

Can We Be Good without God?

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SUMMARY

Why God is the only sound foundation for morality.

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Can we be good without God? At first the answer to this question may seem so obvious that even to pose it arouses indignation. For while those of us who are Christian theists undoubtedly find in God a source of moral strength and resolve which enables us to live lives that are better than those we should live without Him, nevertheless it would seem arrogant and ignorant to claim that those who do not share a belief in God do not often live good moral lives—indeed, embarrassingly, lives that sometimes put our own to shame.

But wait! It would, indeed, be arrogant and ignorant to claim that people cannot be good without belief in God. But that was not the question. The question was: can we be good without God? When we ask that question, we are posing in a provocative way the meta-ethical question of the objectivity of moral values. Are the values we hold dear and guide our lives by mere social conventions akin to driving on the left versus right side of the road or mere expressions of personal preference akin to having a taste for certain foods or not? Or are they valid independently of our apprehension of them, and if so, what is their foundation? Moreover, if morality is just a human convention, then why should we act morally, especially when it conflicts with self-interest? Or are we in some way held accountable for our moral decisions and actions?

Today I want to argue that if God exists, then the objectivity of moral values, moral duties, and moral accountability is secured, but that in the absence of God, that is, if God does not exist, then morality is just a human convention, that is to say, morality is wholly subjective and non-binding. We might act in precisely the same ways that we do in fact act, but in the absence of God, such actions would no longer count as good (or evil), since if God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist. Thus, we cannot truly be good without God. On the other hand, if we do believe that moral values and duties are objective, that provides moral grounds for believing in God.

Consider, then, the hypothesis that God exists. First, if God exists, objective moral values exist. To say that there are objective moral values is to say that something is right or wrong independently of whether anybody believes it to be so. It is to say, for example, that Nazi anti-Semitism was morally wrong, even though the Nazis who carried out the Holocaust thought that it was good; and it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in

exterminating or brainwashing everybody who disagreed with them.

On the theistic view, objective moral values are rooted in God. God's own holy and perfectly good nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions and decisions are measured. God's moral nature is what Plato called the "Good." He is the locus and source of moral value. He is by nature loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth.

Moreover, God's moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commands which constitute our moral duties or obligations. Far from being arbitrary, these commands flow necessarily from His moral nature. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the whole moral duty of man can be summed up in the two great commandments: First, you shall love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your soul and with all your heart and with all your mind, and, second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On this foundation we can affirm the objective goodness and rightness of love, generosity, self-sacrifice, and equality, and condemn as objectively evil and wrong selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination, and oppression.

Finally, on the theistic hypothesis God holds all persons morally accountable for their actions. Evil and wrong will be punished; righteousness will be vindicated. Good ultimately triumphs over evil, and we shall finally see that we do live in a moral universe after all. Despite the inequities of this life, in the end the scales of God's justice will be balanced. Thus, the moral choices we make in this life are infused with an eternal significance. We can with consistency make moral choices which run contrary to our self-interest and even undertake acts of extreme self-sacrifice, knowing that such decisions are not empty and ultimately meaningless gestures. Rather our moral lives have a paramount significance. So I think it is evident that theism provides a sound foundation for morality.

Contrast this with the atheistic hypothesis. First, if atheism is true, objective moral values do not exist. If God does not exist, then what is the foundation for moral values? More particularly, what is the basis for the value of human beings? If God does not exist, then it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special or that their morality is objectively true. Moreover, why think that we have any moral obligations to do anything? Who or what imposes any moral duties upon us? Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science, writes,

The position of the modern evolutionist . . . is that humans have an awareness of morality . . . because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' they think they are referring above and beyond themselves Nevertheless, . . .

such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction, . . . and any deeper meaning is illusory [1]

As a result of socio-biological pressures, there has evolved among *homo sapiens* a sort of “herd morality” which functions well in the perpetuation of our species in the struggle for survival. But there does not seem to be anything about *homo sapiens* that makes this morality objectively true.

