

Where Does Morality Come From?

“Where Does Morality Come From?” is a common question these days. Some people think that this is a new question asked just in recent years. But on 17 August 1941 Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) published a book titled “Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead.” In his book he defined morality that many today believe is correct.

“What is morality in any given time or place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like, and immorality is what they dislike.”¹

IMPLICIT PROBLEM DEFINING MORALITY. His definition of morality implicitly says that morality is never actually morality. He tells us that definition is not stable. Tomorrow is not today. Now why did he choose this definition of morality? The obvious answer is that he concluded it was a good or a correct definition and was worthy of being published. In fact, he used moral judgment to define morality. But maybe tomorrow his definition will not be a good one. Does that mean that his moral definition was good or bad? When I wrote this, I was wondering what moral judgment you, the reader, might have about his use of moral judgment to create his moral definition?

Yet, his moral definition is only one definition among a flurry of other attempted refinements. For example, one writer who was sharing his personal journey into trying to understand morality crafted another refinement. He said,

“Today, much of the discourse is centered around the two most well-known paradigms: classical theism and atheism. The journey in this article, reflecting my own journey, attempts to cast off prejudices and seek the truth.”²

I thought the author’s approach to creating a definition of morality was interesting. This author planned to “cast off prejudices and seek the truth.” Apparently, the author did not

realize that his or her own morality would influence his definition of morality. The author wanted to “cast off prejudices.” The author appeared to believe that prejudice is bad. Maybe what this author thinks is prejudice is actually not prejudice by Whitehead’s



definition. Why did the second author publish this definition of morality? Did he or she conclude that the definition was good or bad? Is using one’s moral judgment to define morality, moral? Now think about that for a few minutes. What is your moral judgment? If morality is not stable and is always

¹ John Bartlett. Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations. Little, Brown and Company. 2002. p. 625..

² KidSpirit. “Where Does Morality Come From.” Huffpost.com. Dec 06, 2017.

evolving, how can we be sure that the definition of morality is moral?

Another person ventured to refine the definition of morality and made this interesting comment.

Morality is the assessment as to what helps towards that goal, and what detracts from that goal. No supernatural beings required.

The biggest struggle, when it comes to discussing morality, is defining what it is we're talking about. What is the purpose of morality? What is it for? Is it just blindly following a set of rules?

That's obedience, not morality.³

He or she had the same problem as the previous writer. I noticed the word "blindly." I ask you, was that a moral judgment? What is your moral judgment? Did you notice the author's statement implicitly assumed a standard of right and wrong, "No supernatural beings required"? This reminds us of a basic problem in defining morality. Is it moral to use one's morality to define morality? Is the process itself tainted by the very thing we are trying to define? The objective truth is that any definition of morality requires a standard of morality! The creation of any such definition involves a moral journey. Man cannot escape the moral definition that God has placed within him. Man cannot objectively discuss morality.

FLAWED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MORALITY. Some years ago, I had an interesting discussion with a man about morality. Eventually, he said that he did not believe a moral standard existed. I told him that I believed there was an absolute moral standard in the universe. After a while he said that he and his girlfriend were going to take a trip to one of the mountains that weekend and camp together. So, I asked him how he would feel if I murdered his girlfriend. Quickly, he told me that would be wrong. I noticed his moral standard. I replied that his response is a universal moral standard. I said that almost everyone seeks to remain alive. It is the rare person who wants to die. Almost universally, everyone believes murder is wrong. It is a universal moral standard that is embedded in your conscience and mine.

Some atheists argue that there is no moral standard, but then claim the God of the Old Testament is evil because He

had people killed. Such conflicting statements obviously reveal that each atheist is using a moral standard to reach his or her moral conclusion about God. But a consistent concept of no moral standard would not claim the God of the Old Testament was evil. Could it be that the God of the Old Testament is good and the atheist is wrong? Does it not depend upon the definition of what is moral? What an interesting idea!

The truth is that everyone operates with an implicit, internal moral standard to define morality. It is embedded within us. God has told us in Romans 2:14-15 that He has written a moral standard into our conscience. Here is the passage,

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 . . . Romans 2:14-15

The passage says that God's moral law has been embedded into our conscience as a moral standard. As a result, our conscience either accuses us or defends our actions. We use that in every evaluation of what is good or bad, right or wrong, or superior or inferior. God says in 1 Timothy 4:2 that our conscience can be damaged so that it does operate as it should.

. . . seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron . . . 1 Timothy 4:2

A damaged conscience no longer operates as it once did. God tells us this can occur as the result of sin, so the consciences of some people do not operate very well. The point is: there is an absolute moral standard embedded into our conscience and it can be damaged. Then people do not behave as they should. God's moral standard is what we use to make value judgments. Even the atheist unknowingly is using his damaged, embedded moral standard to condemn the God who gave it to him or her. He or she just does not understand why God had some people killed because he or she is not asking the right questions in order to learn the reason. Maybe they are too eager to find fault with God. I have wondered, are they trying to escape from God by wrongly using His absolute moral standard to

³ "Where does morality come from, if not God?" Atheist FAQ Answers.

condemn Him? Imagine using God's embedded, but damaged standard of morality to redefine His absolute standard of morality. Is that moral? Do you think that is objective and wise?

Instead of using God's moral standard to argue for no accountability, sinful man should seek God's forgiveness and obtain peace with Him. Then people can discover true morality. If you would like to learn how to be at peace with God and live with Him forever, visit Searching For God at NeverThirsty.org.