

# **The Need of An Absolute Moral Agent in the Secularized Society in Sri Lanka: A Recommendation to face the challenges of the secularized society.**

## **Introduction**

In the context of a rapidly secularizing global society, the discourse around morality has taken on new dimensions, particularly in regions with deeply rooted religious and cultural traditions like Sri Lanka. As Sri Lanka continues to walk on its post-colonial identity and modernize within a global structure, the country faces unique challenges in maintaining its moral principles. These challenges are compounded by the rise of secularism, which often comes hand-in-hand with post-modernist thought. Post-modernism, with its scepticism towards grand narratives and its emphasis on subjective individual experiences, poses a direct challenge to the concept of objective morality. This paper seeks to explore the necessity of an absolute moral agent in maintaining objective morality within the secularized society of Sri Lanka.

The traditional moral structure of Sri Lanka has been largely influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, all of which emphasize the importance of an objective moral order guided by divine or spiritual principles. In such systems, moral laws are seen as universal and immutable, derived from a higher power or cosmic order that transcends human subjectivity. However, with the increasing influence of secularism, particularly in urban and educated circles, there is a growing trend toward moral relativism, a belief that moral values are not absolute but are instead shaped by individual perspectives, cultural contexts, and societal changes.

The crux of the debate lies in the question: Is there a need for an absolute moral agent in a secular society, or can morality be effectively upheld through secular means alone? An absolute moral agent, as argued in this discourse, is not necessarily tied to a specific religious or institutional identity. Instead, it can be understood as a universal source of moral authority, an anchor for objective morality that transcends individual belief systems. The absence of such an agent, it is posited, leads to moral relativism, where individual whims and preferences dictate moral standards. This relativism poses a significant threat to social cohesion, as it can result in conflicting interpretations of what is considered "good" or "bad," ultimately undermining societal harmony.

Post-modernism's emphasis on the deconstruction of grand narratives and its promotion of individual autonomy further complicates the moral landscape. In a post-modern society, morality is often seen as a social construct, subject to change and reinterpretation based on personal experiences and cultural shifts. This perspective, while empowering in its recognition of diversity and individual agency, also risks creating a fragmented society where shared moral values are eroded. In the absence of a shared moral structure personal interpretations of morality can clash, leading to conflicts and a breakdown in social order.

Sri Lanka, with its multi-ethnic, multi-religious population, presents a particularly complex case study in this regard. The country's history of communal tensions, often exacerbated by differing moral and religious viewpoints, underscores the need for a unifying moral standard. This paper argues that such a standard can only be maintained through the recognition of an absolute moral agent. Without this agent, the moral relativism that often accompanies secularization could lead to further societal

fragmentation, as different communities and individuals adhere to their subjective moral codes.

The philosophical underpinnings of this argument can be traced back to Aristotle's concept of the "unmoved mover," which suggests that there must be a fundamental, unchanging source responsible for order and morality in the world. This "unmoved mover" serves as a necessary foundation for objective morality, much like it is required to explain motion in the physical world. In the realm of ethics, an absolute moral agent serves a similar purpose, providing a stable foundation upon which moral principles can be built and sustained.

Moreover, the concept of "tabula rasa," as discussed by philosophers like John Locke, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, supports the need for an external source of moral knowledge. According to this concept, humans are born without innate knowledge, and their minds are shaped by experiences and perceptions. For moral knowledge to develop, there must be an objective reality, a moral agent, against which individuals can measure and learn. In a society where such an agent is absent, moral knowledge becomes purely subjective, shaped solely by individual experiences, leading to a fragmented and unstable moral landscape. The necessity of an absolute moral agent in Sri Lanka's secular society is not just a theoretical argument but a practical one, essential for maintaining social cohesion and moral integrity. Without such an agent, the country risks descending into moral relativism, where societal fragmentation becomes an inevitable consequence. Recognizing and upholding an absolute moral agent, therefore, is crucial for fostering a cohesive, morally grounded society in Sri Lanka.

### **The Role of Institutional Religion in Addressing Life's Uncertainties and Sufferings**

Secularism, from an atheistic perspective, is often viewed negatively. As an umbrella term, secularism invites various interpretations. Within this structure, theistic and non-institutional spiritual understandings offer divergent views on secularism. Religion and spirituality represent distinct concepts. Religion typically involves an institution or organization, a set of rules, a leader, and specific beliefs, requiring adherence to a moral authority. In contrast, spirituality is more personal and flexible, lacking formal codes, rules, or a moral authority, thus relying on individual responsibility for ethical behavior. This distinction creates a perennial conflict: one path involves communal worship and adherence to religious norms, while the other emphasizes personal morality without institutional constraints. The validity of both approaches to liberation cannot be definitively disproved by logic alone. Logic, being a tool of the mind, can support or refute both perspectives. In the post-modern era, many individuals opt for personal freedom over institutional religious practices. Extreme secularism, however, can sometimes lead to a capitalist world view devoid of democratic values.

