He has lectured at several universities in The Peoples' Republic of China on the philosopher and educator John Dewey. Goldwin Emerson has been a columnist for The London Free Press where he has contributed approximately 130 articles in the past 20 years. Dr. Emerson is a Life Member of The Humanists of Canada.