

So the question then is simply, which concept of what is good for humans do you prefer? The traditionally religious notion that good is what a God or supernatural force wants and commands? Or a secular system that enables us to evaluate our own needs and decide how best to try to fulfill them? Recalling that not all secular worldviews are Humanistic, below is a primer on how Humanists conceive of and attempt to uphold their vision of the good.

### The Golden Rule

There is a story about an Ivy League philosophy professor who was sitting and having a coffee on a stairway in a busy street in New York City, near where a big political protest was taking place. A policeman walked over and informed the man that he wasn't allowed to sit on those steps—that he was blocking the flow of traffic in and out of the building. The professor turned his head to look from side to side and raised his eyebrows quizzically in one exaggerated motion, as if to say, "I don't see anyone here to block!" The cop, annoyed by this reaction, pointed to the protest nearby and asked, "What if everyone did what you're doing?" The nonplussed professor muttered under his breath, "Who are you, Kant?"

A couple of hours of jail time later, the professor finally succeeded in explaining that he wasn't calling the officer a nasty name, but rather referring to the philosopher Emanuel Kant and his most famous idea, the categorical imperative: the idea that actions can only be considered moral if they could be imitated by anyone else and produce good results.

If Kant's categorical imperative sounds somewhat familiar even to those who've never quite made it though every jot and tittle of his page-turner *The Metaphysics of Morals*, it's probably because the notion is so similar to another shot-glass-sized concept of how to be good that shows up all over the map of human intellectual history, especially in religions—often referred to as the "golden rule."

For many self-respecting secular intellectuals, the idea of a golden rule is enough to make one nervous—maybe even a little twitchy. It might conjure up images of crotchety Sunday school lectures, or TV commercials about Mormons with clip-on ties and short-sleeved dress shirts. More relevantly, it might smack of moralizing, and as my friend Scott Brewer, a philosophy professor at Harvard Law School, likes to say: "Where moralism goes, hypocrisy

will surely follow." (in the pithy aphorism The well-justified all Shaw said, "The gold Healthy skepticism that may be worthy of again and again in book called

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of what is good for humans that good is what a God or ideal system that enables us to try to fulfill them? Recall below is a primer on how to envision of the good.

professor who was sitting at in New York City, near a policeman walked over and those steps—that he was saying. The professor turned his eyebrows quizzically in one direction here to block! The cop, nearby and asked, “What if the professor muttered under

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is that familiar even to those who read a little of his page-turner? The notion is so similar to what shows up all over the world’s religions—often referred to as the golden rule.

The idea of a golden rule is so catchy. It might conjure up TV commercials about how it hurts. More relevantly, it is, however, a philosophy promoting moralism goes, hypocrisy

will surely follow.” (He admits he’s got a long way to go to catch Nietzsche in the pithy aphorism department, but nonetheless his point is well taken.) The well-justified allergy we have to hypocrisy is the reason George Bernard Shaw said, “The golden rule is that there are no golden rules.”

Healthy skepticism aside, though, there is a concept of how to be good that may be worthy of the nickname “golden,” because it really does show up again and again in basically every religion. As Lloyd and Mary Morain point out in a book called *Humanism as the Next Step*,

Throughout the ages religions of many kinds have contained a common spirit. We can see this in parts of their scriptures.

In Brahmanism we find: “This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you” (*Mahabharata*, 5, 1517).

In Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful” (*Udana-Varga* 5, 18).

In Christianity: “All things whatsoever ye would that man should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets” (*Matthew* 7, 12).

In Confucianism: “Is there one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one’s whole life? Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you” (*Analects* 15, 23).

In Islam: “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself” (*Sunnah*).

In Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellowman. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary” (*Talmud, Shabbat* 31d).

In Taoism: “Regard your neighbor’s gain as your own gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss” (*T’ai Shang Kan Ying P’ien*).

In Jain scriptures: “The essence of right conduct is not to injure anyone.”<sup>2</sup>

But varying religious practices and diverse theological beliefs have been built upon and allied to this common ethical basis.

The point is obvious but achingly, embarrassingly important: the very

first thing we have to do in order to be a good person is learn to look inside ourselves, understand what we love and hate, and use this information when deciding how to treat others. I say it is achingly important because it hurts to think about how often people brush us aside, ignore us, or get angry or wrong us because they are thinking of us only as little pink and brown objects in their way, not as human beings who will feel the same way about their behavior as they would if they had to endure it. And the golden rule is embarrassingly important because it is humiliating to think about how often we ourselves often buzz right past our kids or our spouse or our best friends, eyes distracted, focused on some goal or fantasy we have about how our day ought to be going, forgetting that these people too are struggling not only with petty everyday problems but with their own fears about aging, sickness, and death. Our dignity begins to slip away when we lose sight of our ability to stop and acknowledge their existence, and their struggles, for a moment.

