

READING: The **READING** on The Origins of Morality:... is an excerpt from an editorial in the Boston Globe titled "Bad Reasons to be Good" by Sam Harris

Unfortunately, religion tends to separate questions of morality from the living reality of human and animal suffering. Consequently, religious people often devote immense energy to so-called "moral" questions - such as gay marriage, where no real suffering is at issue, and they inflict terrible suffering in the service of their religious beliefs.

We have to realize that we decide what is good in our religious doctrines. We read the Golden Rule, for instance, and judge it to be a brilliant distillation of many of our ethical impulses. And then we come across another of God's teachings on morality: If a man discovers that his bride is not a Virgin on their wedding night, he must stone her to death on her father's, doorstep (Deuteronomy 22: 13-21). If we are civilized, we will reject this as utter lunacy. Doing so requires that we exercise our own moral intuitions, keeping the real issue of human happiness in view. The belief that the Bible is the word of God is of no help to us whatsoever.

As we consider how to run our own society and how to help, people in need, the choice before us is simple: Either we can have a 21st-century conversation about morality and human happiness -availing ourselves of all the scientific insights and philosophical . arguments that have accumulated in the last 2,000 years of human discourse - or we can confine ourselves to an Iron Age conversation as it is preserved in our holy books.

Wherever the issue of "moral values" surfaces in our national conversation in the coming weeks, ask yourself which approach to . morality is operating. Are we talking about how to best alleviate human suffering? Or are we talking about the whims of an invisible God?

SERMON: The Origins of Morality

Morality, according to the Webster's dictionary is 'an adherence to the principles of right and wrong.' Exactly when such a conscious effort to enact those principles is basically unknown, yet there are a number of evolutionary factors which I believe began at the roots of the animal kingdom, some of which we do have in common. Lets begin with our animal friends.

The first factor is the instinctive pursuit of pure survival. To eat, to reproduce and to have shelter, which is shared by all creatures individually. In animal societies where these elements of survival are shared in colonies, herds, flocks or packs, there is a highly specific social order and a hierarchy of position where the division of tasks and the social rules of order appear to be instinctively pre-programmed, rather than consciously understood. When the hunt for food is co-operative, there is a sharing of shelter and survival depends upon the peaceful interaction of the whole community. These divisions of position and authority are believed to be instinctive elements of the more complex animal societies, where the interaction is task oriented rather than cognitive.

Moving up the gene pool, enter the human animal. The early larger brained, bipedal creatures, being blessed or in some cases cursed with the onset of conscious intelligence, initially retained the same instincts as their animal relatives: the need for nourishment, shelter and reproduction. But they also became aware of their surroundings, of one another and their relationships in a way that the animal kingdom allegedly had not. A highly functioning intelligence rather than instinct became a force to be reckoned with.

For these developing humans, no longer did the natural instinctive order of things dictate life and death in the same way as it did for the animals. Emotions and feelings became more prominent and enhanced, thus paving the way for placing judgment as to what was fair or unfair. As humankind became more aware of the environment, the onset of night and day, the movement of the sun, moon and stars, weather, and

natural occurrences such as heat and cold, earthquakes and volcanoes, the cause of these things became a true concern. The need to explain or to blame the onset of destructive and positive forces in nature led to the creation of gods and goddesses who controlled the environment . They were believed to have determined the course of the natural activity around them.

This also led to a belief that the gods and goddesses shared human emotion and could be calmed or irritated by human behaviors, thus the creation of ritualistic behavior. For example: If the hunt was successful, the God's must be pleased. If the hunt was unsuccessful, the Gods were upset by someone or something done incorrectly or by bad behaviors and offenders were punished. The Gods determined what was right and wrong and it was the job of early humanity to interpret the activities of the Gods to adjust the rituals accordingly.

Now let me skip a few millennia to the origins of Judeo-Christian thought and park ourselves for a moment in the infamous Garden of Eden. Humankind was still struggling for answers to the eternal questions of "What are we here for and what are we supposed to do to be rewarded in this life? What is good and what is bad? What are the rules?" The creationist theologians teach that when God created the earth and Adam and Eve, HE gave the first instruction in moral behavior, "do not eat the apple." OOPs, Eve was bad and ate the apple and the consequences as such, were the onset of pain and suffering inherent in simply being human. The acquisition of food and shelter were no longer to be provided by God and the pleasures of reproduction would be punishable by painful childbirth. No more romping in the garden. No more fun, kids. You broke God's first rule and nakedness became a big deal!

