

THE MORAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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Most everyone knows that they are obligated to do good and be good and the moral argument begins with our knowing such moral axioms as self-evident. The advantage of this argument is that it is based on an awareness that is most near to us and known by virtually everyone, not from data known only to scientists and scholastic metaphysicians.

The starting point of the argument then is the recognition of obligatory moral norms. In other words, there are moral claims that we regard as true and this notion that some moral claims are true is the philosophical position of *moral realism*. Moral realism holds that things like harming an innocent child for no good reason is wrong, really wrong, regardless what some people happen to think about it. Now the data here is unique in that although it is within us, it points to something outside and beyond us. This common moral intuition that we are speaking of is an experience of a constraining power, a sanction that says one must do good and avoid evil. This data demands an explanation.

First, a couple of clarifications are in order. The point here is *not* that one needs to believe in God in order to know what is good *nor* do they need to believe in God in order to be a good person. Rather the point is that if God does not exist then does it make any sense to say there is a real moral standard at all? In other words, how can there be a true moral law if God does not exist? The point of the moral argument is that a common sense view of morality is incompatible with atheism.

We start with data that all should recognize. What is involved in making a simple claim like the following?

“One should not kill innocent children for fun.”

This is a statement that nearly all of us can agree on. If we unpack what is involved in affirming this statement, we can uncover some essential presuppositions. First, a child, unlike say a rat, is something, a kind of thing, that *ought not* to be harmed. You might wantonly set a rat trap to take out a rat that comes into your yard at night, but you wouldn't do this with a child (your own or someone else's). In other words, there is a moral obligation not to harm something like a child and so repercussions should follow if this norm is violated. So from this simple claim, we have at least three elements or “necessary conditions” for moral realism:

1. **Moral obligation** – This is principle by which one is required to do certain actions and refrain from others, in which we say there are “oughts” and “ought nots”. What is meant here a *categorical* “ought” as in a duty or imperative (i.e., “Do X”) to do good and avoid evil and not merely a *hypothetical* “ought” (i.e., “If you want to be good then you ought to do X”). This element is necessary since, after all, it makes no sense to say there are moral norms or “rules” but no obligation to follow them.
2. **Moral accountability** – This is a principle by which one is held accountable for their actions and the need for this element follows immediately from 1, namely, if there is an obligation to do or not do X, this entails one is answerable and held responsible for doing or not doing X. Without moral accountability, moral obligation is meaningless and our moral choices are of no consequence.
3. **Human Value** – This is a non-arbitrary principle of selection by which human beings are designated as being more important and valuable than other species. Without this principle there is no good reason to say human beings are any more valuable or dignified than rats and cockroaches.

Each of these elements are necessary conditions. *If just one of them is missing, moral realism becomes incoherent.* If there is no moral obligation, there is nothing one must do or not do. If there is no moral accountability, obligation is empty. Without a principle justifying human dignity, there is no good reason to think humans are deserving of better treatment than anything else.

Now the question we ask is *in which worldview can this simple claim be supported?* In other words, what does it take to account for these three elements upon which the moral claims like the above are made?

Why Atheism Cannot Account for Morality

First let's take the worldview of the atheist. This is the world were human beings have arrived by way of naturalistic evolution. How would morality come about here?

Imagine the world before there were any conscious beings.¹ Here is a world simply of matter in motion. Planets move, chemicals interact, and energy is transferred. Clearly this is a world without morality. Bring in the arrival of simple organisms, and still we have a world entirely lacking morality. Follow this evolutionary process through to the appearance of the first man. We now have one lone man on a large rock inhabited by a universe full of amoral beings all around him. But with the arrival of the first man do we now have hope for morality? After all here we have an intellect. So imagine if this rather hairy and smelly man starts to think about notions of good and evil. It would be absurd to suggest that suddenly *his* moral ramblings become obligatory or objective. There is no moral obligation here, no accountability, and the only human dignity in this world is the "dignity" that he makes up and confers on himself. Nor would it make any difference if he showered shaved and put on some nicer clothes. Supposing the first man wants to be sympathetic and caring to possible others, still these noble feelings run no deeper than being the product of unconscious forces and how can these amoral produce what is truly moral? It is obvious in this case that:

Truth supposes a standard outside the thinker to which he must conform; but here the thinker is a sort of divinity, subject to no higher judge. Let us call the supposed universe which he inhabits a moral solitude. In such a moral solitude it is clear that there can be no outward obligation and that the only trouble the god-like thinker is liable to have will be over the consistency of his own several ideas with one another... for beyond the facts of his own subjectivity there is nothing moral in the world.²

But the problem worsens. Now bring in a second man. This second man, unlike the first, wants to indulge in his cruelest desires. Which man is "right"? The only answer seems to be "neither"! Nor of course does it matter how many additional men we add to either category or in what order they arrive. The fact is that one and the same universe has brought forth two drastically different responses. Does the universe really sanction the one and condemn the other?

