

# Seven Secular Virtues\*

## Humility, Empathy, Courage, Honesty, Openness, Generosity, and Gratitude

Dale McGowan\*

The idea of virtue is a noble one: identify those qualities that make for an admirable person, then work hard to attain them and encourage others to do the same. Identifying virtues and building a collective desire to achieve them can go a long way toward making a better world. And it's a very good idea for parents of any stripe to have a firm grasp of those qualities they want to encourage in their children.

The trick, of course, is naming the right virtues. The early Christian church named seven (faith, hope, charity, courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom), placing them in opposition to seven deadly sins (pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth) for command of the human soul. Once Thomas Aquinas weighed in, the list of virtues was set in stone.

Freethinkers don't take kindly to stone-carved lists. We know that the best possible rules, principles, ideas, and theories result when we continually reconsider, rethink, and challenge them.

This is not a comprehensive list of human virtues, nor a list that applies only to secularists. Nor do they represent qualities that always come easy to secularists. On the contrary, like traditional virtues, they are qualities to which we can aspire – often with great difficulty. They are not carved in stone, but in butter, meant to stimulate your own thinking about virtue rather than to dictate an immutable set of commandments.

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## Humility

Pride, properly understood as self-esteem, is something to nurture in our kids. Arrogance, on the other hand – extreme self-importance mixed with a dose of contempt for others – is something to guard against, for two good reasons: it’s unbearable to be around, and it makes no sense.

Think of people you’ve known who were just unbearable to be with. Now think of those whose company made you feel at ease, people you could spend all day with and come back for more. Odds are good that arrogance was a big part of the personalities of those unstandables, and *humility* – a decent dose of modesty and self-deprecation – was a common characteristic of the others.

Humility, like so many of these virtues, is about caring what others think and feel, about giving validation to others instead of seeking it all for yourself. The best way for parents to teach this, of course, is to model humility ourselves. Monitor your next conversation. How often can you catch yourself saying, “I may be wrong about that”—no one should know more than a skeptic that everything includes an element of doubt—and how often do your kids *hear* you saying it? How often do you invite someone else’s opinion? Do you spend at least half of the conversation asking about the other person, or are you mostly yakking about you? Do you find something to validate in the other person’s thoughts, or is it wall-to-wall correction?

If being a bearable member of society isn’t incentive enough, try this one: humility is the natural consequence of religious disbelief. The Christian view holds humans to be specially created repositories of the divine spark, molded in the image of the Creator of the Universe, granted dominion over “mere beasts,” and promised immortal life in God’s loving embrace.

Wow. Hard to be humble when you’re the center of it all.

But we’re not the center, of course. Perhaps the greatest contribution of science has been its humbling recasting of our role in the universe. Instead of the main event in a young, small universe, we have come to realize that we are a blink in time and a speck in space. And instead of having dominion over the animals, we find that we are simply one group among them, special only in the development of one organ – which we too often under-use.

Everything about the scientifically-informed world view cries out for humility. We are trousered apes. Yet many nonbelievers arrogantly strut and crow about having figured *out* that they are apes. That's pretty hilarious if you think about it.

Next time you look in the mirror, scratch under your arms a bit. Say *hoo hoo hoo*. Let your kids see you doing it, and invite them to do the same. We've done some pretty amazing things, we trousered apes, but genetically we're still less than 2% away from our fellow chimps. When we get a little too full of ourselves, a little pit-scratching in the mirror can do wonders for restoring some humility.

## Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand how someone else feels – and, by implication, to care. It is the ultimate sign of maturity. Infants are, for their own adaptive good, entirely self-centered. But as we grow, our circle of concern and understanding enlarges, including first family, then one's own community. But having developed empathy for those who are most like us, we too often stop cold, leaving the empathy boundary at the boundary of our own nation, race or creed – a recipe for disaster. Statements of concern for “the loss of American lives” in armed conflict, for example, carry an unspoken judgment that American lives are more precious than others, a serious failure of empathy.

Continually pushing out the empathy boundary is a life's work. We can help our kids begin that critical work as early as possible not by preaching it but by embodying it. Allow your children to see poverty up close. Travel to other countries if you can, staying as long as possible until our shared humanity becomes unmistakable. Engage other cultures and races not just to value difference but to *recognize sameness*. It's difficult to hate when you begin to see yourself in the other. And why stop at the species? Knowing that we are just one part of the incredible interwoven network of life on Earth should engender a profound empathy for those who just happen to be across the (relatively arbitrary) boundary of species.

Secular parents must be on guard against a particular failure of empathy – the failure to recognize and understand the religious impulse. Too many nonbelievers shake their heads

contemptuously at the very idea of religious belief, failing to recognize religion for what it is – an understandable response to the human condition. Let me repeat that: if the religious impulse seems completely incomprehensible to you, I humbly suggest that you don't fully grasp the human condition.

