

# Good Without God?

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### 1: Introduction

One of the hottest questions in contemporary debates between atheists and secular humanists and their theist adversaries, is the assertion that 'We can be good without God.' In other words, there is no necessary connection between ethics and religion. Moral precepts and moral behavior do not require divine sanction to provide effective guidance for our lives and, indeed, they may be better off without it. Most famously nowadays, these claims are made by the loudly belligerent 'new atheists' represented by Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens as well as serious rational philosophers like Paul Kurtz, Corliss Lamont and humanist chaplain at Harvard, Greg Epstein. However, they are neither the only ones, the first nor even the most intellectually acute. Let us not forget the 'old atheists' like Feuerbach and his theory that 'God' is an externalized image of our highest human ideals; Nietzsche and his concept that God is dead; Freud and his psycho-analytic theory that 'God' is the outward projection of the child's internalized father image; Marx and his view that God was a fairy-tale by which the exploitive ruling classes ensured obedience from the enslaved lower classes and Sartre who rejects God as a suppressor of human freedom.

They, too, asked 'Can we be good without God?' and answered it affirmatively in terms of their theories about the supposed nature of God and human nature. Humanists or secular humanists also insist that we not only can be good without God. It should be noted that while all secular humanists are atheists, not all atheists are necessarily humanists. An atheist, for example, can be a hard skeptic who doubts all scientific and ethical claims or an existentialist like Sartre who claims we devise our ethics and identity as we go along. There are also religious – mainly Catholic – integral humanists best represented by Jacques Maritain. That said, atheists and secular humanists both believe that "man is the center and the sanction"[1] meaning that humankind is our only concern and that the morality of all actions must be explained in terms of human benefits. There can be no appeal to a transcendental being i.e. God to provide answers to our difficulties or to transcendental, i.e. spiritual benefits. Paul Kurtz, one of the foremost representatives of contemporary humanism says:

The question for us is whether we can develop ethical principles and values that are secular in meaning and content and entirely independent of supernatural sources.[2]

Greg Epstein makes the same point in the form of a question: “Can you rationally justify your unconditional adherence to timeless values without implicitly invoking the existence of God?”[3] His answer, of course, is affirmative but his question points to an aspect of the ‘good without God’ issue that is often overlooked in the rush for answers: the need for rational justification for our supposed good deeds. Without such rational justification, i.e. without a coherent ethical world-view to guide us, how can we even know what a good deed is? Indeed, doing them will ultimately be a matter of luck. If we do not know where we are going, it is largely a matter of luck if we get there. Furthermore, without rational justifications we have no way of showing that an action is actually good instead of a mere personal preference or source of good feelings an impulse or a quest for personal advantage.

One possible answer to this dilemma is that we ‘just know’ what is right. Despite having some illustrious proponents such as Mencius, Adam Smith and David Hume, moral sense theory has an obvious, inherent defect: there is so much variety in moral sense among people, that it is impossible to establish a standard by which to make ethical judgment and without that ethics are reduced to, at best, to preferences. In addition, human beings change and there is no guarantee that their moral sense remains unchanged – which leads to problems of consistency. Instead of a moral sense, the Baha’i Writings espouse the idea that humans have a potentiality for making moral decisions that must be awakened and guided by the Manifestation and His teachings. He arouses our “spiritual susceptibilities.”[4]

It is clear to humanist thinkers that the question of being good without God involves more than just asking ‘Can non-believers do nice or advantageous things for other people?’ The answer is obviously affirmative. But this only leads to a further question: ‘What acts are nice or advantageous to other people?’ For example, giving in to a two-year old’s temper tantrum may be nice but it is certainly not advantageous to the child’s maturing process. Telling a nasty lie to a co-worker may be nice for the co-worker and may be even advantageous to us, but it is still a nasty lie that most people would regard as immoral. The conclusion is inescapable: doing good with or without God requires an understanding of what true good is and that can only be decided either developing or adopting a particular world-view which includes a standard by which to make judgments. Without such a standard it is actually impossible to justify an action as ‘morally good.’ Indeed, without such a standard, ethics cannot exist except as an expression of personal

preferences at a given moment. No great prescience is needed to see this is a prescription for anarchy and nihilism.

Let us re-cap our main point to now: understanding the question ‘Can we be good without God?’ requires us to recognize that ethics is more than doing good things for others because we do not know what is or is not really good without a supporting world-view to serve as a guide and standard for judgment. A baby cannot do good or evil precisely for that reason. Thus, the question, ‘Can we be good without God?’ cannot be answered by simply by saying that non-believers can do good things for others because how do we – and they – know what they did is really good? This is because an act, a deed, is a natural fact and the judgment that it is good is a value. Moreover, it is value we regard as obligatory. As we shall see in more detail below, in the humanist, i.e. empirical world-view there is nothing in the act itself that necessitates us to value it in a certain way, e.g. good or evil. Values are judgments that we bring to acts. Doing so requires standards and values that cannot be extracted from natural facts. As Hume put it, we cannot get from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought.’[5] This is one of the fatal weaknesses for all atheist and humanist ethics.

Having seen the need for such a standard, Epstein states:

Our ethics come from human needs and interests. What do humans need to flourish? As the Humanist Manifesto puts it, “Ethical values are derived from human needs and interest as tested by experience. Humanists ground values in human welfare shaped by human circumstances, interests, and concerns . . .”[6]

Before we proceed, it is important to note that Epstein, Kurtz and Lamont all make a curious omission in their appeals to ethics based on human “needs and interest”: they ignore the universal need for certainty in their ethical codes, for something that, unlike other humans, we can rely on as guidance in their morality. The universal spread of religion or religious substitutes (“irreligion”[7]) illustrates this need, as does the persistence of religion in various forms even in an allegedly ‘scientific age.’ This need is also reflected in the title of Baha’u’llah’s text, The Book of Certitude.

In the foregoing quotation, Epstein tries to find the basis for ethics within the limits of the empirical world – but that is exactly the problem. If there is no bridge over the chasm between

facts and values, how do we know which needs and subsequent obligations are actually moral? Can we simply identify 'need' and 'moral obligation'? And how do we know we should – morally speaking – fulfill those needs? And in what way? Should we just give a sandwich to a man begging on a street-corner – or should we make him do something for us? The answers to these and other moral questions are not evident from the fact of needs alone.

Because in the empirical world there is no objective standard by which to judge, we are left with some form of ethical subjectivism or preferentialism. All we have as guides to ethics are personal and/or collective preferences. This leads us back to the question, 'Are ethics no more than personal and/or collective preferences and if so, what does that do to the whole concepts of ethics?' Epstein is aware of this problem and bravely declares:

Not only do we not need "objective" values to condemn heinous crimes and uphold ethical standards, we cannot even be confident that objective values exist.[8]

In other words, humanist ethics exemplify ethical subjectivism by abandoning the quest for objective ethical standards. Without such an objective standard, how do we know which crime is "heinous"? The Soviet Gulags are "heinous" to us, but to loyal Stalinists, they were supremely moral necessities because they served to establish a better world for all Russians and all humanity. Without objective values, it's only a matter of preference as to whether Beria or Mother Teresa is the more moral person.