The golden rule shows up in every religion because, for the reasons we discussed in chapter 1, religion has shown up playing a prominent role in just about every society. You can have a society that doesn't have Krishna, Jesus, or Buddha and it will be fine. Eliminate multiple prayer sessions per day, gift-giving around the winter solstice, or candle-lighting every Friday night, and things will work themselves out.

But if you have a society that lacks this principle? Then all hell really will break loose. Then you don't have a society. You have chaos.

In the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda during their genocides, religion was not absent, but the golden rule was as hard to find as a respite from death. People were thinking only of their own pain and their own wants, and the pain and wants of others—the *lives* of others—were worth less than the piles of feces and blood that those entire countries were nearly reduced to. In general, once people start stabbing or shooting one another, you won't find a lot of worry about golden rules. When the Palestinian suicide bomber is thinking about Israeli civilians, he's not thinking about it. When the Israeli settler is thinking about bulldozing the olive trees around hunger-stricken Palestinian villages, he is usually weighing neither Kant nor *Ethics of Our Fathers* nor *The Analects*.

Humanism is not, nor am I, offering anything entirely new here.

But while the golden rule may be simple, it is hard to follow. Religious and secular people alike fail at it all the time, and then we wonder why our

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We idolize rock but rarely do they shouldn't get so an always do to make other public intellex be more loving husk us about all our pro don't make judgmet out with us into our involved with other society whose job de and guiding figures v we've all known one gious institution tha sibility to find ways t golden path.

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lives and our countries are such a mess. And one of the reasons religion still has such a seemingly irresistible pull, to this scientifically and rationally advanced day, is that it is one of the only forces in the world whose leaders can still give themselves permission, without irony or embarrassment, to go about spouting such an obnoxiously simple—but aching and embarrassingly important—message.

We idolize rock singers and rappers for their detachment and defiance, but rarely do they sit down with us and take the time to explain why we shouldn't get so annoyed with our mothers when they do that thing they always do to make us feel guilty. We learn Big Ideas from philosophers and other public intellectuals, but how often do they help us find the strength to be more loving husbands and wives? Psychologists and therapists will talk to us about all our problems, but they don't give warm, supportive hugs; they don't make judgments even when we want them to; and they don't come out with us into our communities and offer us positive, healthy ways to get involved with others. Clergy are among the precious few individuals in our society whose job description it is to do these things that our other heroes and guiding figures won't or can't do. A good priest, minister, or rabbi—and we've all known one or two no matter how much we might resent the religious institution that sent them our way—takes it as a professional responsibility to find ways to poke, prod, and nudge us against our will toward the golden path.

Yes, "do unto others" (or better yet, its counterpart, spoken by Rabbi Hillel—the more modestly phrased and more realistic "That which is hateful to you, *don't* do unto others; the rest is commentary") is a concept that essentially no religion misses entirely. *But not a single one of these versions of the golden rule requires a God.*

We can imagine that God forgives us for our lousy behavior, after all. Religious conservatives and liberals alike ask forgiveness of sin all the time, from Bill Clinton's famous line "I don't think there is a fancy way to say I have sinned," to the televangelist Jimmy Swaggart's slightly, well, fancier, "I have sinned against you, my Lord, and I would ask that your precious blood would wash and cleanse every stain until it is in the seas of God's forgiveness." Is anyone really naive enough to believe that such preening alone merits forgiveness of acts for which men are supposed to be damned to hell for all eternity? And yet the apologies are trotted out time and again, part

and parcel of Christian morality in practice, if not according to everyone's version of Christian theory. And this pattern must embolden some who take enormous risks for the thrill of a little immoral behavior: their Lord will forgive them, if they only ask nicely enough when—or if—they are eventually caught. If you want to do something naughty, you're going to do it, and all the theology in the world isn't going to stop you.

Other people generally do not forgive us unless we earn it. And given that we have so much forgiveness to earn, imagine if we as a society put more energy into earning it. Imagine if all the arguing we do over prayer in schools, all the time we spend saying "God bless America" and "one nation under God," and all our bickering over which religion has things right were instead devoted to national days of the golden rule, and into seminars and sermons focusing solely on how we can learn to better relate to our fellow human beings—with more love and more compassion. In fact, this may be what religious scholar Karen Armstrong has in mind with her project, the "Charter for Compassion," which seeks input from people of every religious and ethical tradition—including Humanism and atheism—on how to best promote the golden rule and the idea of compassion, which Armstrong sees as its heart. Armstrong is a thinker Humanists can admire and support, and I hope many of us will join her in this effort. It may have a certain quality of Hallmark-card kitsch to it, perhaps because Armstrong seems more optimistic than is justified in believing that compassion, rather than supernatural solace and justice, is really the heart of every traditional religion. And even if such a compassion-promotion project were to be put into action rationally, on a large scale, we'd probably still miss our mark fairly often. But don't you think, despite the downside, that we'd be better off?

