

ATHEIST ETHICS

WHO DECIDES WHAT IS GOOD?

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One beautiful day, the Salvation Army was doing some recruiting. This lady drummer, a real Christian soldier, broke her rhythm with the marching band as she saw this drunk lying in a gutter. She gives him a stern lecture on drinking. Look at you, you look terrible; you surely feel worthless; actually you are a disgrace, and you are a bad example to our kids. You are God's child and ought to give kids a good example by being good. Then the drunk asked: But who decides who is good?

The good!!! she yelled as she bangs her drum and marches off.

Gina Allen, author of several books at the end of 20th century, tells how she herself learned that the good decide what is good: She was raised a good Presbyterian but her boyfriend gave her Percy Bysshe Shelley's booklet, *The Necessity of Atheism*. After a night of reading under the covers with a flashlight, she worked herself into a quite an angry fury.

Next morning she stomped downstairs for breakfast, yelled at her father, trustee of the local Presbyterian church: "You're an intelligent, educated man. You can't believe all this God stuff. It's as much a hoax as Santa Claus."

Her father then told her, calmly, "No, I don't believe what the church teaches. But I do believe that without the church there would be no morality. Children learn right from wrong in the church, and adults live righteous lives because they believe in God, heaven and hell."

In my own case, when I left the Catholic Church and its priesthood, my youngest brother asked me "How can you be a good man when you don't believe in God or the Church?" My response then showed how we rational men and women do not need outside authorities to tell us how to live good lives.

It's time for more of us humanists and atheists to speak out. As human knowledge and experience develops so rapidly, we can hardly depend on old authorities to furnish us with reliable ethical principles.

Are you, dear reader, an ethical person, a person of good morals? Are you pretty sure? Are you confident you're on the right track? Where do you get your ethics? What makes you a good person? How and why and by whose standards are you living a good, ethical life?

ETHICS TODAY IS A MESS OF CONFUSION

Definition: Ethics, philosophically, is principles of good be-

havior. (Is that short enough?) Good morality is living according to those principles.

Does good or bad change in differing circumstances, or does good morality remain constant?

The pope says here's a list of goods and a list of bads; the Bible's Torah contains 613 commandments or laws; 365 of them are prohibitions telling the Jews what not to do.

Surely you can appreciate the report of how Moses tried to get this huge list of prohibitions reduced? It seems Moses went to the mountain to bargain with God while the Jews waited below. And after some 40 days and 40 nights, Moses finds his way back down the mountain. He calls the Jews to attention to make his important announcement: "I got Him down to ten, but adultery is still in there."

Your ministers, priests, rabbis, imams say here are the commandments you must obey. Parent-like authorities say "do as I say" — take it on faith; I know more what is good for you than you do. Whether because of their good book or their position in the community, we have plenty of people trying to tell others what's good and what's bad for them.

But, practically speaking, it seems you almost have to be there to decide good and bad. A quick example will show that good and bad are not as simple as they look at first blush:

THERE WAS A BIG PILE-UP ON THE FREEWAY one foggy morning (good or bad?) Before the accident, a poet could wax eloquent about the peaceful beauty of the quiet meditative morning. The farmer who drove the deer from his vegetable garden rejoiced until the lead car crashed into the deer and caused the pile-up killing the driver.

Good or bad? Well, the driver was rushing to deliver drugs; good or bad? Delivering the drugs to the hospital or to his street pusher? Good or bad?

The second car crashed into the first and killed its driver, the hard-working husband, father of three, productive breadwinner, making a good living and keeping his family well-fed and educated. Good or bad that he died? His 15-year-old daughter rejoiced that she would no longer be the terrorized victim of his sexual abuse.

The peace of Foggy Bottom was shattered further as more cars crashed into the earlier cars. Good or bad? Well, the local wrecker service was rejoicing at all the billing he could send to the insurance companies, until he came across the burned out shell of his beautiful sister's car and then, at the hospital, discovered how seriously disfigured she was.

The next driver, following too close, was hurrying to unlock the print shop so his tax-paying employees at the print shop could produce... text books? bibles? pornography? Good or bad?

