

Morality Without God
By Alan Mandelberg, PhD

This is an updated version of an essay that recently I read locally for two non-believer groups. The original intent of the essay was and still is to provide a defensible basis for one's morality for those of us who are non-believers. We do not find support for our ethics in belief in a higher authority, in particular any supernatural authority – but we still want to insist that we are ethical on a rational basis. Here I am opposing what is a common belief among believers and I am afraid among some non-believers too that without an external “higher” authority to which to adhere, an individual will be amoral or even immoral.

It is often the case that holders of one faith or another often just assume that those who do not profess their faith or at least some other faith have no moral scruples. Anecdotally this writer has encountered this notion personally more than once. To cite just one instance, when telling the executive director of a professional organization that I was a non-believer, the director immediately told me that I had to be “without morals”. Other non-believers have expressed to me that they have had similar experiences.

This is a general problem. Maggie Ardiente, a leader of the American Humanist Association, talked about the problem of wide spread prejudice against non-believers at our recent Southern California Humanist Conference. She is an activist in trying to combat this prejudice.

The charge of relativism is made in intellectual circles against those who do not accept the absolutist ethical dicta of one faith or another. Relativism is the view that that there is no objective morality, that the morality (or lack thereof) that one person or group holds cannot be successfully opposed by any others. Thus the morality of one “tribe” or another, such as that, say, of the Nazis is just their morality. “They have their morality, we have ours.” Relativism makes individual morality just a subjective choice analogous to one party preferring chocolate ice cream and another vanilla.

The prejudice often held by believers is that one cannot maintain an objectively justified moral outlook without absolute adherence to some faith-based moral authority. This causes many of us who do not adhere to one religion or another to remain “in the closet”. We hide our lack of religious belief, our “faithlessness” from others in the business world or in our social life.

The wide spread disapproval of atheists is well documented. The recent Pew Research “Religion and Public Life Project” survey reports that about half (52%) of eligible voters would not vote for an atheist. This is an improvement from a previous survey which indicated that about 70% of voters would not vote for a non-believer.

Despite the constitutional injunction against a “religious test” for holding office, in various places atheists have in fact been banned from office. There have been cases, such as a recent one in New Jersey where notaries have refused to certify documents for atheist and/or their organizations.

There was an earlier survey (in 2006) of over 2,000 households by University of Minnesota researchers. They found that:

“...Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in 'sharing their vision of American society.' Atheists are also the minority group most Americans are least willing to allow their children to marry.”

The lead researcher, Penny Edgell went on to add:

Americans believe they share more than rules and procedures with their fellow citizens—they share an understanding of right and wrong. Our findings seem to rest on a view of atheists as self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good.

The comment appended to this observation is that it would appear that atheists have a major public relations job ahead of them before they can be widely accepted and valued.

David Noise, former president of the American Humanist Association in a book, Non-Believer Nation has expressed the hope that once believers are exposed in daily life to atheists and agnostics that they will become more accepting. The analogy here is to the increasing acceptance of LGBT individuals by those “straight people” who become familiar with LGBTs in daily life as co-workers, acquaintances and even family members (David Noise, Non-Believer Nation, see pp. 24ff). Noise thinks that the believing public can become tolerant of non-believers in the medium term.

It is true that the emergence of the “new atheists”, Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hutchins, Richard Dawkins and the rest has generated more public awareness of what non-believers believe or, rather, don't believe. However, the analogous hope that non-believers become more generally accepted by believers become familiar with atheists and agnostics in daily life is wishful thinking. Whereas straight people increasingly come to see that LGBT individuals may act “normally” outside of whatever they do in the bedroom and thereby treat them with tolerance, non-believers may not be so accepted as moral no matter how they act in “daily life”.

LGBT individuals gain acceptance by acting “normal” among straight people. They come to be seen as individuals, average folks despite their sexual orientation. I do

not mean to suggest that prejudice against LGBTs is a thing of the past anymore that I would suggest that racism in this country is a thing of the past. Despite some manifest progress, this is not a post racial society anymore than it is post homophobia. But similarly or rather dissimilarly, prejudice against non-believers is unlikely to as easily diminish over time. The best way to explain this is to discuss the idea of “moral hazard”.