Let me explain. I have been very fortunate. I grew up in a stable home, never at risk of starvation, violence or death. I had a world-class education and parents who encouraged me to develop my mind and refused to dictate my beliefs. My life expectancy is in the late seventies, and I'll probably make it. Those circumstances, and a few dozen others, have given me the freedom – the luxury, if you will – of seeing my way out of superstition. But it would be incredibly pig-headed of me to fail to understand why others, living more tangibly in the shadow of death or without access to education or freedom of inquiry, would find comfort in religious belief. That doesn't mean I can't challenge the many ill effects of that belief – I can and I do, without apology – but *we must* begin by understanding the realities that gave birth to religion and keep it alive. The best thing we can do is work hard to remedy those realities, to give *everyone* the benefits for which we should be grateful. Until then, we must give ourselves a good hard mental swat every time we feel inclined to mock, sneer, or roll our eyes at those whose beliefs differ from our own. You'll know you've failed at this the first time you see your kids mocking or sneering at religious belief. Be thoroughly ashamed when that happens, since they will almost certainly have learned it from you. Fess up and fix it on the spot, not because it's not nice, but because a lack of empathy is literal ignorance.

## Courage

The philosopher Paul Kurtz called courage “the first humanistic virtue.” For no good reason but to demonstrate a little stubborn freethinking independence, I've placed it third. Secularists need courage for two main reasons: to live in a religious world that marginalizes and demonizes disbelief, and to face the realities of human existence honestly.

It takes very little courage to live in the mainstream. As long as you embrace the norms and beliefs of the majority, you'll encounter little difficulty, little resistance. Go with the flow

and the world will pat you on the head and coo. Protest what is “normal” – dress differently, believe differently, speak differently – and you’ll create problems for the Machine. And the Machine, in return, will create problems for you.

Kids need to know that nonconformity requires courage. There are plenty of nonconformists to draw upon as examples, secular and religious people alike, from Socrates to Martin Luther King to Michael Newdow – people whose strength of conviction led them to face with dignity and courage the consequences of stepping outside of the norm in the name of heartfelt principles. It isn’t easy, but doing what’s right can be well worth it.

The second reason is even more daunting. As noted above, religion primarily evolved not to provide answers but to console fears. The idea of death (if I may jump right to the big one) is terrifying to a living being. Evolution has made sure of that – the more indifferent an animal is to death, the more quickly it will achieve it, and the less such unwise indifference will appear in the next generation. An afterlife illusion addresses the fear of death by simply denying it really happens. Not much integrity in such a plan, but if you can get yourself to believe it, the comfort would be undeniable.

Secularists, God bless us, have opted for the honest truth. In doing so, we face the ultimate terror of existence: our eventual *non-existence*. Philosophy has its consolations, of course, but I’m not convinced they do the whole job. If you’ve come happily to terms with oblivion, well bully for you. You’re way ahead of me, and 99.8% of the species. For the rest of us, courage, in the face of mortality and the other genuinely challenging aspects of being human, is a virtue well worth cultivating.

## Honesty

Honesty is the essence of secularism. It is a willingness to set aside any and every comfort in order to know the truth that allowed us to see our way out of religious belief. Somewhat more difficult is ensuring that we practice the same level of honesty in all other aspects of our lives. I say “somewhat more difficult” because in truth most of the humanists and atheists I know are relentlessly, exhaustively honest, sometimes to a comical extent. We are often *paralyzed* by our

obsession with honesty – yet in one of the greatest ironies I know, nonbelievers consistently rate as the least trustworthy minority in America.

Yet in one aspect of honesty, we too often fall flat. How many of us have stuttered or stammered when a pollster asked our religious preference, or when a new neighbor asked what church we attend? It may not be surprising that we blanch at revealing our disbelief to someone who may after all have heard once a week for eight hundred consecutive weeks that disbelief is the ultimate, unforgivably hell-bound sin. But what better way to overturn culturally-ingrained misconceptions about nonbelievers than by revealing that hey, this guy or gal you’ve known and liked for years, your friend, your neighbor, is a nonbeliever? What is accomplished by continuing to “pass”?

Teach your children to choose their beliefs honestly, and then to honestly and proudly own them.

## Openness

Openness has several facets, but all are rooted in the same two principles: embracing your own fallibility and embracing diversity.

Secularists, being human, are as prone as anyone to cling stubbornly to our opinions once they’re established. Openness includes recognizing our own fallibility: no matter how thoroughly we have examined a question, we could still be wrong. The best way to avoid being wrong is to keep our opinions and ideas open to challenge and potential disconfirmation.

The other principle – which often goes by the awful name of “tolerance” – is the very fundament of liberal philosophy. A student in an honors seminar once asked me to define the difference between liberalism and conservatism in a few words – one of the best questions I’d heard in fifteen years. I stared at the floor for what seemed like an hour, then was struck by what I still believe is a darn good answer: the key distinction is the attitude toward difference.

Conservative philosophy tends to believe that there is one “best way” to be, and that our job as individuals and as a society is to find that one way and to unify around it – united we

stand, you're with us or you're against us, join the saved and to hell with the damned. Liberal philosophy holds that there are many "good ways" to be, and that our job as individuals and as a society is to embrace that diversity of approaches to life. Different strokes for different folks.