From a theistic standpoint, non-institutional spirituality is acceptable as long as it upholds moral behavior. The challenge lies in maintaining strict morality without an external moral law. Ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle argued for the necessity of laws to maintain rationality and prevent the dominance of passions. (Plato 1992, no. 357b.) A secular individual who practices morality may encounter limitations when their personal philosophy lacks a guiding end or purpose. For those who embrace spirituality, while they may strive to do good, they often lack a teleological aim to support them during hardships. Unlike theists who might find meaning in suffering through concepts such as

"eudaimonia" (Aristotle 1999, Nicomachean Ethics no. 1094a) or the "beatific vision" (Aquinas 1947, Summa Theologica I-II, Q. 3, Art. 8) secular individuals may struggle to find purpose in suffering. Institutional religions offer moral codes and a moral agent that provide meaning to suffering, framing it as having "per accidens" value; suffering serves a greater purpose as perceived in Christian beliefs. (Aquinas 1947, Summa Theologica I-II, Q. 109, Art. 9) While secular and spiritual approaches can embody moral integrity, institutional religion uniquely provides a comprehensive moral structure and purpose, especially in facing life's inherent sufferings.

### **Aristotle's Concept of the Unmoved Mover**

Aristotle's "unmoved mover" is a fundamental concept in his metaphysics, as outlined in *Metaphysics*, Book XII. The unmoved mover is postulated as the ultimate cause of all motion in the universe, not in a physical sense but as a final cause, an end or purpose toward which things strive. According to Aristotle, this being causes motion not by imparting physical force, but by being an object of love or desire. In this framework, the unmoved mover is both eternal and unchanging, embodying the highest form of actuality and perfection. It is not a physical entity that interacts with the world in a direct manner but an abstract principle that represents the ultimate purpose or end of all things. (Aristotle 1924, *Metaphysics* no. XII.1072b)

Aristotle's concept of the unmoved mover is extended to moral philosophy. The argument suggests that just as there must be a first cause to explain the motion in the physical world, there must also be an absolute moral agent to ground objective morality. (Aristotle 1999, Nicomachean Ethics no. 1094a) The key philosophical principle here is the rejection of an infinite regress of causes, both in the physical and moral domains. Aristotle posited that an infinite series of causes is impossible because it would lack a definitive starting point or foundation. (Aristotle 1924, *Metaphysics* no. XII.1072a) In the same way, the argument claims that an infinite series of moral agents is untenable. All moral agents we encounter are intermediaries, dependent on something more fundamental for their moral authority. Therefore, there must be a final, absolute moral agent that is the source of all moral knowledge and principles. (Aristotle 1999, Nicomachean Ethics no. 1096b)

When the role of innate knowledge is discussed, if humans are born with innate moral traits or knowledge, this knowledge must be triggered by something external, some reality that corresponds to and activates this innate potential. This is where the need for an absolute moral agent becomes apparent: without such an agent, there would be no ultimate source to correspond with and activate the innate moral knowledge within individuals. (Aristotle 1999, Nicomachean Ethics no. 1103a)

This line of reasoning draws on Aristotle's correspondence theory of knowledge, which suggests that knowledge is formed by the mind's ability to reflect the realities of the external world. If applied to morality, this implies that moral knowledge requires a corresponding moral reality, an absolute standard against which actions can be judged. Without this absolute standard, moral knowledge would remain latent and unactualized. (Aristotle 1924, *Metaphysics* no. IV.1007b)

To assess this argument scientifically, it's important to consider the nature of causality, both in physical and moral terms. In physics, the idea of causality has evolved significantly since Aristotle's time. The modern understanding of causality in science often involves empirical observation and experimentation, rather than metaphysical

speculation. The concept of an "unmoved mover" as a final cause has no direct counterpart in contemporary physics, where causes are generally understood as events within a temporal and spatial framework. (Hawking 1988, 85) However, in philosophy, the idea of first causes and necessary beings remains a topic of discussion, especially in the fields of metaphysics and philosophy of religion. (Kant 1998, Critique of Pure Reason A416/B443)