A useful way to begin to elucidate the concept of moral hazard is recount an old joke. It goes like this:

It is the first night out of port on a cruise ship, There is a ball for the passengers. A woman is standing by the ship's rail looking quite attractive in the moonlight in all her finery. A man whom she has never seen before approaches her and with the first words out of his mouth propositions her. She angrily replies “What kind of woman do you think that I am? You don't know me. Why do you think that I would just go to bed with a total stranger, someone who just walks up to me and asks me.” The next night he approaches her and offers her one hundred dollars to spend the night with him. She angrily rebuffs him again with “What kind of woman do you think that I am?” The third night (these stories always come in threes) as he approaches her she is already in a rage. One would think that she might even throw him overboard if she could. He says to her “Now just wait a minute. Hear me out. I am very rich. How about ten thousand dollars for one night? That amount of money means very little to me.” She falls silent. He can see her hesitating and thinking about what he has just said. She repeats the word “ten thousand dollars” under her breath but audibly. He quickly responds “Now that we have established what kind of woman you are, let's haggle about the price”.

“Moral hazard” has to do with people often having a price in a particular instance and being tempted, perhaps being willing to do something of which they might otherwise outwardly disapprove. All of us know temptation. As someone who has dealt for decades in the real estate and associated finance business, I have become imbued with a sense of the darkness that pervades the business world. Moral hazard is rife in the business world and often given into. Add to this how we know how lust infects especially males at a young age everywhere and it is hard to deny how widespread moral hazard is and often is accompanied with its attendant hypocrisy.

Among religionists the idea of temptation is part of the sin and redemption picture that preachers paint. And that picture is profitable for those in the religious business. For instance, coveting one's neighbor's wife on Saturday night will lead to contributions in the collection plate Sunday morning. Add to this religion inspired guilt installed in children at a young age. This is further compounded by filling children with “the fear of

God” and it is easy to see the essential benefit of this guilt machine profit engine for “organized religion”.

But non-believers by definition have no fear of a god since they don't believe in a god. They may have abandoned this picture when they abandon a religious upbringing. Or perhaps they never had it if they were raised in a secular household. This makes atheists and agnostics suspect to believers. Non-believers may appear “nice” to believers in the ordinary course of events – but what about the behavior of non-believers in the face of moral hazard. As Penny Edgell says in her commentary quoted above on the University of Minnesota study which she led, members of the general public, a large majority of whom designate themselves as believers, also believe that non-believers do not share the believer's “sense of right and wrong”.

Believers can easily see non-believers as essentially con-men. For instance, knowing how corrupt politics is, it is no wonder that they would not trust a candidate for office who comes out as a non-believer – as if they should anymore trust a politician who professes belief. It does not strike the voting public that those aspirants for office who do not spout religion are less likely to be hypocrites. Instead a non-believer aspiring to office is to be regarded as an outlier, outside the fold. None believers in this country *do* have a serious PR problem.

Secularism is much more prevalent in Western Europe, especially in Northern Europe. From my perspective culture is much more advanced there compared to here. The two previous Roman Catholic Popes have written extensively inveigling against what they see as relativism in increasingly secular Europe. These popes have seen their faith based alleged morality as the only alternative to this relativism. We will see where the current “it is not for me to judge” pope comes down on this issue. In any case the picture that this dichotomy presents is wide spread. Only if this either-or choice can be seen not to be valid can one avoid the choice of blind adherence to a faith based morality or having no defensible morality at all.

The worry that non-believers may have no basis upon which to base their morality is not confined solely to believers. Non-believers may have this worry too. This is behind the lament, “God is dead. All things are permitted.” as if some things are not permissible *only if* there were a higher authority to condemn them. “God is dead. All things are permitted” was originally annunciated by Dostoevsky in The Brothers Karimatsov through the character, Ivan Karamatsov. This expression of grief was then popularized by Jean Paul Sartre and other Existentialists.

Having lost their faith, these disappointed Christians. - in the case of most French Existentialists, disappointed Catholics – find themselves without any moral compass

whatever. They don't have the belief any longer that there is a god who will tell them what to do, what to believe. They say things like "man makes himself" as if morality can be conjured up in an individual by a sort of spontaneous generation. A moment's reflection indicates that what one person comes up with as her or his morality may differ from what the next person comes up with. There is then no way to choose between competing moralities arrived at by a sort of moral pathogenesis. So on this view held by Existentialists we are back again stuck with relativism.