Ambulance crews saw it in varied ways. One lady miscarried. Turned out that the woman had learned the baby was going to be hydrocephalic; she wanted to abort, but her minister had talked her out of it. Good or bad? Is she guilty or innocent as she rejoices at the miscarriage?

Another car caught fire; two heroes pulled driver clear, however, it turned out that the burning car had been stolen and the murderous driver was fleeing justice. Good or bad that he survived?

Who decides? The good? Or the powerful? Yes! In the past it has traditionally been the reputedly good and the powerful who decided what was right and what was wrong.

HOW CAN WE DECIDE WHO IS TO DECIDE ON GOOD OR BAD?

The old authoritarian approach worked before general education. It worked for Moses; it worked for popes, kings, emperors, dictators (even presidents) of many stripes for so many centuries.

Old authorities die hard. They don't like losing power and influence. They want their controlling catechisms and catalogs of good and evil to keep them in power, like a parent holding on too long to the controlling influence over the children.

Pope Benedict XVI still insists it's a horrible sin, big enough to send Catholics to hell, if they practice artificial birth control. This papal attitude is not likely to change; it simply reiterates the 1968 teaching of Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. And it's just as bad and hell-threatening for the stem cell researcher who kills a couple of human cells in a petri dish.

DIGNITAS PERSONAE — “The dignity of the person” — was issued officially from the Vatican's official doctrinal office in late 2008. The 32-page papal instruction on bioethics was at

least six years in developing. It bans the morning-after pill, the intrauterine device and the RU-486 pill, saying these can result in what amounts to abortions. What a bizarre conclusion!

Nearly as bizarre was the situation that developed in March of 2009. A nine-year-old girl had been pregnant with twins from her rapacious stepfather. Doctors feared for the 80 pound girl's life and so aborted the pregnancy. Local Catholic authorities excommunicated the girl's mother and the doctors, the excommunications being ratified by Rome. When Frances Kissling, bioethics scholar at University of Pennsylvania learned of this, she asked, “Are these prelates crazy?”

Perhaps Ms. Kissling's implication is correct: Many would agree that when persons who are not asleep and yet are so out of touch with reality, they might commonly be labeled “crazy.”

Such official Roman Catholic church teaching is directed to Catholics, non-Catholic doctors, medical researchers and legislators possibly considering regulating stem cell research and other biomedical technology. And now some pharmacists in pluralistic America can legally refuse to sell birth control devices to customers. Such counterproductive thinking continues to enslave the ignorant and anger the thoughtful.

Back in February of 2006, John B. Hodges published a paper titled “Atheist Foundations of Ethics.” He summarized this old problem pretty well when he wrote: “Priests have been allied with kings and dictators throughout history, using religion as a tool to keep exploited people quiet. Religion...has perverted the field of ethics, severing it from any connection to the consequences for real people in this world, denouncing as sinful any attempt to apply human thought to moral questions.”

Thomas Jefferson, in his 1818 report for the University of Virginia, U.S., made this point very well. Paraphrasing Jefferson, “The teaching that man's condition cannot be improved, that what has been must always be, and that

to be secure in the present we must tread with awful reverence in the footsteps of our fathers, is the fruit of the alliance between Church and State. And those of you who hold to this alliance are just too comfortable with your present condition; so you oppose the advancements that might unmask your usurpations and monopolies of honors, wealth and power; and so you fear change that might threaten your present comforts.”

CLEARLY TIMES ARE A CHANGIN'

During the dark ages of faith, commandments, handed down from on high, worked as clear guidelines to be followed. Their authoritarian successes in controlling the ignorant masses worked pretty well during the Dark Ages, for the lowly believers felt the need for direction from on high. The Bible used to give believers comfort and direction, but not so much any more.

Even the most fundamental Bible thumper would likely want change from old time biblical morality imposed from above. The following reflects a letter that an Internet wag is supposed to have addressed to televangelist Reverend Jerry Falwell:

Dear Jerry Falwell:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination.

