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The Ten Commandments are also insufficient as a yardstick of morality because they do not condemn many practices that are generally considered immoral (spousal abuse, kidnapping, torture, rape, incest, indecency, cannibalism, mistreating animals, etc.) You might argue that these are implied by the Ten Commandments (kidnapping is stealing, rape is adultery, incest is disrespecting a parent, euthanasia is murder, etc.), but this seems to be pushing a point.

So for the moral atheist, the Ten Commandments might be an important historical document, and it might be something to ponder while developing an ethical system, but it is not a good stand-alone solution for living a moral life.

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# SHOULD I FOLLOW THE TEN COMMANDMENTS?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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Is there a good argument for following these commands in the Bible in general, but should a moral atheist obey the Ten Commandments simply because they are a good guideline for morality? Obviously, an atheist doesn't feel compelled to obey an icon of moral law. Some religious people would go so far as to say that they are the foundation or the definition of morality.

The first four commandments — have no other gods, make no idols, don't take God's name in vain, and keep the sabbath — have very little meaning to an atheist. An atheist believes in neither gods nor idols, and sees no day as holy, so almost by definition cannot break the first, second, and fourth commandments. An atheist might use bad language, but cannot be showing God disrespect by cursing in His name since the atheist doesn't think that God exists in the first place (and you can't meaningfully disrespect someone you don't believe exists).

The fifth commandment is a command of respect toward parents. This is a good idea, but a moral atheist could argue that some parents don't deserve respect, or that a moral person should respect everyone who has made sacrifices for the atheist's benefit.

The next three commandments — against murdering, committing adultery, and stealing — most people would agree are excellent ones (so long as we define our terms carefully).

The command against bearing false witness is also a good one, but a moral atheist might argue that it doesn't go far enough — condemning lying only in a certain context instead of in general.

The Ten Commandments ends with rules against coveting a neighbor's wife or possessions. A moral

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Is there a good argument for following these commandments for purely secular reasons? One might argue against cursing because it is rude or might offend others, but aside from that, it's hard to argue that one must obey these commandments to be considered moral.

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# QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

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1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on [blog.iamanatheist.org](http://blog.iamanatheist.org). Thanks!

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