

## UU 201 – ETHICS FOR UU'S WORKSHOPS 2A & 2B – UNCHANGING TRUTHS

*Two things awe me most, the starry sky above me and the moral law within me – Immanuel Kant*

### GOALS

This workshop will:

- Introduce the concept of truth that grounds Kantian/deontological ethics
- Explore Unitarian Universalist ethics using the lens of Kantian ethics
- Guide participants to name any unchanging moral truth(s) to which they adhere
- Provide opportunities for participants to test the benefits and limits of Kantian ethics as a personal ethical/moral framework
- Strengthen connections among participants.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will:

- Know about Kantian/deontological ethics
- Have examined whether unchanging moral truth(s) exist which pertain to all people, at all times, and in all circumstances
- Be able to identify unchanging or absolute ethical precepts in the seven Unitarian Universalist Principles and other commonly held Unitarian Universalist values
- Be able to recognize the benefits and limits of a system of ethics grounded in Unitarian Universalist Principles.

### WORKSHOP 2A AT-A-GLANCE

Activity	Minutes
Welcoming, signing-in, resources & handouts	5
Reading and lighting the chalice	5
Activity 1: Deontological Ethics	10
Activity 2: Opening Scenario	15
Activity 3: Thinking About Rules-Based Morality - Kant	20

#### Handouts:

- Unchanging Truths Introduction
- Opening Scenario
- Thinking About Rules-Based Morality
- UU Moral Law

#### Homework:

- Review UU Moral Handout
- Review Covenant Draft and come prepared for a short discussion and final adoption

## WORKSHOP 2A – UNCHANGING TRUTHS

### HANDOUTS

#### WORKSHOP 2A & 2B: UNCHANGING TRUTHS

*Two things awe me most, the starry sky above me and the moral law within me. — Immanuel Kant*

#### INTRODUCTION

For centuries a debate has raged among philosophers and religious thinkers on the nature of morality. Is there such a thing as absolute and unchanging moral truth? Many philosophers and theologians have asserted that such truth does exist, although they make differing claims about its source. Some assert that absolute and unchanging moral truth is established by God and can be found in particular religious texts or in rituals and practices of their faith tradition. Some affirm the existence of absolute, unchanging moral truth that can be identified without appeal to religious traditions or texts.

Western philosophers postulated the existence of moral laws which are similar to the physical laws that govern the natural world. Because scientific discoveries at the time supported the notion that the natural world was an ordered place, governed by laws and rules, philosophers imagined there must also be moral laws guiding how humans are supposed to conduct their lives. Many of these philosophers reasoned that just as we discover new scientific laws over time, so also will humans discover new moral laws. They believed that as human understanding of truth evolves and new insights are gained, the moral laws by which we live evolve and become clearer, moving humans ever closer toward an understanding of ultimate moral truth.

The school of thought espousing the idea that there is absolute, eternal, unchanging moral truth is known as deontological ethics. The most prominent advocate of this approach is the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant further developed deontological ethics, asserting the existence of a moral rule he termed the "categorical imperative," the idea that the only morally acceptable actions are those that can be universalized. In other words, if it is morally acceptable for one person to do a particular action, it has to be morally acceptable for anyone to do the same. According to Kant, moral truth exists and it applies equally to everyone.

This workshop invites Unitarian Universalists to examine questions about the existence and nature of truth, and to explore whether and how moral thinking is shaped—either reactively or proactively—by notions that there is ultimate unchanging moral truth to guide actions. Is there absolute moral truth that Unitarian Universalists affirm is valid for all people at all times and under all circumstances? What presumptions are implied in asserting such moral truth(s)? Are the ethical statements represented in our Unitarian Universalist Principles grounded in our notion of absolute moral truth(s)? From what authority do assertions of absolute moral truth(s) derive?

## **WORKSHOP 2A – Unchanging Truths**

### **HANDOUT – 2A**

#### **ACTIVITY 2: OPENING SCENARIO**

You desperately need money. You get it by making a promise to someone to repay them although you know that you won't keep that promise. Is it okay for everyone to make promises they know they will not keep?

#### **ACTIVITY 3 - THINKING ABOUT RULES-BASED MORALITY**

Believing that moral rules need to be universally applicable, Kant arrived at some interesting conclusions about the nature of humanity. Kant believed that human life was inherently worthy of dignity and respect. As such, he felt it was immoral to use any human being as a means to an end. If such behavior were universalized, he argued, it would result in the dehumanization of our entire species; we would all interact with one another for the sole purpose of achieving our own ends. We would not look at one another as persons, but as instruments of gratification. Kant wrote, for example, that prostitution was immoral because a human being was used as a commodity or "thing" rather than recognized as a person. Another example of using a person as a means to an end is befriending someone not because you like them, but because that person has status and power and can be of use to you. Kant had strong moral objections to this and any behavior in which a person was objectified, used, and not treated with respect and dignity.

#### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Consider ways in which you are in relationship with others exclusively as a means to an end. Examples include store clerks, gas station attendants, doctors, and other people you depend on for certain services.

Turn to a partner and brainstorm as many examples as possible. Record the examples. When time is called, decide who will report to the group. You will have ten minutes.

## WORKSHOP 2A – UNCHANGING TRUTHS

### 2A HANDOUT

#### ACTIVITY 2: FROM SCIENTIFIC LAW TO KANT'S MORAL LAW

Immanuel Kant, a key figure in the field of philosophy, was born in what is now Germany. He grew up in a Lutheran household, part of a family that particularly emphasized piety and vigorous religious devotion. At the age of 16, he enrolled at the University of Königsberg, and went on to spend his entire career as a member of the faculty there. His best-known and most important published work is *The Critique of Pure Reason*, first published in 1781.

Kant was a theist, and his religious beliefs provided an underpinning for his understanding of the world. As scientists of his time discovered and described natural laws, Kant came to believe that similar moral laws existed and would become clearer over time. Underlying his theory was a belief in a divine hand that provided order to what we otherwise might term chaos or randomness. He believed that our evolving understanding of scientific and moral laws moved us gradually closer to God.

In 1755, at the age of 31, he published *Theory of the Heavens*, a book that built on Isaac Newton's description of the basic physical laws that govern our solar system and our lives. Kant hypothesized that stars were created out of the material of nebulae, that stars spiraled around the center of galaxies, and that the galaxies spiraled around the center of the universe. Although we now know that much of what Kant hypothesized was correct, his observations about the universe went largely unnoticed during his time, in part because the publisher of his book went bankrupt.

As a test for determining whether a particular action is in harmony with the laws of morality, Kant developed his famous concept of the Categorical Imperative, the idea that an action is morally acceptable if it can be universalized, and done by *everyone*.

Kant's work is closely associated with deontological ethics, a rules-based ethics which emphasizes the end result. In this ethical schema, the final outcome matters more than the countervailing circumstances or the means by which we arrive at a result. Proponents of deontological ethics hold that the moral laws or moral principles one develops are always and, in every circumstance, correct, and one must adhere to them, even when it is difficult to do so.

Kant's work made him an important and influential figure in his lifetime, and his influence continues today.

## **WORKSHOP 2B – UNCHANGING TRUTHS**

### **HANDOUT for 2A**

#### **ACTIVITY 1: UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MORAL LAW**

This activity will focus on exploring whether UU values as expressed in UU principles can be considered as moral laws.

Please come prepared to brainstorm a list of UU moral/ethical statements that you have heard, read about, adopted, questioned, or have been shared with you by friends and/or family. You might want to record such statements in your journal so that you can share and examine your statements with fellow participants at the workshop.

#### **Consider the following questions:**

- Are any of these statements what Kant might call moral laws, standards to which we should adhere at all times and in every situation?
- Do you think some of our Unitarian Universalist shared values as expressed in our principles could be described as moral laws that are fixed and unchanging? If so, which ones? If not, why not?
- If there are Unitarian Universalist moral laws that are fixed and unchanging, where is the locus of moral authority for those laws—the self, the community, God, or somewhere else? Does naming the source of authority help us judge the universal applicability of moral laws?
- Does the idea that there are Unitarian Universalist moral laws conflict in any way with Emerson's notions, as examined in Workshop 1, regarding the source of moral authority?
- What happens when one moral law is in conflict with another?

## UU 201 – ETHICS FOR UU'S

### UUA Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating

UUA' statement of conscience was adopted by the 2011 General Assembly and is provided to you for your information.