I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the other specific laws and how to follow them:

1. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

2. I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

3. *Leviticus 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?*

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

It's high time for more thoughtful people to be heard. It's time for atheists and humanists to become confident enough of our moral principles that we go public. I'm tired of those with their morality mired deep in the past being allowed to claim the right to decide what makes good values, what it takes to live a good moral life.

Clearly we need a better foundation for ethics than the Bible, the Pope, ayatollahs or bishops and their old catechisms. But what?

ETYMOLOGY OF WORDS: MOS – ETHOS

It will help clarify some thinking in this area of ethics or morals if we look at the etymology of those words. The word morality comes from the old Latin word *mos* (custom) *moris* (of custom). So the phrase "customary morality" is really a tautology; it is self-repetitive. Similarly, the Greek word *ethos* (custom) gives us our word *ethics*; and again the phrase "customary ethics" is another tautology — it's like saying customary customs.

Customs have a way of changing, so it's now immoral for the good, rich, religious plantation owners to own slaves, so slaves don't have to be subject to their masters any more. For financial reasons, that custom died pretty hard. And Catholics can now eat meat on Friday without fear of hell. The practice was being abandoned from the bottom up; Catholics saw that this was a senseless rule, so finally the law was changed at the top! Rome changed the law about meatless Fridays for Catholics, so it is no longer a serious sin for them to eat meat on Friday.

However, I can well remember the brouhaha that developed when my dad asked our pastor for a dispensation from the old meatless Friday rule for the thresher crew. These hard working Catholics and non-Catholics were to be at our farm on a Friday. Not only did the pastor refuse to grant the dispensation, but then he went on to make a public point of it in the following Sunday's sermon. What an embarrassment that was for dad, especially since nearly everyone in our small community knew who the pastor was pointing at.

In grandpa's day, when he wanted

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”

to take a long trip, he needed to pack some water and oats to keep up the horse power. Today we might take a little water for ourselves, but we leave out the oats. Women may or may not wear hats and be silent in church, as St. Paul commanded; they may even decide not to go to church at all, this without fear that big daddy will condemn them for thinking for themselves.

Oh, that part about not going to church at all, that may not be the custom yet in some parts of the world, so it will be harder for the thinking woman in some more conservative societies to buck the tradition or custom and stay away from church. Social pressure, the power of society, still helps shape morality; it always will. This important basic principle is not going to change, even though specific customs continu-

ally change.

Have you ever noticed how societies that are most custom-bound, most stuck in the past, most bound by old ceremonies, liturgies and beliefs, are the ones that are the most condemning of modern progress, too often becoming bunions on the foot of progress?

Too often these custom-bound folk become authoritarian protectors of morality. For financial, religious and/or political reasons, they seem to prefer to look backward to the old sources of their control rather than forward to progress that could result if old blinders were removed. Ever notice how those who are so hung up on their own ethnicity, overly proud of their own bloodlines and traditions, are the ones who remain superior in their own eyes, and stay prejudiced against other groups? Even after the survival value of ethnicity is long gone, even as we become true globe trotters and rub elbows with all kinds of ethnic groups, our planetary neighbors. These tradition-bound groups seem to run around in superstitious liturgical or prejudicial circles rather than staggering forward out of the familiar past into the riskier rationality of a scientific future.

You know, I think society, as it staggers through history, rejecting old customs and adopting new ones, is really not so very unlike the drunken individual finding his way to his destination. After going too far to the right, he staggers back toward the center of his intended path, goes too far to the left, corrects again — bouncing from one extreme to another, gradually getting more and more rational as he sobers up.

After centuries of such societal staggering and experimenting, we gradually develop more and more reasonable moral guidelines. We find that workable moral guidelines reflect both the customary wisdom of the past and the rational new learnings of scientific discoveries.

MODERN MORAL GUIDELINES
In deciding when to hold and when to fold a custom or old teaching, let's bring

in some of the best modern philosophers to help us.

