



Reflections on Higher Values for Living a Moral Life

Laurie Ross © 2 June 2024

‘Two things fill the mind with ever increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind is drawn to them: (they are) the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’ Immanuel Kant ‘Critique of Pure Reason’ [1724-1804]

Let us start with 3 Questions: What are ‘higher values’? Why do we want or need them? How do we develop ‘Higher moral values’ for living a good life?’

Simple answers are:

- 1/Higher Values are the ideals, beliefs and principles for living a good and moral life, as individuals and as societies.
- 2/ We want Values because it is in the nature of being Human for our intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual Well-Being.
- 3/ We develop Higher Values through **philosophical inquiry into ‘what is true and good’** within Ourselves and in Humanity. It is a lifelong journey of **Inner reflection** upon our experience, study, knowledge, dialogue and questioning what we think and why.

Science vs Religion

This essay was inspired by a recent talk presented to Unitarians by John Maindonald, in which he discussed **Charles Darwin** who grappled with the dichotomy between his Scientific knowledge and Christian beliefs 1859. Empirical Evidence of Evolution over millions of years disproved Biblical authority of how God Created Life and Humanity ‘. (‘a single source of truth fallacy’)

However, Scientific and religious moral integrity need not conflict. The higher unifying value of Science and Religion is **Reverence for Life**. Science reveals the facts in ever expanding knowledge of the universe which inspires religious feeling. **Albert Schweitzer was a great man who mastered and harmonised the disciplines of science, music, medicine and religion in Humanitarian Higher Values**. As a theologian and doctor in Africa 1923, he wrote: ‘The Philosophy of Civilisation’ and ‘The Decay and Restoration of Civilisation’ (and Ethics).

Our Auckland University science Professor John Morton and renowned Business Climate journalist Rod Oram, are religious men (high Anglicans) who balanced the two realms of knowledge. **Their higher values, grounded in their religion and community were enriched by scientific knowledge**.

Establishing higher Moral Values is a thought process that need not fit within Empirical Science which is a different discipline and realm of knowing. Values do not require Scientific proof for validity. However, rational thinking develops ‘Higher Values’. Modern philosopher **Karl Popper** calls it ‘**Modest Critical Rationalism**’. He explains that ‘doing what is right’ is an ‘**Act of Faith in Reason**’ for ‘**Moral Decisions**’. This empowers **Conscience** and reveals the ‘**Unity of Human Reason**’ in Higher Values.

Science and Technology are regarded as objective and de-coupled from higher values, that should restrict them. The development and uses of **High Tech Science needs High Ethical standards and regulations** to protect Humanity from catastrophic consequences. This requires 'Higher Values' in political policy and practice, that **prioritise Human, Environmental Health and Well-Being**, over and above economic wealth, from the untethered freedom of a market driven Technological Science.

What are Core Values? Respect and Gratitude- for All Creation and Being Human

These Values in practice *mean*: **Working for a Peaceful world based on Justice and Human Rights. *Stopping violence in our communities and Abolishing State organized Warfare.*

**Being a Kaitiaki Guardian to protect Papatuanuku- Earth, by ending Militarisation and Pollution of the land, rivers, oceans, air and Outer Space Ranginui.*

We have one precious Life as a Human Being. We do not need to believe in 'God' *per se*, but in **the Higher Values of 'Goodness in Humanity' and in Ourselves.** The purpose for Living by higher values is not for future 'spiritual reward in heaven' nor avoiding punishment in Hell.

The purpose of this life, is to learn what it means... and how to be.... a Good Human Being.

This aspiration appeals to rational thinkers, 'Humanists' and those who believe in some form of 'Spirituality', whether traditional or transcendental.

I believe we can create 'Heaven on Earth' NOW -in this life. I believe it is possible for everyone to have material and political conditions necessary for living a good and moral life. However, it would involve **Transformation of both the military economic system and the violent social programming** that are creating 'Hell on Earth'. In addition, **people need HELP to awaken to their 'true nature'** of goodness and the courage to **Create a Global Culture of Goodness.**

Moral Values in Society

Human Beings have a natural '**inclination**' to do both good and bad –first unconsciously, then intentionally. Social conditioning teaches us to distinguish between them and to choose-what is 'good' or 'right'. Each culture develops **values and rules** for living in society. There are common values in all cultures, like **Reciprocity**-based on principles of giving, sharing and exchange obligations.

It is part of human nature to create stories around 'God' or 'a higher power' of authority, to show ways to earn merit or avoid suffering negative consequences for one's acts. This involves creating a personal and collective deity(s) or a 'Higher Sense of Self' who provides guidance for us to do the right thing. It takes the form of rituals, roles, prayers and practices.

People may not subscribe to any conventional religion or moral narrative, but may still recognise the Higher Values within religions and in themselves. These could be called 'Universal Values'.

The **Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism** provide an example of Higher Values for individuals and the community eg. #2 Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

#4 A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It can be lonely on the moral high ground so we need to find friends to nurture these values. *I am grateful for Unitarian Fellowship in Auckland, Aotearoa and the World.*

Individual Higher Values

Human beings have the innate capacity 'to know' and to develop higher values and live by them, out of freedom (not fear or coercion). We can recognize truth, goodness or a 'higher value' when we see or hear it, yet not know how we know. **Intuitive knowledge**, can be validated through philosophical exercise, to provide reasons and arguments supporting insight.

This quest for truth, meaning, morals and higher unifying values, through rational thought, was established by Western philosophers eg. Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, 500 BC in ancient Greece. Our Western Philosophy Whakapapa is a Legacy of leading Thinkers developed over 2500 years.

