

Morality and Spirituality

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Presented to the Unitarian Universalists of Benton County

26 April 2009

Reading: *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, compiled by President Thomas Jefferson

Jesus: You have heard that it has been said, You should love your neighbor, and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies Be you therefore merciful.

Presentation: "Morality and Spirituality"

Why be moral? Why be good rather than bad? Why be generous rather than selfish? What is the definition of *being good*? Is there an objective morality, or is morality just a matter of opinion?

These days, for many of us, the traditional answers to moral questions are no longer adequate. New answers to the fundamental moral questions are needed.

The traditional answers to the questions "why be moral? and what behavior is moral?" rely on two sources of authority. One source is the tribe, and the other source is religion. The tribe and religion are often fused together, but right now let's consider them separately.

The morality of the *tribe* is based on group survival. As members of a tribe we are dependent on one another for our basic survival. We must be able to trust one another to do what is best for the tribe. Otherwise, we will not survive. If we steal from one another, if we lie to one another, if we do not come to one another's aid, then the tribe will not be able to act in concert to supply its basic needs and to defend itself from outside aggressors. The tribe must function as a *team* to win the battle for survival. Teams are most successful when each member is at least as concerned about the success of the team as he is about his individual success.

Therefore, within the tribe the *definition* of morality is doing what is best for the tribe: that is, *care* for others within the tribe and *aggression* toward those outside the tribe. The teaching of children and the laws and traditions of the tribe are based on this definition of morality.

The morality of the tribe is limited to its members. There is little or no moral obligation to outsiders. Pillaging other tribes is perfectly fine. After all, our survival does not depend on other tribes doing well. In fact, our tribe may be better off if another tribe does *not* do well. Perhaps we are competing for the same hunting ground, for example.

The morality of the tribe is still very much alive in our modern world. This is the basic morality of business. The members of a business must function as a cohesive team. The rules and traditions within the business encourage ethical behavior toward the team.

Each business is trying to maximize its own profits. There is little or no obligation toward the well-being of other businesses or of the customers; that is, like the tribe, its morality does not extend to outsiders. For example, as employees of RJ Reynolds,

Incorporated, the more cigarettes we sell, the better we are. If you don't believe this, then you are not a good employee; you're not a good member of the tribe.

Tribal morality is also the morality of nationalism. For the nationalist patriot, what is good is what makes my country stronger than other nations. This is the nation as tribe. Our morality is confined to members of our own nation. Our moral outrage is limited to transgressions against the people of our own nation. Transgressions against the people of other nations are not as morally bothersome. For example, a level of civilian casualties that is considered tolerable in our actions against another nation would likely provoke an outcry if a police action inflicted those casualties on our own innocent civilians.

Yes, tribal morality, the morality of mutual self-interest—the earliest social form of morality—is still very much alive and well. However, as the world has become less and less a group of separate tribes, as technology and population growth have broken down the barriers between peoples, tribal morality has run into the limits of its adaptive benefits. Businesses looking only to their maximum profitability now lead to consequences that endanger everyone: pollution, bad public health, the loss of natural resources and economic recession, for example. Nations looking only to their relative strength on the world stage now lead to consequences that endanger everyone: nuclear proliferation, global warming, and the international arms trade, for example. Tribal morality has become a liability. A basis for morality other than tribalism is needed.

The other traditional source of morality is religion. Religion began as the worship of the god of our tribe. If we followed our god's rules then he would protect our tribe from harm, he would help us destroy our enemies and he would give us heavenly rewards. This is the god of the Old Testament. The rise of monotheism brought larger groups of peoples together into the same moral system. The people of different tribes, and then the people of different nations, who believed in the same god all had the same moral rights.

Morality based on traditional religion is the morality of self-interest extended into the afterlife. Why be moral? Because if we are then we will enjoy eternal bliss in heaven, and if we are not moral we will suffer eternal torment in hell.

Religion was considered a reasonable basis for morality until the Enlightenment, beginning about 1700. By then, scholars were questioning the literal truth of the Bible, and shortly thereafter they were even questioning the existence of God. It wasn't long before both the Bible and the concept of god were seen as products of the human imagination. By about 1900 Nietzsche had declared that god is dead and Freud had declared that religion is an illusion. So being moral to win God's favor is no longer meaningful for those not still under the spell of traditional religion. A basis for morality other than religion is needed.

Therefore, Enlightenment philosophers attempted to base morality on *Reason*, the new religion of the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill all created *logical* systems of morality. According to Kant, we should limit our actions to those that we would like to see everyone follow. Bentham and Mill said that we should act in ways that provided the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

However, Reason cannot tell you *why* you should care about acting morally in the first place. Reason cannot tell you why you should care about others enough not to take selfish advantage of a situation if you can get away with it. Some basis for being moral other than reason is required.

