Is God Necessary for Morality?
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(Opening statement in a debate with Bill Craig on February 24, 2009. I have lightly edited the text for the sake of clarity and brevity)

The topic for tonight's debate is whether God is necessary for morality. I'm going to be arguing that a belief the existence of God is *not* necessary for morality. I spoke to one of my colleagues (another moral philosopher) and gave him the topic *Is God necessary for morality?* and his answer was, "Well of course not!" Now I don't think the issue is quite as open-and-shut and black and white as that, but it does reveal I suppose a common outlook among moral philosophers that I share.

It's not at all obvious to those of us who take a secular approach to moral philosophy what the problem with secular morality is supposed to be, so what I'll try to do is sketch a little bit about what a plausible account of morality might be, that doesn't make use of appeal to God, and try to answer some objections that one might raise against it.

A second preliminary remark is that I'll sometimes slip into talking of an *atheist* approach to moral philosophy, and that's a bit of a misnomer because I'm describing a view that's completely available to theists as well. In calling it an atheist view I simply mean it's a view that does not make use of the appeal to God. It's not necessarily limited to those who deny the existence of God.

Let me start with something I'm completely confident that Bill will agree with. To ask whether or not morality requires the existence of God is *not* to ask whether moral motivation or moral behavior presupposes in some way *belief* in in a deity. I certainly hope that it's apparent to every person in this audience that the answer that question is 'certainly not'. That is to say, atheists (people who deny the existence of God) are just as capable of acting morally as anybody else. Theists don't have any kind of monopoly on moral behavior.

The more interesting question is whether or not we need God for there to *be* morality, in the sense of there being a genuine difference between

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right and wrong. Here we think of God not as the *motivator* for moral behavior but as the *source* or the author or the ground of morality – its basis. So, the question I'll be focusing on is whether or not there can be a secular (i.e. non-theistic) basis for morality, and I believe the answer that is *yes*.

I don't think there's going to be any difference of opinion between Bill and me on the question: "Do non-theists believe in morality?" Of *course* we all believe in morality. The question is whether I, as an atheist, am *entitled* to talk about right and wrong, as something that *genuinely* exists without any appeal to God.

So, what I'm going to do is sketch an outline of a view about ethics that I find congenial. It's not at all original to me, and I don't in any way mean to suggest that it's the only kind of outline one could accept as an atheist trying to explain what morality is all about, but it'll give you an illustration of what a secular foundation for morality might look like. Then I'll raise some deeper questions about it.

So here's the basic idea: Right and wrong is a matter of whether or not your behavior hurts people or fails to help them. A *wrong* action is an action that hurts somebody, or fails to help them in the relevant circumstances, and *right* action is basically a matter of those behaviors that refrain from hurting people and do provide help. So, once we've got this basic idea in place it's pretty natural to see how the more familiar rules of ordinary common-sense morality fall out from that. We have an explanation as to why it is that you shouldn't lie—because lying hurts people. You shouldn't commit murder, and you shouldn't rape because rape hurts the victims of rape. You have to aid the needy. Slavery is wrong. You need to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. In all these ways these behaviors are morally wrong or right because of their connection with harm, and failure to help.

Now there's a lot of details that would need to get worked out, but I think for tonight's purposes they're not likely be all that important. Let me just mention though there's a variety of ways that people can be hurt. There's not just *physical* harm, but also emotional harm, assaults on somebody's autonomy, and you can fail to respect them in a variety

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of ways. The second point is that of course to say that you can't ever harm is a bit of a simplification. There are going to be cases in which one would have an adequate justification for harming somebody else—for example in cases of self-defence against a deliberate aggressor.

Now that's the nutshell of the moral theory that I believe in, and clearly I didn't say anything about God, and so it seems to me I'm entitled to believe in morality. The only question I want to ask at this point is: *Why would anybody think otherwise?* Well, so here's a worry that one might have: Are these things *really* wrong on the atheist view that I've just sketched, or is it just a matter of opinion?