1. Aware of our interdependence, we acknowledge that eating ethically requires us to be mindful of the miracle of life we share with all beings. With gratitude for the food we have received, we strive to choose foods that minimize harm and are protective of the environment, consumers, farmers, and all those involved in food production and distribution.
2. Environmental justice includes the equitable distribution of both environmental burdens and benefits for populations of residents and workers. Marginalized people have often been able to find housing or work only in areas exposed to environmental pollutants, with consequent negative health and quality of life effects.
3. As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to address our relationship with food. Our Principles call for recognition of and respect for the other. As we search freely and responsibly for truth, meaning, and spiritual wholeness, we will make a variety of individual choices about food. Ethical eating is the application of our Principles to our food choices. What and how we eat has broad implications for our planet and society. Our values, Principles, and integrity call us to seek compassion, health, and sustainability in the production of food we raise or purchase.
4. Food production involving growing, processing, packaging, transporting, and distributing food has become a vast worldwide industry. The mass production of food often maximizes production while minimizing price. This mass production has greatly increased food supply, but has resulted in the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides with crops and the mistreatment of animals and workers in food production. Both this overuse and the large waste streams from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) result in pollution of water, land, and air.
5. Access to an adequate supply of healthy food and clean water is a basic human need and right. Many people do not have adequate food, while others have a surplus. In many locations, poor distribution of food is a major contributor to hunger and malnutrition. The effects of climate change, weather conditions, and armed conflicts can also expose many people to starvation. Paradoxically, an abundance of food does not guarantee access to healthy food.
6. We acknowledge that aggressive action needs to be taken that will ensure an adequate food supply for the world population; reduce the use of energy, water, fertilizer, pesticides, and hormones in food production; mitigate climate change; and end the inhumane treatment of animals. These steps call for an evolution of our eating habits to include more locally grown,

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minimally processed whole foods. We acknowledge that this evolution must respect diversity in cultures, nutritional requirements, and religious practices.

7. Minimally processed plant-based diets are healthier diets. Some of us believe that it is ethical only to eat plants while others of us believe that it is ethical to eat both plants and animals. We do not call here for a single dietary approach. We encourage a knowledgeable choice of food based on understanding the demands of feeding a growing world population, the health effects of particular foods, and the consequences of production, worker treatment, and transportation methods. We commit to applying this knowledge to both personal and public actions, recognizing that many of us might embark on a dramatic change in eating choices and some might pay more for food that is ethically produced. For congregations, helping congregants gain this understanding and supporting their choices will require a long-term collective process of engagement, education, discernment, and advocacy. Unitarian Universalists aspire to radical hospitality and developing the beloved community. Therefore, we affirm that the natural world exists not for the sole benefit of one nation, one race, one gender, one religion, or even one species, but for all. Working in the defense of mutual interests, Unitarian Universalists acknowledge and accept the challenge of enlarging our circle of moral concern to include all living creatures.
  8. As individuals and as congregations, we recognize the need to examine the impact of our food choices and our practices and make changes that will lighten the burden we place on the world. We also recognize that many food decisions will require us to make trade-offs between competing priorities. These priorities include: taste, selection, price, human health, environmental protection, sustainability, adequate food supply, humane treatment of animals used for food, and fair treatment of farm and food workers.
  9. **Environmental** concerns include the use of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and hormones and high volumes of animal wastes produced by CAFOs, all of which can contaminate soil, air, and water. Contributors to global warming include the overreliance on fossil fuels for food production; the methane produced by animals, including but not limited to cattle, sheep, and pigs; and the long-distance transport of food. Expanding agriculture and animal farming often removes natural habitats and reduces natural biodiversity. An additional environmental concern is the deterioration of the oceans and their life forms due to overfishing and pollution.
  10. **Human Health** concerns include producers' use of growth promoters, pesticides, and antibiotics that can affect child development, antibiotic resistance, and other health conditions.
- Advertising

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and marketing can encourage overeating, poor food choices, a focus on body image that can contribute to eating disorders, and the use of infant formula in preference to breast feeding.

11. Concerns about the **Humane Treatment of Animals** include intensive confinement and abuse in CAFOs, and inhumane conditions during production, transport, and slaughter.
12. Concerns about the **Fair Treatment of Food and Farm Workers** include low pay, poor and unsafe working conditions, exploitation of undocumented workers, and enslavement of others.
13. **Policy** concerns include agricultural subsidies that reward the production of certain crops and animal products that are less healthful and environmentally friendly than unsubsidized ones, and that penalize small to moderate-sized farming operations. Agricultural subsidies of exported crops have driven small farmers in developing countries off their land. The consequences of agricultural subsidies and mono-cropping include increased gender disparity where women have been the traditional agricultural producers. We recognize replicating corporate agricultural modes in our aid to developing countries is not in the best interest of humanity. We support the development of farming models that safeguard the environment, produce safe foods, provide economic benefits to all economic levels, and create environmentally and economically sustainable models.
14. Classism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are deeply connected to economic justice, which is a prime determinant of access to food. Some of us will not be able to pay more for ethical food. Others of us will. Yet all of us can have a role in improving the ethics of food. We affirm that the fight for environmental and economic justice is inherently a fight against all forms of oppression. As a result, ethical eating requires different ways of thinking about these issues that reflect their interconnected nature, and we understand that this work will require creativity, patience, and resolve.