Whence Comes Morality?

By Martin Pickup

Henry Chandler, the notable 19th century theologian, once said, "We are all of us far more certain that there is a binding right, and a repellent wrong, than we are that there is a God." Many individuals deny the existence of God. Many more relegate the question to the back burners of their mind, treating it as an irresolvable issue that has little relevance to their lives. But Chandler correctly points out that human beings do not show the same lax attitude about the verity and importance of morality.

Human beings are moral creatures. We live with the understanding that our free-will decisions bear moral responsibilities and that these responsibilities should be faced and accepted by each one of us. We discuss and argue issues of proper ethical conduct almost every day—and usually we do so with intense passion. Our speech is laced with moral imperatives: "How could he do such a thing?" ... "She ought never to have said that!" ... "Why do people act this way?" Whenever we ourselves fail to follow what we think is morally right, a feeling of shame descends upon us and something deep inside—we call it a *conscience*—berates us for our own misconduct.

This "sense of ought" is something that separates us from the animals. Dogs and cats have no moral standards, nor do we expect them to. But we believe that each and every sane human being is morally responsible. Our abundant affirmations about proper and improper ethical conduct attest unequivocally to a moral sense that is a part of every rational person. And here is the key point: all of the above is true regardless of whether a person believes in God or not.

Atheists and theists both believe in moral standards and both feel guilt when they do not act in accordance with these standards.

These observations raise an interesting question: *Could it be that the human conscience points to the existence of God?*

Human Beings and Morals

To help us address this question, let me first make another observation about human morality. I affirm that all human beings share fairly common moral principles. I am not saying that moral principles are identical from individual to individual or from society to society. But neither are they poles apart. All of us tend to feel guilty when we wrong another person, if we hurt their feelings, or if we harm them physically. Shame engulfs us if we mistreat the innocent. But does anyone ever feel guilty for *not* hurting someone? Do you feel remorse when you don't strike a neighbor, don't insult a stranger, or don't betray a friend?

Honesty, likewise, is an accepted ideal among all human beings. People generally feel guilty for telling lies, especially when the deceit is perpetrated for the purpose of gaining an advantage over someone else. But have you ever known someone to feel ashamed for *not* misstating the truth? Say to your neighbor, "You're a bold-faced liar!"—and he will either rebut the charge with indignation, or feel remorse and admit his guilt. But he certainly will not take it as a compliment. Say to your neighbor, "You're an honorable person"—and he will respond with a grateful, "Thank you."

It is true, of course, that human beings commonly debate ethical issues with one another. But that fact supports my contention rather than negating it, for the issues under contention are typically the finer points of ethics rather than broad moral principles. When it comes to basic morality, the differences between individual human beings are not as vast as they may at first

appear. Bring up the subject of abortion in the break room at work, and it may incite a heated argument over whether taking the life of a fetus is murder. But none of the disputants will argue that a person has a right to take a gun and shoot whomever he wants. Capital punishment is a practice that some people defend and other people condemn—but underlying the controversy is a mutual recognition that, in general, the taking of human life is morally wrong. People may debate whether it is okay to lie in a particular situation, but no one doubts that honesty should be the standard practice of one's life. In short, it is undeniable that certain fundamental moral principles are shared by human beings of all backgrounds and philosophies.

Seeking an Explanation

So how do we explain this moral sensitivity and the basic commonality of human ethical principles?

The Bible has a very clear explanation. Men and women are made in the image of a God who himself is a moral being. It is therefore a part of our nature to understand that certain behaviors are right and other behaviors are wrong, and our God-given consciences attest to this fact. The apostle Paul writes, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these not having the Law are a Law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom. 2:14-16). The Bible does not claim that a person's subjective perception of right and wrong is always correct, but it does affirm that there are fundamental moral concepts that men and woman recognize as a result of their being created by a moral God (Rom. 1:29-31).

Here are several questions I'd like to pose to the atheist. If indeed there is no God, whence comes morality? Why do human beings possess a moral capacity? When an atheist

responds (as he must) by saying that homo sapiens are nothing more than advanced primates— the product of chance evolutionary processes—and that our sense of morality is simply an evolved trait, then what does that say about *the validity* of the moral principles that we all espouse so ardently? Bertrand Russell, one of the most significant social reformers of the 20th century, said the following about his lifelong work: "I have lived in the pursuit of a vision . . . [namely,] to see in imagination the society that is to be created, where individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them." What a wonderfully ethical society Mr. Russell envisioned. Yet I find his moral activism rather odd, for Bertand Russell was an ardent atheist.

