

“Morality is more than possible without God, it is entirely independent of him.”

Julian Baggini

AtheistRepublic.com

God and Morality

Does God make a difference?

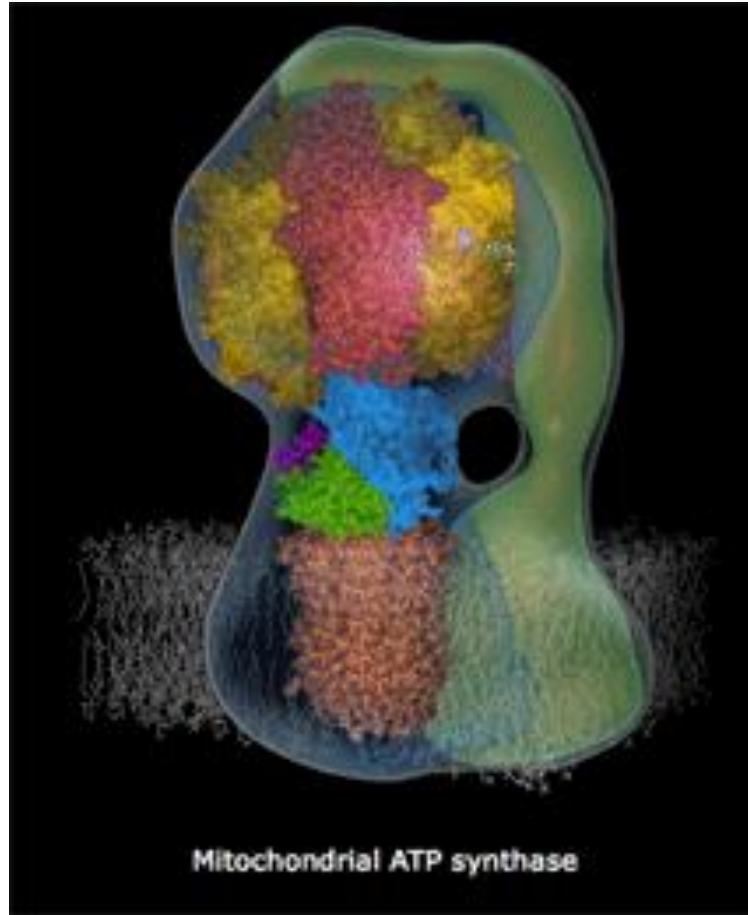
Subjective vs. objective need for God

- The question, “Can we be good without God?” is ambiguous.
- E.g. someone might answer ‘yes’, because “Plenty of good people are atheists.”
 - How does this person interpret the question?
- They interpret it as asking whether a person needs God *subjectively*:
 - can we be good without *belief* in God?

Objective need for God

- The question “Can we be good without God” has another interpretation, however. What is that?
 - It may be asking whether moral goodness comes from *God himself*, rather than from belief in God, religious rituals, etc.
 - **This is the question that both Kagan and Craig are addressing.**
- E.g. almost all of our bodies’ energy molecules (ATP) come from ATP synthase (not from *belief in ATP synthase*).
 - Perhaps God provides some kind of foundation for ‘the moral order’?

(ATP Synthase)



Subjective or objective need?

- “The main conclusion of Hauser and Singer’s study was that there is no statistically significant difference between atheists and religious believers in making these [moral] judgements. This seems compatible with the view, which I and many others hold, that we do not need God in order to be good—or evil.”
- Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 258
- Here he’s saying there’s a *subjective* need for God

Moral realism

- Kagan and Craig are both moral realists
- **Kagan:** [moral reasons are] **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*."

- **Craig:** 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.

Normativity

- Morality is normative or evaluative,
- i.e. concerned with good and bad, right and wrong.
- (*Ought*, not just is.)
- Normative claims don't just describe, they make demands on us.
- Other normative notions?
 - Knowledge, justification, warrant
 - Logical consequence, validity, probability
 - Health, disease, disorder, disability
 - Truth

Those anthropologists!

- “In 1947 ... the American Anthropological Association issued a statement declaring that **moral values are relative to cultures** and that there is no way of showing that the values of one culture are better than those of another.”
- (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Moral Relativism”)
- Almost all *philosophers* reject this. (E.g. Kagan: “Do non-theists believe in morality? Of course we all believe in morality!”)
- E.g. philosophers believe slavery, racism, child sacrifice, FGM, caste systems, subjugation of women, etc. to be objectively wrong.