Humanism attempts to solve to this dilemma. "Humanist Manifesto III" puts this as follows:

Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience. Humanists ground values in human welfare shaped by human circumstances, interests, and concerns and extended to the global ecosystem and beyond.

However, just like the Existentialists, "Manifesto III" does not say how such values are derived. Just how are values grounded in human welfare? There is no explanation in the "Manifesto" of this process.

"Humanist Manifesto III" goes on to say that we [Humanists] "are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity and to making informed choices in the context of freedom consonant with responsibility." Now these are wonderful sentiments in which I personally share. Commitments are a wonderful thing but what are we to do in the face of those that do not share them? What do we do with those who do not recognize the "inherent worth and dignity" of others? How do we defend those sentiments against those who, no matter what they may or may not advertise, do not give a damn about people? What about bigots who do not acknowledge the worth of one or another minority?" We can't simply shout "you are bad and we are good". The values expressed in the Manifesto are aspirational. Humanists may hold to them. Unfortunately these values are not manifested by everyone. These values cannot be justified by just announcing them.

Sometimes it is argued that from early hominids on right up to modern *homo sapiens* people have needed to cooperate in order to survive – and this is how morality has evolved. Early humans were pretty defenseless against, say, saber tooth tigers in the primeval forest. In later times it is still the case that "no man is an island." People have to cooperate in order to survive and this is how morality supposedly arises.

It is argued that as people have evolved in nature so has their morality. Unfortunately evolution has not universally led in a positive direction. For instance, one could note that natural selection has resulted in men being bigger and by and large much more physically strong than women. The story goes that men were the hunter-gathers and

women kept the hearth, responsible for fostering the young and so insuring the survival and prospering of the species. Women have not needed to be as big and strong as men. This has led to women generally being abused and subjugated by men in many places worldwide. In all too many places this physical power differential between women and men has not led to a very morally acceptable set of “values”.

Furthermore that people need to cooperate may even be acknowledged outwardly by those who will in secret not cooperate when tempted by moral hazard. If the opportunity to cheat is available and the resulting benefit is great enough, hypocrisy is a temptation to which many individuals may succumb. There is a cynical saying most typically heard in the entertainment world: “Sincerity will get you far. Fake it as long as you can.”

As expressed above believers often are prone to think that such hypocrisy is in the hearts of nonbelievers, that without uncritical adherence to a “higher authority”, nonbelievers may just be faking it. And even if non-believers are sincere, how are we to defend ourselves against the accusation that this happens just to be the way we feel, just habit without justification.

Humanists believe that we can be “good without God”. Good Without God is the title of a popular book by Greg M. Epstein, Humanist Chaplain of Harvard University. In his book, Epstein explains what humanists believe, outlining the long history of humanistic thought. He also provides guidance toward fully living according to humanist principles and exhorts people to live by these principles. Echoing what is or rather not in the Humanist Manifesto what he does not do is explain *why* one should live by these principles.

What he says (page 137).is the following:

Still, while it's not important or (I hope) necessary to spend any further time explaining that it is every bit as plain for nonreligious people as for religious ones to recognize that murder, adultery, thievery, and lying—among many other such pernicious activities—are wrong, we might profit from some discussion of *how* Humanists go about determining which such actions are worthy of censure and which are punishable offenses. We've talked [and rejected talking] about the obnoxious question of whether we have a method for determining right and wrong generally.

With this I disagree. It *is* important to spend time as I will below “explaining that it is every bit as plain for nonreligious people as for religious ones to recognize that murder, adultery, thievery, and lying—among many other such pernicious activities—are wrong,” Religious folks cite their scriptures, their commandments as justifications for their moral beliefs. Without such authorities, how do non-believers justify the moral principles that they hold?

Epstein goes on to say (*Ibid*):

... in the words of Erich Fromm, "Humanistic ethics, for which 'good' is synonymous with good for man and 'bad' with bad for man, proposes that in order to know what is good for man we have to know his nature.

Humanistic ethics is the applied science of the 'art of living' based on the theoretical 'science of man.' " Contrary to the notions of those who would demonize Humanists and the nonreligious out of ignorance, fear, or outright hatred, we do not have a very hard time determining that murder, adultery, theft, and lying are bad, not only because we can see the effects they have on people, but most likely also because we evolved to have a sense regardless of which religious beliefs we do or do not hold, that such things are wrong.