One great German philosopher in the 1780s who focused on these questions was **Emmanuel Kant** in his books: 'Critique of Practical Reason' 'What is Enlightenment?' and the 'Metaphysic of Morals'. He explained the limits of reasoning but also how moral values originate **a priori (innate) in reason**. He states genuine morality must meet certain criteria as a '**Categorical Imperative**'. This means one must '**Act only according to the maxim by which you would want to be universal law**'.

He says: 'Good Will' is the decisive element in how one's virtues or qualities are used for good or ill. This is directed by the 'Will to Good' in Itself, as the 'Highest Good' that applies to all. It is 'not taught but brought to light' through a sense of 'Duty to Do the Right thing'.

Kant says: 'men deserve to be praised or blamed on their motives or reasons for acting-rather than on good or bad consequences, that their actions produce. People often do the right thing for the wrong reasons' or vice versa.

'Respect' is an effect of the Law on a person, not its cause. One aligns with 'original Cause' of moral Principle (rather than observation or experience) and applies the general rule to the particular case.

According to Kant 'Love Thy neighbor (and thine enemy)' is not in one's natural inclination, but resides in the Will. Thus, a person must decide then apply their Will - for GoodWill'.

A simpler statement of a universal Value **was taught by Jesus 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'** which is still recognized as 'the golden rule'. This higher value is fundamental to the **Christian religion** (Catholic, Protestant, all sects, etc) throughout the world for 2000 years. It is also a common value in other cultures and religions. A person who has no faith in a personal God, nor belief in an afterlife for good behaviour, may still choose to live according to higher values, within or outside of a religion.

Spiritual Values vs Narratives

One does not need to believe in a virgin birth or crucifixion and resurrection story, etc, in order to believe in the values Jesus taught. In fact the supernatural stories and beliefs may distract from the true values and put people off in modern secular society. One can reject traditional religious narratives and dogma **-but does not need to throw the baby out with the bathwater.**

Socio-Political Values

Cooperation and organization in families, communities, countries and internationally is essential. People want to live in an orderly society, with higher **values of freedom, democracy, Human Rights and equitable laws**. Most agree to: '**do no harm to others and adhere to the laws of the land**'. Compliance is based on fear of legal punishment and on **higher values of justice and fairness**.

Universal Values for Humanity

On the International level our higher values are enshrined in the **UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (1948 coordinated by Eleanor Roosevelt -wife of a US President). The Preamble starts with: '*Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.*' etc

The **UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals** provides a Framework for governments, to ensure all Human Beings have good food, clean water, sanitation, health, housing, electricity, free from violence, war and ecological destruction. However, this requires Transformation of the Global Economic Order to Stop abuse of power by multinational corporations.

Higher Values of the UN are reflected in **Unitarian Universalism Principles: #6** The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. **#7 Respect** for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The United Nations of 194 states provides the forum for governments to negotiate Peace and Security over the last 79 years. The process produces international Treaties to protect **social and environmental Well-Being for Humanity**. The Values, Rights and Principles can be agreed upon, but they are difficult to achieve in practice and maintain compliance, without coercion.

Implementation of higher values continues to develop through public education and national policies, as well as through **United Nations International Law, Humanitarian Law, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court**.

At the present time (June 2024) there is huge public attention focused on these UN institutions: to **STOP Israeli Genocide of Gaza (36,000 killed in 8 months), End illegal Israeli Occupation of the West Bank (since 1967), End Siege in Gaza (17 years), Stop the Destruction and Famine in Gaza, End Israeli Oppression of Palestinians and Apartheid (76 years).*

We realize the need for Common Higher Values that Unite Us, whilst maintaining Sovereignty and Security as nations and rights as individuals. **Philosopher Kant** presented this ideal 300 years ago in the essay '**Perpetual Peace**' (1795) **to abolish the barbaric abomination of warfare**.

Learning Higher Values

In my own life, I see the influence of **Christian teachings from my grandmother Ross**. Later I recognized this was the foundation of our Western Cultural moral values.

My father, **Larry Ross** provided the **foundation for my rational thinking**, in the **Unitarian fellowship of Toronto and Montreal**, where I also learned appreciation for all religions.

My husband **David Theobald**, was my teacher in the **Art of Philosophical Dialogue** and the study of **Wisdom** from Philosophers of East and West, and to Him I am forever grateful.

To Be a 'Free Thinker' and assert noble values of the '**Higher Self**' in the public domain requires courage and practice.

We need to promote Higher Human Intelligence and Values NOW -more than ever before, as we face the greatest existential threat to Humanity, from our High Tech Artificial Intelligence and Space Age War Weaponry. **My Hope** is that **We Humans** can **evolve our Higher Consciousness**, Values and '**Will to Good**' (and ensure AI does too).

Albert Einstein said: 'The most important function of art and science is to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive.' The Human mind that begets Science also begets **Reverence for Life** which is our Higher Common Value-that must preside.

Through reading, philosophical inquiry, prayer and meditation, one experiences various **transcendent** mind states and '**Unity in Diversity**' of all religions and in harmony with nature. These mystical insights reveal our innate goodness and Human compassion.

We cultivate this in: the 'Love' [Te Aroha] - the 'Faith' [Te Whakapono]- the 'Peace' [Te Rangimarie] through spiritual culture. We often sing this Maori waiata 'Te Aroha' that nourishes these higher spiritual Values.

*In a future essay I will explore 12 Virtues as follows: *Respectfulness, * Compassion, *Truth, *Integrity, *Patience, *Kindness, *Forgiveness, *Confessing mistakes, *Courage, *Exposing Wrongs, * Dignity, * Diligence. They represent what I call the 'Nature of Good/God Consciousness'. Aspiring to cultivate these values is the purpose of Human Life.*

Meditation / Conversation starter

1. What are your 'Higher Values'?
2. How do you apply them to living a moral Life?