Shelly Kagan

- He confesses that it isn't obvious to him and his Yale colleagues "what the problem with secular morality is supposed to be".
- Kagan's secular foundation of morality:
 - **"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."**
- "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."

- Comments?

Some quick responses

1. 'Harm' and 'help' are normative (teleological) terms, not purely descriptive terms. (They're not the same as pain and pleasure.) So it looks *circular*.
 - E.g. you won't let your 8 year old drive the car in city traffic, and this causes great distress. Is he *harmed*?
2. According to Jon Haidt, Care/harm is only one of six cognitive modules ("taste buds") that humans use to make moral judgements.
 - Also (fairness/cheating), (loyalty/betrayal), (freedom/oppression), (authority/subversion), (sanctity/degradation).
 - Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.

Some quick responses

3. Morality is concerned more fundamentally with *character* than with actions. (Virtue ethics.)
4. What about human nature?
 - Haidt: “I chose the title *The Righteous Mind* to convey the sense that human nature is not just intrinsically moral, it’s also intrinsically moralistic, critical, and judgmental.”
5. (N. B. Kagan himself asks this) What makes harming someone *objectively wrong*, as opposed to just something we disapprove of?
 - Does harming someone violate the fabric of reality?
 - What is morality *grounded* upon?

Response 1:

The analysis is circular

- Pain is often *beneficial*, indeed essential for health.
 - Getting sick builds a child's immune system
 - Cuts and bruises teach kids to manage risk, etc.
- Conversely, making people happy often harms them.
- The term 'harm' has *wrongness* built into it. It means to make the person *worse off*. It requires a prior understanding of what a person is *supposed* to be like.
 - So this account of morality basically says, "a wrong action is one that makes a person worse off, or prevents them from becoming what they should be."

Response 2:

The analysis is too narrow

- Haidt describes a moral system based mainly on care/harm (with a bit of fairness/cheating and freedom/oppression) as WEIRD morality
 - “WEIRD” = Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic
- “A family’s dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They had heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog’s body and cooked it and ate it for dinner. Nobody saw them do this.”
- “A man goes to the supermarket once a week and buys a chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he has sexual intercourse with it. Then he cooks it and eats it.”

Response 3: Virtue ethics

- According to virtue ethics, the deepest moral truths concern character, being a certain type of person, rather than actions as such.
 - A person's *motives* in performing an action are more important, from a moral perspective, than the *consequences* of the action.
 - A person who does all the right things, but without love, is seen as morally deficient.
- “Do not eat the food of a begrudging host, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of person who is always thinking about the cost. “Eat and drink,” he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.” Proverbs 23: 6-8

4. What about human nature?

- Moral rules are apparently “baked into” human nature.
- Haidt: “I chose the title *The Righteous Mind* to convey the sense that human nature is not just intrinsically moral, it’s also intrinsically **moralistic, critical, and judgmental.**”
 - We’ll return to this.

5. What makes morality objective?

- What makes anything (e.g. punching someone) *objectively wrong*, as opposed to just something we disapprove of?
 - Does punching someone violate the fabric of reality?
 - What is morality *grounded* upon? Where do the rules *come from*?
- Kagan says that, according to some, “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 ...”
- But Kagan himself offers a “deeper account” here.

The “deeper account” is *contractarian*

- “moral rules are ... 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”
- This set of rules is often called the ‘social contract’.
- Often, the imaginary negotiation occurs “behind the veil of ignorance”, i.e. the negotiators don’t know what race, sex, nationality, etc. they are.

These rules are necessary and objective

- “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.” (Kagan)
- Kagan also says that the terms of the social contract are *logically necessary*.
 - E.g. it’s clear that a rational person would choose “*Do not murder*” and “*Do not lie*” to be part of the social contract.

Moral commandments

- Kagan also claims that **the social contract has the authority to issue commands** that are binding.

“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.**”

- Comments on this “deeper account”?
- It relies on transcendent rational norms.
 - Can such rational norms exist without God?
 - “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.” (Kagan)
 - “There’s no possible world in which P and \neg P are both true”

Human nature? Evolution?

