

2009-2010 Executive Precepts Program

(New York City, Philadelphia, Princeton, and Washington, D.C.)

Sponsored by the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions
Princeton University

The Ethics of Atheism

Why leave a note on the windshield of the other car when no one saw you hit it? After all, the owner of the other car parked too close. And it is late and the airport parking garage is deserted and it was a long trip and maybe someone else might pick up the note and use the information against you. Besides, the dent barely broke the paint. Surely the prudent course is to keep on going and let the other fellow's insurance company take care of it. You think of all this, and leave the note anyway. Why?

According to the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, one leaves the note, even if no one saw, because God saw. Moral tenets about sexual continence, fair-dealing, truth-telling, generosity, respect for the property of others, to name a few, are popularly understood to come from God, who is the source of their authority. Similarly God, who is omnipresent and by some accounts wrathful, superintends observance, even when people are home alone, or in parking garages, or wherever.

If this God-based morality is honored as often in the breach as in the observance, at least it has an internal logic; one can understand why the believer might act against his own interest. But what is more difficult to understand is the thinking of the atheist who leaves a note. An omnipresent and wrathful God does not even enter his thinking. Yet we all know atheists who live by the highest moral standards, and who would certainly leave the note. Why?

This latter question is the theme for academic year 2009-2010. How does Godless morality work? What is the authority behind it — self-interest, consent, personal autonomy, or some combination? Who is responsible for the design and what is his (its) authority? What is the enforcement mechanism? Can such a Godless morality be coherent, or at least more coherent than the Judeo-Christian “Do it because God says so”?

In terms of the reading selections, we solicited suggestions from Professors George, Gallagher, Wilson, and Levine. As usual we got back a lot more than we knew what to do with. The resulting list, put together by Matthew O'Brien Princeton '03, Ph.D. candidate, with the help of intern Brandon McGinley, Princeton class of '10, is on the one hand impossibly incomplete, but on the other hand just what we need to get the conversation going. We are grateful to Brandon and Matthew, and everyone should be sure to make their acquaintance at the last precept meeting on campus in June.

Reading List

- Plato, *Euthyphro* and *Laws* (excerpt)
- Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, 'Buddhism'
- D. Diderot, *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*
J.J. Rousseau, *Emile* (excerpt)
- D. Hume, 'Concerning Moral Sentiments' & 'Of Some Verbal Disputes'
- J. H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 'Moral Effects of Communion with God' and *Oxford University Sermons*, 'Personal Influence, the Means of Propagating the Truth'
- F. Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov* (excerpt)
- E. Durkheim, selected writings on religion
- M. Twain, 'Letters from the Earth'