Moreover, on the atheistic view there is no divine lawgiver. But then what source is there for moral obligation? Richard Taylor, an eminent ethicist, writes,

The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, not noticing that, in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well. Thus, even educated persons sometimes declare that such things as war, or abortion, or the violation of certain human rights, are ‘morally wrong,’ and they imagine that they have said something true and significant. Educated people do not need to be told, however, that questions such as these have never been answered outside of religion. [2]

He concludes,

Contemporary writers in ethics, who blithely discourse upon moral right and wrong and moral obligation without any reference to religion, are really just weaving intellectual webs from thin air; which amounts to saying that they discourse without meaning. [3]

Now it is important that we remain clear in understanding the issue before us. The question is *not*: Must we believe in God in order to live moral lives? There is no reason to think that atheists and theists alike may not live what we normally characterize as good and decent lives. Similarly, the question is *not*: Can we formulate a system of ethics without reference to God? If the non-theist grants that human beings do have objective value, then there is no reason to think that he cannot work out a system of ethics with which the theist would also largely agree. Or again, the question is *not*: Can we recognize the existence of objective moral values without reference to God? The theist will typically maintain that a person need not believe in God in order to recognize, say, that we should love our children. Rather, as humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz puts it, “The central question about moral and ethical principles concerns this ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they purely ephemeral?” [4]

If there is no God, then any ground for regarding the herd morality evolved by *homo sapiens* as objectively true seems to have been removed. After all, what is so special about human beings?

They are just accidental by-products of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and which are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. Some action, say, incest, may not be biologically or socially advantageous and so in the course of human evolution has become taboo; but there is on the atheistic view nothing really *wrong* about committing incest. If, as Kurtz states, “The moral principles that govern our behavior are rooted in habit and custom, feeling and fashion,” [5] then the non-conformist who chooses to flout the herd morality is doing nothing more serious than acting unfashionably.

The objective worthlessness of human beings on a naturalistic world view is underscored by two implications of that world view: materialism and determinism. Naturalists are typically materialists or physicalists, who regard man as a purely animal organism. But if man has no immaterial aspect to his being (call it soul or mind or what have you), then he is not qualitatively different from other animal species. For him to regard human morality as objective is to fall into the trap of specie-ism. On a materialistic anthropology there is no reason to think that human beings are objectively more valuable than rats. Secondly, if there is no mind distinct from the brain, then everything we think and do is determined by the input of our five senses and our genetic make-up. There is no personal agent who freely decides to do something. But without freedom, none of our choices is morally significant. They are like the jerks of a puppet’s limbs, controlled by the strings of sensory input and physical constitution. And what moral value does a puppet or its movements have?

Thus, if naturalism is true, it becomes impossible to condemn war, oppression, or crime as evil. Nor can one praise brotherhood, equality, or love as good. It does not matter what values you choose—for there is no right and wrong; good and evil do not exist. That means that an atrocity like the Holocaust was really morally indifferent. You may think that it was wrong, but your opinion has no more validity than that of the Nazi war criminal who thought it was good. In his book *Morality after Auschwitz*, Peter Haas asks how an entire society could have willingly participated in a state-sponsored program of mass torture and genocide for over a decade without any serious opposition. He argues that

far from being contemptuous of ethics, the perpetrators acted in strict conformity with an ethic which held that, however difficult and unpleasant the task might have been, mass extermination of the Jews and Gypsies was entirely justified. . . . the Holocaust as a sustained effort was possible only because a new ethic was in place that did not define the arrest and deportation of Jews as wrong and in fact defined it as ethically tolerable and ever good. [6]

Moreover, Haas points out, because of its coherence and internal consistency, the Nazi ethic

could not be discredited from within. Only from a transcendent vantage point which stands above relativistic, socio-cultural mores could such a critique be launched. But in the absence of God, it is precisely such a vantage point that we lack. One Rabbi who was imprisoned at Auschwitz said that it was as though all the Ten Commandments had been reversed: thou shalt kill, thou shalt lie, thou shalt steal. Mankind has never seen such a hell. And yet, in a real sense, if naturalism is true, our world *is* Auschwitz. There is no good and evil, no right and wrong. Objective moral values do not exist.

Moreover, if atheism is true, there is no moral accountability for one's actions. Even if there were objective moral values and duties under naturalism, they are irrelevant because there is no moral accountability. If life ends at the grave, it makes no difference whether one lives as a Stalin or as a saint. As the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky rightly said: "If there is no immortality, then all things are permitted." [7]

The state torturers in Soviet prisons understood this all too well. Richard Wurmbrand reports,

The cruelty of atheism is hard to believe when man has no faith in the reward of good or the punishment of evil. There is no reason to be human. There is no restraint from the depths of evil which is in man. The Communist torturers often said, 'There is no God, no hereafter, no punishment for evil. We can do what we wish.' I have heard one torturer even say, 'I thank God, in whom I don't believe, that I have lived to this hour when I can express all the evil in my heart.' He expressed it in unbelievable brutality and torture inflicted on prisoners. [8]