Paul Kurtz, a truly great humanist philosopher, received the American Humanist Association's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007; this award was given to Paul at the AHA conference in Portland, Oregon, U.S. I would like to paraphrase briefly several of the humanist ethical values and principles that he offered in that truly impressive acceptance speech:

1. Ethics is not derived from external commands but comes from human experience modified by human intelligence.
2. Life, the here and now, is good for its own sake.
3. We are confident we can solve our problems with reason, science, education and good will.
4. We tolerate pluralistic lifestyles without necessarily agreeing with them.
5. While seeking our own happiness, we are concerned with the rights of others sharing our planetary community.

In this beautiful expression of basic modern principles, we can see reason reigning pretty supreme throughout. And, of course, reason is always looking for better, more refined ways to improve on the past customs.

Austin Dacey, in his 2008 book *The Secular Conscience*, shows good philosophical insight as he goes beyond what most moralists have reached so far. He accuses liberals of holding that religion or faith is a totally private matter. So, it follows, man should be free to believe whatever he wants as long as he keeps his beliefs out of the public sphere. I'm confident that many of you might well say, "believe what you will; just don't get in my hair with it!" Thomas Jefferson himself said: "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

Well, Dacey very productively disagrees, as he expounds his Privacy

Fallacy and his Liberty Fallacy. He argues that leaving belief systems completely in the private and personal realm, we don't allow adequately for serious public discussion of the validity or rationality of religions and religious tenets. Dacey calls this the Privacy Fallacy.

The **Privacy Fallacy** assumes that "because matters of conscience are private in the sense of nongovernmental, they are private in the sense of personal preference." Dacey, of course, admits we have no right to force anyone to believe what he or she does not choose to believe. But, since personal beliefs influence personal behaviors that do not always remain private, he insists that we all still have the right to evaluate or rationally criticize those beliefs. He insists that since the exercise of personal conscience manifests itself publicly, it becomes like other commodities in the marketplace. It is therefore rightly available for evaluation in the public sphere.

As Dacey's Privacy Fallacy over-emphasizes personal privacy of conscience, so his **Liberty Fallacy** over-emphasizes personal freedom of conscience.

While agreeing with most people that the conscience must be free from coercion, Dacey nevertheless insists that conscience is **not** "free from criticism, reason, truth, or independent, objective standards of right and wrong." Those who accept the "unthinking assumption that matters of belief are immune to (sic) critical public inquiry and shared evaluative norms" demonstrate the Liberty Fallacy.

Such discussions of the faith, religion, conscience matters of others in society need to be done with understanding and compassion, but always with **reason** being the ruler: Reasonable arguments with compassionate understanding, yes, even in matters of personal conscience. (You are free to smoke in my presence as long as you do not exhale.)

Dacey is onto something very good and practical here. It's another way of saying that for practical or moral

purposes no person is totally an island. He shows the practical understanding that **what a person believes does, indeed, affect what he or she does**, and that it does, indeed, has some effect on our society. Dacey again: "The exercise of conscience takes shape inside a social context of people giving reasons to each other. In this way, although conscience issues reasons to an individual, its exercise is inherently public."

An obvious example might be the Amish horseman delaying modern traffic. A more serious example would be society's right to discuss the sometimes Muslim belief that it's good to kill an infidel Christian. A less obvious example could be that of the chauvinistic father of a daughter living by his private belief that St. Paul was right when teaching "women, be subject to your husbands."

On January 20, 2009, *The New York Times* had a report of a previously healthy 11-year-old Wisconsin girl, Kara Neumann, having grown so weak that she could neither walk nor talk. Her parents believed that God alone had the ability to heal the sick; they prayed for her recovery and refused to take her to a doctor even though relatives and neighbors urged them to get medical help. After Kara's death, the county coroner ruled that she had died from diabetic ketoacidosis resulting from undiagnosed and untreated juvenile diabetes.