As we shall observe throughout this paper, atheism and humanism are neither internally self-sufficient nor coherent. Their lack of internal self-sufficiency results from their empirical world-view in which they lack the internal resources to bridge the logical gaps between 'is' and 'ought' and between fact and value. We might disapprove of theism's solution to those problems but the fact remains, it has an actual solution within his world-view. This allows him to form a coherent ethical theory whereas the atheist and humanist cannot.

Naturally, we may ask if this makes any difference when it comes to individual acts of charity and assistance. A sandwich given to a hungry man is still a sandwich whether given by an atheist or a theist. That is correct as far as it goes but as we shall see in our exploration of the Baha'i Writings, it does not go very far. For now let us merely observe that even if at the personal level there is no difference, the same is not true at the collective or social level. The implicit philosophies that inform governments and constitutions have an enormous impact on the values and ethics, attitudes, practices, laws, ideals and standards, individuality, and in the manner in which things are done. This is how cultural and social differences arise.

In the following discussion, we shall refer to 'atheists' and 'humanists', two groups which cannot necessarily be conflated. Humanists are atheists, but not all atheists are humanists. With the exception of integral humanists who base their beliefs on the work of Jacques Maritain and who tend to be Roman Catholics, humanists reject any morality based on revelation and insist that all ethics must come from human nature. Some atheists may be humanists but others can be communists i.e. dialectical materialists, Randian objectivists or various kinds of moral relativists, skeptics or even nihilists. The one thing they have in common is the explicit rejection of God and revealed ethics.

## 2: Why Is This a Problem for Bahá'ís?

For Baha'is, the assertion that we can be good without God is challenging for at least two reasons. First and most obvious is that the claim that we can be good without God challenges the need for the Manifestations of God to guide humankind through its material and spiritual evolution. If human reason by itself, is sufficient to develop effective ethical codes, there is no need for God or any Manifestation. From this it follows that divinely based ethics are, at best, part of a past we must leave behind.

However, according to 'Abdu'l-Baha:

It is evident that the holy Manifestations and divine dawning points are necessary, for these blessed and glorious Souls are the foremost Teachers and Educators of mankind, and all human souls are developed through Them by the bounty of the Holy Spirit of God.[9]

Elsewhere he says:

GOD sends Prophets for the education of the people and the progress of mankind. Each such Manifestation of God has raised humanity. They serve the whole world by the bounty of God. The sure proof that they are the Manifestations of God is in the education and progress of the people.[10]

In short, human reason while necessary is not sufficient for humanity's material and spiritual progress. This contradicts the atheist and humanist view that:

human beings possess the power or potentiality of solving their own problems, through reliance primarily upon reason and scientific method applied with courage and vision.[11]

In other words, for atheists and humanists, reason alone is both necessary and sufficient to solve our difficulties including our ethical difficulties. Reason is, in fact, all we have. This leads to the question whether or not ethics depends on religion or can be based on reason alone. We shall discuss this issue below.

The Baha'i Writings also place an enormous emphasis on reason, but they do not believe that reason is both necessary and sufficient[12] especially in regards to ethics. While they do not question the necessity of reason, they deny that it is sufficient to provide humanity with all the knowledge – including ethical knowledge – we require. 'Abdu'l-Baha states that reason is subject to certain limitations insofar as logical argument can lead to contradictory conclusions.[13] Consequently, certainty in our ideas is impossible. Such certainty may come through the Holy Spirit[14] and/or through the Manifestation Who has "essential infallibility." [15] This issue will be discussed below.

Insofar as the Baha'i Writings make both personal and collective moral evolution dependent on the Manifestation and His effects on the world, it is clear that no one has ever been good without

God since no one has ever been without divine guidance. Whether or not people have always accepted this guidance is another matter – but it has always been available. We can see the truth of this in the fact that atheist and humanist ethics are not significantly different from the ethics taught by the Manifestations. Even though they overtly reject this divine revelation, they have absorbed it from their social and cultural surroundings. With additional, newly developed justifications they have adopted these ethical principles simply by living in certain kinds of society. This leads to an interesting distinction about our topic. We may conclude that no one can be good without God or what can claim that no one has been good without God. The first is a statement of principle and the second is a historical claim. Readers will have to choose for themselves which one they prefer.

The second reason Baha'is are challenged by the belief that we can be good without God is the Writing's insistence that knowledge of God is a necessary pre-condition for all completely developed ethical systems and behavior. To understand why, it is first necessary to recognize – as virtually all humans do – that knowledge and intention are necessary aspects of the moral actions we perform. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Baha points out the primacy of knowledge in ethical acts:

Although a person of good deeds is acceptable at the Threshold of the Almighty, yet it is first "to know," and then "to do . . . By the faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds.[16]

No one asserts that a baby can act ethically or unethically because babies lack the knowledge necessary to form an intention. That is why they cannot do evil; they can do injurious or disadvantageous acts by poking a finger in your eye, but no one would describe this act as 'evil.' Similarly, there can be no accidental moral good. If an unexpected arm spasm causes a driver to swerve and, thereby, avoid hitting a sleep-walker wandering on the road, no moral act has been committed. The same holds true for the mugger whose blackjack sends a victim to hospital where a hitherto undetected brain tumor is discovered and removed. The mugger cannot claim to have acted morally because he had neither the necessary knowledge nor intention to do good. Nor is someone committing a moral act when he helps an old lady across the street if his only motive is to calm his own fears of crossing a busy street alone. The act was advantageous to the old lady but it was not a moral act for the helper. In other words, an act may be good or advantageous to others but that by itself does not make the act moral. Consequently, it adds nothing to the moral development or growth of the one who commits it.

The Baha'i Writings recognize this distinction between an act and a moral act when they say, "Work done in the spirit of service is worship." [17] The "spirit of service" – which requires correct knowledge and intention – is what distinguishes mere labor from worship. Shoghi Effendi elaborates:

Every individual, no matter how handicapped and limited he may be, is under the obligation of engaging in some work or profession, for work, especially when performed in the spirit of service, is according to Bahá'u'lláh, a form of worship. It has not only a utilitarian purpose, but has a value in itself, because it draws us nearer to God, and enables to better grasp His purpose for us in this world [18]

According to the Baha'i Writings, correct knowledge and intention actualize the spiritual potential latent in every act. Just as "Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God" [19] so every act has a spiritual potential that can be actualized under the right conditions. One of these is being performed in "the spirit of service" which requires correct knowledge and intentions. Therefore, both the act and the doer are transformed by the actualization of these spiritual potentials. It also becomes clear that there is more to any act than what is empirically observable in regards to either the recipient and the doer. This distinguishes Baha'i ethics from utilitarianism and its offshoot, consequentialism insofar as they are exclusively concerned with the empirical benefits of an act. Considering consequences is necessary but is not sufficient to provide a complete understanding of an ethical act.

