

**SECULAR ETHICS IN CIVIL SOCIETY****Mahadevagouda<sup>1</sup> & Ghunavanti C. Sangati<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, SVM Arts, Science and Commerce College, Ilkal.<sup>2</sup>Librarian, Department of Library and Information Center, S.R.Kanthi College of Education, Ilkal.**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18839776>****ABSTRACT:**

Ethics are not absolute in a sense that they are independent of society; they are an invention of human beings. Every invention has its purpose and the purpose of ethics is to provide a stable standard of interpersonal behavior so that society can function smoothly and people can interact in a productive and cooperative way. Human beings are basically social animals so this fulfills a deep instinct and acts as a survival mechanism (since humans survive better through cooperation). Does this mean that ethics are meaningless?

**KEYWORDS:**

Ethics, Secular, Society, Religions, Non-Violence, Morality.

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**Introduction:**

Secular ethics is a branch of moral philosophy in which ethics is based solely on human faculties such as logic, reason or moral intuition, and not derived from supernatural revelation or guidance—the source of ethics in many religions. Secular ethics refers to any ethical system that does not draw on the supernatural, such as humanism, secularism and free thinking.

Secular ethical systems comprise a wide variety of ideas to include the normativity of social contracts, some form of attribution of intrinsic moral value, intuition-based deontology, cultural moral relativism, and the idea that scientific reasoning can reveal objective moral truth (known as science of morality). Secular ethics frameworks are not always mutually exclusive from theological values. For example, the Golden Rule or a commitment to non-violence, could be supported by both religious and

secular frameworks. Secular ethics systems can also vary within the societal and cultural norms of a specific time period.

**Meaning/Definition:**

Secular ethics is a branch of moral philosophy in which ethics is based solely on human faculties such as logic, reason or moral intuition, and not derived from supernatural revelation or guidance—the source of ethics in many religions.

Ethics are meaningful because we give them meaning. In modern society, humanity is often belittled with phrases like “he’s only human” and with beliefs that place human beings in the position of being helpless and needy. The pyramids need not have been built by space aliens, they were built by Human beings with hard work, intelligence, engineering, and ingenuity. What people fail to realize is that things that are created are real too, just as with airplanes and bird nests and we can create things. Although not the only way things can exist, creating is one event that brings things from non-existence to existence. Since we created ethics, ethics necessarily exists. “Meaning” is a useless word unless it refers to who it has meaning for. Things that we create can have meaning for us.

**Importance:**

Ethics are important because of the reasons I mentioned earlier. Ethical behavior is crucial to the cooperation (and therefore both individual and collective survival) of humanity. This was obvious the first time two Humans decided to help each other. Individually speaking, ethical behavior encourages others to be the same toward us, it makes for good relationships which we can enjoy and benefit from, and most of all it makes us feel good about ourselves and provides a stable, psychologically well-balanced, and healthy mind. This is because Humans have an underlying instinct for empathy and need for mutual love (a survival mechanism for any social animal).

**Categories of ethics:**

As mentioned above, propositions regarding universally preferable behavior fall into three general categories – positive, negative and neutral. To help us separate aesthetics from ethics, let us start by widening these categories to encompass any behavior that can be subjected to an ethical analysis.

**These seven categories are:**

1. It is good (universally preferable and enforceable through violence, such as “don’t murder”).
2. It is aesthetically positive (universally preferable but not enforceable through violence, such as “politeness” and “being on time”).
3. It is personally positive (neither universally preferable nor enforceable, such as a predilection for eating ice cream).
4. It is neutral, or has no ethical or aesthetic content, such as running for a bus.
5. It is personally negative (predilection for not eating ice cream).
6. It is aesthetically negative (“rudeness” and “being late”).
7. It is evil (universally proscribed) (“rape”).

**Principles of Secular Ethics**

Despite the width and diversity of their philosophical views, secular ethicists generally share one or more principles:

- Human beings, through their ability to empathize, are capable of determining ethical grounds.
- The well-being of others is central to ethical decision-making.
- Human beings, through logic and reason, are capable of deriving normative principles of behavior.
- This may lead to a behavior preferable to that propagated or condoned based on religious texts. Alternatively, this may lead to the advocacy of a system of moral principles that a broad group of people, both religious and non-religious, can agree upon.
- Human beings have the moral responsibility to ensure that societies and individuals act based on these ethical principles.
- Societies should, if at all possible, advance from a less ethical and just form to a more ethical and just form.