It is impossible to see how this could be.

To go deeper and make the point more specifically, the claim that evolutionary development is sufficient to ground morality fails for at least two reasons:

1. *An Evolutionary Account of Ethics Fails to Satisfy the Necessary Conditions of Morality:* In the atheistic account, the best that can be said is that mass murderers have their desires and the rest of us have ours. We don't like their desires and they don't like ours. So as it turns out the majority prevents them from acting on their desires through law and institutions and will satisfy their desire to punish them if they violate the desires of the majority. All that can be said here is that "might makes right" and the desires of the stronger side wins (but what if the Nazis had won?). Here moral goods and evils run no deeper than fallible, imperfect human individual desires, and these desires are the result of blind forces of chance. Yet to avoid human arbitrariness, we have to say it doesn't really matter if a *group* is committed to morality; we need to ask the further question if *reality* is committed to morality. What real factors are there in the world to ground the moral preferences of a group?

Take moral obligation for example, if moral obligation is a human creation, this obligation is an arbitrary product of just a certain group of humans and there seems to be no good reason why the

¹ This analogy is inspired by William James "The Philosopher and the Moral Life" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover 1956) p. 191

² James, p. 191

decisions of one group ought to override the other. Without real obligation, the decision to be good is utterly arbitrary; and so the decision to be a Mother Teresa rather than a Hitler would be as arbitrary as choosing either a salad or a hamburger for dinner. In the absence of God, moral obligation is just a human convention, wholly subjective, and non-binding.

Moreover, take the notion of human dignity. If what makes human beings more valuable than other animals is the just the decisions of some human beings, then this is self-serving and arbitrary and there would be no reason to say why another person couldn't come along and decide we should start treating rats as more valuable than human beings. An arbitrary preference of species is of no more significance than any other arbitrary criterion like race or ethnicity, and so could be rightly called "speciesism".

The case of course worsens if we try to ground morality in the chance forces that produced the first man. Imagine if a scrabble box fell off the shelf and spilled out a random set of letters that said, "Be good" or if while you were eating alphabet soup the floating letters formed the phrase, "Do not kill".³ Commands that come about by chance forces are things that come about by unintelligent amoral forces. Clearly these accidentally formed "commands" are not really commands at all and can be justifiably ignored. The same can be said of the blind chance formation of DNA information through socio-biological development. A man may be very grateful that such development got him here, but there is no good reason to say he is bound to listen to his accidentally formed genetic information now any more than an accidentally arranged sentence in alphabet soup! Why choose one over the other?

So it seems clear that neither other human beings nor blind chance can satisfy the necessary conditions for morality.

2. *An Evolutionary Account of Ethics Allows for Immoral Actions:* Even if we put these problems aside and grant for the sake of argument that socio-biological pressures are the basis for morality, still problems arise. First, the survival of the species standard can only account for an overall attitude towards humans and cannot account for prohibiting individual actions. *Individual* immoral acts could be occasionally justified as long as they weren't made common enough to affect the overall species. In fact, this standard of propagating the species seems to collapse into utilitarianism. Ethnic cleansing might promote the species by getting rid of the weak and making the human race better equipped for survival. Rape might promote the species by making more offspring. Why not have a pay per view rape show that could raise tens of thousands of dollars for poor people in third world countries? One might respond, "If everyone did that society would be harmed." True, *but everyone is not*. Just a few isolated instances would not harm the propagation of the species; in fact we could set a legal limit on how many such shows could be made a year. But all of this of course is absurd. Hence, the propagation of the species standard seems not only to allow for but might even justify acts that most of us find cruel and immoral.