Let us now see how this works in the Writings. In regards to the knowledge necessary for good actions, the Baha'i Writings specifically require knowledge of God's Manifestations for an act to be moral in the fullest sense of the word. Baha'u'llah writes:

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this Duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. [20]



Recognition of the Manifestation of God is the “first duty” for one overwhelmingly important reason: without such recognition, our world-view, our ‘map of reality,’ our understanding of the world, ourselves and others, and subsequently, of what is morally good or bad is fatally impaired. This is because the Manifestation of God is, so to speak, the ‘north pole’ by which our comprehension of reality orients itself. That is why Baha’u’llah says “whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray.” They are lost – which is what happens to people who wander the world without a mental-spiritual map of reality, i.e. without even a basic understanding of the ontological anthropological and ethical aspects of reality.[21] Indeed, they are lost even though they are “the author[s] of every righteous deed.” This is easy to illustrate. If you are lost in the woods, even if you do everything right – keeping your feet dry, building a proper lean-to, and trying to send smoke signals – the fact is, you are still lost and there is no guarantee you will be found. No matter how many ‘right’ or “righteous” things you do, the fact that they are good in themselves does not change your situation as lost and the possibility of death. Even good will and good motives cannot change your basic situation.

Indeed, the difficulties go deeper. A person who does not recognize the Manifestation for the age may, from the Baha’i perspective, possess a false or only or incomplete map of reality. Atheists and humanists fall into the first category and believers in previous Manifestations into the second. The latter have some of the truth, but, in light of the Baha’i teaching of progressive revelation, their map is incomplete for this particular age. The goodness of their acts is fully affirmed and cannot be denied but there is a question about whether accidental good deeds have actualized their ethical potential and to what degree. Recall our previous discussion of why babies cannot perform ethical acts because they lack knowledge and intention.

In His foregoing statement, Baha’u’llah asserts that those who recognize the Manifestation for this age “have attained unto all good.” In other words, they have attained the source of “all good” in our world, because the Manifestation the source of ethical guidance for the age in which He appears. Without His guidance, doing good will more a matter of happy accident or partial achievement rather than conscious knowledge since He provides the moral map by which we systematically orient ourselves to what is good. In other words, when we recognize the Manifestation, we attain the pre-condition for a fully actualized moral life. Once again we encounter the concept of degrees of morality, albeit from a Baha’i perspective. Of course, attaining this pre-condition for a fully actualized morality does not mean individual Baha’is are perfect and immune from evil, misunderstanding and/or sheer stupidity.

A brief caveat must be added: because a person has attained the “source of all good” i.e. the pre-condition for a fully actualized moral life does not mean he or she is incapable of bad or even

evil actions. Attaining a pre-condition is not attaining an actuality. Those who have reached this pre-condition must still choose to make ethical decisions, and, in some cases, fail to do so.

One of the logical – but highly controversial – consequences of the foregoing argument is that the good actions performed by disbelievers are deficient or lacking in some way. Their moral acts are not fully actualized and in that sense are incomplete. ‘Abdu’l-Baha confirms this when he states:

If man has not this knowledge [of God], he will be separated from God, and when this separation exists, good actions have not complete effect. This verse . . . signifies only that the foundation is to know God, and the good actions result from this knowledge . . . the blessed verse means that good actions alone, without the knowledge of God, cannot be the cause of eternal salvation, everlasting success, and prosperity, and entrance into the Kingdom of God. [22]

At first glance, ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s statement sounds prejudicial insofar as it suggests that all ethical acts are not equal, indeed, that even the same act committed by two different people do not necessarily have the same ethical value. However, appearances can be deceiving. Consider the following thought-experiment. Two people give a sandwich to a homeless man. Person A drops the sandwich in his lap and says nothing and continues walking. Person B stops, gives the sandwich and says, “You looked hungry so I thought you might like this.” After the homeless man nods, Person B moves on. From an empirical perspective, the acts are identical: they each deliver exactly the same number of measureable calories to a hungry man. The difference lies in the manner of giving i.e. this difference concerns human interest i.e. a willingness to recognize and engage with the person as a person and a declaration of thoughtfulness. Both acts alleviate the man’s hunger which is the material basis for the act, but only one is a complete charitable. Person A’s act is deficient, i.e. it is not a complete act of charity because it fails to express the human dimension inherent in a charitable act vis-à-vis another individual. Person B’s act is more complete because it actualizes the humane elements inherent in charitable acts. This means that Person A’s action is not wrong or bad, but it is incomplete. Of course, it is probable that no moral act can ever be fully complete since humans are imperfect creatures. However, it is clear that there are degrees of completion in moral acts. It may be argued that Person A was too shy or too busy to take more care – but that does not change the incompleteness of the act itself. It helps explain why the act is incomplete but does not mitigate its insufficiency.

Few people would fail to recognize that giving the sandwich is necessary part of the charitable act but that it is not sufficient for the act to be fully charitable. Something is missing in a charitable act that does not speak to the humanity of the recipient that reduces him to a mere receiver of goods. Indeed, such a gift might even be demeaning. (Think of Nietzsche’s warning

about the dangers of pity.) We feel something is wrong with such deeds because we all sense that charity is first and foremost a recognition of the common humanity we share with others and inherently contains that recognition at least in potential. When this potential is not actualized, the charitable act is incomplete.

‘Abdu’l-Baha takes this line of reasoning even farther. According to him, “when this separation[between God and humanity] exists, good actions have not their complete effect.” Just as a charitable act may be complete or incomplete depending on how it is done, a moral act requires the recognition of God because in the last analysis, only God can justify any action as moral or not. As we shall see below, only God can decree any action to be moral or immoral; humans can say an act is convenient or advantageous but convenience and advantage are not moral categories. Harvesting organs from a healthy person to save the lives of ten others who are dying, certainly creates the greatest good or advantage for the greatest number, but few will accept this as ‘moral.’ This is where atheist and humanist ethics fail to establish a logical viable foundation for their ethics: they cannot bridge the gap between the advantageous and the moral. We shall say more about this in the next section.