According to the Bible, after the failed instructions verbally given to Adam and Eve, centuries passed until God had had enough with the pathetic floundering of inept human behavior. Obviously the first moral lesson wasn't enough so God embarked on lesson # 2 and sent Moses up the mountain to gather the second set of laws of morality, "The Ten Commandments." They were simple and clear, spelled out in common language and should be easily understood and obeyed. Once again God underestimated the forces of free will. More centuries passed and God's children continued to break His rules and blew it again. God's laws were not being obeyed. It was time for a true interactive approach and as the bible tells it, God finally, in a last

attempt to bring moral order to the human community, sent his son Jesus, to straighten out the whole mess.

Some got it and followed. The message did get out and upon Jesus violent death, the apostles and others who had reformed their own lives due to Jesus teachings became self proclaimed prophets and sole interpreters of his parables and miracles. This is where it began to slide again. The laws became cloudy once more as each of the biographers of Jesus life and the meaning of this life, took on interpretations that only served the needs of those in power, who from the onset of Jesus death fought over who would lead this new church.

The interpretation of Jesus simple message of tolerance, love, forgiveness and the goodness of divine intervention waffled between, inflicting acts of revenge and violence toward those offenders for breaking quote "God's Laws" to the struggle of others who sought to address unacceptable moral behavior in gentler terms by responding to offenders with kindness and good will toward one another.

Today we have not moved very far from that arena. The issues of right and wrong, of moral behavior and the appropriate response to breaking the rules lies more in how the offender is treated, with kindness and understanding or with substantial punishment.

In a sense the argument continues today between 'taking an eye for an eye, as suggested by the accounts of the violent God of the Old Testament, and the gentler God of the New Testament, as relayed through the kind words and compassionate response of Jesus to common human failings.

Let me back up a bit and summarize for a moment. Humankind began with a predominance of instinctive behaviors, similar to those found in the animal kingdom. As we evolved and the extent of our cognitive powers began to reveal themselves, some individuals took conscious leadership positions, others became hunters or gatherers or keepers of the cave, if you will. In a sense, this is very similar to animal societies where there is a distinct division of labor.

In time the evolution of our brain power began to separate us from the animal kingdom. As an intellectually advanced species, our ancestors could not only make

tools and use them but they also had the capacity to ponder the cause and effect of the environment on our survival.

We learned to plot and to plan, to control the actions and even the freedoms those around us and to impose what was understood to be right and wrong, true or false on the lives of others.

It was first believed that a secular moral code was created which was intended to enhance the basic survival of the whole society. In time as our brains developed early human thought was no longer confined to only the issues of physical survival but included questions about our origins. The moral code then took on a religiously ritualistic undertone which began as the earliest humans wrestled with a very limited understanding of their interaction with the natural world and the Gods that controlled it. With the onset of a more organized set of religious laws, Jesus introduced the possibilities of a heavenly afterlife which meant that adherence to a strict moral code became even more critical if one did not wish to burn in hell.

The prophets of every faith have posed numerous answers and words of advise and wisdom for our consideration, but the fact remains that in each and every religious society there are those whose power and authority extends well beyond the teachings of their faith. Depending upon how much power they wield, the religious community can seriously affect the quality of the lives of those who do not share the same beliefs.

The origins of morality began primarily as a search for answers to life's most pressing needs and manifested itself from a secular need for co-operation to attain the basic components of survival, into ritualistic behaviors intended to bring about favor with the Gods that were thought to control very aspect of our well being. In Western society, right from our Nation's humble beginnings, the adoption of the religious components of moral law through acceptance of Judeo-Christian teaching became the catalyst for determining appropriate behavior as found in the writings of the Old and New Testament prophets. Our present laws reflect the morality of each and every leader that has presided over the welfare of this country. Most have come from purely religious teachings. The issue remains not what our leadership believes as much as how those beliefs are transmitted; through legal deprivation and

punishment for breaking the literal interpretation of Biblical thought, or through a more universal and secular awareness of what is fair and just for all regardless of personal belief.

We may have come a long way developmentally. From living in caves to sending probes into space, but the origins of morality as we have come to understand them will remain in flux as long as we continue to search for answers we do not have. It is in a sense the curse of our intelligence, the need to gain enough power to impose upon others our own definitions of what is good and what constitutes evil.

As it says in the bible in John 8:32 “We will know the truth and the truth will set us free.” May the secular morality of kindness and justice once again find their way back into our politics, our definitions of the law and into our everyday lives. Only then will we know the truth that will someday, set us all free.

So be it.

Amen

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