Given the finality of death, it really does not matter how you live. So what do you say to someone who concludes that we may as well just live as we please, out of pure self-interest? This presents a pretty grim picture for an atheistic ethicist like Kai Nielsen of the University of Calgary. He writes,

We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons should not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. Reason doesn't decide here. The picture I have painted for you is not a pleasant one. Reflection on it depresses me Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality. [9]

Somebody might say that it is in our best self-interest to adopt a moral life-style. But clearly, that is not always true: we all know situations in which self-interest runs smack in the face of morality. Moreover, if one is sufficiently powerful, like a Ferdinand Marcos or a Papa Doc Duvalier or even a Donald Trump, then one can pretty much ignore the dictates of conscience and safely live in self-indulgence. Historian Stewart C. Easton sums it up well when he writes, "There is no objective reason why man should be moral, unless morality 'pays off' in his social life or makes

him 'feel good.' There is no objective reason why man should do anything save for the pleasure it affords him." [10]

Acts of self-sacrifice become particularly inept on a naturalistic world view. Why should you sacrifice your self-interest and especially your life for the sake of someone else? There can be no good reason for adopting such a self-negating course of action on the naturalistic world view. Considered from the socio-biological point of view, such altruistic behavior is merely the result of evolutionary conditioning which helps to perpetuate the species. A mother rushing into a burning house to rescue her children or a soldier throwing his body over a hand grenade to save his comrades does nothing more significant or praiseworthy, morally speaking, than a fighter ant which sacrifices itself for the sake of the ant hill. Common sense dictates that we should resist, if we can, the socio-biological pressures to such self-destructive activity and choose instead to act in our best self-interest. The philosopher of religion John Hick invites us to imagine an ant suddenly endowed with the insights of socio-biology and the freedom to make personal decisions. He writes:

Suppose him to be called upon to immolate himself for the sake of the ant-hill. He feels the powerful pressure of instinct pushing him towards this self-destruction. But he asks himself why he should voluntarily . . . carry out the suicidal programme to which instinct prompts him? Why should he regard the future existence of a million million other ants as more important to him than his own continued existence? . . . Since all that he is and has or ever can have is his own present existence, surely in so far as he is free from the domination of the blind force of instinct he will opt for life—his own life. [11]

Now why should we choose any differently? Life is too short to jeopardize it by acting out of anything but pure self-interest. Sacrifice for another person is just stupid. Thus the absence of moral accountability from the philosophy of naturalism makes an ethic of compassion and self-sacrifice a hollow abstraction. R. Z. Friedman, a philosopher of the University of Toronto, concludes, "Without religion the coherence of an ethic of compassion cannot be established. The principle of respect for persons and the principle of the survival of the fittest are mutually exclusive." [12]

We thus come to radically different perspectives on morality depending upon whether or not God exists. If God exists, there is a sound foundation for morality. If God does not exist, then, as Nietzsche saw, we are ultimately landed in nihilism.

But the choice between the two need not be arbitrarily made. On the contrary, the very considerations we have been discussing can constitute moral justification for the existence of

God.

For example, if we do think that objective moral values exist, then we shall be led logically to the conclusion that God exists. And could anything be more obvious than that objective moral values *do* exist? There is no more reason to deny the objective reality of moral values than the objective reality of the physical world. The reasoning of Ruse is at worst a text-book example of the genetic fallacy and at best only proves that our subjective perception of objective moral values has evolved. But if moral values are gradually discovered, not invented, then such a gradual and fallible apprehension of the moral realm no more undermines the objective reality of that realm than our gradual, fallible perception of the physical world undermines the objectivity of that realm. The fact is that we do apprehend objective values, and we all know it. Actions like rape, torture, child abuse, and brutality are not just socially unacceptable behavior—they are moral abominations. As Ruse himself states, “The man who says that it is morally acceptable to rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says, $2+2=5$.” [13] By the same token, love, generosity, equality, and self-sacrifice are really good. People who fail to see this are just morally handicapped, and there is no reason to allow their impaired vision to call into question what we see clearly. Thus, the existence of objective moral values serves to demonstrate the existence of God.

