

NATURAL ETHICS

What is the ultimate basis for ethical human conduct?

Postmodernism's answer is that there is no ultimate basis. Our behavior is simply guided by the values and mores of our particular culture. A universal, culture-free basis for ethics is impossible. Each culture creates its own moral standards and laws. Cultures may clash because their values and morals differ.

Both our legal and criminal justice systems are based on this view.

Natural ethics finds the ultimate basis for ethical conduct in "natural laws" or a "natural order" inherent in the workings of the universe. It is distinct from *ethical relativism*, which regards ethics as a construction of human culture, and *consequential ethics*, which assigns value to human conduct based

on good consequences. One of the best-known proponents of natural ethics was Thomas Aquinas, who proposed that the foundation of ethics lay in the rational order of the universe established by God. According to Aquinas, humans were free to participate in that rational order—or to go against it—based on whether their conduct was rational or irrational. Aquinas then took some pains to define the nature of “rational” conduct (Murphy, 2008).

In modern times natural ethics has fallen out of favor. Ethics is no longer based on universal principles inherent in the cosmos but rather on some form of social utility. Human societies make up their own ethical conventions in order to maintain social order and cohesiveness. What we “should” do is based on our society’s conventions of socially adaptive behavior, codified in our society’s set of laws. There

are no universal ethical principles apart from a given culture's particular set of norms.

Unconditional Love: An Inherent Attribute of the Universe

Natural ethics—a viewpoint which may be centuries in the making-- restores a universal and spiritual foundation to ethics. The basis for “right” conduct is found neither in human convention (ethical relativism) nor in theological views such as those of Aquinas.

Instead, the universal principle of unconditional love—or compassion—becomes the basis for human behavior across cultures. Furthermore, unconditional love is not merely a human sentiment but understood to be *inherent to the workings of the Cosmos*. This is only possible if “Cosmos” is not merely the physical universe but an intelligently ordered, conscious field of potential—a conscious order that includes unconditional love as an inherent aspect.

Unconditional love is a universal value that appears to transcend culture. All religions emphasize the fundamental importance of unconditional love as a basis for ethical conduct. From the first two Commandments of the Old Testament to Buddhist injunctions to act with compassion and lovingkindness, unqualified love (epitomized in the Greek concept of *agape*) is the principle that seems to stand above all others in governing our behavior toward our fellow human beings. In our actions toward others, the operative question, from a spiritual standpoint, is always “What is the most loving thing to do?” Certainly in some instances this may require what has been called “tough love”—the setting of a limit or boundary to protect others from harm or to protect someone from harming himself. To be sure, the “most loving thing to do” may sometimes require taking a firm stand rather than allowing oneself to be abused or to be a doormat.

In general, though, it is widely thought that the principle of unconditional love “should” guide our behavior. A majority of the world’s religions go further and believe unconditional love is a *fundamental attribute of the Godhead*. Buddha exhibited the Godhead or nirvana through his perfect compassion; Jesus exhibited the Godhead through his perfect love. Pure, unconditional love is, at the very least, a major aspect/archetype of Divinity, along with perfect truth, beauty, peace, and joy. Many would say it is the most fundamental aspect of Divinity. Mystics such as Meister Eckhart have said that the entire Universe would fall apart if it were not for the Love of God (Eckhart, 2005).

Most religions believe that we each contain a spark or element of God within the deepest part of our being. Jesus said that the “Kingdom of God is within” each of us. The Hindu concept of Atman or Self implies

the same thing. In Buddhism, beyond the self-concept or ego-self is the *One* (the unity of all things). So we are left with the following syllogism: If perfect love is a fundamental aspect of God, and the deepest, most fundamental aspect of our being is identical with God, then it is within our innermost nature to be perfectly loving.

Unconditional Love as the Basis of Ethics

While conventional ethics may view unconditional love as an external standard to live up to, spirituality regards it as an innate potential within our innermost being. The more we are able to align ourselves with that place of perfect love deep within ourselves, the more we will *naturally* be inclined to act in a loving way.

This can be summed up simply: *the ultimate basis for ethical conduct is just to be who we truly are, in our*

very innermost being. If we strive to bring ourselves into alignment with the Divine within, through spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, ritual, and worship, we will embrace Divine love and naturally act in a loving way toward others—as well as toward ourselves. The one exception to this is instances where we have been legitimately wronged and seek *justice*. Justice may be sought in some instances in order to restore self-respect, self-dignity (and ultimately self-love) in those situations where we have been hurt, abused, or taken advantage of by the ignorant actions of others. Thus we need a legal system, which is always culture-based and imperfect, but nonetheless at least exists for the purpose maintaining justice among human beings in their dealings with one another. Justice is a necessity in maintain social cohesion within societies, but it does not stand as an ultimate principle embedded in the Cosmos.

The point of this essay is to suggest that *ultimate* basis for ethics lies *not* in humanly devised standards. Nor is it relative to culture. Different cultures may have somewhat different values and standards regarding human behavior, but they all share the basic value of cultivating love and compassion toward others. This is expressed in the fact that every religion throughout the world has its own variation of the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). The ultimate basis for ethics is simply to express unconditional love by being who we truly are.

Being who we truly are, aligning with Spirit within, generally *feels good*. Ultimately it feels better than just about anything else. Beneath all of our ego goals and aims, and all of the fear, anger, prejudice, and narrow- mindedness based on cultural and familial conditioning, all of us *want* to live and express our

innermost nature, to live in attunement with the Spirit within. So the highest form of action—the most ethical way to proceed in any situation—is not a matter of what we *should* do but is simply to act with love, which at the deepest level is what we *want* to do anyway (although we might not be aware of this when we are coming from a more superficial ego perspective).

Conclusion

In sum, to act ethically toward our fellow human beings is simply to be and do what we want to do at the deepest, spiritual level of our being. The ego might cajole us otherwise, since it often acts out of fear, hurt, avarice, envy, self-righteousness, and a sense of competition rather than cooperation. But in our heart of hearts, the most ethical way to behave toward others (and ourselves) is just to express

unconditional love, *which is completely natural when we act from a place of authenticity.*

The prescription “*Ought*” ultimately reduces to the existential truth of “*is.*” If we are living from our inner spiritual truth, there are no “oughts” or “shoulds” to which we need subscribe. Rather, we simply enact, in our everyday actions, the forgiveness, tolerance, and love of the Christ, or the compassion and lovingkindness of the Buddha. As humanity moves toward a future where greater cooperation among all peoples is increasingly needed (to deal with global trends such as climate change, overpopulation, and nuclear proliferation), each of us can choose to become a force for peace by embodying the innate compassion that is our essence.

References

Eckhart, Meister. *Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Held Nothing*. Reprint Edition. New York: New Directions Books, 2005.

Murphy, Mark. *The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring, 2008.