

Ethics and Morals

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote the classic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Whatever else might be said of Dostoyevsky, he grasped one of the essential implications of Atheism, Humanism, and Naturalism. He had Ivan (one of his characters) observe: "If there is no God, everything is permitted."

Ethics and morals have to do with right and wrong conduct and the standards by which behavior is judged. The mere mention of ethics and morals implies the existence of right and wrong, which, in turn, implies an ultimate standard for determining right from wrong.

Men proffer many "standards," all of which end up being their opinions or personal preferences. All such rules are subjective and are as varied as their originators' druthers. Under these circumstances, men are left to do what is right in their own eyes (Jud. 17:6), which well describes much of the modern world.

Unlike all other life forms, human beings undeniably possess a sense of morality and ethics. The fact that we even discuss this subject argues the existence of human moral responsibilities. Apart from an ultimate objective standard, however, the word *ought* is meaningless; no "oughtness" or "non-oughtness" attaches to any human behavior. Stated another way, there is no behavior that is innately right/good or wrong/evil **if there is no set standard by which to judge behavior**.

Atheistic "standards" of "good" behavior include:

- **Hedonism** seeks the greatest pleasure and the least pain (but what if one must **inflict** pain to **avoid** personal pain?).
- **Utilitarianism** seeks the greatest pleasure for the most people (Hitler's atrocities were "good" by this criterion).
- **Nihilism** denies God, so there is no ethical standard (cf. Dostoyevsky's Ivan) (Nihilists hold this only for themselves, not allowing others to mistreat them, of course).
- **Relativism** denies the existence of universal moral "truth"; such is culturally determined by region (but they reject the standard of a region that respects an absolute standard).
- **Situationism** denies moral absolutes and suggests "loving" behavior according to the situation (of course, each person is allowed to decide what *love* means in each situation).
- **Determinism** denies human responsibility, averring that man is a product of social and biological forces he cannot help (thus none should ever be punished for murder or rape).

Is everything permitted? Are some things permitted? Who is to decide? Apart from God and His revelation (the Bible) we are morally adrift in selfish and self-destructive systems.

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it was published in *The Lighthouse*, weekly bulletin of Northpoint Church of Christ, Denton, TX, October 18, 2015, of which I was editor.]

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