Secondly this principle would seem to leave some persons out. For example, what about the handicapped? The moral principle that we ought to respect all human persons, whether handicapped or not, and the evolutionary principle of the "survival of the fittest" are mutually exclusive. If morality were just a product of evolution, then the same socio-biological pressure that says we ought not to harm others in order to better the survival of the species also suggests that the weaker members of the species ought to be eliminated so they do not contaminate the gene pool. Basing morality on the betterment of the species cuts both ways, namely, preserve those that better the species and do not preserve those who do not.

Finally, grounding morality in the "survival of the species" can say nothing against animal cruelty. How does being cruel to a kitten or puppy harm the survival of the human species? In fact, again, such cruelty could be sold as entertainment on pay per view and the proceeds donated to orphaned children. A clubbing of seals DVD could be sold as a fundraiser to help impoverished urban

³ This example is owed to Francis Beckwith at Baylor University.

families attain transportation for jobs (A “Clubbing Seals for Wheels” campaign?). But of course this is morally abominable and so the survival of the species standard is an insufficient ground for morality.

Thus, we can conclude that atheistic evolution can only explain our moral inclinations *if and only if* those inclinations are not indicative of a true moral law. So while it is still theoretically possible that our moral inclinations all originate in unintelligent amoral chance, this would mean morality, as we know it, is a façade. But this of course proves the point, namely, that if there is no God there is no moral law.

Why Theism Can Account for Morality

Yet by contrast, theism can sufficiently account for all three of the necessary conditions for morality. Let us now look and see how well a theistic worldview can handle each of the three necessary conditions laid out above:

1. **Moral Obligation:** God alone is a sufficient answer for the source of moral obligation because such an obligation presupposes; an *intelligence* that can direct moral agents towards a goal, an *authority* to whom a duty is owed, and something *absolutely good*. We cannot give our allegiance to an imperfect being. A fallible or imperfect goodness might be mistaken or second-guessed, and since moral claims are unconditional, their source must also be. God as an absolute authority to whom all creatures owe their existence, completely good and intelligent satisfies all of these.
2. **Moral Accountability:** Without accountability the existence of moral obligation would be empty and meaningless. But what must an absolute source of moral accountability be like? Such a source needs to be; again *absolutely good* and *just, powerful* enough to mete out reward and punishment, and an *intelligent* being that is also a “searcher of hearts.” Since motivations are important in determining moral actions, then a Judge has to know these in order to judge rightly.
3. **Human Dignity:** What is needed to determine human beings as somehow dignified or having a special value? A *non-arbitrary principle of selection* by which human beings are designated as being more important and valuable than other species requires a source that is; *intelligent, good, authoritative*, and the source responsible for the ontological hierarchy of creatures and setting the goals for humanity in the first place. In the theistic alternative, human beings are said to be valuable and have dignity insofar as they more fully exemplify an absolute standard of perfection. Created in the image of God, they are persons – self-determining moral agents, who have been directed towards partaking in the nature of an infinitely good divine being.

Thus, it is simple to see how theism can make far better sense of this moral data than atheism can. If we follow through with the moral data we started with in the beginning, we are led to the conclusion that God exists. In other words, the recognition of moral norms is an implicit but necessary recognition of God. So the dilemma for the atheist boils down to this:

Either affirm that, “One should not kill innocent children for fun” is a morally empty statement or affirm that God exists.

Which will it be? Can the atheist be so certain of affirming the former that he or she is willing to deny the latter? The theist, at least, has no problem of choosing between these alternatives. But what if someone is just not sure about moral norms, that is, what if unlike the most of us, someone is not certain if intentionally killing an innocent child is wrong? To this it can be said that to the same degree in which one affirms a statement like, “One should not kill innocent children for fun,” is the same degree in which one should also accept the existence of a moral Lawgiver standing behind it.

While it is correct that the truthfulness of moral norms shows only a small part of what theists believe about God, it is also the case that the data is richer, more like inside information or the faint voice of god whispering in the depths of our souls. The whole point is put well by Cardinal John Henry Newman:

[Man] has within his breast a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion, or impression, or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others. I do not say that its particular injunctions are always clear, or that they are always consistent with each other; but what I am insisting on here is this, that it commands, -that it praises, it blames, it promises, it threatens, it implies a future, and it witnesses the unseen. It is more than a man's own self. The man himself has not power over it, or only with extreme difficulty; he did not make it, he cannot destroy it. He may silence it in particular cases or directions, he may distort its enunciations, but he cannot, or it is quite the exception if he can, he cannot emancipate himself from it. He can disobey it, he may refuse to use it; but it remains.