- This naturalistic foundation for morality is curiously disconnected from any mention of human nature, or human origins (evolution).
 - E.g. humans are social animals, form hierarchies (respect authority), distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, share food, give gifts, favour in-groups, get married, hold property, take revenge, give rewards, punish crimes, trade goods, make promises.
 - *Admire*: generosity, hospitality, self control
 - *Oppose*: incest, murder, rape, stinginess, oppression
- Did we get these from the social contract?

Does the social contract have authority?

- Why should you be obliged to do something that's contrary to your desires, just because this social contract (a purely abstract entity that no one has signed) commands it?

Bill Craig

“Without God, the following would not exist:

1. Objective moral **values** [good, bad]
2. Objective moral **duties** [right, wrong]
3. Moral **accountability**” [God will punish the wicked]

- **‘Theocentric’ moral views:** moral norms wouldn’t exist in a Godless world
 - (just as ‘up’ and ‘down’ don’t exist without planet earth).

N.B. Good vs. Right

- Philosophers don't use 'good' and 'right' interchangeably.
- **Good** refers to *states of affairs* that are desirable (such as health, happiness, virtues)
- **Right** refers to *actions* that in accordance with some moral command (such as *feed your own children*). We are *morally obliged* to do what is right.
- N.B. Often an action will be prudent, a "good idea" (since it produces some benefit) without being morally obligatory.

