



From Atheist to Theist (Part 8)

The Law of Morality

By

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As an atheist I cared little for ‘morality.’ In fact, how others saw morality was often something I had to overcome to get what I wanted out of life. So, when Christians who called in on my radio talk show to talk about the existence of God brought up the ‘law of morality,’ it wasn’t something I was interested in discussing — at first.

I later learned that the moral argument for the existence of God is based on generally accepted points of morality within societies. It is based on the premise of moral normativity – the awareness of civilized human beings that some actions are right while others are wrong. Here are three ways I’ve heard the Moral Argument stated:

(1)

- Some aspect of Morality is observed
- Belief in God provides a better explanation of this feature than various alternatives
- Therefore, to the extent that (1) is accepted, belief in God is preferable to these alternatives

(2)

- If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist
- Objective moral values do exist
- Therefore, God exists

(3)

- Every law has a law giver
- There is a Moral Law
- Therefore, there is a Moral Law Giver

Why do people have moral conflicts if morality does not exist? If people have moral conflicts, then morality exists. Without morality, there could be no moral conflict. People do have moral conflicts, so morality exists. Hmmm.

The word 'morality' comes from the Latin *moralitas* ('manner, character, proper behavior') and is concerned with the principles of right and wrong behavior and the goodness or badness of human character.

Moral codes have existed for thousands of years – *Adamic Code ... Noahic Code ... Egyptian Code of Ma'at ... Babylonian Code of Hammurabi ... Hebrew Law of Moses ... Greek Moral Code ... Chinese Code of Confucius ... Roman Code of Morality ... Christ's Sermon on the Mount*. The long history of moral codes demonstrates that people and societies are aware and sufficiently concerned about morality to define and codify it for the good of the social majority. These and other codes of morality have governed the populations of numerous civilizations as far back as evidence of the written word to explain them.

Situation Ethics

I was a child in the late 1940s and '50s, and a teenager and young adult in the '60s. The changes in morality during those years were amazing. How did we go from what appeared to be objective moral values following World War II to the relativism of the 1960s? What was absolutely true in 1948 was not necessarily true in 1968. How could that happen in just 20 years? Doesn't it take generations before morality makes major shifts?

Atheism has been around for a long time, but it came of age during the 20th century — at least to me. The writings of Bertrand Russell had a strong effect on me as a teenager and young adult. Another influence was Joseph Fletcher. Fletcher was an ordained Episcopal priest who taught Christian Ethics at Episcopal Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School — and Medical Ethics at the University of Virginia. He later said he was an atheist. Fletcher wrote a book called *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* in 1966. I was in college at the time and was already attracted to atheism. Fletcher's book and its

presentation about morals and values supported what I was thinking and practicing.

Situation ethics attempts to remove the concept of absolutes in the areas of morals and values. Instead of following the directives of an absolute moral law, situation ethics determines morality and value based on the particular 'situation.' Situation ethics supported the idea that moral principles can sometimes be cast aside if love is best served to do so in certain situations. Fletcher believed that the only law that was absolute was agape love and that all other laws could and should be set aside to achieve the greatest amount of that love.

As a budding atheist I liked some aspects of Fletcher's situation ethics. It fit very well with my desire to do whatever I thought was right for me. I was the definer of right and wrong for my own life. I determined what love was and did as I pleased. Situation ethics is very appealing to the sin nature. I had been raised in churches where moral law was taught. However, my strong desire to sin free of guilt and consequence responded well to Fletcher's view of no

absolutes in life – no absolute truth, no absolute right and wrong, no absolute values, no absolute standards – everything was relative – or so they said.

The fact is people like Fletcher do believe in absolute truth, values and standards – theirs. They believe they are right and anyone who disagrees is wrong. I know that from my own pre-Christian thinking. I didn't want anyone stepping on my rights, but I didn't mind stepping on theirs because they didn't have any rights – or so I thought.

Ask an atheist what they think about someone killing, robbing, or raping a member of their own family. Since they believe everything is relative and situational, shouldn't they embrace other people's right to kill, maim, kidnap, rob and rape anyone they want — including members of their family? If someone who espouses situation ethics had a loved one or best friend on one of the planes that Muslim extremists flew into the Twin Towers in New York City, or the Pentagon, or the field in Pennsylvania, do you think they would say what the extremists did was fine since they (the extremists) did what they believed was the right thing for them to do? If there are

no absolute truths, or right or wrong, or values or standards – since everything is relative and based on the situation from the perspective of each individual – what the Muslim extremists did was good for them and their cause and therefore okay to do. Right? Of course not — and I dare say it would be difficult to find atheists who would embrace people who murdered, maimed or raped their loved ones and friends.

There is something inside of most people that tells them violence against humanity is wrong. As an atheist I would talk a good talk about situational ethics and amorality, but I would defend friends and family against anyone who attempted to harm them. I viewed defending people I cared about as a duty, even though I didn't want anyone to stop me from doing what I wanted to do — even if they thought what I was doing was wrong. I taught martial arts to help people learn how to defend themselves. Why would I have done that if I didn't believe in some level of morality?

The journey from atheism to theism is different for each person who makes it. My journey began with science, then made a turn onto the path of ethics and morality.

- Webster's Dictionary defines ethics as "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation."
- Webster's defines morality as "a moral discourse, statement, or lesson, a doctrine or system of moral conduct."
- Webster's Learner's Dictionary defines morality as "beliefs about what is right behavior and what is wrong behavior, the degree to which something is right and good, the moral goodness or badness of something."

More about 'ethics and morality' in the next part of our special series, *From Atheist to Theist*.