

Can one be moral yet not believe in God? If so, what are the consequences of this to the moral life? Two humanist thinkers discuss their views. — Editor

Morality Without Religion

Marvin Kohl

Secular humanists and their opponents are fond of debating the vague question, Can one be moral and not believe in God? The question is vague because it is glaringly unclear. As a rule, it leads to senseless dispute. If the question is interpreted (as secular humanists would be inclined to interpret it) to mean "Is it possible for a person to follow, in general, the principles or precepts of justice, veracity, beneficence, and not believe in a theist-type god?" then the answer, based on evidence of the behavior of some agnostics and atheists, is in the affirmative. On the other hand, if the question is interpreted to mean (as most theists are likely to interpret it) "Is it possible for a person to be moral (i.e., to believe in God and generally follow his commandments) and, at the same time, not believe in God?" then the answer, for reasons of logic, is in the negative.

There are, I agree, a few intellectuals who would be content with this kind of standoff. But many would not. The secularist probably would reject the identification of morality with belief in God and following his commandments. He would insist that, even if one admitted that God exists and commands only what is good, one has to know independently what is good in order to know what God commands. The theist, on the other hand, probably would insist, and I think correctly so, that one of the basic issues here is not what exceptional persons can or cannot do but whether or not ordinary men and women can be moral without belief in God. He argues that the exception does not make the rule. The fact that some men can run the four-minute mile or can be moral without an explicit commitment to God does not mean that men generally can do either of these things.

The secularist, of course, rejects the latter move and quickly takes up the gauntlet. He argues that ordinary people can be taught morality and that this in no way entails religious belief. He maintains that with proper education, especially in early childhood, men can be trained to be moral and that this can be accomplished without any appeal to religious belief. "Early religious teaching," writes Mill, "has owed its power over mankind rather to its being early than its being religious."

When . . . any rule of life and duty, whether grounded or not on religion, has conspicuously received the general assent, it obtains a hold on the belief of every individual, stronger than it would have even if he had arrived at it by the inherent force of his own understanding. . . . And, as it cannot be imagined that the commands of God are

to young children anything more than the commands of their parents, it is reasonable to think that any system of social duty which mankind might adopt, even though divorced from religion, would have the same advantage of being inculcated from childhood. . . .²

Indeed, it is tempting to conclude that Mill and the secular humanists are right. For if the original question is interpreted to mean "Can ordinary men and women be educated to believe in and generally follow the principles of justice, veracity, and beneficence and not believe in God?" then it would appear that the available evidence clearly supports the secular-humanist contention. Given a kindly environment and proper moral training at an early age, it seems to be true that individuals so educated generally will behave in a moral manner.

I have two worries. The first, the lesser one, is that this conclusion is only likely to appeal to those who advocate soft theism, that is, those who believe that, although God exists and is the source of morality, morality can be learned and effectively practiced without commitment to a deity. It is improbable that it will appeal to, or in any significant way alter, the beliefs of the advocates of hard theism, that is, those who claim that in order to be moral a person must explicitly believe in God and follow his commandments. Contrary to what the secular humanist often likes to believe, the hard theist maintains, first, that both the goodness and justice of God can be derived from his existence and, second, that morality therefore demands a commitment to his existence. In other words, the claim is that God's existence entails his goodness, that morality thereby requires a commitment to Him (and not merely a belief that He exists), and that this is known to be true. My point is a simple one. I am not suggesting that what the theist claims is known to be true or that the teleological argument is viable. Quite the contrary. I believe that a formidable case can be made for atheism (the claim that we know that we have no knowledge about God) and against the teleological argument. What I wish to suggest is that if the purpose of raising the God-morality question is to convince the hard theist, and if there is no common ground for doing so, as appears to be the case, then the undertaking has little point.

My second worry raises a complex and difficult question, one that has been relatively neglected in the literature. The question is, Can ordinary people be moral without an enforcement factor and is belief in God a sufficient enforcement factor?" Any general answer to this question is likely to be too simple; but I suspect that one reason people are inclined to identify morality with belief in God is that they reject the notion that holding people to be praiseworthy, or blameworthy,

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is sufficient, sufficient to prevent self-interest, in moments of serious conflict, from overruling the commands of morality. They maintain that, without an enforcement factor (in this case the threat of God's judgment and punishment), people will behave morally only when it is convenient. In short, the claim is that, while morality can be taught, the effectiveness of this teaching is roughly proportionate to the power of those beliefs or their correlates to control behavior and that a deep commitment to God is effective because it does accomplish that control; that without God, without an effective enforcement factor, moral etiquette may be taught, but not morality per se.

It may be objected that the history of religion has not been exactly the history of morality; but if this is to be taken to imply that the history of religion has been a history of a deep commitment to God, I think that it is false. What may be true is that we have failed to make ordinary men and women, as well as common clergy, truly religious. But since this is an end that there is no sufficient reason to regard as being generally obtainable, and which, when attempted, nurtures a sinister form of totalitarianism, it should be rejected by all who are guided by knowledge and inspired by a genuine love for mankind.

There is another objection, which seems to strike closer to the mark. What if the theist charges that humanist morality—a morality largely based upon the sentiments of praise and blame being the only moral sanction—is, and probably must be, *less effective* than a theist morality based upon the ideal of being truly religious? And what if such an ideal is limited to classical ethical Judaism or the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount? Now it is the fashion in secular circles to mock religious claims. But these questions give rise not to a religious or metaphysical claim but to an empirical one. The general claim is that religion may be morally useful without being otherwise intellectually sustainable. The specific claim is that morality (in contrast to moral etiquette) requires an effective enforcement factor and that, with proper limits, the traditional theist grounding of morality provides a *better* enforcement factor than humanist theories.

As for myself, I share the conviction that morality, if it is to be effective, must have an adequate enforcement factor; that theories in which the sentiments of praise and blame are the sole factor are, in this respect, inadequate; and that, because of the necessity of having to couple adequate moral principles and precepts with an enforcement factor, some theist theories may be better than some humanist ones. However, I would also maintain that humanist theories need not have timid enforcement factors and, therefore, need not become extensionally equivalent with egoism. Where basic human rights are consistent with social justice and are conceived of as claims (or their like), there is no need to surrender oneself to the authority of reactionary humanism or to the illusions of religion.

Notes

1. J. S. Mill, "Utility of Religion," in *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1874), p. 83.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-81.
3. An enforcement factor may be partially defined as something in, or intimately associated with, a theory or moral code that has the power of causing men to act morally when they would have acted otherwise.