But how do we “determine” these things? If determining these things is “an applied science”, there must be some pure science from which to apply it. Epstein doesn't cite any such science. Epstein does not explain how we non-believers determine these things. He just says that we do. One might be tempted to say that these things are self-evident. But, as I have been pointing out, what is self evident to one person may not be to another. Saying that we see what is bad (or good) because we can “see the effects they have on people” may be no better than basing morality on emotional reactions. We need better than this.

There is another prominent book that *does* try to base morality on science. Sam Harris in his [The Moral Landscape](#) understands, indeed defines goodness as relating to the “well being of conscious beings” right at the onset of the book. This is connected to the subtitle of the book, “How Science Can Determine Human Values”. This subtitle is more instructive of what Harris is about than the title. Harris wants to argue that moral questions can be settled by the unearthing of facts, by science in the wider sense, that is, by assembling the facts via empirical investigation. This is the theme of the book. When responding to the widely held view that ‘controversies about human values are controversies about which science officially has no opinion’, he says

I will argue, however, that questions about values – about meaning, morality and life's larger purpose – are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood: regarding positive and negative social emotions, retributive impulses, the effects of specific laws and social institutions on human relationships, the neurophysiology of happiness and suffering etc. (pages 1-2)

Harris says at the beginning of his book (p, 12) that we must *define* “good as that which supports well-being” and elsewhere calls this equation a “first principal” (p.). His argument is that one cannot sensibly deny this. The problem is that various critics do deny this and make sense in doing so

Many critics notice that Harris with his idea that “the good” is what enhances well-being is explaining what is good in terms of its consequences. This makes his ethics what is called “consequentialist”. The most prominent form of consequentialism in philosophy is Utilitarianism, the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mills. Bentham and Mills define goodness in terms of maximizing human pleasure. Harris substitutes well being for pleasure but the same sort of objections made to classic Utilitarianism obtain to Harris.

Attempting to base “questions of values” on facts, scientific facts or facts otherwise, is what is labeled as “naturalism” by philosophers. To attempt to define morality based on facts in general and consequences in particular is what G.E Moore claimed would be committing what he called ‘the naturalistic fallacy’. The charge of committing this fallacy was leveled against Bentham and Mill and applies equally to Harris.

Moore argues that naturalistic attempts to define what is good in terms of pleasure or well being fall prey to “the open question argument”. Against any claim that what is good or bad can be defined by any feature in the world, Moore argues that it can sensibly be asked “Is that really good (or bad)? The answer may be that such a thing *is* good or bad but the fact that the equivalence is open to question establishes that the feature in question is *not the same* as what is good or bad. Whether it is or is not is subject to critically determining what the empirical facts are.

Here is an obvious objection to Harris’s equivalence of what is good with the well-being of conscious beings in this world. Suppose religious zealot believes that misery in this life will be outweighed by well-being “hereafter”? Think of the well-being that a suicide bomber will expect in the next life: 70+ virgins waiting for him and eternal happiness for his family if he just foregoes the future well-being that this life might bring if he blows himself up. This could be and is an easy sale to those mired in poverty with little prospect of much well-being in their lives or those of their loved ones.

Irrespective of what may produce happiness or well-being, a religionist might argue that these things do not matter, that what is good is what conforms to “God’s will”. Plato deals with this idea in the dialogue, The Euthyphro. I do not have time to go into that now._

There are other objections to Harris’s main thesis. Harris tries to deal with these objections but it is sufficient to say that once a philosopher pronounces something as “self-evident”, a debate will quickly break out. I should also add that once a thinker

begins to defend an idea on some basis, this establishes that the idea is not a “first principal”, that there must be some justification(s) behind it.

It is certainly an improvement trying to justify actions in terms of enhancing human well-being over trying to satisfy some vindictive “Big Daddy in the Sky”. But it is pretty obvious that justifying actions in terms of well-being is itself in need of justification. Another way of putting this is to say that finding the means to enhance well-being is a means to that end but the end itself, well-being, must be justified.

