

God is necessary for morality

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(Opening statement in a debate with Shelley Kagan on February 24, 2009. I have lightly edited the text for the sake of clarity and brevity)

The question before us this evening is: *Is God necessary for morality?*

Notice what the question is *not* asking. We are not asking whether *belief* in God is necessary for morality. No one in tonight's discussion is arguing that in order to live a moral life, you need to believe in God. Rather, the question, as Shelley emphasized, is whether *God* is necessary for morality.

And the answer to that question I think obviously depends on what you mean by *morality*.

If by morality you mean simply a certain pattern of social behavior prevalent among human beings, then obviously this sort of behavior could still go on, even if it turned out that God does not exist. God isn't necessary in order for human beings to exhibit certain patterns of social behavior which they call acting morally. But if by morality you mean that certain things are *really* good or evil, that certain actions are unconditionally obligatory or impermissible, then many atheists and theists alike agree that God is indeed necessary for morality.

In the absence of God, morality turns out to be just a human convention or illusion. The same patterns of social behavior might go on without God, but it would be a delusion to think that such behavior has any objective moral significance. Accordingly, I'm going to argue that God is necessary for morality in at least three distinct ways. Without God, the following would not exist:

1. Objective moral values,
2. Objective moral duties, and
3. Moral accountability.

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.

Now when we talk about moral values, we're talking about whether something is good or evil. To say that there are objective moral values is to say that something is good or evil, independently of whether anybody believes it to be so.

To say, for example, that the Holocaust was objectively evil is to say that it was evil, even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was good, and it would still have been evil even if the Nazis had won World War 2 and succeeded in brainwashing or exterminating everybody who disagreed with them, so that everyone believed the Holocaust was good.

My first claim is that if there is no God, then moral values are not objective in that sense.

Traditionally, objective moral values have been based in God, who is the highest good. He is the locus and paradigm of moral value. God's own holy and loving nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions are measured. He is, by nature, loving, generous, just faithful, kind, and so forth, and thus if God exists, objective moral values exist.

But if God does not exist, what basis remains for objective moral values? In particular, why think that human beings would have moral worth? On the atheistic view, human beings are just accidental byproducts of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust, called the planet earth, lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe in which we are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time.

On atheism, I can't see any reason to think that human well-being is objectively good—any more than insect well-being or dog well-being or monkey well-being.

On a naturalistic view, moral values are just the byproduct of biological evolution and social conditioning. Just as a troop of baboons exhibit

cooperative and even altruistic behavior, because natural selection has determined it to be advantageous in the struggle for survival, so their primate cousins, *homo sapiens*, have similarly evolved behavior for the same reason. 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.

But on an atheistic view, there doesn't seem to be anything that makes this morality *objectively true*. As the philosopher of science Michael Ruse reports, 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 our 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." [Ruse, *The Darwinian Paradigm*, 1989.]

If we were to rewind the film of human evolution back to the beginning and start anew, people with a very different set of moral values might well have evolved. As Darwin himself wrote in *The Descent of Man*,

"If men were raised under precisely the same conditions as hive bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers. And mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters, and no one would think of interfering."

For us to think that human beings are special, and our morality objectively true, is to succumb to the temptation of speciesism—that is to say, an unjustified bias toward one's own species.

Richard Dawkins' assessment of human worth may be depressing, but why (on atheism) is he mistaken when he says there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pointless indifference?

We are machines for propagating DNA. It is every living object's sole reason for being. If there is no God, then any basis for regarding the herd morality evolved by homo sapiens as objectively true seems to have been removed. Take God out of the picture and all you seem to be left with is an ape-like creature on a tiny speck of dust, beset with *delusions* of moral grandeur.

2. If God does not exist, objective moral duties do not exist.

Duties have to do with whether something is *right* or *wrong*. Now, you might think at first that the distinction between right and wrong is the same as the distinction between good and evil. But if you think about it, you can see that this is not the case.

Duty has to do with moral obligation, with what I *ought* or *ought not* to do. But obviously you're not morally obligated to do something just because it would be good for you to do it. For example, it would be *good* for you to become a doctor, but you're not *morally obligated* to become a doctor. After all, it would also be good for you to become a firefighter, or a homemaker, or a diplomat, but you can't do them all. So, there's a difference between moral values and moral duties.