One student immediately raised the usual concern that the liberal view looks like an "anything goes" position. But it isn't, of course – it embraces *many* ways, but not *all* ways. Someone whose choices harm others would not be permitted by the society to choose that way. So liberals tend to oppose war, which invariably inflicts harm on innocents, and to support the right of gay marriage, which harms no one and would make many people happy.

My concern with the conservative position is that we humans tend to each define *our* way as the "one true way" — and quickly end up facing each other in armed camps, coalesced around our various "best ways," determined to eradicate the others, with God on our side. (For reference, see MIDDLE EAST, NORTHERN IRELAND, ABORTION DEBATE.)

A conservative secularist might declare our way of believing the "one true way," dreaming of a day without religion. That would be as boring and undesirable a world to me as a Planet Evangelical. We shouldn't even *wish* for everyone to be like us – and fortunately, few secularists do. Our worldview is inherently liberal philosophically. We should therefore look toward a world in which our view is one legitimate voice among many, and teach our kids openness of spirit and embrace of diversity as a fundamental virtue.

## Generosity

Hear enough "deconversion" stories and you'll begin to see a pattern. Many feel sadness and confusion as their faith begins to flag – only to describe a feeling of peaceful relief once it is finally gone, followed by a sense of personal freedom. But then – despite the dire warnings of the evangelists – instead of picking up a machine gun, we are hit with what I'll call the Humanist Epiphany: in the absence of a god, *we are all we've got*. Freedom is joined by an awesome sense of responsibility.

Christians could be forgiven if they took an entirely hands-off approach to charity. God is all-just, after all. He will provide for the needy, if not in this world, then in the next. Yet plenty of Christians are out there doing good works for others as a direct and visible expression of their values.

Atheists, however, have no excuse to sit passively. We know there's no divine safety net, no universal justice, no Great Caretaker, no afterlife reward. We have the full responsibility to create a just world and care for the less fortunate because there's no one else to do so. So why are Christians doing most of the charity?

They're not.

I was shocked to learn that myself. That churchgoers do the lion's share of the charitable work in our communities is simply untrue. They get credit for it because they do a better job of tying the good works they do to their creed. But according to a 1998 study,<sup>1</sup> 82% of volunteerism by churchgoers falls under the rubric of "church maintenance" activities – volunteerism entirely within, and for the benefit of, the church building and immediate church community. As a result of this siphoning of volunteer energy into the care and feeding of churches themselves, most of the volunteering that happens out in the larger community – from AIDS hospices to food shelves to international aid workers to those feeding the hungry and housing the homeless and caring for the elderly – comes from the category of "unchurched" volunteers. The idea of a religious monopoly on charity and community service is clearly a myth.

Our shortcoming is not in doing good, but in making it clear that charity without church is not a stretch but a logical outgrowth of a nontheistic worldview.

Generosity goes far beyond organized charity, of course. We must also model the kind of generosity of spirit that improves everyone's experience of daily life. Giving a compliment is an act of generosity. Allowing a car to merge in front of you is an act of generosity. Spending time with an isolated person, expressing love, interest, concern or support, allowing someone else to

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<sup>1</sup> "Religion and Volunteering in America," paper presented at the Conference on Religion, Social Capital, and Democratic Life at Calvin College by Steven J. Yonish (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and David E. Campbell (Harvard University), October 1998



take credit for something done together – these acts of generosity are all better modeled than “taught” to our children, and represent a virtue that fits hand-in-glove with the non-religious worldview.

## Gratitude

The most terrible moment for an atheist, someone once said, is when he feels grateful and has no one to thank. I suppose it was meant to be witty, but it’s pretty silly. Nonbelievers of all stripes should and do indeed feel enormously grateful for many things, and I’m not aware of any terrible moments. Whereas religious folks teach their children to funnel all gratitude skyward, humanists and atheists can thank the *actual* sources of the good things we experience, those who *actually* deserve praise but too often see it deflected past them and on to an imaginary being.

We have no difficulty reminding the four-year-old to “say thank you” when Grandma hands her an ice cream cone, but in other situations – especially when a religious turn-of-phrase is generally used – we often pass up the chance to teach our kids to express gratitude in naturalistic terms. Instead of thanking God for the food on your table, thank those who really put it there – the farmers, the truckers, the produce workers, and Mom or Dad or Aunt Millicent. They deserve it. Maybe you’d like to lean toward the Native American and honor the animals for the sacrifice of their lives – a nice way to underline our connection to them. You can give thanks to those around the table for being present, and for their health, and for family and friendship itself. There is no limit. Even when abstract, like gratitude for health, the simple expression of gratitude is all that is needed. No divine ear is necessary – we are surrounded by real ears and by real hearers.

I read recently of a woman who had lost her husband unexpectedly. She was devastated and bereft of hope – until her neighbors and friends began to arrive. Over the course of several days, they brought food, kept her company, laughed and cried, hugged her and reassured her that the pain would ease with time and that they would be there every step of the way. “I was so grateful for their love and kindness during those dark days,” she said. “Through them, I could feel the loving embrace of God.”

She was most comfortable expressing her gratitude to an idea of God, but the love and kindness came entirely from those generous and caring human beings. Humanists and atheists are not impoverished by the lack of that god idea; they must simply notice who truly deserves thanks, and not be shy about expressing it.

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