When considering the notion of an absolute moral agent scientifically, we must examine the assumptions underlying this idea. The argument presupposes that morality, like physical motion, requires a first cause or a fundamental source. Yet, moral philosophy has explored alternative explanations, such as social contract theories, evolutionary biology, and cognitive science, which suggest that moral norms could arise naturally from human social interactions, evolutionary pressures, or psychological mechanisms. (Gauthier 1986, 85) These explanations do not necessarily require an absolute moral agent; instead, they suggest that morality could be a product of natural processes, evolving over time in response to human needs and environmental conditions. (Wilson 2012, 120)

The rejection of infinite regress in moral agents is a central point in the argument. The reasoning here is that without an absolute starting point, moral principles would lack a foundation, leading to a form of moral nihilism or relativism. The discussion of an absolute moral agent, drawing from Aristotle's "unmoved mover," presents a compelling philosophical argument for the necessity of a foundational source of morality. However, when viewed through the lens of modern scientific inquiry, alternative explanations for the origin and nature of moral principles emerge. These alternatives suggest that morality could arise from natural processes rather than from a single absolute moral agent. Nonetheless, the idea of a foundational moral agent continues to hold significance in debates about the nature of morality, particularly in discussions that seek to establish a universal moral structure in an increasingly secular and pluralistic world. The ultimate resolution of this debate may lie at the intersection of philosophy, science, and theology, where different perspectives can inform and challenge one another.

### **The Concept of Tabula Rasa**

The philosophical concept of tabula rasa, the idea that the human mind at birth is like a blank slate, with knowledge and moral understanding being inscribed upon it through sensory experience, has been central to the thoughts of philosophers like John Locke, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas. Each of these philosophers has contributed to the development of epistemology and the theory of knowledge. Based on the concept of tabula rasa, an absolute moral agent is necessary for the existence of objective morality. To discuss this scientifically, we need to analyze the philosophical claims, explore their implications for morality, and consider alternative explanations.

Aristotle, while not explicitly articulating the concept of tabula rasa, contributed to the idea through his discussion in *De Anima* (On the Soul), where he compared the mind to a blank slate that is in potentiality for acquiring knowledge. (Aristotle 1936, *De Anima* no. III.5) For Aristotle, the mind starts in a state of potentiality and only becomes actualized through the process of thinking and perceiving. He stated that "the intellect is at first potentially whatever the objects of thought are, though actually nothing until it has thought." (Aristotle 1936, *De Anima* no. III.5) This suggests that knowledge is not pre-existing but is formed through engagement with the world. (Aristotle 1936, *De Anima* no. III.5)

Thomas Aquinas, influenced by both Aristotle and Christian theology, extended this idea in his *Summa Theologica*. He argued that the human intellect is initially like a blank tablet, with the potential to receive intelligible objects from the senses. Aquinas proposed the correspondence theory of truth, which states that truth is the conformity of the intellect to reality (*Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*). (Aquinas 1947, *Summa Theologica I*, Q. 16, Art. 1) In other words, for a thought to be true, it must accurately reflect the external world. (Aquinas 1947, *Summa Theologica I*, Q. 16, Art. 1)

Based on the *tabula rasa* theory, objective morality requires the existence of an absolute moral agent. The reasoning is that if the human mind is a blank slate at birth, any moral knowledge must be acquired through experience and interaction with an external reality. For this knowledge to be objective, there must be a standard or source that provides the content for this moral knowledge, an absolute moral agent. Without such an agent it is clear that moral knowledge would remain subjective and dependent on individual experiences, leading to moral relativism. (Locke 1997, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding II* 1) This absolute moral agent is therefore necessary to ensure that morality is grounded in something beyond individual perception, making it objective and universally applicable.

To analyze this claim scientifically, we must consider both the philosophical assumptions and the empirical evidence related to moral development. Firstly, the *tabula rasa* concept has been challenged by developments in cognitive science and psychology, particularly in the study of moral development. Research by psychologists like Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg has shown that children develop a sense of morality in stages, influenced by both innate cognitive structures and social interactions. (Piaget 1932, 45-67) This suggests that while experience plays a crucial role in moral development, there may be inherent predispositions that guide this process. For example, studies in evolutionary psychology propose that humans have evolved certain moral instincts, such as fairness and empathy, which are not learned but are part of our biological makeup. (Hauser 2006, 105-115)