Of course, even if we were able to convince others to spend more time focusing on this simpler understanding of goodness and less on the vagaries and complexities of religion, we would need to provide more than one rule to live by. Sometimes people really do need a little more ethical guidance than that. So even though "the rest is commentary," as Rabbi Hillel said, let's take a closer look at what a Humanist commentary on ethical rules and values would look like. After all, Rabbi Hillel's statement comes in the Mishnah, an early, foundational book of Talmudic literature, and the Talmud—a text that could take up the entire space of some small libraries—is a whole lot of commentary.

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### Beyond the Golden Rule: Rules, Regulations, and Suggestions

One of the defining elements of almost every major religion is a set of moral rules, regulations, and suggestions. Judaism has Halacha, an evolving and ever-expanding set of laws that regulate or at least comment on nearly every aspect of life—though only a small minority of contemporary Jews actually pays much attention to these laws. In Islam there is Sharia, often compared to Halacha as a complex and comprehensive system of religious laws and guidelines regulating everyday life. In Catholicism, there is Canon Law. Evangelical and other conservative Christians often speak of the Ten Commandments, but in fact their tradition draws on a much broader-ranging, if less well-defined system called Christian Ethics, which has been used to attempt to regulate everything from mixed dancing to the life of Terry Schiavo to whether we can go into armed conflict with another country under the religious banner proclaiming “A Just War.”

Religious laws and guiding principles are not the sole property of the West, either—one of Buddhism’s founding elements was the Eightfold Path; Confucianism began with a tightly circumscribed set of hierarchies all members of a family and a state were expected to observe in relation to one another. And those were just two of the options open to Asian religionists over two thousand years ago.

All these laws were instituted so we wouldn’t have moral chaos as we attempted flailingly to interpret the golden rule, or at least stop ourselves from ignoring or flouting it entirely. They were created before we had any kind of well-developed secular law—Roman democracy was occasionally nice if you happened to be a relative of Caesar, but if it got you thrown into the gladiator pit, not so much. It solved real, pressing human problems in days when there were no methods for selecting rational juries, reviewing reasonable legal precedents, or the like. And we know that even today, our legal and justice systems are painfully flawed. Any secularist or atheist who tells you that the simple solution to these problems is some glorified version of getting the word *God* off our coins or out of the pledge of allegiance is probably deluded.

But fortunately, the vast majority of secularists, Humanists, and the nonreligious would in no way claim that they have simple answers to any and all legal and moral questions. We reject the idea that any supposedly

divine commandments, as they are proclaimed by human beings, ought to have absolute authority over our lives. And we believe that laws and ethical principles must come from human reason and compassion. So religious laws get a vote, but not a veto. If a given religious precept can help lead to a good life and a good society, we may adopt it. But we feel no special allegiance to laws created in an earlier time, to deal with earlier problems, according to a now-outdated value system: it is no longer necessary to refrain from mixing wool and cotton, or milk with meat, and it is unacceptable not to allow men and women, or straight people and gay people, to mix as equals in the workplace or in the place of worship, or in marriage.

How does this work out in practice? Let's begin to answer the question by looking at the Ten Commandments. In the table below I'll start with the King James Bible's version, then translate that English into modern English. And finally, we'll take a look at the Humanist version of each commandment.

#### THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: HOW HUMANISM COMPARES<sup>3</sup>

KING JAMES	SAY AGAIN!	HUMANIST
1 I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.	Do not worship any other god.	Seek the best in yourself and in others, and believe in your own ability to make a positive difference in the world.
2 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.	Do not make or worship idols or images of God.	Pursue truth and honesty in all you do; and be wary of allowing power, status, or possessions to substitute for moral courage, dignity, and goodness.

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| 3  | Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.   | Do not misuse the name of God.   | Be positive and constructive rather than negative and disrespectful.  |
| 4  | Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. | Keep the sabbath day holy. You must rest on that day each week.  | To be healthy, you must balance work, play, and rest.   |
| 5  | Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.   | Honor your mother and your father.   | All members of the family should respect each other.  |
| 6  | Thou shalt not kill.   | Do not commit murder.  | Same.   |
| 7  | Thou shalt not commit adultery.  | Do not be unfaithful to your husband or wife.  | Same.   |
| 8  | Thou shalt not steal.  | Do not steal.  | Same.   |
| 9  | Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.  | Do not lie or speak badly about others.  | Same.   |
| 10 | Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.   | Do not be jealous of other people, and do not desire other people's spouses, houses, or anything else they have. | When you see nice things owned by others, let them be your inspiration, rather than a source of bad feelings. If there are things that you want, work hard to get them. |