The morality of the tribe, the morality of religion, and then the morality of reason all proved insufficient for modern times. The morality of the tribe was seen to be just the self-interest of the group. The morality of religion was seen to be based on superstitious belief in a heavenly reward for giving up selfish behavior on Earth. Reason could not explain why any individual should not be as selfish as possible, even if he wanted everyone else to act morally. By the 1900s this situation led many thinkers to believe that there is *no* firm basis for morality. This is the position of post-modernism and of moral relativism: that there is no solid foundation for determining what is right and what is wrong. It's all a matter of custom and opinion. Who is to say that the self-sacrificing honest person really isn't the chump that the smart swindler takes him to be? Who is to say that the law of Sharia, which includes stoning and flogging, is less moral than the law of Western liberalism? Well, let's look further for a firm basis for morality. Let's look at the development of morality, first in individuals and then in cultures.

Lawrence Kohlberg was a psychologist who, in the mid-twentieth century studied the development of morality in individuals from childhood to adulthood. He found six levels of moral development, which can be grouped into three stages. The earliest stage he named the *pre-conventional* stage of moral development. In this stage the person's sense of what is right or good is to maximize self-interest as far as possible without incurring negative consequences: one believes that one should grab all that one can without incurring punishment, no matter the consequences to others. This is the morality of the typical two-year-old who wants all the toys and feels no need to share them. This is also the morality of opportunism, which we often see at work in adult behaviors. Bernard Maddoff, the investment swindler, is just one extreme example.

Next in human development is the *conventional* stage of morality, in which the individual has come to believe that the customs and laws of *his* culture represent what is morally right. This is the morality of rules and justice. This is the morality of the typical eight-year-old who feels that things should be divided evenly, and that the rules of the game should always be followed no matter the consequences. In adults we see this stage in the person who feels that the *law* is the highest moral authority, whether this is the law of the state or of the church.

Finally, the *post-conventional* stage of moral development comes about when a person's beliefs about what is right become independent of the customs and laws of his culture. The person has developed her own moral system and does not feel bound by the standards within her culture. At this post-conventional level of morality one feels obligated to the greater good of humanity, not just the good of oneself or one's own society. One believes that there are universal principles of morality that apply to all humanity. This is the morality of mature adulthood.

Every person begins in childhood at the self-centered pre-conventional stage of moral development. If we are fortunate in our development we achieve the rule-centered conventional stage and then the *care*-centered post-conventional stage of morality. However, the pre-conventional and conventional moral stages never go away completely in anyone. Under stress we can easily regress to the pre-conventional morality of selfishness or to the conventional moral stage of rule-limited moral obligation. And, unfortunately, the full development to post-conventional morality is not assured. In fact, the vast majority of people remain mostly at the conventional level of moral

development. They believe that the laws and customs of their particular religion or nation are the highest moral authority.

Moving beyond the individual, through history whole cultures also have shown a pattern of moral development. Studies by Lloyd de Mause, an historian of the psychology of societies, have shown that as societies developed from tribes to civilizations, and then from ancient agricultural civilizations to industrial civilizations to modern information-based civilizations, the morality of societies has also evolved. Over the past 3000 years child rearing practices have become less aggressive, more caring, and more oriented toward the developmental needs of the child. Punishment of criminals has become less brutal. Treatment of the disabled has become more caring. The status of women and of minorities has improved. Through the centuries morality has become less determined by aggression. People have come to be seen less as means to the ends of those in power, and more as having the *right* to determine their own good life.

Also, over the ages the definition of the in-group, those for whom our own moral code applies, those who have equal rights, has steadily enlarged. At first the in-group was just our tribe. Then the in-group was just those who share our religion. Then the in-group was those who live in our nation, regardless of their race or religion. Nowadays, for some individuals the moral in-group includes all humans no matter their race, religion or nationality. Finally, for some people these days the moral in-group includes all life, both human and non-human. This enlarging of the moral in-group through history has been called the *widening circle of morality*.

So, at the level of societies, throughout history there has been an *evolution* of morality toward less aggression and more care, and from the moral code being narrowly applied to a small in-group to its being applied to an ever-wider circle of peoples.

At the level of the individual person, there is a *development* of morality from being self-centered, to being group- and rule-centered, to being humanity- and care-centered.

So, both in the history of societies and in the life history of the individual person we see morality moving away from selfishness, aggression, and restrictions and moving toward inclusiveness and care as the basis of *what should be*. This is the direction of the moral evolution of *Spirit*.