It is clear that the Baha’i Writings assert that a virtuous act informed by knowledge is different from one that is not. However, this does not mean that a virtuous act performed in ignorance is inherently worthless or bad but, as we seen before they are incomplete insofar as they can only be ‘lucky breaks,’ i.e. accidental in philosophical terminology. This is simple common sense: if you achieve something without knowledge you have just been fortunate enough to come to the right conclusion. It takes no great thought that we cannot leave ethical decisions to luck, which, in turn means that we must be able to justify our ethical acts. This leads to a question: is a morally ‘good’ action performed in ignorance, i.e. without knowledge of its ethical foundations, still a good moral action in the same degree as a moral act performed in the light of knowledge? Does doing good because we ‘felt like it’ have the same degree of moral actualization as doing good with knowledge? In short, does knowledge help determine the ethical quality of an act?

The Baha’i Writings answer affirmatively with universal agreement from all societies. Parents in all societies teach their children moral behavior and explain why certain deeds must be done so that children can do these things intentionally rather than accidentally. They implicitly understand the distinction between performing a moral act in the light of knowledge and intention, and simply offering another persona an advantage. There is also an implicit recognition that it is better for the child to understand why certain acts must be done rather than

practicing ignorant goodness. The internal reason is clear: among other things, understanding and being able to justify its decisions sensitizes and strengthens the child in pursuit of a moral life. This affects outward i.e. social behavior. We cannot allow moral acts to remain accidental, i.e. chance actions, and, therefore, we provide explanations and justifications so that moral actions become thought through and intentional in the future. To leave moral acts to chance undermines the entire social fabric insofar as reliability of moral action is thrown into disarray. The Baha'i Writings, therefore, accept the principle that without meeting the pre-conditions that allow us to justify belief, we are reduced to building ethical beliefs on personal opinion and/or collective custom. Without a solid basis in metaphysics and anthropology ethical principles have no solid foundation and this inevitably weakens our ability to be steadfast and reliable in our commitments because personal opinion and collective custom are highly changeable.

At this point, the question arises, 'Does the obvious difference between ignorant and knowledgeable doers in this case, make any difference to the recipient of the good deed?' After all, a piece of bread is a piece of bread no matter if it comes from an atheist or from a believer. From the perspective of the Baha'i Writings, the difference is immense and important, although not necessarily observable from a materialist-empiricist viewpoint. It must be deduced from the Writings. If offered in the spirit of service to God, the whole act of giving – including the recipient – is connected to or harmonized with God and this leads to spiritual benefits for all. Perhaps there is a further awakening of "spiritual susceptibilities"[23] in the recipient. It seems reasonable to postulate that there is a difference of manner – of ren as Confucianists would say – in the giving by someone who believes the recipient is a spiritual image of God, [24], "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value"[25] and someone with a rational soul and free will who can, therefore, can rise from his situation and, on the other hand, the giving by someone who feels deep compassion and believes poverty is a violation of human dignity as well as human rights laws. The first person understands that the recipient and the act of giving have enormous metaphysical implications and the second does not.

The exact differences in the manner in which the charitable act is given may be difficult to describe but it is difficult to deny their existence. After all, every human action is shaped or informed by our knowledge, beliefs, feelings and world-view. In other words, these four factors inform the manner in which moral actions are done, and the meaning they explicitly and implicitly, consciously and unconsciously convey.

The recognition of God affects the doer and the action in another way. The moral acts of atheists and humanists are purely subjective or at most, sanctioned by collective human opinion and, thereby, and remains psychological. Given their own beliefs, there is nothing but personal and/or

collective human opinion on which to base ethics. Such ethics remain purely subjective and bring with them the problems of all subjective opinions: changeability, doubt and the lack of legitimacy, power and universality (which we shall discuss below). How could that knowledge not affect the manner in which actions are performed and the message which is consciously or unconsciously conveyed?

By contrast, the theist based views may begin subjectively but extends into the objective, metaphysical realm because it seeks its foundation and justification in God. The second is not only based on subjective response but on objective recognition of the divine image and the associated obligations.

### 3: Ethics and Religion

Underlying the foregoing discussion is the question of the relationship between ethics and religion. Are they necessarily related or not? From a Baha'i perspective, one of the consequences of the need to know God is that ethics are ultimately based on religion. Shoghi Effendi states:

The other statement reported to have been made by Dr. Einstein to the effect that the ethical behavior of man 'requires no support from religion' is incompatible with the Bahá'í viewpoint which emphatically stresses the fact that no sound ethics can exist and become effective unless based on revealed religion. To dissociate ethics from religion is to render the former not only void of any firm foundation but without the necessary driving power. [26]

In this statement, Shoghi Effendi answers one of the most basic questions in meta-ethics: 'Do ethics depend on religion?' Or, conversely, 'Can ethics be independent from religion?' The Bahá'í Writings clearly hold that the two are not only intimately connected but also that ethics is dependent on and grows out of religion. In short, ethics depends on religion and without religion, i.e. God or a 'ground of being' is, as we shall see, deficient in some way.

The truth of Shoghi Effendi's statement has long been observed virtual identity between the ethical values upheld by atheists and humanists with those of the world's religions. There is no evidence that atheists and humanists developed these remarkably uniform codes independently instead of absorbing them from the surrounding culture via parental training, education and

social inter-action. In some cases, they may have retro-actively found further justifications for these codes, which is certainly a good thing, but maxims and attitudes have their source in religions of the time. For example, as Charles Taylor points out, individualism is a value that came to the fore in the 18th Century, largely through the work of Herder and Rousseau.[27] However, no great reflection is needed to realize that valuing the individual and his soul was already a prime aspect of Christianity and Judaism, both of which preceded humanism by millennia and in the case of Christianity, dominated European civilization.

On the other hand, atheists and humanists deny any connection between the two but as we shall see, this position is easier to assert than to defend. Paul Kurtz, the foremost contemporary defender of humanism declares that “philosophers have demonstrated the possibility of autonomous ethics in which moral obligations emerge.”[28] By “autonomous ethics,” he means ethics established on their own philosophical foundations rather than being dependent on religion.

When we recall that ethics are about obligations, i.e. things we ought to do, a serious problem arises. Hume, one of the essential empiricists denied the logical basis of all ethics when he declares that an ‘is’ cannot be used to support an ‘ought.’ Just because something ‘is’ the case does not mean it ‘ought’ to be the case, i.e. we cannot draw attain moral obligation from a certain set of facts.[29] In other words, there can be no emerging moral obligations from any set of empirical or natural facts. But if that is the case – and Hume’s logic seems correct – then the ‘gap’ between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ cannot be bridged.

How can we connect the fact that it is advantageous to do something, even at the collective level, to what is morally correct? Moreover, if we claim that it can be bridged, by what means can we do so? For example, it is advantageous for ten sick people to receive the organs of one healthy person who has been sacrificed for them – but few would consider that moral.