Or consider the nature of moral obligation. What makes certain actions right or wrong for us? What or who imposes moral duties upon us? Why is it that we ought to do certain things and ought not to do other things? Where does this ‘ought’ come from? Traditionally, our moral obligations were thought to be laid upon us by God’s moral commands. But if we deny God’s existence, then it is difficult to make sense of moral duty or right and wrong, as Richard Taylor explains,

A duty is something that is owed But something can be owed only *to* some person or persons. There can be no such thing as duty in isolation The idea of political or legal obligation is clear enough Similarly, the idea of an obligation higher than this, and referred to as *moral* obligation, is clear enough, provided reference to some lawmaker higher than those of the state is understood. In other words, our moral obligations can . . . be understood as those that are imposed by God. This does give a clear sense to the claim that our moral obligations are more binding upon us than our political obligations But what if this higher-than-human lawgiver is no longer taken into account? Does the concept of a moral obligation . . . still make sense? . . . the concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone. [14]

It follows that moral obligations and right and wrong necessitate God’s existence. And certainly

we do have such obligations. Speaking recently on a Canadian University campus, I noticed a poster put up by the Sexual Assault & Information Center. It read: "Sexual Assault: No One Has the Right to Abuse a Child, Woman, or Man." Most of us recognize that that statement is evidently true. But the atheist can make no sense of a person's right not to be sexually abused by another. The best answer to the question as to the source of moral obligation is that moral rightness or wrongness consists in agreement or disagreement with the will or commands of a holy, loving God.

Finally, take the problem of moral accountability. Here we find a powerful practical argument for believing in God. According to William James, practical arguments can only be used when theoretical arguments are insufficient to decide a question of urgent and pragmatic importance. But it seems obvious that a practical argument could also be used to *back up* or *motivate acceptance* of the conclusion of a sound theoretical argument. To believe, then, that God does not exist and that there is thus no moral accountability would be quite literally de-moralizing, for then we should have to believe that our moral choices are ultimately insignificant, since both our fate and that of the universe will be the same regardless of what we do. By "de-moralization" I mean a deterioration of moral motivation. It is hard to do the right thing when that means sacrificing one's own self-interest and to resist temptation to do wrong when desire is strong, and the belief that ultimately it does not matter what you choose or do is apt to sap one's moral strength and so undermine one's moral life. As Robert Adams observes, "Having to regard it as very likely that the history of the universe will not be good on the whole, no matter what one does, seems apt to induce a cynical sense of futility about the moral life, undermining one's moral resolve and one's interest in moral considerations." [15] By contrast there is nothing so likely to strengthen the moral life as the beliefs that one will be held accountable for one's actions and that one's choices do make a difference in bringing about the good. Theism is thus a morally advantageous belief, and this, in the absence of any theoretical argument establishing atheism to be the case, provides practical grounds to believe in God and motivation to accept the conclusions of the two theoretical arguments I just gave above.

In summary, theological meta-ethical foundations do seem to be necessary for morality. If God does not exist, then it is plausible to think that there are no objective moral values, that we have no moral duties, and that there is no moral accountability for how we live and act. The horror of such a morally neutral world is obvious. If, on the other hand, we hold, as it seems rational to do, that objective moral values and duties do exist, then we have good grounds for believing in the existence of God. In addition, we have powerful practical reasons for embracing theism in view of the morally bracing effects which belief in moral accountability produces. We cannot, then, truly be good without God; but if we can in some measure be good, then it follows that God exists.

Footnotes

[\[1\]](#)

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[\[2\]](#)

Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), pp. 2-3.

[\[3\]](#)

Ibid., p. 7.

[\[4\]](#)

Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988) p. 65.

[\[5\]](#)

Ibid., p. 73.

[\[6\]](#)

Critical notice of Peter Haas, *Morality after Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), by R. L. Rubenstein, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60 (1992): 158.

[\[7\]](#)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Signet Classics, 1957), bk. II, chap. 6; bk. V, chap. 4; bk. XI, chap. 8.

[\[8\]](#)

Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967), p. 34.

[\[9\]](#)

Kai Nielsen, "Why Should I Be Moral?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 90.

[\[10\]](#)

Stewart C. Easton, *The Western Heritage*, 2d ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1966), p. 878.

[\[11\]](#)

John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), p. 63.

[\[12\]](#)

R.Z. Friedman, "Does the 'Death of God' Really Matter?" *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1983):322.

[\[13\]](#)

Michael Ruse, *Darwinism Defended* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1982), p. 275.

[\[14\]](#)

Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason*, pp. 83-4.

[\[15\]](#)

Robert Merrihew Adams, "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre dame Press, 1979), p. 127.