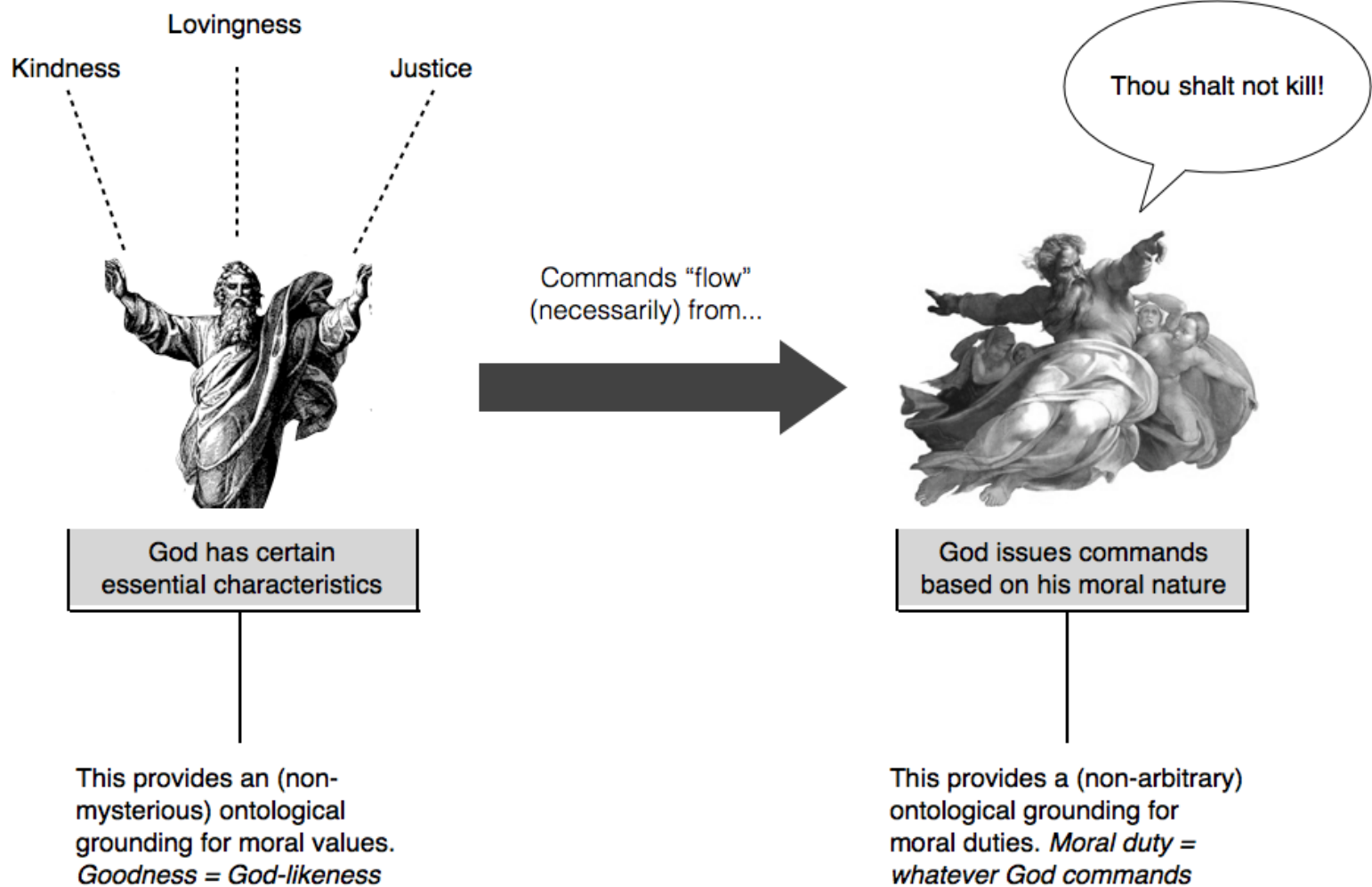
Theocentric morality

- There are two main ideas about how God provides a moral foundation:
 - i. **God's nature** defines moral **goodness** (in something like the way a *metre* was once defined by a certain rod).
 - ii. **God's commands** create our moral **obligations**. (God has authority over us, and we must obey him.)
- Craig uses both.

Naturalised ethics

- God's role can be played by:
 - Evolutionary history, as a “designer” of humans
 - Social attitudes (acceptance, or stigma)
 - Reason (e.g. social contract theory)

Craig's view of Moral Ontology



- (Image by John Danaher, "Philosophical Disquisitions" blog)

God's nature and Human nature

- **God's nature** is considered essential, or necessary, just as he has necessary existence. (His nature is held to be just, loving, faithful, truthful, generous, merciful, etc.)
- **Human nature** is largely a result of God's *will* or *design*.
 - N.B. snakes, dolphins, lobsters have very different natures from us.
 - Humans are special, “made in the image of God”, i.e. modelled to some extent on God's nature. (E.g. humans are also designed to be rational, faithful, loving, etc.)

Craig and human nature

- Craig doesn't seem to appeal to human nature in his account of theocentric morality.
- E.g. the commands of God “flow necessarily” from God's nature – but surely human nature is contingent, and results from divine free will?
 - Did God *have* to make us social beings? With 2 sexes? For monogamy? (There are many other arrangements in the animal kingdom.)

Naturalists on human nature

- Among naturalists, some accept a “**blank slate**” view of humans, according to which there is no fixed human nature, but rather human culture is infinitely variable (in principle). (e.g. J. S. Mill, John B. Watson, Emile Durkheim, Margaret Mead)
- Other naturalists, **biological essentialists**, hold that human culture is largely (not completely) determined by innate biology. Thus they believe in a kind of ‘human nature’, as provided by *evolution* rather than God. (E.g. Jon Haidt, Steven Pinker, Noam Chomsky)

Blank slate morality (Stanley Fish)

“Norms and Deviations: Who’s to Say?” (*New York Times*, June 1, 2008. Stanley Fish is a professor of humanities and law at Florida International University, in Miami.)

- Fish is assuming a “blank slate” perspective, so that there is no fixed human nature, determined by biology.
- He notes that historically, women, Irish, black people, Italians, and gays were seen as inferior, deviant, etc. but now have gained equality, human rights, etc.

- “Within the minority community the conviction grows that its stigmatization is the result **not of “natural” deficiencies**, but of a politically established norm that serves the interests of the powers that be. Exposing that norm as **a mere artifact of history with no special claim to authority** means first that it is no longer obligatory to honor it ...”
- Today, some other groups *presently* judged defective or deviant in some way (e.g. people with autism, deaf people, obese people, pornographers, polygamists, pedophiles, etc.) are making the same argument.

E.g. Deaf people

Fish describes the view of Douglas Baynton, associate professor of history and American sign language at the University of Iowa:

The story of the “hearing world,” ... is that deafness is an incapacity; but ... what we are dealing with are “physical differences” ... and physical differences “do not carry inherent meanings.” That is, they do not come labeled “normal” and “inferior,” “abled” and “disabled”; these labels, Baynton contends, are fixed by “a culturally created web of meaning,” ...