The significance of Hume’s finding cannot be exaggerated because it undercuts the possibility of establishing any moral rules on an empirical or scientific basis for all non-religious ethical

systems. Hume's observation undercuts the logical foundations of utilitarianism, consequentialism, hedonism, egoism, "self-realizationism,"[30] pragmatism, scientific ethics, situation-ethics and Kantian duty ethics (deontological ethics). By themselves, natural facts; advantages to one or many; practical or 'best' solutions or results; pleasure; agreement with science etc. are in themselves neither moral nor immoral – they just are. Given their morally neutral nature, we cannot use them to construct moral imperatives. An act is what it is – and no purely empirical argument can demonstrate its inherent moral correctness.

We shall now examine two contemporary attempts to develop a purely empirical ethic. In *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, Paul Kurtz claims that we can base our ethical systems on the "common moral decencies"[31] which are inherent in human nature and in our human situation as social animals. Kurtz admits that the:

central issue about moral and ethical principles concerns their ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they ephemeral? . . . The moral and ethical principles that we live by and to which we are committed are "real": that is, we can make factual descriptive statements about their centrality of human behavior.[32]

Kurtz then explains – in a manner congruent with Baha'i teachings – that these "common moral decencies" are stable but may appear in different forms in different cultural circumstances. Kurtz's view converges with the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation though of course, he denies the need for a Manifestation. In any case, Kurtz then provides an elaborate and well-thought out list of these 'decencies': truthfulness; promise-keeping; trustworthiness; justice; tolerance and cooperation to name just a few. These, he believes are inherent in human nature and in our situation as social beings. Without these "common decencies" any kind of society is unworkable and will disintegrate.

However, there are at least two problems with Kurtz's argument. The first has already been presented by Hume. Even if these "common decencies" are universally found, i.e. are facts, that does not mean they ought to be followed in the future and that we have an obligation to follow them. The "common decencies" seem sensible and practical enough but that in itself does not necessarily make them moral, i.e. obligatory. In other words, we are back at the 'is/ought' gap, the chasm between what is the case and what ought to be the case. Who or what has the legitimacy and authority to bridge this gap, to declare that living up to these facts is obligatory and to impose that declaration on other human beings? That is the downfall of the concept of

humanist, non-theist ethics. Kant, who tried to develop a non-theist ethic, was forced to recognize this problem and consequently re-introduced God as a necessary postulate to ground ethics.[33]

A second problem arises with these “common moral decencies.” If they can be applied differently in different cultures, how can we distinguish between better and worse applications? None of these decencies were missing in Nazi, Fascist or Soviet society for example because they are rooted in human nature and in the humanity’s social nature. However, few would defend their application of these decencies as moral. These societies – and others like them in the past – applied these decencies to a limited circle, i.e. family, tribal, racial or national members. Who or what is to judge them as mistaken? This problem devastates Kurtz’s argument because it clearly shows that within his empirical framework, there is no answer to the question of what is really good and really bad. At best, we have preferences. Ultimately, Kurtz’s argument falls into the relativism it seeks to avoid.[34] Like all other non-theist, empiricist ethics, it does not have the internal resources to make such decisions about good and evil within its own framework, and, consequently, it lacks internal coherence.

In contrast, the Baha’i Writings and theist ethics in general do not suffer from the ‘is/ought’ problem. Since God is the Creator of nature, all natural facts are already implicitly endowed with meaning and potential ethical significance.

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.[35]

In other words, there is more to all created things than can be known by strictly empiricist methods; all things have spiritual aspects that are known only to those who have experienced “the awakening of spiritual susceptibilities.”[36] Everything reflects spiritual values and consequently, there is no logical category mistake of jumping from fact to value in basing an ethical argument on natural facts. The facts already embody ethical categories as seen in the names and attributes of God. For example, the virtue of generosity is embodied in every created thing insofar as it ultimately exists by the generosity of God Who brought them out of nothingness. Generosity is moral because it is in harmony with God’s will. The various advantages it brings to individuals and collectives are also valuable, but by themselves they do not establish the moral goodness of the act. Only being in harmony with God’s will can do that. As Baha’u’llah says:



The source of all good is trust in God, submission unto His command, and contentment with His holy will and pleasure . . . The source of all evil is for man to turn away from his Lord and set his heart on things ungodly.[37]

In other words, no action or goal can be good if it does not harmonize with or “submit” to God’s commands; conversely, any action or goal that contradicts God’s command is evil.

In this sense, theist ethics are internally self-sufficient and coherent because unlike non-theist ethics, they have within themselves the conceptual resources to bridge the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought.’ The presence of God’s names and attributes performs this function. Consequently, theist ethics have not only self-sufficiency but also coherence, i.e. no conceptual void between empirical facts and observations. Indeed, the Manifestation of God bridge this gap even more directly and clearly insofar as they are the Beings that guide our understanding of the facts to the correct moral conclusions. This feature is also missing in non-theist ethics.

A non-theist may reply that such a strategy only works for those who believe in theism – which is true. That is why our claim is that theist ethics are internally self-sufficient and coherent. The point, however, is to realize that non-theist ethics have no possibility of attaining such internal self-sufficiency and coherence and, therefore, will always be deficient in this regard.

### 3.1 The Dostoyevsky Problem

Every workable and coherent ethical system requires rational foundations in both metaphysics and the philosophy of man. The reasons for this are clear. A coherent ethical system must be appropriate for the kind of universe we live in, i.e. it must be based on a theory of reality (metaphysics) which supports and justifies the ethical conclusions it reaches. If, for example, there is a God, then ethical rules must take that into account; otherwise they won’t make much sense. Similarly, if no transcendent aspect to reality, if no God exists, if only matter is real, then our ethical thinking must reflect those facts. Ignoring them would lead us seriously astray. Furthermore, ethical injunctions must be in harmony with our philosophy of man or theory of human nature because ethical demands that do not fit human nature will be useless as guidance and probably lead us to commit immoral acts.

As we have seen above, the lack of a proper foundation for atheist ethics brings with it a very specific problem: how can we prevent the slide into moral anarchy or moral nihilism, i.e. the belief that there are no real morals but only personal preferences and that there is no valid way to claim that any preference is better or worse than any other. Whether these moral preferences are individual or collective does not matter – they are all preferences and that is all we can say about them. In other words, moral choices have no objective metaphysical basis, or, in religious terms, have no foundation in God because God does not exist.

Because the requisite knowledge of God or any other metaphysical foundation is absent, the atheist and humanist finds himself in the position of Ivan Karamazov. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov asserts that if God does not exist then everything is allowed?[38] Who, after all, has the legitimacy, authority and the power to restrain us from following our preferences to any extreme we like? If there is no God, no one can claim that a predilection to molest children is any better or worse than a predilection to feed the hungry. These predilections are just different and as such, no one has the legitimacy or the power to say otherwise. Dostoyevsky's shows that without God, moral nihilism i.e. the rejection of moral absolutes always remains a strong possibility.