It is not that I think it strange for an atheist to long for an ethical world where people are benevolent to their fellow man. As we have seen, all people—whether they are believers in God or not—possess a sense of morality that compels them to believe that human beings should rise above the behavior of animals. Just like theists, atheists affirm that people should be guided by humane goodness rather than by bestial passion. But the oddity of Russell's grand vision is the fact that he, like all atheists, speaks of moral values as if they were objective truths that all human beings are obligated to follow. He decries the immorality of selfishness, hatred and bigotry as if they were intrinsic evils that ought to be shunned. Yet the logical and necessary consequence of a denial of God is that moral principles can no longer be viewed as possessing objective validity. Let me explain further what I mean.

If the Bible's worldview is correct and we are created by a moral God, then our compulsion to argue for certain values as being inherently right and universally binding is a compulsion that has a rational basis: namely, a supreme, moral Being who created us to be like him, and who gave us rationality and the capacity to recognize and make moral choices.

Atheism, on the other hand, cannot ground morality upon anything save the subjective feeling of the individual, or at best the subjective feeling of society (a group of individuals). This means that if atheism is correct, our values are really nothing more than arbitrary determinations reflecting personal taste. In and of themselves, they carry no moral weight. According to the atheist's worldview, our consciences may tell us that some behaviors are intrinsically right and others are intrinsically wrong—but this reflects only how we feel, not how things really are. In short, a universe without God means that objective morality is a sham.

A Walking Contradiction

How does atheism explain the existence of the human conscience? In the only way that it can explain it. Atheists tell us that our conscience is the product of chance evolutionary development. The guilt that a person feels if he takes advantage of the weak or harms the innocent is but an evolved trait, one peculiar to our species. Like an opposable thumb and the ability to walk erect, our "sense of ought" is a happenstance of evolution that assists us in successfully adapting to our environment. Morality proves useful in preventing homo sapiens from killing off one another and discontinuing the species, but it is merely utilitarian and it does not reflect a true, absolute good. This is the atheist's explanation of things. It's the only explanation he's got.

There is an inevitable consequence to this naturalistic, Godless worldview—a hidden thorn on the atheist's rose. If our moral sense is nothing more than an evolved feeling, then our perception of moral principles as having objectively validity is a false perception. Without God, human moral values become subjective and arbitrary, devoid of any logical reason for being treated as inherently binding upon ourselves or anyone else. Are atheists willing to live as if ethical standards are just a matter of personal taste?

In the atheist's world, Osama bin Ladin and the al Qaeda terrorists violated no objective moral standard when they slammed two airplanes into the Twin Towers. Neither did Timothy McVeigh when he killed 168 people in the Oklahoma City bombing and dismissed the little children in the building at the time as "collateral damage." In the atheist's world, Adolf Hitler did not violate any absolute moral principle when he slaughtered six million Jews in the Nazi death camps. For an atheist there can be nothing really evil about any of these acts, because "evil" implies an objective moral standard and that is something atheism disallows. If there is no God, then human beings are—and will always be—nothing more than animals. Any feeling inside ourselves that says we ought to rise above our animalistic passions is a mirage.

Yet atheists blithely ignore all of this and go right on condemning the evil of racism and bigotry and the mistreatment of the under-privileged—often with as much fervor as any Bible-thumping evangelist. The atheist simply ignores the incompatibility between his worldview and the way of life he advocates. Bertrand Russell espoused a philosophy that necessarily negated the possibility of objective moral standards, yet he still preached the moral goal of a "perfect world [where] every sentient being would be to every other the object of the fullest love, compounded of delight, benevolence, and understanding inextricably blended." After Russell's death, his daughter wrote in her book, *My Father Bertrand Russell,* that he had recognized the inconsistency of his position and acknowledged the absence of a logical basis for his moral vision.

Atheists are walking contradictions. They cannot live as if people really are the amoral animals their worldview dictates them to be. Atheists long for a better, more moral world, but they reject the only grounds upon which it can truly exist. This inconsistency is the Achille's heel of atheism.