Secondly, the need for an absolute moral agent to ground objective morality is a philosophical claim that requires careful scrutiny. The argument assumes that without a transcendent source, morality cannot be objective. However, there are alternative philosophical approaches to morality that do not rely on an absolute moral agent. For instance, Immanuel Kant proposed a deontological ethical structure based on the concept of duty and the categorical imperative, which suggests that moral principles can be derived from reason alone, independent of any external authority. (Kant 1964, 60) Similarly, utilitarianism, as developed by philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, argue that morality can be based on the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number, which is determined through rational calculation rather than an absolute moral agent. (Bentham 1907, 1-20) Moreover, moral realism, a position in meta-ethics, holds that there are objective moral facts that exist independently of human beliefs or perceptions. (Mackie 1977, 10-30) This view can be compatible with a secular understanding of morality, where objective moral truths are grounded in the nature of the world or in the rational structures of human cognition, rather than in a divine or absolute moral agent. (Mackie 1977, 15-25) But these philosophical thoughts are highly questionable when it comes to the existence of morality. Kant himself later postulates a moral adherence that goes beyond reason.

The argument that objective morality necessitates an absolute moral agent based on the concept of tabula rasa is a compelling philosophical perspective. Even though Scientific developments provide alternative accounts of moral development and objectivity that do not rely on a transcendent moral agent but those don't seem to have any validity. Cognitive science suggests that moral understanding may arise from a combination of innate predispositions and experiential learning. According to the Philosophical thought of Aristotle objective morality can't be grounded in rational principles or moral facts that do not require an absolute moral agent. While the debate remains open, it is clear that the relationship between tabula rasa, moral knowledge, and the need for an absolute moral agent is a complex issue that continues to be explored in both philosophical and scientific domains.

### **The Impact of Absence of a Moral Agent on Morality in Secularized Sri Lanka: A Scientific Perspective**

In the context of a rapidly secularizing society like Sri Lanka, the absence of an absolute moral agent or institutional religion can significantly affect moral coherence and societal stability. This analysis will examine how morality, when detached from an absolute moral agent or institutional structure, impacts Sri Lanka's social and ethical landscape. The rise of secularism often leads to moral relativism, where moral values are seen as culturally or individually constructed rather than universally applicable. Studies have shown that societies experiencing moral relativism may face increased social fragmentation. For instance, research by Jonathan Haidt on moral psychology indicates that moral relativism can lead to reduced social cohesion because individuals and groups adhere to divergent moral standards based on subjective interpretations. (Haidt 2012, 150) In Sri Lanka, with its diverse ethnic and religious groups, the absence of a unifying moral framework could exacerbate existing communal tensions.

The concept of "social trust" is integral to societal functioning and cohesion. According to Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*(2000), social trust is bolstered by shared values and norms, which are often reinforced by institutional religions. In a secularized society lacking a unifying moral agent, social trust can diminish, leading to decreased cooperation and increased conflict. (Putnam 2000, 22) This dynamic is particularly relevant in Sri Lanka, where traditional communal bonds might weaken without a cohesive moral grounding.

### **Conclusion**

In exploring the necessity of an absolute moral agent within the secularizing context of Sri Lanka, it is shown through philosophical arguments, religious considerations, and scientific insights to understand the implications for morality and societal cohesion. As Sri Lanka continues its journey through modernization and secularization, the role of traditional moral structures and the impact of secularism on moral coherence become increasingly critical.

The rise of secularism and post-modern thought introduces a significant challenge to the traditional moral paradigms that have historically guided Sri Lankan society. The traditional moral structures in Sri Lanka, rooted in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, have provided a universal and immutable moral order, largely influenced by divine or spiritual principles. These structures assert that moral laws are derived from a higher power or cosmic order that transcends individual subjectivity. However, as

secularism grows, particularly in urban and educated circles, there is a discernible shift towards moral relativism the belief that moral values are shaped by individual perspectives and cultural contexts rather than being universally applicable.

The necessity of an absolute moral agent an ultimate source of moral authority that transcends individual belief systems emerges as a compelling argument in this context. Philosophically, Aristotle's concept of the "unmoved mover" serves as a foundational argument for the need for an absolute moral agent. Just as Aristotle posited that an unmoved mover is required to explain physical motion, a similar foundational entity is argued to be necessary for grounding objective morality. Without such an agent, morality risks becoming subjective and fragmented, as individual whims and cultural variations dictate moral standards.

The notion of "tabula rasa," or the blank slate theory, further reinforces the argument for an absolute moral agent. According to this concept, individuals are born without innate knowledge, and their understanding of morality develops through experiences and interactions with an external reality. For moral knowledge to be objective and universally applicable, there must be an absolute source of moral authority against which individuals can measure and learn. In the absence of such an agent, moral knowledge becomes inherently subjective, leading to moral relativism and potential societal fragmentation.