With this in mind, we are able to appreciate an important, but easily overlooked aspect of Baha'u'llah's sharply worded warning:

Know thou for a certainty that whoso disbelieveth in God is neither trustworthy nor truthful . . . He that acteth treacherously towards God will, also, act treacherously towards his king. Nothing whatever can deter such a man from evil, nothing can hinder him from betraying his neighbor, nothing can induce him to walk uprightly.[39]

It is essential to notice that Baha'u'llah refers to "whoso disbelieveth in God," i.e. those who consciously choose to reject God and to whoever "acteth treacherously towards God." Such actions also require conscious choice. Baha'u'llah supports Ivan Karamazov's realization that without a belief in God, nothing is forbidden and everything is allowed: "Nothing whatever can deter such a man from evil." The actions of disbelievers may be advantageous to others but without a proper foundation, we cannot rely on such disbelievers because their acts – while

perhaps advantageous to themselves and others – are based on nothing more than their own often contradictory beliefs and preferences, on custom or even temporary convenience. Hence, the acts of the disbelievers are “untrustworthy”: their ethical beliefs and actions have no reliable basis and therefore can easily change under a variety of influences. They have nothing but themselves to rely to make, monitor and enforce ethical demands or set goals, no higher viewpoint to allow objective evaluation and judgment and nothing but ourselves to require us to take responsibility. That is why Baha’u’llah says, “[N]othing can hinder him from betraying his neighbor, nothing can induce him to walk uprightly.” This is because he is his own ultimate ethical authority and consequently, can justify anything that suits him.

Of course, Baha’u’llah is not saying that every believer is a saint incapable of doing wrong or that every act by every atheist or humanist is perfidious. Both believers and atheists are capable of doing what is advantageous for others even at the cost of self-sacrifice. Such acts are certainly not limited to believers. However, the believer can remedy the moral deficiencies of his actions by returning to the foundations provided by God and His Manifestations and, thereby, make his actions ethically complete. This course is not available to the atheist and humanist who, in the last analysis has only himself to rely on.

Contrary to first impressions, Baha’u’llah’s warning does not contradict His injunction to “Consort with all men, O people of Baha, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship?”[40] Nothing in the Baha’i Writings suggests that we should be unfriendly to others because of their personal or intellectual short-comings. But, if we are wise, we should be aware of these deficiencies in our dealings with them. As Christ says, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”[41] Being loving and kind does not require us to be naïve.

## 3.2 The Question of Authority and Universality

The belief in God helps us deal with three basic issues that any system of ethics must deal with: authority and legitimacy, and universality. Authority has two aspects – legitimacy and power. Legitimacy deals with the questions, ‘Who – if anyone – has the legitimacy or the right to lay down moral principles and precepts for the human race? Who or what – if anything – has the knowledge, understanding and goodness necessary to legitimize a demand for obedience? Who – or what – is inherently entitled to make obedience a condition for attaining ‘rightness,’ or true value and appropriate worth as a human being?’ It is virtually self-evident that no human and no

collection of human beings inherently possess such legitimacy by virtue of their human nature. The reasons are obvious: humans are fallible, are fickle, have personal interests, lack absolute independence from all things, are susceptible to outside influence, interference and coercion. Thus, humans cannot guarantee objectivity and justice. They also lack the unlimited knowledge needed to dispense perfect justice, understanding and compassion. In the last analysis, various inherent and inescapable human limitations prevent us from demanding obedience with inherent moral legitimacy. Of course, we give governments the power to do so in the political realm, but this is a legal not moral legitimacy. However, God is not only unaffected by the aforementioned deficiencies, but He is also the actual maker of the world and the nature of everything in it. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine who else could have such moral legitimacy.

The second aspect of authority is the question of power. Without power, legitimacy remains purely theoretical, i.e. impotent. Thus, to see how legitimacy is actually put into practice we must ask ‘Who – if anyone – has the power to impose His will and His ethical judgments on humankind? Who – if anyone – can impose both obligations or laws and consequences for committed or omitted acts? Who has legitimate power?’ Here, too, theistic and non-theistic systems part company since the former believe that only God can adequately fulfill that role. Because of obvious inherent limitations, no human can. Furthermore, divine authority is also needed to restrain and contain human behaviors as well as to ensure justice. As Bahá'u'lláh says:

The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment....[42]

Elsewhere, He says, “That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment.”[43] It is obvious that only a being with power can be the effective foundation of individual and social ethics.

Non-theistic ethical systems, of course, reject God and basically set the question of God’s authority aside as meaningless, irrelevant or insoluble. Some even regards the notion of God’s authority as pernicious, as in the cases of Marx and Sartre, precisely because it denies the authority of man. Marx regards ‘God’ as a construct of the ruling classes to keep the lower classes in submission and slavery and similarly, Sartre adopts his “postulatory atheism”[44] to safeguard absolute human freedom. Atheists and humanists want humans to have all the authority and consequently cannot explain why any one set of morals should take precedence over others. In the last analysis, Marx relies on force, i.e. the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie whereas Sartre accepts a kind of ethical anarchy in which everyone is free to choose his or her own ethics validated by no more than the fact of being chosen.

Kant is one philosopher who clearly recognizes the centrality of the ‘authority problem.’ That is why in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant tries to remedy this problem in a way that actually (but inadvertently) supports the Writings by an appeal to a ‘postulatory theism.’ Since Kant denied we could prove rationally, God’s existence, he said that we must postulate or assume His existence if we are to attain the “summum bonum” i.e. the greatest good for humankind. According to Kant:

the supreme cause of nature, which must be presupposed as a condition of the summum bonum is a being which is the cause of nature by intelligence and will, consequently its author, that is God . . . Therefore, the summum bonum is possible in the world only on the supposition of a Supreme Being. [45]

Kant states that a morally good life is possible only on the “presupposition” of a “Supreme Being” Who has the legitimacy and the power to be the “supreme cause of nature” and Who also acts morally and is the pre-condition for our moral action. Kant claims that a postulatory theism is needed to lead a good life – and, of course, a good life requires the exercise of our rational freedom which could never surrender itself to illegitimate power. If we did, our ethical lives would quickly degenerate into slavery and/or complete confusion.

The ‘authority problem’ with its two aspects of legitimacy and power presents serious difficulties for atheist and humanist ethics. Without agreement on who or what has the legitimacy to make ethical decisions – such as bridging the ‘is/ought’ gap – ethics degenerates into the expressions of personal preference. These will frequently be in conflict and that creates the problem of establishing an ethical code for society. How can we settle the issue of who or what has the legitimacy to make ethical decisions? Every man for himself? If everyone is his or her own ethical arbitrator, how will we achieve social cohesion? Will ethics – and ethical codes – be built by majority vote, i.e. transformed into politics? The power aspect of the authority problem arises when we ask who or what also has the power to impose certain ethical views? It is easy to answer that society has such power – but what happens when we live in an immoral society such as Nazi Germany, Mao’s China or Stalinist Russia?

