

Good moral path includes scientific thought

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Can an atheist be moral? The simple answer is, yes, atheists can be moral, and they can be immoral, just as religious believers can be moral or immoral. It is often assumed that the more religious a person is, the more ethical that person will be. Consequently, the question of whether or not a religious believer is moral is rarely asked, although sometimes it should be.

Religious adherents deal with some unique and complex issues in deciding moral answers. They are concerned, not only with doing good things for their fellow human beings, but also with pleasing God, and with following principles and dogma according to the persuasions and doctrines of their particular religion. Herein is a potential problem. There is a wide range of religious opinions held on moral issues. Questions concerning birth control, divorce, overpopulation, euthanasia, male-only clergy, same sex marriages, gender equality, respect for racial diversity, free choice about abortion, stem cell research, and other current moral issues in our society often divide religious opinions. In extreme, but not uncommon cases, such divisions lead to conflict and wars among various religious faiths. This despite the fact that many adherents ironically believe we need religion to keep our ideas about morality from going off in all directions.

According to a computer search in Google, there are over 4000 different religious denominations in the world. These accommodate a great deal of diversity of thought, or variations, or sometimes confusion, about moral issues, each claiming to know how God thinks on these matters. Apart from the basic theological question of whether God exists, it is obviously difficult to know with any certainty what God thinks. The proliferation of so many religious denominations, even within the broad groupings of the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Muslim faiths is, in its self, evidence of these difficulties.

Conscientious atheists are generally open to acceptance of practical results that can be measured and observed. Sciences, including social sciences, offer useful guidance and direction in assessing whether or not people are properly fed or have adequate housing and proper health care. Science can be informative about crime rates and their possible correlations with poverty, or educational levels. These disciplines can help to assess drug problems or spousal abuse. In other words, science can help people see the underlying causes as well as the solutions to moral problems in order to work toward a healthy and caring society.

Often the more difficult and complex the moral situations are, the more scientific knowledge is required in order to understand the implications of issues such as stem cell research, the dangers and benefits of cloning, or the ethics of keeping comatose patients like the USA citizen, Terri Schiavo, on a medical life support system for nearly ten years in her continued vegetative state, this despite the advice of medical doctors. Science can help us determine whether we are being good stewards of our planet earth. Are we depleting our natural resources and polluting our air and water? Is there really climate change, and if so, is it the result of human behaviour? Science can offer relevant information in these ethical matters. In compassionate health care, the scientific advice of psychiatrists and medical researchers is vital.

Of course, science, like religion, doesn't have the answers to all things, and scientific inventions and discoveries can sometimes be used in unethical ways. Yet, on balance, the growth of scientific knowledge in the past hundred years is quite remarkable. In total, it exceeds the entire body of previous scientific information throughout human history up until approximately 100 years ago. I wonder if the same claim can be made concerning the growth of religious knowledge. In moral matters, science is accessible to both

believers and non-believers. Religions, and in particular, fundamentalist believers, often look upon science unfavourably or with disinterest and suspicion.

Fortunately, thoughtful religious adherents, as well as thoughtful, concerned, non-believers recognize that science is helpful, though not always sufficient to ensure clarity and wisdom in moral matters. A prudent beginning in choosing a good moral path for either religious or non-religious citizens would be to combine a caring, compassionate attitude with the best scientific knowledge we have available.