From a scientific perspective, the implications of secularization on morality in Sri Lanka reveal a complex landscape. Studies in moral psychology and social trust underscore the potential challenges posed by moral relativism. Research by Jonathan Haidt highlights that moral relativism can lead to diminished social cohesion, as divergent moral standards create conflicts and undermine communal harmony. In Sri Lanka's context, where diverse ethnic and religious groups coexist, the absence of a unifying moral structure could aggravate existing tensions and weaken social trust.

Robert Putnam's concept of social trust, emphasized in his work "Bowling Alone," further supports the need for a cohesive moral structure. Institutional religions often reinforce shared values and norms that bolster social trust and cooperation. Without such a structure, as secularism increases, social trust may decline, resulting in decreased collaboration and heightened conflict. This dynamic is particularly pertinent in Sri Lanka, where traditional communal bonds might become strained in the face of growing secular influences.

Philosophical theories, such as those proposed by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, provide additional insight into the role of moral agents. Aristotle's unmoved mover suggests that an ultimate source of order and morality is necessary to avoid an infinite regress of moral agents. Aquinas's correspondence theory of truth reinforces the idea that objective moral knowledge requires an external reference point. Without an absolute moral agent, moral standards may become inconsistent and subject to personal interpretation, further contributing to societal fragmentation.

Empirical studies on secular societies offer mixed findings regarding the impact of secularization on moral outcomes. Pascal Bruckner's critique of secularism points to potential losses in moral clarity and increases in moral ambiguity, which can manifest in societal issues such as crime and diminished social cohesion. In Sri Lanka, the transition towards secularization must be managed carefully to mitigate these risks and ensure that strong ethical frameworks or institutional supports are in place.

The necessity of an absolute moral agent in a secularized Sri Lanka is underscored by the need for a stable and cohesive moral framework. Traditional moral systems, influenced by religious and cultural traditions, have provided a sense of universal moral order that is challenged by the rise of secularism and postmodernism. The philosophical arguments, coupled with scientific insights into social trust and moral development, suggest that without an absolute moral agent, Sri Lanka risks descending into moral relativism, which could undermine social cohesion and stability. Recognizing and upholding an absolute moral agent, or at least a unifying moral framework, is crucial for fostering a morally grounded and cohesive society in Sri Lanka. As the country continues to navigate its modern identity, addressing these moral challenges will be essential for ensuring long-term societal harmony and integrity.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Sri Lanka is an island which is tiedly bound by traditional religions and cultural norms and values. Sri Lanka has a high regard for these values from ancient times. But now since secularism has invaded Sri Lanka, it will not find several kind of other substitution for the highly valued religious beliefs or traditional value systems. So the destruction of the humanity, society, culture and all the aspects of life is no far.

### **References**

- Aristotle. 1924. *Metaphysics*. Trans. W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Aristotle. 1936. *De Anima*. Trans. W. S. Hett. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Bentham, Jeremy. 1907. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bruckner, Pascal. 2010. *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dissanayake, Buddhadasa. 2018. *Sri Lankan Buddhism and the Religious Constitution*. Colombo: Buddhist Cultural Center.
- Dissanayake, Wimal. 2005, *Sri Lankan Buddhism*. Colombo: M. D. Gunasena.
- Gauthier, David. 1986. *Morals by Agreement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 85.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hauser, Marc. 2006. *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Hawking, Stephen. 1988. *A Brief History of Time*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1964. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. H. J. Paton. New York: Harper & Row.

Kant, Immanuel. 1998. Critique of Pure Reason. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. 1981. Essays on Moral Development. Vol. 1. The Philosophy of Moral Development. New York: Harper & Row.

Locke, John. 1997. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. London: Penguin Books.

Mackie, John. 1977. Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong. New York: Penguin Books.

Mill, John Stuart. 1863. Utilitarianism. London: Parker, Son and Bourn.

Piaget, Jean. 1932. The Moral Judgment of the Child. London: Routledge.

Plato. 1992. Republic. Trans. G. M. A. Grube. Revi. C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Putnam, Robert D. 2000. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sellars, Wilfrid. 1997. Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Thomas Aquinas. 1947. Summa Theologica. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Bros.

Wilson, Edward O. 2012. The Social Conquest of Earth. New York: W. W. Norton.

**Author's details:**

**M.P Sandun Madushka Cooray**

**B.Ph. Rome at the National Seminary Philosophate, Kandy**

**Reading for B.TH. Rome at the National Seminary Theogate, Kandy**