About a month after Kara's death, the Marathon County, Wisconsin district attorney brought charges of reckless endangerment against Kara's parents, Dale and Leilani Neumann. Despite the Neumanns' claim that the charges violated their constitutional right to religious freedom, Judge Vincent Howard of Marathon County Circuit Court ordered Mrs. Neumann to stand trial. If convicted, each faces up to 25 years in prison. "**The free exercise clause of the First Amendment protects religious belief,**" the judge wrote in his ruling, "**but not necessarily conduct.**"

Such a manifestation of parental

insanity surely cries out for the aspect of openness of conscience that Dacey contributes over and above the older and more private concept of conscience. If the Neumanns had let their rational neighbors contribute to their conscience formation, they would likely still have their beautiful daughter.

[Editor's note: Both parents were found guilty of second degree reckless homicide and sentenced to 10 years probation and six months in jail, serving only one month a year, each at a different time, for six years so one parent can remain home with their three other children, all teens. The Neumanns' are appealing the sentence.]

In his *Secular Conscience*, Dacey shows immense and over-riding respect for the human reason and an individual's conscience; actually they turn out to be almost the same thing.

OUR HIGHEST AUTHORITY/ POWER IS OUR REASON

When I was still a youngster in the seminary, the old Catholic moral theologians agreed that conscience is right reason making a practical decision about the goodness or badness of this act in my present circumstances. And Dacey's definition of conscience is essentially not very different — he calls conscience “empathic reason forming judgments about what makes most sense to believe or do, taking into consideration all the relevant interests and reasons.”

This is highly relative to one's personal circumstances and insights; some would say it is too subjective. But Dacey takes a productive step forward as he insists on the “openness” of conscience, that the matters of personal conscience are appropriate matters for societal analysis and compassionate evaluation. Then he concludes that “The sound of conscience is the clamor of conversation, not the eerie whisper of revelation.” The conscientious humanist revises his or her principles and values in light of the best solutions that emerge from conversations with others.

Dacey again: “A serious, earnest

claim of conscience should be held to the same standards as any other (claim): honesty, rationality, consistency, evidence, feasibility, legality, morality, and revisability.

“Honesty means we typically say what we really think; rationality that we take efficient means to our ends...; consistency, that we are prepared to accept the implications of our views as they apply in other instances; evidence, that it matters how our reasons link up with the real world...; feasibility, that the proposal is realistic; legality and morality, that it is in accord with our laws and ethics; and revisability, that we are prepared to entertain objections, criticisms, and changes.” Of these eight I suspect that the first and last, honesty and revisability, taken together, are the most important.

THIS SHOULD HELP CLEAR UP A LOT OF THE ETHICS MESS:

These guidelines help us lead moral lives without a god or parental figure of some sort looking over our shoulder to tell us what is good and what is bad in ever-changing circumstances. With these rational guidelines we don't need the catechism or Leviticus or the pope to tell us what works for the benefit of our society in our specific circumstances.

Admit in practice that **reason is our highest power, our highest authority**, and follow it rigorously. This will mean acting on evidence and riding down emotions and extrasensory insights or unreliable hunches. And wisely, Dacey suggests, consulting the reasonable wisdom of society and its moral or customary marketplace of reasonable ideas.

DOES THE END JUSTIFY THE MEANS?

Many decades ago when I was studying moral theology, we seminarians were taught that the end does not justify the means. The goal, intention, or end does not make the means just or good. Well, as with so many things, I think differently now. When we think seriously

about it, we just might conclude that the end is really what most usually does actually justify the means.

The goal or end of winning an Olympics gold medal is precious enough for some to dedicate their life for four, eight or more years to achieve that end. Your intention or end of learning more of atheist ethics is what justified your investment of time and bother to do so. A youngster's end or intention of marrying the love of his life is a valuable enough end to justify or make reasonable his heroic efforts at refinement. It is precisely correct to hold that the end justifies the means.

DOES THE END ALWAYS JUSTIFY THE MEANS?

Pyrrhic victories are by definition too expensive to be justified. Sometimes it turns out that victory proves to be so expensive that it's really a loss. Does the goal of winning a race justify taking drugs, undermining health or getting disqualified from future races? Was the goal of securing oil interests in the Middle East a valuable enough goal to justify the thousands of deaths and the millions of families and fortunes ruined, or was the cost immorally high? Ordinarily, it would be hard to justify cutting off one's arm; it would ordinarily be immoral self-mutilation. But you may recall the lone American hiker who saved his life by doing just that. This hiker was hopelessly pinned down by a huge boulder that had rolled onto his hand. With no hope of rescue, he cut off his own arm thereby saving his life. The valuable end justified the valuable means.