Now, what do I mean by spirit? Spirit is the aspect of the universe pushing toward life and consciousness; consciousness as both awareness and emotion—that is, consciousness that both knows and cares. The basic stuff of the universe organized itself into this planet about four billion years ago. By about three billion years ago, the universe organized itself into living forms. By 200 million years ago, the living universe had organized itself into animals with brains. At that point, for sure, consciousness with awareness and emotion had come into being. By two hundred thousand years ago human beings had pulled ahead of other animals in degree of consciousness, in the capacity to know and to care.

Since then the progress of the creative force of the universe has been primarily within the consciousness of human beings; the progress in our capacity to know and to care. The capacity to know—intelligence—expresses itself as science and technology. The capacity to care—emotion—expresses itself as love and morality.

We are now in a position to answer our first question: What is morality? Morality is an expression of the capacity to care for others. What is moral goodness? An action is

morally good if it is more caring, and more inclusive of others. What is morally bad? Anything that is more aggressive toward, and more exclusive, of others.

So we can put to rest moral relativism. We *can* make solid moral judgments about religions and societies; judgments that are not just expressions of our own culture's prejudices. Those religions and cultures that express more care toward individuals, and a larger, more inclusive circle of people who have equal rights, are morally more advanced. Those that express subjugation, condemnation and punishment, or a less inclusive circle of those with equal rights, are morally less advanced. This basis for moral judgment is as objective as is the judgment of a culture's level of science and technology.

We can also answer our second question: Why should we care to act morally? The reason is that in our *essence* we are particular organizations of the living universe, selected for progress in our capacity for knowledge and in our capacity for care. That is what *you* are. That is the ultimate basis of morality. Not custom and the law; not any book or commandments; not the in-group; not the threat of hell and the promise of heaven. The basis of morality, the source of the validity of the *should* as in we should be caring toward others, is the nature of consciousness itself; the nature of the generative power of the universe itself. We feel this in *our* deepest nature.

Every life form, including humans, has a drive to be fully developed. Full development for humans includes creativity and compassion. Freud recognized this when he defined mental health as the capacity to work and to love. We see in psychotherapy that when neurotic inhibitions are reduced, patients automatically develop toward more creativity and toward more loving, compassionate relations. To obey the moral "should" is to fulfill our own development.

What about moral dilemmas? Is it moral to torture someone if that might result in saving a city from nuclear destruction? Is war ever just? There are no moral absolutes. We use our intelligence and our feelings to do the best we can. Violence for revenge is immoral. Violence for self-preservation may be a necessary evil. Extreme pacifism that gives a *carte blanche* to oppressors is immoral, for it tacitly condones their violence. In the end, reason and logic alone will not define the morally best action. Rather our own sense of what is the best thing to do will have to be our guide.

Now what practical lessons are there for each one of us? First, we should recognize that moral progress among the world's societies is uneven and is subject to temporary setbacks. We will continue to witness immoral actions on the world stage, but we should have confidence about future moral progress; confidence that comes from the long-term moral progress we have seen already.

Second, we should develop our own moral capacities toward the greatest possible maturation, and we should contribute to the moral maturity of those around us and to that of our society. How do we do this? One way is to ask, "What would Jesus do?" Jesus, as the symbol of love for all humanity. The words of our opening reading may still express the highest level of moral development on Earth. How would Jesus act in any particular situation? What institutions would he support? How would he vote?

Another way to promote our own moral development is meditation, which gets us in touch with our basic essence as Caring Consciousness. Meditation can also facilitate our self-analysis of the inhibitions that fixate us in excess selfishness and aggressiveness. This self-analysis—shadow work it is sometimes called—tends to unshackle the further development of our compassion.

Our individual, personal resources for providing care to others are limited: our money, our time, and our emotional energy are limited. Although mature morality extends outward to include care for more of humanity, one's *personal* investment in providing that care will be—and should be—limited. At some point of distance from others we rely on institutions to provide for their needs, and our obligation then is to support proportionately one or more of those institutions.

We should also recognize that life is about more than caring for the well-being of others—the mind has functions other than morality, including needs for self-development and self-expression (one's life as a work of art). It is appropriate to spend

one's resources in creating a self-fulfilling life—this is care for the self. You are as important as anyone else. Yet, even in *self*-fulfilling activities, one's moral maturity will contribute at least indirectly to the good of others.

You are a form of the living universe resulting in conscious awareness and care. You are the basic stuff of the universe becoming self-aware and compassionate. To follow the path of moral development is to live out fully what you are. To live morally is to be part of the leading edge of the evolution of Spirit. Amen.

Reading: Confucius

At 15 I set my heart upon learning; at 30 I had planted my feet firm upon the ground; at 40 I no longer suffered from perplexities; at 50 I knew what were the biddings of Heaven; at 60 I heard them with docile ear; at 70 I could follow the dictates of my own heart, for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right