Now that's tricky of course. In moral disputes, is there a fact of the matter as to who's right? I take it there *is* a fact of the matter with regard to whether or not it's wrong to harm people, whether it's wrong to rape for example. I think it's wrong to rape, and I take this *not* to be just a matter of opinion. It's not as though if I thought otherwise rape would be okay, or if everybody thought otherwise rape would be okay. Rape is *wrong*. So at least if you're worried about whether there could be *genuine* morality, where there are facts of the matter, then on an atheistic account I'm inclined to think "Oh, of course there can!" We might wonder what makes it wrong, and the answer is that rape is wrong because it harms the victim.

We might ask instead: "What do we *mean* in saying that it's wrong to rape?" Now this is a controversial matter, and not all moral philosophers agree about the ingredients that we need to build into the basic definition of right and wrong, but roughly it's like this. To believe in morality as a *genuine*, objective state of affairs is to believe that there are *reasons* to act morally to help others, and to avoid harming them, and that these reasons don't depend on the particular desires of goals you happen to have. It's not as though if you happen to care about Truth, Justice and the American Way then you've got a reason to act morally. Rather, *everybody* has these reasons – these reasons are *overriding*. To use philosophers' jargon they're *categorical* reasons, so when I say that it's an objective fact that rape is wrong what I'm saying is there's this kind of overriding and strong categorical reason not to

harm people in this way, and that's not up to me to *make* it so, it's just *so*.

Now you might ask whether there is a deeper account that can be offered about where these reasons come from, or what makes them so, or what are the basic rules of morality—what their ultimate foundation or basis is, and I want to say that secular atheist philosophers disagree about that point. Some are (we might say) "non-foundationalists", who say:

> "Well, we can state the various moral rules: *keep your promises, tell the truth, don't tell lies, don't hurt people, help the needy …* and if we want we can boil these rules down into a simpler set of rules I've suggested (don't harm, do help) but *there may be nothing at all deeper to be said* about what makes those rules the valid rules. It's just a basic fact about reality that there are these categorical reasons – objective reasons to behave in certain ways versus others. There's nothing deeper to say."

On the other hand, there are philosophers who believe there *is* something more to say, and (again unsurprisingly) different philosophers will disagree about what that deeper story looks like. Let me give a sketch of one such story, that I think isn't bad as far as it goes.

It's a version of the view that's known as *contractarianism*. The thought is that moral rules are the rules that we *would* give to one another to govern our interactions with one another – the rules that we would agree to if we were to set about trying to settle on a bunch of rules to govern our interactions under the assumption that we were perfectly rational. Nobody wants to follow rules that people accept because of mistakes in their reasoning, so imagine that we are reasoning perfectly. Perfectly rational beings would agree to various rules to govern their interactions, and the rules that they agree to are the rules of morality.

There are different ways of running this contractarian thought. One version of it, which I have some sympathy to, adds an extra twist: the reasoning needs to take place behind a so-called "veil of ignorance". The thought is that I'm not going to know (while I'm engaged in this

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hypothetical bargaining session) what my actual position in society is. For example, I won't be able to try to rig things in favor of white males because I won't know that I'm a white male. Everyone negotiates what the rules of society should be from behind this veil of ignorance about his actual identity – that's the basic thought here.

So here we have a deeper story about where the moral rules come from. They are the rules we would give to ourselves to govern our behavior with one another, insofar as we were perfectly rational. Does this capture a notion of objectivity for ethics? It seems to me the answer is *yes*—there's a fact of the matter about what would be rational for us to agree to in terms of these rules.

One might wonder whether the moral rules coming out of this imaginary bargaining session are *necessary*. Maybe that's another feature we're looking for, if we're to get *genuine* morality as opposed to merely the illusion or appearance of morality. I believe that the answer is again *yes*, the moral rules are necessary on this account.

Now, if you're a non-foundationalist (i.e. you don't think there's any deeper story to be told about where the moral rules come from) you might just stop it right here. You might say that "murder is wrong" means that there's a categorical reason not to murder, and this isn't a contingent truth it's a necessary truth. It's a truth that obtains (as philosophers like to put it) in all possible worlds. If we do go the contractarian root, then we might instead put our necessity a little bit deeper. We might say something like:

> "The moral truths are necessary, but their truth is itself explained in terms of a social contract, and that in turn is explained in terms of certain necessary truths about reasoning. It's a *necessary* fact that perfectly rational beings would reason about what kinds of rules they wanted to give to one another in such and such a way, so I think we can get the necessity of morality as well."