This is Conscience; and, from the nature of the case, its very existence carries on our minds to a Being exterior to ourselves; for else whence did it come? and to a Being superior to ourselves; else whence its strange, troublesome peremptoriness? I say, without going on to the question what it says, and whether its particular dictates are always as clear and consistent as they might be, its very existence throws us out of ourselves, and beyond ourselves, to go and seek for Him in the height and depth, whose Voice it is. As the sunshine implies that the sun is in the heavens, though we may see it not, as a knocking at our doors at night implies the presence of one outside in the dark who asks for admittance, so this Word within us, not only instructs us up to a certain point, but necessarily raises our minds to the idea of a Teacher, an unseen Teacher.⁴

Objections

“Morality is just decided upon by society.”

Really? Who took the vote? Nobody asked me, did they ask you? This objection wants to say that actions are right and wrong based upon the decisions of society, but what counts as the society? Society is not a thing; it is simply other people, and which societal group decides and why are they always right? What about when a society is divided? What about reformers that go against the dominant view of society, should we obey them? Should a German have obeyed society during the Nazi era?

Not only are these sorts of questions insurmountable, but also this objection falls to the same problems as the claim that morality is grounded in the evolutionary adaptation of promoting the species.

“This argument doesn’t prove that there is only one God.”

True but the argument doesn’t claim to do so. It claims that there is at least one god who acts as a moral lawgiver. Yet since, all things being equal, we should always choose the simpler explanation, there is no reason to posit many gods when one God will be a sufficient answer.

“Well then either morality is good just because God prefers it or God prefers it because it is already good. So either there is a moral standard outside of God or morality is just God’s arbitrary whim.”

The problem with this objection is that it assumes only one answer can be given but this is a false dichotomy since both alternatives can be true. God’s will for what is good follows from His good nature. Take these examples; there is nothing obviously wrong at all with holding each pair of statements to be true:⁵

- 1-1 David is a good student because the examiner gives all “A’s” to him
- 1-2 David got all “A’s” because he is a good student
- 2-1 This wine is good because all gourmets agree on it
- 2-2 All gourmets agree on it because this wine is good
- 3-1 An action is good because God commands it
- 3-2 God commands an action because it is good

⁴ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Occasional Sermons: V, Dispositions for Faith*

⁵ James Hanink and Gary Mar, “What Euthyphro Couldn’t Have Said” *Faith and Philosophy* v. 4, 3 (1987) p. 252-3

Now what is meant by “because” in the first statement of each pair differs from the second statement in that the “because” in the first statements indicate a cognitional reason (meaning “from the knowledge of”) while in all the second statements indicate an essential reason (meaning “from the fact that”). But we are not forced into choosing only one or the other since both can be right! Holding *both* that an “authority says X” and “X is a fact” is a compatible combination! After all, judgments of competent authorities should coincide with the facts of the matter.

In the same way, God’s will operates according to a standard, and his very nature of infinite goodness is the standard for all that he wills. As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “God’s power is His goodness: hence He cannot use His power otherwise than well.”⁶ and “Since good as perceived by intellect is the object of the will, it is impossible for God to will anything but what His wisdom approves. This is, as it were, His law of justice, in accordance with which His will is right and just. Hence, what He does according to His will He does justly.”⁷

“The God answer is no better. Why ought I to care about what God thinks or do what He says?”

The cases are not parallel. Of course, we can always ask “why” about anything, but that doesn’t mean every time we do that the question is equally meaningful. The “why” here is not the same as the theist’s “why”. The theist holds that whatever lacks goodness and authority cannot be the ground for morality. So when the theist says, “Why should I follow my genetic influence?” for example, the point is that one owes no obligation to amoral sources with no authority.

This is not the case with positing God. To ask *why* I should follow the decisions of an omniscient, absolutely good and Ultimate Authority is not at all like asking why I should follow the decisions of something that lacks these qualities. In other words, to ask “Why should I adopt the moral point of view (when there is no good authority)?” is utterly different from asking, “Why should I adopt the moral point of view (when there is a good authority)?”⁸

One might from there ask why, *given that there is an omnibenevolent Ultimate authority*, one should we listen to Him, but this objection seems utterly nonsensical. The reason why is that some propositions are what the philosopher Alvin Plantinga calls “properly basic”. Properly basic propositions are not always a contradiction to deny, but they are foundational to our knowledge nevertheless. Such things like “The world was not created 5 minutes ago with an appearance of age”, “my memory is a veridical faculty”, and others are foundational to our knowing anything. The same is true for ethical knowledge. Justice requires that “we are obligated to do what a legitimate authority reasonably commands.” Obligation, if it means anything, is to owe a duty to a superior. An authority is one whose opinion on a subject is entitled to be accepted. (Lat. *auctoritas* – authority – the state or condition of the author).