When a wage earner works a second job to keep his family secure and healthy, that's seems like good and moral behavior, but if he takes the second job to avoid his wife and support his mistress, that's another story, eh? The end doesn't always justify the means.

Does the goal of probably learning how to prevent and cure serious diseases justify destroying a few microscopic human cells growing in a petri

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dish? For reasonable people the answer is an easy and obvious “yes”; of course, for those who say those few cells in the petri dish are infinitely valuable human beings, that answer is not reasonable. Here is a glaring example of the need for reasonable members of society to discuss their conscientious position in an effort to convince the obstructionists of stem cell research that a petri dish is not really a swimming pool for young children, just as certainly as an acorn is not an oak tree.

Some knotty questions easily come to mind: Is aborting an unformed or malformed fetus justified by the goal of the convenience or health of the mother? Should society spend a couple of million dollars in the extraordinary efforts necessary to save a ten-ounce preemie fetus? Is the neonatalist doctor’s goal of proving that he **can** do it enough justification to spend millions of limited health-care dollars to actually do it? Do any of your answers change when you recognize that the mother already has a house full of youngsters to care for? In the case of the ten-ounce preemie, would your answer change if it is seriously deformed? How seriously?

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES

No pope, no ayatollah, no politician, no catechism, no set of lawyers and no legislature is wise enough to lay down specific, binding and unbending guidelines to cover all the changing circumstances in real life. But **the general guideline must be reason weighing the value of the goal or end against the cost or means of achieving that goal.** This is the reasonable, conscientious guide to good moral behavior.

It’s important to keep a reasoned

balance between means and ends, in order that the end can justify the means. Once you recognize that the weight of the goal must be comparable to the weight of the means, it’s much easier for reason, your reason, to show itself as your highest and most reliable power that checks emotions, impetuosity, and short-term selfishness. Then it’s easier to see things as others or society sees them. Then it’s easier for you to clear-headedly and reliably think through and do what is good, what is prudent, for you long term. If you do what’s good for you long term, you’ll automatically be doing what’s good for your/our society. Think it through. Feeling it through rather than thinking it through can be dangerous, since feelings tend to be independent of long-term consequences or costs. Feelings are not reliable for preserving the balance between means and ends.

Unless you’re looking for your reward in heaven, you probably don’t want to make the mistake that the following selfless altruist made: This naive fellow came before the mythical pearly gates, but before admitting him St. Peter asked, “What is one of the best things you have done in your life that I should admit you?” The young man took only a few seconds to respond: “Well, one day I stopped a big fight to save a damsel in terrible distress. It looked like this huge bruiser was going crazy angry with his cute little motorcycle passenger. He was so mad at her I thought he was gonna club her with his big fist; I mean he was wild-eyed, loud and crude. I told him to back off and treat the lady like a lady. And he growled at me, ‘Or you’ll what?’ And I said, ‘Or I’ll seriously bruise your family jewels; then I’ll twist that smelly arm of yours ’til it pops off; then I’ll beat you over

the head with it.’” Impressed, St. Peter said, “Well, that was really quite heroic of you. When did this happen?” “Oh, I guess it was about four or five minutes ago.”

ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST: SMART SELFISHNESS VS. STUPID SELFISHNESS.

It’s common for popular authors of movies, books and sermons about morality to make the ethical person become altruistic and selfless. For such writers, doing what is good **for others** is what really counts. “Greater love than this no man has than to lay down his life for his friend.” What then? Once dead for that one friend, how can he help friend number two if he dies helping friend number one? Should the prudent farmer give away his seed corn for his hungry neighbor to eat it? Or should he keep the seed so that later on he can feed himself and many others?