Can we make a distinction?

“... once the norm has been relativized (you have yours, we have ours; why can't we just get along), there is no obvious way to declare a way of life beyond the pale.”

- the “harm” standard?
 - It “cannot itself be neutrally applied”, i.e. “harm” is itself a normative term, and opposing views won't agree on what counts as harmful
- Children can't consent to sex!
 - the “age of consent” is a political construct
- Pedophilia is against the law!
 - “But no category is more obviously the plaything of politics and prejudice than the category of lawbreakers ...

- Fish thus argues that, from a blank slate perspective, there is no logical basis for seeing some traits and behaviour as ‘normal’, others as ‘defective’. The arguments are equally good,

“whether the condition that asks for dignity and the removal of stigma is autism, deafness, blackness, gayness, polygamy, drug use, pedophilia or murder.”

Responses to Fish?

- What can a **theocentric** moralist say to Fish?
 - Women are in accordance with God's design plan, so they're not defective or deviant (just a little different from men). Pedophiles are not in accordance with God's design – so they *are* objectively deviant.
- What can a naturalist like Chomsky, Boehm or Haidt (who bases morality on **evolutionary biology**) say in response to Fish?
 - Basically the same as the theist, but referring to evolution rather than God. Pedophilia doesn't contribute to fitness.
- What about a secular moralist like Kagan, who bases morality on the **social contract**?
 - Nothing?

Biological essentialism

(e.g. Noam Chomsky)

- Ethical norms depend on human culture, but *culture is in turn highly constrained by human biology*.
- “extensive built-in innate structure” allows young children to learn their own culture from very limited data. There is a “narrowly determinative fixed basis”.
- Universal moral values result from this innate cognitive structure.
 - Objective moral *progress* is possible, as we ‘penetrate more deeply into our own actual moral values’.



Is naturalistic ethics an illusion?

“On a naturalistic view, moral values are just the byproduct of biological evolution and social conditioning ... [but] there doesn't seem to be anything that makes this morality *objectively true*.” (Bill Craig)

- Granted that evolution has given us certain innate moral urges, what *authority* do these urges have over us?
 - If these urges prevent us from doing what we want, and we're able to resist them, then why *shouldn't* we resist them?

Michael Ruse

“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.]

Michael Ruse

- “... if we did not think that morality was objective, before long it would break down as we began cheating. If rape isn’t really wrong, then why stay back when others move forward? So the entirely natural case is that **morality—the objectivity of morality that is—is an illusion put in place by our biology to make us social animals**, because social animals are selected over non-social animals.” (pp. 431-2)

Are all humans equal?

“... the idea that all humans are equal is also a myth. In what sense do all humans equal one another? Is there any objective reality, outside the human imagination, in which we are truly equal? . . .

...The idea of equality is inextricably intertwined with the idea of creation. The Americans got the idea of equality from Christianity, which argues that every person has a divinely created soul, and that all souls are equal before God.”

Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011)

Are all humans equal?

- Anthropologist Christopher Boehm has found that **hunter-gatherers have relatively egalitarian societies** (compared to other primates, such as chimps). The tribal chief tends to be “first among equals”.
 - His explanation is that, after spears were invented, it became possible for weaker tribe members to join forces and kill a tyrannical alpha male. (Or something like that.)
- But does this fact (if it is fact) about humans make hierarchy *wrong*?

Did rape evolve?

- Anthropologists Thornhill and Palmer argued, in 2000, that rape has evolved as a (moderately successful) male reproductive strategy.
 - Rape can be a cause of pregnancy and hence may lead to spreading the rapist's genes, including any rape-inducing gene.
- On this view, rape is 'natural', as it arises from our evolutionary history (just as equality does in Boehm's view). The tendency to rape was selected for, in our ancestors.
 - Rapists were 'born that way'.

Did rape evolve?

- As you might expect, there was a firestorm of protest, and many denounced their book as saying that rape is natural, so it's morally ok.
- Thornhill and Palmer argued that *no moral consequences can be derived from this empirical study*. One certainly should not infer, they say, that rape is morally permissible.
- But in that case, an evolved human nature has no moral *authority*?
 - (As Bill Craig says.)