**Objectives of Secular Ethics****Secular Ethics – Introduction to Moral Theory**

Whether Secular Ethics or Theistic Ethics, Max Hocutt nails the issue: “The fundamental question of ethics is, who makes the rules? God or men? The theistic answer is that God makes them. The humanistic answer is that men make them. This distinction between theism and

humanism is the fundamental division in moral theory.”

### **Secular Ethics – A Science of Ethics**

When it comes to Secular Ethics, Humanists are working toward a “science of ethics” specifically in keeping with their beliefs in atheism, naturalism, and evolution. Kurtz, in *The Humanist Alternative*, calls for Secular Humanism to be “interpreted as a moral point of view.” Indeed, in the preface to *Humanist Manifestoes I & II*, Kurtz defines Humanism “as a philosophical, religious, and moral point of view.” Later in *Humanist Manifesto 2000* Kurtz redefines Humanism as “an ethical, scientific, and philosophical outlook that has changed the world.”

### **Secular Ethics – Foundation of Humanist Ethics**

When debating Secular Ethics, the differences among Humanists result largely from their disagreement over the foundation of morality. Kurtz believes in “a limited number of basic values and principles,” but he does not point to a specific foundation for ethical principles, saying only that they are “naturalistic and empirical phenomena.”

The realization of this concept is a component of reaching the highest level of moral maturity. In his book, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism*, Paul Kurtz reasonably outlines the general stages of moral development. I will paraphrase them here...

**Infantile amorality:** Instant gratification with no sense of right or wrong. Mostly represented by infants, psychotics, and some of the gravely handicapped.

**Obedience to rules:** Obedience to commandments based on a system of rewards and punishments, much like animals are trained. Every child must go through this stage and, sadly, much religious morality never gets past this level.

**Moral feelings for others:** The development of an internalized empathy for the needs of others. A normal progression of healthy Human social instincts, it may flourish or be muffled by upbringing and/or psychological defect. Nevertheless, an important basis for the beginnings of true moral development.

**The ethics of self-interest:** Adherence to a moral code only to the extent that it yields self-gains. Breaking of moral decencies may occur if one can escape detection. We all experience such temptations, and some

do it to excess. Although this level represents a serious problem with selfishness and a sad lack of empathy, integrity, and social perspective, formulating some certain choices on the basis of self-interest does not, in itself, imply a lack of moral concern for others and therefore would not be meant as a description of this level.

Union of moral feeling and rational self-interest: A genuine feeling of empathy and loving concern for others to the extent that it fits within feelings of self-interest. Here altruism is planted in one's cognitive and affectional attitudes.

Humanistic ethics: A fully developed ethical system that involves a concern for the broader community on a more universalistic basis. There is devotion to general ethical principles, not to be broken without just cause, an inward feeling of moral sympathy and a desire to not needlessly hurt other human beings, reason is used in guiding one's conduct in terms of the moral excellences and will involve concern for both the individual and the whole, and ethical considerations to the whole of humanity will exceed allegiances to one's inner circle, smaller groups, etc.

In a similar organization to moral maturity models, I often present four general answers to the question of, "Why should I be good?"

**FIRST REASON – SELF INTEREST:** Given the fact that we live in a society made up of human beings like ourselves, it should be obvious that people will not respond well to being lied to, stolen from, or harmed. If you think you can get away with evil deeds undetected, ask yourself if you've ever done anything long term without making a mistake of some kind eventually. If you lie, for example, people will tell each other that you are a liar and not to be trusted. Whether we admit it or not, we all need the support and cooperation of others to get along in the world so the social consequences of treating others badly are bad enough. To add to that, however, there are often legal consequences for more extreme behaviors. The risks to your reputation, possessions, and even freedom make unethical behavior extremely unwise and costly. You may think you'll never be caught but, in the long run especially, that is very unlikely.