A great lot of foolishness has been written in the name of altruistic ethics — far too much. But I found a refreshing contrast in a very brief article in the June/July 2008 issue of *Free Inquiry*. In a mere one page article, Tibor Machan showed more common sense and honesty than is usual in ethics writers and preachers: He refused to equate ethical behavior with altruistic behavior. He wrote that “most (ethics) commentators focus on ... how **others** should act. But in their private and even their social lives, most people are not altruists at all.” Machan shows himself the realist here, and he goes on to point out that “a proper ethics for human beings does not require self-sacrifice, selflessness, and so forth but rather a sensible focus on one’s own success in life as a human being.” Get that? Rather, instead, have a

sensible focus on one's **own** success in life as a human being. Sounds terribly selfish, doesn't it? And it is selfish; we're getting to that very important point right now.

Before all, you take care of your own health, you love yourself first; love begins at home. If you don't take care of you, how are you going to have the strength and resources to love and take care of anyone else? Unless, of course, you believe in miracles.

However, taking really good care of yourself includes a compassionate caring for those around you, in differing degrees. Taking good care of yourself, you are then able to care generously for your wife or significant other, then significant **others** in varying degrees of proximity and responsibility. I love and take good care of me, so I'm able to love and take good care of my wife. Then it just naturally happens that she is happier, healthier, more able and more generous, so she does the same for me: I help her get more out of life, so she helps me get more out of life. So we are a happy family; being a healthy, happy family we are able to help our neighbors get more out of life — surprise of surprises, they love us back, and we begin to make a caring, happy neighborhood! And if we neighbors do it right and show each other what true compassion means, we will contribute to the health and happiness of the greater society.

GOLDEN RULE or Platinum rule?

See how directly a healthy or enlightened selfishness leads to the wisdom of the modified Golden Rule or platinum rule? We live in context, not in a vacuum of isolation. If you only take good care of yourself without consideration of or compassion for others, you are stupidly selfish and will end up pretty lonely. But if you are so smartly selfish as to see that you also help yourself when you help another human being, you'll show true enlightenment; your enlightened self-interest, your smart selfishness will keep on making your world better and better. And since we atheists don't look forward to anything

better than this life, we try to make this life the best we can. When we are truly reasonable we become compassionate; and the more reasonable, the more conscientious, the more generous we become in our love for others, but always without undermining our own enlightened self-love.

If you let a fellow motorist enter into traffic in front of you, you'll contribute to less anger and impatience in his and your world. Of course, you'll not delay to let him in if you're rushing to the hospital with a bleeding spouse. If you give time or money to improve your neighborhood, you enjoy a better neighborhood, but you don't give until it harms your own health or security or that of your family. You stay smartly selfish; you take care of yourself first — but not only. Love begins at home; it doesn't stay there. Shakespeare said this very well: "This above all, to thine own self be true, then it shall follow as night follows day, thou shalt not then be false to any man." (Polonius to Laertes, *Hamlet*)

CONSCIENCE FORMATION for adults and the immature

For an adult conscience to be well-formed, that adult respects the customs that have been working; those customs that work reflect the wisdom of the past. At the same time, the responsible adult realizes he lives in a changing world, so he responsibly embraces new discoveries and probable hypotheses that science (today's best reasoning) says work even better than what worked in the past.

So, finally, this all boils down to something that is **very simple**: Conscience is right reason (informed by both custom and science) deciding about the appropriateness of this action for me in my planetary circumstances. Follow your conscience, your reason unclouded by emotion or childish impetuosity. Then you'll be able to decide reliably and confidently what is good for you, what is smartly selfish, what is good for your long-term happiness.

Now a lot of you are still saying "this sounds far too selfish for me."

Well, first check whether you're being honest with yourself or perhaps altruistically hypocritical. It may help you to decide appropriate selfishness by asking yourself four simple questions:

- (1) *Will my action help me?*
- (2) *Will my action not hurt others I am responsible for?*
- (3) *Will my action help those I am responsible for? and,*
- (4) *What would our planet be like (long term) if most people in similar circumstances did this?*

I've been addressing you as responsible, thinking, conscientious adults. But what about those without well-formed consciences? What about the young, immature and irresponsible? We already know that no set of lawyers or legislators is wise enough to foresee all circumstances and furnish an adequate catalog of catechetical guidelines for all to memorize and follow.