Here's a rather different objection that might get raised. We have the thought that morality involves *commandments*, and *requirements*. We even talk about moral *laws*. So sometimes it's suggested that where

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there's a commandment there's got to be a commander. Where there's a law there's got to be a law giver, and so on. But who could play this role of commander, or law giver? Who would have the *authority* to issue commandments to the whole human race, or lay down laws for us all to follow? It's got to be God, our creator. So, if we're really going to have the notion not just of moral reason to behave in this way or that way but rather moral *requirements* to behave in one way rather than another, then we need to appeal to God after all to be the law giver.

This is an argument that's been proposed by various theistic philosophers—indeed this very argument been embraced by some *atheistic* philosophers, who said "Yeah, you know talk of moral requirements does presuppose a lawgiver. So now that I no longer believe in God, I believe there are no moral requirements." Now I'm not myself inclined to go that way. I'm perfectly prepared to talk about moral requirements – I think it's a completely appropriate thing to do. In fact, it would be simply mistaken, *full-stop*, to give up talk about moral requirements, so a question I want to push a little bit is: Is it really true that requirements require a requirer (there's a mouthful) and I'm inclined to believe that the answer is actually *no*.

Let's take an example of a requirement outside the moral domain. I suppose that when we are engaged in reasoning about belief matters – theoretical reasoning – it's a requirement of appropriate reasoning that you not contradict yourself. People sometimes talk about *the law of non-contradiction*. I take it to be a requirement of rationality that you don't contradict yourself. Now, should we similarly conclude that since there's a requirement, the law of non-contradiction, there must be a law-giver – there must be some cosmic logician who commands us not to contradict ourselves? It doesn't seem to me to be so. I mean, I can imagine that somebody does say that, but I don't myself feel the force of thinking that if there's a law of non-contradiction then there must be some cosmic logician laying down that law. The logic of the word 'requirement' does not actually entail the existence of a requirer – that at least seems to me the most natural thing to say about the law of non-contradiction.

I don't think there's any harm in saying that "reason itself requires" that you not contradict yourself. That's fine – I don't have any problem talking that way. It's talking about reason in a somewhat personified fashion, but no harm is done as long as we understand that there doesn't actually have to *be* a person who laid down the law of non-contradiction. Similarly then, I want to say that with regard to the various moral requirements: We don't need a law giver for them to be genuine requirements. It seems to be a perfectly legitimate thing to say that *reason requires that we act in accordance with reasons*. It lays down these various categorical reasons not to harm people, and so we can personify reason in that way, but all we mean is that there are these compelling, objective, categorical reasons to behave in certain ways and not behave in other ways. So I myself am skeptical of the claim that commandments require a commander or requirements require a requirer or the law requires a law giver.

If you brought up on stage four of us atheistic moral philosophers, you'd probably get four different stories about how to ground morality in a secular fashion. Some of my colleagues are more sympathetic to the thought that talk of moral requirement really does entail that there be *somebody* who's commanding us to behave accordingly. And then we might ask: "Well, if that's so, who could it be besides God?" The answer I would give is: "All of us! *We*, the members of the moral community, are the ones who are laying down these requirements." That idea is a natural fit if we accept the contractarian theory that I was sketching in my earlier remarks. Let's say we think of the rules of morality as emerging from this hypothetical session in which we, as perfectly rational beings, lay down these rules for each other. We enter into these rules *freely* because we see that it makes sense for us to reach these agreements, and so it is *rational* for us to agree to rules requiring telling the truth, forbidding murder and so forth. Consequently, if somebody breaks those rules then they're not upholding their part of the social contract, and as such the rest of us (who are indeed limiting our behavior in keeping with this agreement) can appropriately and with due authority turn to the person who's acting immorally and say *You shouldn't behave that way. You're not keeping up your end of the bargain*.

Well, obviously there's a great deal more that needs to be said about all these subjects, but I've used up my allotted 20 minutes. I hope you can see at least the outline of a secular approach to morality. This approach offers us a fairly plausible account of what morality is all about, under which the rules of morality are not an illusion (they're not a mere matter of opinion but rather a matter of objective fact) and consequently I'm inclined to think that moral philosophers of an atheistic inclination are completely entitled to believe that we can have morality without God.