**SECOND REASON – SELF PRIDE:** Believe it or not, most people like goodness and hate evil – including evil people! With the exception of severely psychotic persons, most people dislike evil, even when they themselves are committing it. Hating evil is not really a matter

of choice, that's just human nature. This is why many criminals do things which are self-destructive. Deep down, even if unconscious of it, they hate themselves. People who lead unethical lives ultimately lose respect for themselves and become very unhappy. But when we do what is right we nearly always feel a great sense of self-worth – even if no one ever knows about what we did. This higher sense of development is what justifies being good, even when no one is looking.

**THIRD REASON – EMPATHY:** Humans are, by nature, social animals. Like many other social animals, humans normally have the instinctive emotion of empathy. Sometimes the ability to experience empathy can be dramatically suppressed by early abuse or neglect. However, in a well-rounded individual, empathic emotions cause us to involuntarily experience the emotions of those we see around us. This is one reason why movies and books are so much fun – we automatically put ourselves in the place of the characters, experiencing joy or sadness as they do. If empathy is nurtured properly in a child, s/he will grow up to be an adult who will feel guilty when causing harm to others and feel happy when helping others. This emotion can be a powerful driving force to being a good person. In cases where empathy has been suppressed, long and difficult counseling or other psychological measures may be effective. Religion has been used as a tool to help reform such people but secular or philosophic counseling has also been effective. Furthermore, religion only works if the person believes it. The placebo effect of religion does not in any way support or suggest the truthfulness of any of its beliefs. There are many ways to help people reform without the need to promote superstitions.

**FOURTH REASON – GREATER GOOD:** Once a person has fully understood the first two reasons and is under the influence of the third, a natural tendency is for them to become more concerned about the greater good of the world. At the highest level of moral maturity, individuals see themselves as part of a larger whole. This doesn't mean they live for the good of that whole necessarily, it only means they are aware of it and often are concerned as to how all of our individual actions “add up.” The contributions we make to others around us in the world are part of what gives meaning and continuity to our lives. A fully developed moral person will get enjoyment from such contributions. Some may scoff at this reason as not being of interest to those who might ask why

they should be good. However, it should be noted that, for many who have become more sensitive to moral issues, the first reason (self-interest) is often of less concern in ethical decision-making.

As I said earlier, each of these reasons may only be important to a person at a certain stage of his or her life. Some people never reach full moral maturity. Often, it is the authoritarian and simplistic nature of much religious doctrine that suppresses moral development, holding its members to such a childish level of morality, that they cannot comprehend why a person would be good without the threat of punishment or reward in an alleged afterlife. This is similar to a third grader wondering why an adult attending junior college should do his or her homework, since there is not an ever-present parent forcing them to. In general, you will notice a direct correlation between wisdom and goodness. The fact is that ethics are what's best for us, and it takes no supernatural sanction to justify this inescapable conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

Because Secular Humanists disagree with each other so often, defining Secular Ethics as a conceptual whole is problematic. To remain consistent with their theology and philosophy, most Secular Humanists take the side of ethical relativism, but it remains difficult to standardize what exactly that entails. Because Secular Humanists are aware of their logical inconsistencies and the dangers inherent in an ethics of relativism, their inability to make ethical assertions may be a mixed blessing. For example, Paul Kurtz insists that Secular Humanists accept the Golden Rule and even the biblical injunction to “accept the aliens within our midst, respecting their differences.” Kurtz likewise insists that Secular Humanists “ought to tell the truth, keep promises, be honest, sincere, beneficent, reliable, dependable, show fidelity, appreciation, gratitude, be fair-minded, just, tolerant, should not steal, injure, maim or harm other persons.” Christians have no difficulty agreeing with him in these dogmas or values. What Kurtz and his fellow Secular Humanists fail to address, however, is why these values are worth defending as moral declarations. Soliciting the thoughts of non-activists, the efficacy of recruitment efforts and resonance of movement frames can be gauged through the reactions of those whom the movement is attempting to reach: the uninitiated. Ultimately, the question is raised: is it preferable to get noticed in a negative way or not at all? The findings constitute a cautionary tale for

social movement organizations that employ incendiary language or images in their recruitment efforts.

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