



## WHAT IS CONSCIENCE?

“It seems to me to be very, very hard to come up with an atheistic explanation of conscience, any more than you could have a compass without a magnetic north.” ✎

The idea here is a recurring claim by theists that morality absolutely depends on their deity. Here conscience is a “moral compass” that can have nothing to “point to” if there is no divine “moral pole.” But the problems with this particular analogy are as manifold as those attending William Paley’s famous comparison of the universe to a watch in order to conclude that there must be a watchmaker, i.e., a Creator-Deity.

The simple explanation of conscience that requires no god(s) is the very obvious one that the human conscience arises from an internalization of parental training concerning what is and is not acceptable behavior. Many examples could be cited of different habits of thinking and acting that arise in this way. The Jesuits themselves famously assert “Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man.” Much more could be – and has been – said about this but it all reflects a common understanding that conscience is learned just as language and other abilities are. That is, conscience is a product of culture.

Now it might be asked how and why human societies, however much their systems of morality may differ, have nevertheless tended to espouse the same basic moral values. Again, the simple explanation requires no god(s). Because humans are social animals sharing an evolutionary past, the solutions they have found to the problems of survival, in this case the problem of moral guidance, are much the same.

This is still not a satisfying answer to believers like Peter Hitchens. What they are looking for is a sort of metaphysical or epistemological explanation of why people the world over recognize and rely on the same forms of morality. It is as if such believers were asking why human beings generally get around by walking on their feet instead of crawling on their hands and knees and were unwilling to accept a biological explanation for it. After all, people could get around on their hands and knees if they wanted to and there is no cosmic requirement that they walk on their feet.

As it happens, philosophers have come up with explanations for why morality takes the form(s) that it does, almost all of which do not require the existence or say-so of god(s). The extremely condensed version of such thought is that there are only two basic moral principles, with many variations. One is “Might Makes Right” or “The Law of The Jungle.” The other is the “Law of Reciprocity” or “The Golden Rule.” Neither of these invoke divine authority, though one form of the first is to appoint a deity as the moral authority. Even then, such a divine power has to be specified as loving and good, which begs the whole question of where moral values come from.

Thus, “an atheistic explanation of conscience” is that the human “moral compass” is a manifestation of the human capacity to make sense of things. It is the result of the human capacity to look at the facts, to apply reason in ascertaining what the consequences of any given behavior are likely to be, to generalize and abstract from that understanding, and then to choose a course of action that maximizes one’s safety, security, well-being and, most importantly, that does not do violence to or damage one’s capacity to continue to make sense of things in this way.

✎ Peter Hitchens, in an exchange “Can Civilization Survive Without God?” with his brother Christopher Hitchens, moderated by Michael Cromartie, Vice President, Ethics and Public Policy Center available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Belief-in-God/Can-Civilization-Survive-Without-God-.aspx#8> accessed 4/30/2013

## INDOCTRINATING DOUBT

“Do you ever doubt your atheism?” Christopher Hitchens was once asked by a theist. After pointing out that “the atheist secularist materialist practice is based on doubt,” he was pressed with “Do you ever doubt gods’ nonexistence?” whereupon Hitchens said “no.” This led the believer to charge that atheists are arrogant and have a certitude that even believers don’t have, while Hitchens tried to back-pedal by saying that “I try but I can’t succeed” in doubting his atheism.

Although Hitchens held his own in the exchange with the two theists (Dinesh D’Souza and Dennis Prager in 2008), he would have done better to stick with his first answer. That is, if one is unpersuaded of something, one cannot doubt one’s unbelief any more than one can doubt not having a toothache. One can imagine something’s being the case however irrational and counterfactual it may be, but that is not the same as doubting one’s unbelief in it. It is simply not possible to be in doubt about doubt. But if, as Hitchens’ inquisitor had it, reasonable believers often doubt, then such believers are really doubters who are able, at least sometimes, to suppress their doubts.

This bears on the subject of childraising because Freethinkers, in particular, are wary of the education of their children taking the form of indoctrination. They often inartfully express this by saying that they want their children “to make up their own minds about whether God exists.” It is not that Freethinkers don’t care if their children become lunatics. They just want their children to rely on facts and reason and not simply on the say-so of authority figures. Somewhere along the way, in fact, they want their children to realize that not all authority figures are trustworthy or even well-intentioned. The work of guiding children in this is both easy and difficult. It is easy because teaching doubt is much simpler than teaching dogmas. It is difficult because it requires knowing the facts and reason behind human understanding, including anything that children may learn to point the cannons of doubt towards.

So for Freethinking parents the challenge is not the task of indoctrinating their children into a narrow sectarianism. The challenge is to help children open their minds to all the ways that human beliefs can fall prey to misconceptions, misunderstandings, and unreason in its many forms.

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED, AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or through our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: [www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought](http://www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought) - **JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

**Social Luncheon:** Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills Mall, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Sheraton, cross over the freeway and make a left onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114) going west. Then take the first exit RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, continuing on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

**Freethought Salon:** Get together to discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. Most Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton Vineyard in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site! (May 12th at Jason’s on MacArthur!)

**Game Night:** The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

**Secular Singles:** Freethinkers have met their life-partners through the Secular Singles group. Check the meetup site for the next date, time and location!

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:  
FLOOD MYTHS  
(Guest Speaker Prof. Gail Gear)  
>>> Sunday, June 2nd, 2013 <<<  
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT  
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Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

The North Texas Church of Freethought  
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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