Moore’s open question argument exposing the naturalistic fallacy is sometimes thought to be an intellectual descendant of the “is-ought” dichotomy first enunciated by David Hume in the 18th century. Hume’s critique is mirrored by Moore’s. Hume’s logical separation of “is” statements from “ought” statements (in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 469) has become the starting point of very many philosophical debates ever since. Hume says that no matter how long one goes talking about *what is*, one cannot get to the point of establishing “*what ought*”. That is, facts themselves are morally neutral. According to Hume, facts by themselves do not lead to moral conclusions. Hume says that in every “system of morality” with which he is acquainted, “the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs” when, he continues “all of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*.” Hume concludes that what seems “altogether inconceivable is how this new relation, an ought statement “can be a deduction from others [“is” statements] which are entirely different from it.” When applied to Harris’s arguments, Hume’s separation of facts from values means that all Harris’s talk about brain states and their relationship to facts in the world will not lead to his moral conclusions regarding well-being.

Throughout the book Harris wrestles what are with both Hume’s and Moore’s objections to the sort of enterprise on which he has embarked. As mentioned this intellectual judo does not satisfy his many critics. Rather than struggle through Harris’s struggles, let me propose an alternative way of looking at morality.

A hint of what I want to say is indicated by Harris when he says (p.39)

It seems uncontroversial to say that a change that leaves everyone worse off, by any rational standard can be called “bad,” if this word is to have any meaning at all.

What I want to focus on here is the reference to meaning. If there are both strictly factual but also moral elements already in the very concepts that we use to describe morally relevant situations, then there is no reason to have to jump any gap from facts to values. Similarly, if using certain words to describe any situation, person or whatever

already implies that they are good or bad already, we do not have to confront Moore's question regarding whether it is good or bad. Moral concepts are different from the descriptive concepts that we employ to describe scientific facts in nature but they never the less involve the understanding of facts.

To learn language, to begin to listen and speak – here I am not speaking of learning *another* language but rather the native language by which we first learn to communicate – is to learn about the world and this includes what is good and bad about it.

Let us discuss the concept of rape. That rape is a physical act of violating someone's person is basic to understanding what rape is. That it is evil is part of understanding what rape is. There is no "open question" here. A truly ignorant remark sometimes attributed elsewhere to various football coaches was uttered by the Republican candidate who lost to the governor's race in Texas to Ann Richards in 1990. This candidate, Clayton Williams, said "if one is going to be raped, she might as well lie back and enjoy it". To this we can reply "You don't know what you are talking about." Rape is a hurtful, violent act that often does permanent mental damage to the victim as well as physical damage. It can't be described in "morally neutral" terms. Anyone who thinks that one can adequately describe any incident of rape in "morally neutral terms" does not understand the concept or is pretending not to understand it.

Following Wittgenstein, to understand a concept is to understand it in the context of experience. ("To understand a form of words is to understand a form of life.") To understand what rape is *is* to understand that it is evil *without question*. Since it is evil without question, there is no "open question" concerning it.

Rape is a simple and unequivocal concept to explain. When one considers such ideas as justice, fairness and equality on the one hand and deceit, oppression and discrimination on the other, things can get more complicated. Sometimes conflicts between values can arise such as the possible opposition of the value of privacy with the value of safety. These both have positive value but balancing between them is not easy in, say, dealing with the threat of terrorism. Privacy seems to be compromised by safety and *visa versa*. I personally have mixed feeling when I see the proliferation of video surveillance cameras everywhere in public. We are about to see a proliferation of drones flying around observing us allegedly in the interest of "public safety".

The morally relevant concepts to which I am calling attention are what people often call "values". When attention is called to these concepts, there is little disagreement as to whether what they describe is good or bad. No one is going to defend murder. No one needs some list of "commandments" for this. We know that murder is evil because, again, we know what it is. However, deciding which extinguishings of human life are evil is another question. There are of course extreme pacifists who will turn the other

cheek no matter what. But for the vast majority of people there are cases where killing is not murder – such as plain cases of self defense. The term “justifiable homicide” is not an oxymoron.

To decide whether a particular human caused death of another person is murder or not depends on the circumstances, There is a useful maxim among lawyers which is relevant here: “Circumstances alter cases.” We need to know the situation, all the relevant facts, before we can decide whether a certain homicide, such as a case of self-defense, was justified. One can observe that very often when people are having what may be classed as a moral debate, they are actually disagreeing as to what the facts are. They don’t disagree about what is right or wrong. They disagree about what the relevant facts are that allow us to apply one moral concept or another.