So unless we want to lapse into *moral nihilism*, we must adopt *some* authority and standard and basing that necessity on an all-knowing morally perfect Creator seems like the least arbitrary way to go about it.

The theist holds that the justification for morality is that there is a true moral law issued by an all-good, just, wise, and loving God and that moral law is founded upon the way in which we are designed to properly function. It is both a legitimate duty laid upon us and in our own self-interest to follow it. The sufficiency of this answer seems so self-evident that it is difficult to see how any better answer is possible.

“But even if we grant God as the source of moral norms, still this does not help me in practical day to day moral decisions.”

⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.2.4

⁷ *Ibid*, I.21.1 ad.2

⁸ One can distinguish two types of “should” questions – asking for moral reasons and asking for a rational justification. A “moral should”, like in “Why should I not do X” asks for moral reasons. This type of should is meaningless here, since we would be asking for moral reasons for adopting moral reasons. The second type of “should” however asks for a rational justification. “Why should I be moral?” in this case asks for the rational justification for moral norms. It is this sense that is intended in the moral argument.

This is a question of practical ethical decision making (an issue in “applied ethics”) and not a question of the ultimate ground for morality (an issue in “metaethics”). The moral argument is asking about the grounding of morality in general not in solving every particular ethical issue. In any case, the question of the ultimate basis for ethics would have to be answered before any individual ethical decision could have any real meaning above one’s own subjective opinion.

“I deny that there are any moral norms so the argument doesn’t work.”

This objection simply bites the bullet and denies data that is intuitively obvious to nearly everyone, namely, that there is a moral difference between say feeding an innocent child and brutally harming her. Thus this response appears unbelievable and sounds suspiciously insincere. The moral introspection here must be honest. If the atheist wants to deny the data, nothing more can be said and they should perhaps be left to confront it when they are alone.

But it needs to be asked how someone can be more certain that God doesn’t exist than they are that an innocent child should not be intentionally harmed? To the degree in which someone accepts the latter, they should also, to that same degree, accept the existence of God. In the absence of any proof showing that God does *not* exist, there is no good reason to deny our common moral intuitions any more than there is to deny our common sense intuitions about experiencing external reality itself. For any skeptical argument one could give about denying our moral intuitions, one could give a parallel skeptical argument for why one should deny our intuitive experience of the external world.⁹ So to say there are no moral norms is not an explanation of our common experience but a denial of it.

In fact, the theist can be perfectly happy to chalk this response off as a victory and a backhanded testament and concession to the strength of the moral argument. Atheism fails to account for one of the most important facets of our common experience. From the theist’s perspective, the atheist has conceded a square of reality to theism, akin to losing a major piece in chess match, and in doing so the atheist is one step further removed from reality.

Conclusion

Moral values fit comfortably well in a theistic universe and by contrast, a world in which God does not exist is a world that cannot account for common sense moral truths. When anyone says someone *ought* to do such and such and *ought* to avoid doing so and so, they are assuming a world that is radically at odds with atheism. If they claim to be atheists, they are oblivious to the way their moral language is unhinged from what is really needed to root those very moral norms that they themselves profess. A worldview that cannot justify the most basic moral claims doesn’t seem like the world we live in and any worldview that cannot consistently call killing an innocent child for fun absolutely and always wrong is a worldview that should be rejected.

In conclusion, we close with a formal summary of the argument:

I. If God does not exist, then moral realism is false

- a. Atheism cannot account for the conditions necessary for moral realism
 - i. That which is necessary for moral realism is a source of moral obligation, accountability, and human dignity
 - ii. But no atheistic worldview can account for a source of moral obligation, accountability, and human dignity
 - iii. Therefore, no atheistic worldview can account for that which is necessary for moral realism.

II. But moral realism is not false

- a. It is intuitively clear that actions like “Killing an innocent child for fun” are morally wrong.

III. Therefore God exists

⁹ This point is indebted to William Lane Craig of Biola University.