The third challenge for atheists and humanists is ‘universality.’ ‘Can any ethical system which lacks legitimacy and power claim to be universally valid for all human beings?’ The Bahá’í answer is negative – because only theistically based ethics possess legitimacy, power and universality to justify our ethical beliefs? Atheist and humanist writers usually turn to two sources for justification: humankind in general and science. We shall examine these in turn.

## 4. The Humanist and Scientific Alternatives

Perhaps the most cogent attempt to establish a philosophically coherent ethics based on atheist and humanist principles is the work of American philosopher, Paul Kurtz. Over the last forty years, he has tried to present atheistic humanism as a philosophically viable alternative to theism. According to Kurtz:

The central question about moral and ethical principles concerns their ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendental ground, are they purely ephemeral? If they are simply relative to human interest, can they be violated with impunity? What happens if they clash or conflict; how do we decide which have higher priority and legitimacy?[46]

This passage accepts that ethical beliefs must have proper “ontological foundation[s]”, i.e. must be based on a theory about the nature of reality and its subsequent consequences for our theory of human nature. Indeed, like the Baha’i Writings, Kurtz recognizes that ethical systems need “ontological foundations” in order to avoid being “ephemeral,” i.e. unstable, unreliable and, thereby, untrustworthy. Thereby he implicitly recognizes that improperly or inadequately grounded ethical beliefs cannot provide a reliable basis for ethical belief and action. Like Baha’u’llah, he recognizes that inadequate ethical foundations cause the ethical beliefs built on them to be, in the last analysis, “untrustworthy”[47] precisely because they are “ephemeral.” On this issue Kurtz and the Baha’i Writings converge. However, essential difference arise because according to Kurtz, there is no need for a “transcendental ground” i.e. no divine Being or non-physical ground of being to support these ethics and provide a basis for justification. Human knowledge and reason alone are sufficient.

By arguing that ethics is autonomous, I simply mean that it is possible to make moral judgments of good, bad, right and wrong independently of one’s ultimate foundations, i.e. there is a fund of common moral decencies that can be developed in human experience. Yet humanist ethics does have foundations and these are eupraxsophy”[48]

‘Eupraxsophy’ – a word coined by Kurtz – emphasizes the pursuit of practical wisdom guided by the love of wisdom, i.e. by the best knowledge available to us. It resembles Aristotle’s ‘eudaimonia’ i.e. “human flourishing” which is the goal of Aristotle’s ethical system. Eudaimonism involves bringing human development to its highest possible level, or, in Maslow’s terms, to the greatest possible self-actualization. In other words, Kurtz intends to make the quest for human flourishing the basis of his ethics as well as their goal. To achieve this, he adopts the foundational principle that there is a universal human nature that is the same in all times, places and circumstances although it expresses itself in various ways. Here, too, he is in agreement with the Baha’i Writings – indeed, with all religious ethics because there is no other way to meet the requirement of universality which we have discussed above. For example, for the Buddha’s teachings to be appropriate for all peoples, they must appeal to universal aspects of human nature.

However, at this point, a problem arises for humanists. The problem is not that there is no human nature but rather that it is humans who are observing, identifying and defining these universal traits which Kurtz calls the “common moral decencies”[49] that all cultures and individuals accept. These “common moral decencies” make it clear that:

Ethical principles are not simply subjective emotional attitudes or states unamenable to any critical justification. They are important objective criteria that we use to evaluate ethical principles.[50]

Kurtz wants to separate ethics from subjectivity, i.e. from the charge that ethical principles are simply subjective reactions driven by emotion, self-interest, irrational bias or fear. He wants to show ethical principles can be objective and supported “by rational considerations and by the relevant evidence”[51] needed to be credible. This, he thinks will “transform[ ] [them] from unexamined moral assumptions and principles into critical ethical principles.”[52] The most serious problem here is that Kurtz, like all atheists and humanists, is trying to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. Because he can only take evidence from the empirical world, he cannot provide his ethical principles with the truly objective sanction he desires because such logically valid objective sanction must come from ‘beyond’ the empirical realm. Any ‘sanction for objectivity’ from within the empirical world would have the inherent problems of all other evidence from the empirical world. What Kurtz is trying to do – as are all atheists and humanists – is logically impossible. For all their disagreements, religions are at least on the right logical track in seeking support for objectivity in the transcendental realm. It cannot come from anywhere else. This is why humanist ethics are not internally self-sufficient. It has no internal

standard by which to assess ethical claims and/or systems.

## 4.1 Scientific Ethics

There have also been efforts to establish ethics on a scientific basis, i.e. to use the scientific method to establish objective ethical standards. We shall examine the most recent such attempt which is quite representative of the rest. In 2010, Sam Harris published *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* in order to demonstrate that values, ethics, morality do not require more than an empirical basis.[53] According to Harris, there is no need for any appeal to a transcendental God, prophets or holy books in order to establish a viable system of personal and social ethics. Moreover, by using the sciences – particularly physiology and neurosciences – as a basis for ethics, we would be able to develop a universal morality true for all humans by virtue of our common nature, and certain by virtue of its empirical foundations. Scientific research would eliminate ‘guesswork’ and ‘opinion-swapping’ in ethics.

In order to assess whether science alone can “determine human values”[54] we must be clear and precise about is meant by ‘science.’ Let us begin by noting that the word ‘science’ refers both to a body of knowledge acquired in a special way and to the process by which such knowledge is acquired. This process, the scientific method, only studies phenomena that (1) are physical/material; (2) are susceptible to empirical direct or indirect observation by the humans senses or instruments; (3) are measurable or quantifiable; (4) are results of repeatable experiments or observations; (5) are observer independent and (6) are disprovable or falsifiable by observation and/or experiment.

Knowledge derived by this method can be interpreted into various kinds of testable theories that are often modified as new information is gathered. No scientific claim or theory is exempt from this although some theories have been so well-established that efforts to disprove or modify them have virtually ceased. Of course, each area of study must adapt the scientific method to its own particular material.

Harris, Sheehan,[55] Rottschaeffer[56] and others wish to establish ethics on a strictly empirical, i.e. scientific foundation, one based on experimentation and observation. This goal brings them



into collision with a problem that some other ethical systems – such as Kant’s deontological ethics – do not encounter. This is the famous distinction between facts and values. The problem is that if we wish to establish a strictly empirical system of morality, it is necessary to close the gap between empirical facts which are established by the scientific method and human values which are the products of human judgments about those facts. From a purely empirical perspective, valuation is something that we bring to the facts; the facts themselves do not give us an evaluative judgment, although they do give us the material for such judgments. For example, nothing in the strictly empirical evidence from a body sprawled on the sidewalk allows us to establish that this death is ‘sad,’ ‘wrong’ or ‘evil.’ Such moral evaluations are not scientifically testable because moral values are not physical, measurable, physically observable, observer independent, objective or disprovable.’ No coroner’s report will say that certain physical evidence shows the moral evil of this death. How could the scientific method even begin to investigate the ‘evil’ nature of such an event? How could scientific criteria or experimentation establish the moral ‘rightness’ (or ‘wrongness’) of picking a flower or the ‘duty’ (obligation) to save a child from drowning? Moral values – obligations, good, evil, degrees of permissibility – are simply not proper scientific objects, i.e. they are not suited to discovery or exploration by the scientific method.