Society needs **parental** types of help to keep the peace, to keep conflicting selfish interests from hurting us or society. So parenting of youngsters is necessary to enlighten the kids' natural selfishness — to teach the immature to expand their vision of happiness to include planetary neighbors — in varying degrees of proximity and responsibility.

And just as ethical parents must keep children from hurting themselves and society, so we create laws to keep peace among the varied clans on a pluralistic planet. The many prejudices and conflicting belief systems among the tribes make wise laws necessary, laws that reflect both wise customs of old and new learnings of science. And when you and your clan are trying to decide whether a law should be obeyed or changed, ask those four earlier questions that a conscientious individual should consider: (1) Will our action help us? (2) Will our action not hurt others we are responsible for? (3) Will our action help those we are responsible for? and, (4) What would our planet be like (long term) if most clans in similar circumstances did this?

LET'S SIMPLIFY EVEN FURTHER!

Too many ethics writers complicate what can be really very simple. Good morality or ethics is simply **WHAT WORKS** for the **long-term** benefit of the person or clan in their planetary circumstances — smart selfishness accompanied by compassion; really smart selfishness naturally includes compassion, unless, of course, you happen to be Robinson Crusoe.

I hope this makes it easier for you to enjoy life more. As an optimist, I think far, far too many conscientious people live in fear of sinning, in fear of big daddy, in fear of breaking some law, in fear that they are unworthy of all the joy that rational living can bring. Not trusting themselves adequately, they find it hard to trust and respect others generously. And compassionate love is difficult when trust and respect are lacking. Those who are too hung up on the past tend to spend too much time wondering how their actions will please the big, powerful daddies of history and antiquated theologies, while spending too little time figuring out how to improve the quality of life for themselves and for their real planetary neighbors. (Is it so very surprising then that atheists tend to make the best neighbors?)

BEFORE CONCLUDING, a couple of summary review points:

Let us frankly admit that Tibor Machan is surely correct when he states that most ethics writers seem determined to tell **others** how to live fairly altruistic lives, and that this often demonstrates as well as leads to a lot of hypocrisy.

Finally, in establishing reliable ethics for adults, it helps to realize that God's followers represent many different clans and sects. So, as Dacey puts it, "...citizens must appeal to a law higher than God's if they wish to coexist in peace. That higher law is the rule of conscience." Further, I have to agree with Dacey when he insists that for good conscience formation, "there is no viable alternative to reasoning together." Those who feel that conscience is a **totally** personal matter hold onto two serious and basic fallacies: The **Privacy Fallacy** (what I believe is exclusively my business alone and must not be discussed publicly) and the related **Liberty Fallacy** (my conscience must be free from criticism, liberated from shared objective standards of right and wrong). True, conscience must remain free from coercion but not free from criticism and analysis.

The ethics I have presented, is it SITUATION ETHICS? Yes, indeed! And we **always** live in a situation.

In conclusion, I hope these thoughts make it easier for you to be at **peace** with your reasonable self. Then I think you'll agree with the great 19th century agnostic Robert Green Ingersoll when he said so famously: "The time to be happy is now; the place to be happy is here; the way to be happy is to make others so." **SN**

After 11 years in the Catholic priesthood, Dr. Stephen Uhl followed his agnostic conscience, left the Church and became a family psychologist. Much of his joy and success in his psychological practice came from helping his clients deal with their guilt and superstition-based fears. He wrote his recent book, Out of God's Closet: This Priest Psychologist Chooses Friendly Atheism, to help others set aside childhood superstitions, come out of the musty closet of fear and guilt, and enjoy the sunshine of reality-based compassionate love of planetary neighbors. He is retired and lives in Oro Valley, Arizona, USA with his wife of 42 years. This article is based on his presentation at the 2009 AAI Convention in Burbank. Uhl can be reached at author@OutOfGodsCloset.com.

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