Can you be good without gods or religion?

Where do moral values come from?

Humanists believe that morality – being good or at least doing no harm – is based on human nature and human experience. We base our morality on guiding principles rather than inflexible rules that can't be challenged because a religious authority says they have been handed down from a supernatural being.

The welfare and happiness of humanity is at the centre of humanist morality and ethics.

We humans have evolved as a social species and we need to cooperate with each other. Empathy, compassion and reason are essential elements in the development of human society, and these form the basis of humanist morality. Selfishness, aggression and other such characteristics are also aspects of human nature and this is why human societies develop moral values, to balance and counteract those incompatible elements.

"Humanism is important because having a non-supernatural worldview allows you to make more ethical choices based on a general desire to do the most possible good."

TIM MINCHIN
COMEDIAN, ACTOR AND MUSICIAN

The Golden Rule

Humanists don't have a simple set of rules, but there is a basic principle which underlies our morality. It is known as the 'Golden Rule', and seems to be universal to all the traditions – religious and philosophical. The Golden Rule can be stated positively as: 'Treat other

Some examples of the Golden Rule from around the world

I will act towards others exactly as I would act towards myself.
From a Buddhist text, about 500 BCE

This is the sum of duty: Do nothing to others Which, if done to you, could cause you pain.
Hindu text, about 150 BCE

Love your neighbour as yourself.
Judaism and Christianity, from the Torah and the Bible, about 400 BCE and again 1st Century Common Era

None of you truly believes, until you wish for your brothers and sisters what you wish for yourself.
Islam – from a saying of The Prophet Muhammad, 7th Century CE

people in a way you would like to be treated yourself'. But the negative version: 'Do not treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself', is easier to follow. It is not difficult to understand what would cause another person harm or suffering, and to recognise that we should consider the personal interests of others before acting.

Humanists make the Golden Rule the foundation for other principles. Care for others, for example, since we would want people to be kind to us should we need it. On the other hand, it is clear that violence and killing, stealing, bullying and dishonesty are all unacceptable under this rule.

'Do not treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself' is a very general principle, and it requires empathy and understanding of others, which is something that develops as we grow up. And it also requires thought, as do all moral principles, even for people who follow the rules set down by different religions. For example, are there any circumstances when lying, or even stealing, can be justified?

Think about
What do you think about the Golden Rule? Would the world be a better place if everyone acted in this way?

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