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**The "Secular 10 Commandments" and the Fallacy of Atheist Ethics – Part 1**  
by Tal Davis

Recently CNN and The Christian Post reported that two out-spoken American atheists conducted a contest asking their fellow secularists to come up with a set of ten humanist ethical standards. The atheists, Lex Bayer and John Figdor (a so-called "humanist chaplain" at Stanford University), analyzed the nearly 3,000 entries, selected the ten best ideas, and published them in a book titled *Atheist Mind, Humanist Heart: Rewriting the Ten Commandments for the Twenty-first Century* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014).

The two author's contention is that secular moral principles are superior to the Ten Commandments given to Moses as written in the books of Exodus (20:1-17) and Deuteronomy (5:4-21). Of course, atheists deny that the Ten Commandments, or anything else in the Bible, were actually revealed by God and thus have no divine authority attached them. Nonetheless, they contend, atheists, agnostics, or other secularists, can follow a code of conduct based on reason and science. They would hesitate to call them "commandments" since they would never say they are in any way absolute, but may and should change as culture and society evolves.

Here are the ten principles Bayer and Figdor selected for their book (as listed by the Christian Post):

1. Be open-minded and be willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence.
2. Strive to understand what is most likely to be true, not to believe what you wish to be true.
3. The scientific method is the most reliable way of understanding the natural world.

4. Every person has the right to control of their body.
5. God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life.
6. Be mindful of the consequences of all your actions and recognize that you must take responsibility for them.
7. Treat others as you would want them to treat you, and can reasonably expect them to want to be treated; think about their perspective.
8. We have the responsibility to consider others, including future generations.
9. There is no one right way to live.
10. Leave the world a better place than you found it.

Our contention is that this list, though it sounds good and reasonable, is actually self-contradictory and based on fallacious presuppositions. More important, without any sort of absolute basis (God) there is simply no reason why anyone should voluntarily be obliged to follow any of the principles. Only if the government, or some other controlling human entity, has the power to enforce these ideas would anyone feel compelled to adopt them as his or her personal ethical code.

Only a divinely ordained set of normative principles can truly motivate a person to obey their precepts. Why? Because only an infinite and eternal deity is capable of establishing absolute standards of right and wrong. That being said, in this two part series we will analyze and critique each of the above mentioned secular moral points. In this installment we look at numbers one through five.

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### 1. Be open-minded and be willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence.

That seems like a reasonable concept for an intelligent person to follow. And, in most matters of scientific research, it probably is the best way to proceed. However, if someone is always ready to change their beliefs, especially in the ethical realm, she can never assert that anything is right or wrong. Why, because as the "evidence" (whatever that means) evolves, what may be seen by a culture as right today will be wrong tomorrow, or vice versa.

### 2. Strive to understand what is most likely to be true, not to believe what you wish to be true.

This sentence also sounds practical. However, trying to discern by pure reason what is "most likely to be true" is, in many cases, impossible – especially concerning ethical issues. For example, look at the following two sentences and consider which is "most likely to be true." (1) Human beings are nothing more than chemical components arranged in highly complex ways. (2) All human beings have infinite spiritual worth and value and should be cared about by fellow humans.

The atheist, if he is honest, will have to agree that, from his perspective based on pure naturalistic reasoning, the first sentence is "most likely to be true" since the second statement cannot be proven scientifically. The ethical implication of that view is terrifying to say the least and has been used to justify the deaths of hundreds of millions of people.

### 3. The scientific method is the most reliable way of understanding the natural world.

Actually this statement is not an ethical principle at all but an affirmation of the standard way of doing scientific investigation. Most of us

would agree that the scientific method (originally formulated by Theists) is the best way to discover things in the natural world. However, it tells us nothing about what is right and wrong. The scientific method is morally neutral and can easily be followed by scientists with no ethical considerations at all. When the scientific method and ethics are separated, as it has been numerous times in the past, the scientific method can be used to justify horrible acts done to human beings, animals, or the environment.

For example, Nazi doctors like Josef Mengele had no moral compunction about performing sadistic experiments on Jews and other living human subjects in the name of scientific progress. No doubt he followed the "scientific method."

### 4. Every person has the right to control of their body.

The question I would pose about this statement is simply: "Who says a person has rights about anything?" The whole issue of rights is directly determined by the presupposed value of a human being. If a person is only a complex mass of matter, as the atheist must acknowledge (though he will rarely do so publically), then her value is no more than the market price of her chemical components. To say she has the right to control her own body is dependent on whether she has any rights at all. The atheist can make no valid argument for the existence of intrinsic human rights.

This is one of the greatest fallacies of secular humanism. Its advocates want the benefits of divinely endowed human rights but eliminate the One who endows them. I have never heard an atheist or secular humanist offer a satisfactory answer to the question of where rights originate.

In the 20th Century, atheistic Communist and Nazi regimes understood this moral incongruity. For them, human

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rights were intrinsically nonexistent. The only "rights" people had were those the state allowed them to have. Thus, they had no qualms imprisoning and murdering millions of people who they decided had no rights at all.

The Christian would say that human rights are divinely endowed since we are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26, 27). Nonetheless, our rights are limited by boundaries as revealed in God's Word and by Jesus. Even some actions, though they may be legal and have been deemed our "right" by the U.S. Supreme Court, may be well beyond the Bible's standards. For instance, we do not have the "right" to commit adultery, though it may not be illegal.

As for our bodies, the Bible says we are not our own (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). God is our owner. Though the law may allow it, we do not have the "right" to do anything we wish to do to ourselves. We do not have the "right" to commit suicide, to engage in immoral sexual behavior, to get drunk or abuse drugs, to worship false gods, etc. We also do not have the "right" to kill unborn human life, though that, too, is legal. (The above statement actually does not even apply in this case since a fetus is a separate person and not part of a woman's own body).

### **5. God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life.**

Once again, as with the previous point, this concept fails because it cannot honestly define what, exactly, "a good person." is. The answer they give usually goes something like this, "A good person is someone who is nice, loves his family, obeys the law, and doesn't hurt others." That is a pretty good description, except it offers no reason why anyone should be that way. If a person recognizes no ultimate divine authority then he has no motive for being a "good person."

Even the word "good" has no objective meaning. He may want to get along with others in society or avoid getting in trouble with the law, but that doesn't necessarily mean he is "good."

If those external constraints are dropped he might act in a very different way. For example, recently we saw on TV the lawless actions of hundreds of ordinarily "good people" in a town in Missouri looting and burning stores and cars. When the outnumbered police withdrew, the "good people" saw their opportunity to let their not so good real personalities express themselves.

As for living "a full and meaningful life," we ask, "How does anyone define that concept?" I am sure many atheists would argue that they have happy and good lives. But, I must say, that in my 63 years of living I have never met an old atheist who is genuinely content about the past and at peace with the prospect of death. He must at some point, if atheists are right, come to grips with the fact that everything he did in his life ultimately had no purpose or meaning and that death is a cold and empty end to everything.

In the second installment we will examine the above secular ethical principles six through ten.

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