Sometimes the distinctions are clear cut. Sometimes they are not. In this context let me reference the socially contentious issue of abortion. Everyone can agree that killing a person who is not out to harm anyone else is murder. So the question that arises is “What is a person?” This is a factual question, though not always an easy one to answer. We are familiar with the extreme religionist view – one without any empirical evidence whatever – that once a sperm cell meets up with a human egg in the womb, there is a person there with the right to live. To someone who does not hold the idea “on faith” it may seem absurd to attribute “personhood” to zygote of a few dozen cells. Yet none of us would countenance the abortion of a fetus eight months into a pregnancy because the mother to be just doesn’t feel like giving birth to a child. Despite the insinuation of some anti-choice demagogues, no sane person is for such unlimited “abortion on demand”.

The issue is trying to draw a line here, deciding at what point in a pregnancy there is a person whose extinction would constitute a murder. Where between a handful of cells, a zygote, and a fully formed healthy fetus who could easily survive a cesarean delivery should the line get drawn?

Laying aside ideologically charged, arbitrary and uncritical notions such as “human life begins with a heartbeat”, or “twenty weeks into gestation, that’s it”, when there is a person there remains a difficult question. That drawing an exact line here is difficult if not impossible does not mean the distinction between when there is person in a womb as opposed to when there is not does not mean that no distinction may be drawn. That one may not be able draw an exact line on a color chart that continuously goes from orange to red does not mean the there is no distinction between orange and red. Surely the colors marked out near either end of this spectrum are clearly either orange or red. One does not need a commandment here either to see this.

What I am insisting upon here is that learning our native language, our first language, as opposed to a foreign language subsequently learned, involves learning about the world. This involves learning the application of the concepts which words signify. These concepts learned include morally relevant concepts.

We non-believers learn these concepts at least as well – and probably with less intellectual confusion than those with “faith”. So when a non-believer is challenged as to the foundation of her or his moral standards, the answer is plain: “I know what decency on the one hand is versus injustice on the other, democracy versus tyranny is. I know the evil of murder, theft and rape. I understand these things as well as anyone else who has learned the language that they speak. I have grown up as you have to have learned to understand these concepts as I have learned about the world. I don’t need any list of commandments which I am supposed to accept uncritically ‘on faith’ to understand these things.”

This is the answer that we can give to those who accuse us non-believers of amoralism. In particular we can feel confident in our morality without depending on any belief in a god.

That concludes my original defense of morality without a god. Now I want briefly to go on the offense. I want to argue that faith cannot ground morality. Any list of injunctions such as list of commandments cannot establish morality. Uncritically accepted moral rules are subject nonetheless to Moore’s open question critique. For example I discussed murder above. “Thou shalt not kill” cannot be just accepted on its face. Similarly I once asked a supposedly religious woman who had been molested by her father how she felt about honoring her parents. Every one of the commandments (except maybe the one about not “putting any other god before me” which seems more a matter of jealousy than morality and implies polytheism) is subject to rational discussion and therefore cannot be a “first principal”.

The fact is that all of us have to deal with competing moral concepts. We don’t hold all of these at the same time consciously in our minds. Anyone who has taught logic should become aware that one can list competing moral statements on a board but people pay attention to one or the other of them to the exclusion of others at any given time. Holding contradictory ideas is what Orwell called “double think”.

This fact can be applied to the recent debate between Sam Harris and Reza Aslan. Harris called Islam a storehouse of bad ideas. Aslan defended the great majority of Muslims in the world as not holding bad idea. The Quran of course says that infidels should be slain and adulterers should be stoned to death. Non-jihadist Muslims may ignore these ideas just as most all Christians ignore the more toxic ideas in both the Old

and New Testaments Believers cherry pick through their “sacred texts”. Most all Christians are not aware and might in fact be appalled by what is enjoined in “Leviticus”

Getting back to the dispute between Harris and Azlan, it can be pointed out in defense of Harris’s position that believers can be reminded of what is in their “god inspired” texts. Those who do not live in at least somewhat secular and modern culture may not have at their command scientific and other ideas with which to oppose the jihadists. In those places where imperialism formerly dominated, Western ideas may be rejected out of hand as part of an anti-colonialist response. Witness *Boko Haram* – the name means “against Western Education” . In such a situation critical consideration of the storehouse of bad ideas may be hampered or not occur at all.

The fact is that if people do not allow their brains to be turned off by an abject, uncritical acceptance of articles of faith, they can weigh competing ideas, competing oughts. Those of us who are not blinded by faith can and maybe have an obligation to remind the faithful of what they know or should know regarding morality in general and moral oughts in particular.

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