Now my claim is that if God does not exist, then it seems we have no objective moral duties.

To say that we have objective moral duties is again to say that we have certain moral obligations regardless of whether we think that we do. Traditionally, our moral duties were thought to spring from God's commandments, such as the Ten Commandments. Far from being arbitrary, these commands flow necessarily from his moral nature.

On this foundation, we can affirm the objective rightness of love, generosity, self-sacrifice and equality, and condemn as objectively wrong selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination and oppression.

But if there is no God, what basis remains for objective moral duties on the atheistic view – human beings are just animals and animals have no moral obligations to one another.

When a lion kills a zebra, it kills the zebra, but it doesn't *murder* the zebra. When a great white shark forcibly copulates with a female, it forcibly copulates with her, but it does not *rape* her, for there is no moral dimension to these actions, they are neither prohibited nor obligatory.

So, if God does not exist, why think that we have any moral obligations to do anything? Who or what imposes these moral duties upon us? Where did they come from? It's very hard to see why they would be anything more than a subjective impression ingrained into us by societal and parental conditioning.

On the atheistic view, certain actions such as incest or rape may not be biologically and socially advantageous, and so in the course of human development, have become taboo. They go against the social contract that Shelley has imagined. But that does absolutely nothing to show that rape and incest are *really* wrong. Such behavior goes on all the time in the animal kingdom.

On the atheistic view, the rapist who flouts the herd morality or the social contract is doing nothing more serious than acting unfashionably, like the man who flouts etiquette by belching loudly at the dinner table. If there is no moral lawgiver, then there is no objective moral law which we must obey – it's all a matter of social convention on a par with rules of etiquette.

3. if God does not exist, then there is no basis for moral accountability.

Traditionally, it's been held that God holds all persons morally accountable for their actions, despite the inequities of this life. In the end, the scales of God's justice will be balanced, and thus the moral choices that we make in this life have an eternal significance.

But if God does not exist, what basis remains for moral accountability? Even if there were objective duties and values under atheism, they seem to be irrelevant because there's no moral accountability.

If life ends at the grave, then ultimately it makes no difference whether you live as a Stalin or as a Mother Teresa. So as the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky rightly said, if there is no immortality, then all things are permitted. Given the finality of death, it really does not matter how you live.

The state torturers, in Soviet prisons understood this all too well. Richard Wurmbrand (a Romanian priest who was tortured in communist prisons) 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.”

Given the finality of death, it really doesn't 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? You might say it's in your best self-interest to adopt a moral lifestyle, but clearly that's not always true.

We all know situations where self-interest runs smack dab in the face of morality. Moreover, if you're 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 Stuart 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. 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'd have to accept 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 'demoralization', I mean a deterioration of moral motivation. It's hard to do the right thing when that means sacrificing your self-interest or to resist temptation when desire is strong. And the belief that ultimately it doesn't matter what you choose or what you 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."

The absence of moral accountability from the philosophy of atheism thus makes an ethic of compassion and self-sacrifice a hollow abstraction.

In sum, I think it's plausible that without God there are no objective moral values, moral duties, or moral accountability. God is therefore vitally necessary to morality.

Now, as I said, this is a conclusion which is accepted by a great many atheist philosophers such as Nietzsche, Russell, and Sartre. Though the conclusion is a painful one, these thinkers believe that honesty compels them to face it squarely. The challenge confronting the atheist philosopher, who continues to cling to objective moral values and duties after letting go of God is, I think, threefold.

First, to explain what is the basis for objective moral values on atheism. In particular, what is the basis for the intrinsic value of human beings?

Second, to explain what is the source of objective moral duties, on atheism. What makes certain acts obligatory or forbidden, if there is no moral lawgiver to command or prohibit them? Why is it wrong to inflict harm on other members of our species?

Third, to explain how on atheism ultimate moral accountability exists, or alternatively to explain why it is not necessary to morality. These questions must, I think, be addressed, if one is to maintain that God is not necessary to morality.