Harris is fully aware of this difficulty which is why he claims that “the divide between facts and values is illusory.”[57] He states that “the division between facts and values is intellectually unsustainable especially from the perspective of neuroscience.”[58] The problem here is self-evident: a brain scan, even of the most positive state of mind imaginable, is still only a brain scan, i.e. an objective piece of scientific data subject to all the limitations of the scientific method. Nothing in the data provided by the brain scan itself tells us whether this state of mind or state of brain or the action that accompanies it is morally ‘good,’ ‘allowable,’ ‘virtuous’ or ‘blameworthy.’ Nothing in the brain scan itself can instruct us whether we are obligated or have a duty to avoid or cultivate such acts or their correlated states of mind. If moral obligation or duties are proper scientific objects, then what, for example, are their measurable attributes? This problem is not just a matter of awaiting future refinements in fMRI technology; rather the problem is intrinsic to the machinery itself. fMRI machines are not designed to detect moral evaluations because such evaluations do not meet the criteria of being scientific objects, i.e. they are not physical, measurable, physically observable, observer independent, objective or disprovable. Brain scans alone cannot tell us whether or not actions are moral or immoral.

The same problem undermines Harris’s argument that:

science can, in principle, help us understand what we should do and should want – and, therefore, what other people should do and want in order to live the best lives possible.[59]

The problems here are also self-evident. How can one set up a scientific experiment to determine the moral ‘rightness’ of an action or intention? Sociological and psychological studies can only determine what people currently think or plan, but not ethical correctness itself. What can a brain scan tell us about the moral properties of its correlated act? There is simply no data in the scan or in the physical brain itself that tells us an act is good or evil. A positive scan may be correlated with acts of kindness – in a Mother Teresa – or with acts of terror – in an Osama bin Laden. The scan itself shows no preference. Therefore, how could brain scans obligate us to do anything? What measurable attributes does it have that imposes an ‘ought’ on us, i.e. require or compel us to make certain moral choices? What are the physical characteristics of such an obligation? Can we actually see it in the brain scan itself? Only a moment’s reflection is needed to understand that the concept of ‘obligation’ or ‘should’ or ‘ought’ simply is not relevant to brain scans.

In the fact/value division, we detect a variation of Hume’s ‘is/ought’ chasm. Harris tries to dismiss this distinction and quotes Daniel Dennett who asks, “If ‘ought’ cannot be derived from ‘is,’ just what can it be derived from?”[60] That question is exactly the heart of the problem for empiricists – if the empirical facts of nature cannot logically serve as the foundation of morals, what can? The inability of empirical facts alone to provide a foundation for ethics puts a variety of options on the table including Kant’s deontological ethics, virtue ethics and various forms of theistic ethics.

## 5. Conclusion

Our study of the question ‘Can we be good without God?’ leads us to three main conclusions.

*First*, the Baha’i Writings make it clear that we cannot be good without God, and that no one has ever been good without God. This does not mean that all people are conscious of this influence or even want to be. Those disbelievers who do genuine good are being guided by the Manifestations nonetheless.

*Second*, the biggest single weakness in atheist and humanist ethical systems is the inability to bridge the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ and ‘fact’ and value.’ The ability to bridge these gaps is one of the key strengths of theistic ethics and especially Baha’i ethics.

*Third*, the Baha’i Writings raise challenging issues vis-à-vis the relationship of knowledge and ethics.

*Fourth*, unlike atheist and humanist systems of ethics, Baha'i ethics are internally self-sufficient and coherent.

## Footnotes

- [1] Corless Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, p. 11.
- [2] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 16.
- [3] Greg M. Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 31.
- [4] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 339.
- [5] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part 1, Section 1.
- [6] Greg M. Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 34.
- [7] Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 104.
- [8] Greg M. Epstein, *Good Without God*, p. 35.
- [9] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 330; emphasis added.
- [10] 'Abdul-Baha, *'Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 42.
- [11] Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, p. 13.
- [12] See Ian Kluge, Reason in the Baha'i Writings, forthcoming in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 14. To obtain an advance copy, please contact the author at [iankluge@netbistro.com](mailto:iankluge@netbistro.com)
- [13] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 297.
- [14] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 297; emphasis added.
- [15] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 171.
- [16] 'Abdul-Baha., *Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha v3*, p. 549.
- [17] Compilations, *Baha'i Scriptures*, p. 278.
- [18] Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, p. 83; emphasis added.
- [19] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, XC, p. 177.

- [20] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, CLV, p. 330.; emphasis added.
- [21] Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* and Pitrim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*. These are probably the most succinct studies of individuals and cultures who have lost their bearings.
- [22] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 238; emphasis added.
- [23] 'Abdul-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 7.
- [24] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 69.
- [25] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, CXXII, p. 259.
- [26] From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, December 6, 1939 in Compilations, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 505; emphasis added.
- [27] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, p. 28.
- [28] Paul Kurtz, *Meaning and Value in a Secular Age*, p. 47.
- [29] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part 1, Section 1.
- [30] William S Sahakian, *Ethics: An Introduction to Theories and Problems*, p. viii.
- [31] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 93.
- [32] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 95.
- [33] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Chp. II, V.
- [34] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 95 – 96.
- [35] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, XC, p. 177.
- [36] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 339.
- [37] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 153 – 155.
- [38] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Translated by Constance Garnett, p. 790.
- [39] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, CXIV, p. 232
- [40] Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 15.
- [41] *The New Testament*, Matthew, 10:16.

- [42] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXII, p. 218.
- [43] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 128.
- [44] James Collins, *The Existentialists*, p. 40.
- [45] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Chp. II, V.
- [46] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 95.
- [47] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, CXIV, p. 232; see also footnote # 11 for the full passage.
- [48] Paul Kurtz, *Meaning and Value in a Secular Age*, p. 47.
- [49] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 93.
- [50] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 104.
- [51] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 104.
- [52] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, p. 104.
- [53] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. New York: Free Press, 2010.
- [54] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*.
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- [56] William A. Rottschaeffer, “Scientific Naturalist Ethics” in *Science and Ethics*, ed. by Paul Kurtz, p. 285 – 305
- [57] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, p. 14.
- [58] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, p. 24.
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