Richard Dawkins on altruism

- **Altruism** in the animal kingdom, including humans, can be explained (from a Darwinian perspective) by:
 - Genetic kinship
 - Hope of reciprocation
 - Building a good reputation
 - Advertisement of superiority
- Some moral urges have such a Darwinian origin, and so are biologically innate.

The world has changed

- Our moral urges evolved in our hunter-gatherer ancestors – they're shaped by a very different world.
E.g.
 - In those days, a violent and dangerous nature was needed in order for others not to mess with you. Now we have lawyers and cops.
 - Food was scarce, so eat sugar and fat whenever possible.
 - We lived in small tribes, where survival meant absolute loyalty to the tribe and killing outsiders (xenophobia).

Main questions

- Is there any reason to regard urges to action that were fitness-enhancing during our **evolutionary history** as authoritative?
- (Is there any reason to regard urges to action that result from **God's design** of humans as authoritative?)

Moral Argument for God #1

1. If there is no God, everything is permitted
(Dostoevsky)
2. Some things are morally impermissible

∴ God exists

Is this what Dostoevsky meant?

1. All moral statements are *evaluations* (or requirements, commands, etc.) of actions and other states of the world
2. An evaluation requires an evaluator
3. In the absence of God, the only available evaluators are humans, who lack authority

∴ In the absence of God, moral statements are based on (mere) human preferences, and lack authority.

#2. The 'divine policeman' argument

1. If people think they can do evil and get away with it, they are more likely to do evil.
2. Religion tells people that God *sees everything*, and will eventually *punish* all who do wrong.

∴ Religion is needed to make people good

- Thoughts?
 - (Argues for the *usefulness* of religion, rather than its *truth*.)

The divine policeman

- 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.”
- Richard Wurmbrand, quoted by Craig

#3. The 'ultimate justice' argument

1. We often see injustice: good people suffer and die, while the wicked prosper.
2. In the absence of a divine judge, who evens the score, such injustices are permanent.
3. For morality to be reasonable and make sense (not be a cruel joke) **virtue and well-being must ultimately be in harmony.**

A righteous divine judge must exist (to punish the wicked, and reward the virtuous, in the afterlife).

The need for ultimate justice

- Theocentric morality claims that the right/wrong distinction disappears with the absence of God, just as the up/down distinction disappears in the absence of planet earth.
- The up/down distinction has practical significance. E.g. towers have to be vertical (pointing at the centre of the earth) or the earth's gravity will tip them over.
- Similarly, right/wrong has practical significance, if God punishes the wicked.

Reflection on naturalised ethics

- Does evolutionary biology have a conception of human nature, or flourishing, that is similar to the theistic conception?
 - E.g. what if humans (especially men) are naturally violent? (Among animals, “step fathers” usually kill their step kids.)
- Does the fixed human nature that Chomsky appeals to have *moral authority*?
 - If slavery, sexism, etc. work in my favour, then why should I give them up? (“Evolution commands me to”?)
 - Can we solve Stanley Fish’s problem of drawing a line between normal and deviant humans?

Reflection on naturalised ethics

- Can naturalism account for other forms of normativity?
 - Knowledge, justification
 - Logical consequence
 - Health
 - Truth

Divine Command Theory (DCT)

- According to DCT, moral truth arises from God's *commands* (or more generally his *will*, including design choices).
- E.g. generosity is right, or obligatory, *because* God commands us to be generous (or has designed us to be generous).
- The DCT faces the Euthyphro problem.

Euthyphro Problem

- Is generosity right because God commands it, or does God command it because it's right?
- If the latter, then we've abandoned the DCT.
- But if generosity isn't already right (prior to God's command) then why command it?
 - If God *creates* rightness by issuing commands, then he could command theft, rape and murder, and these would be right!

Analogy: scientists and the truth

- Someone may say, “**To say that something is *true* means that *scientists accept it***”, but this faces a Euthyphro-style dilemma.
- Is (e.g.) evolution true *because* scientists accept it?
- Or do scientists accept evolution *because* it’s true?
- (Surely the latter. But then evolution is *already* true, on some other basis, regardless of what scientists accept.)

Bill Craig and Bill Alston reply

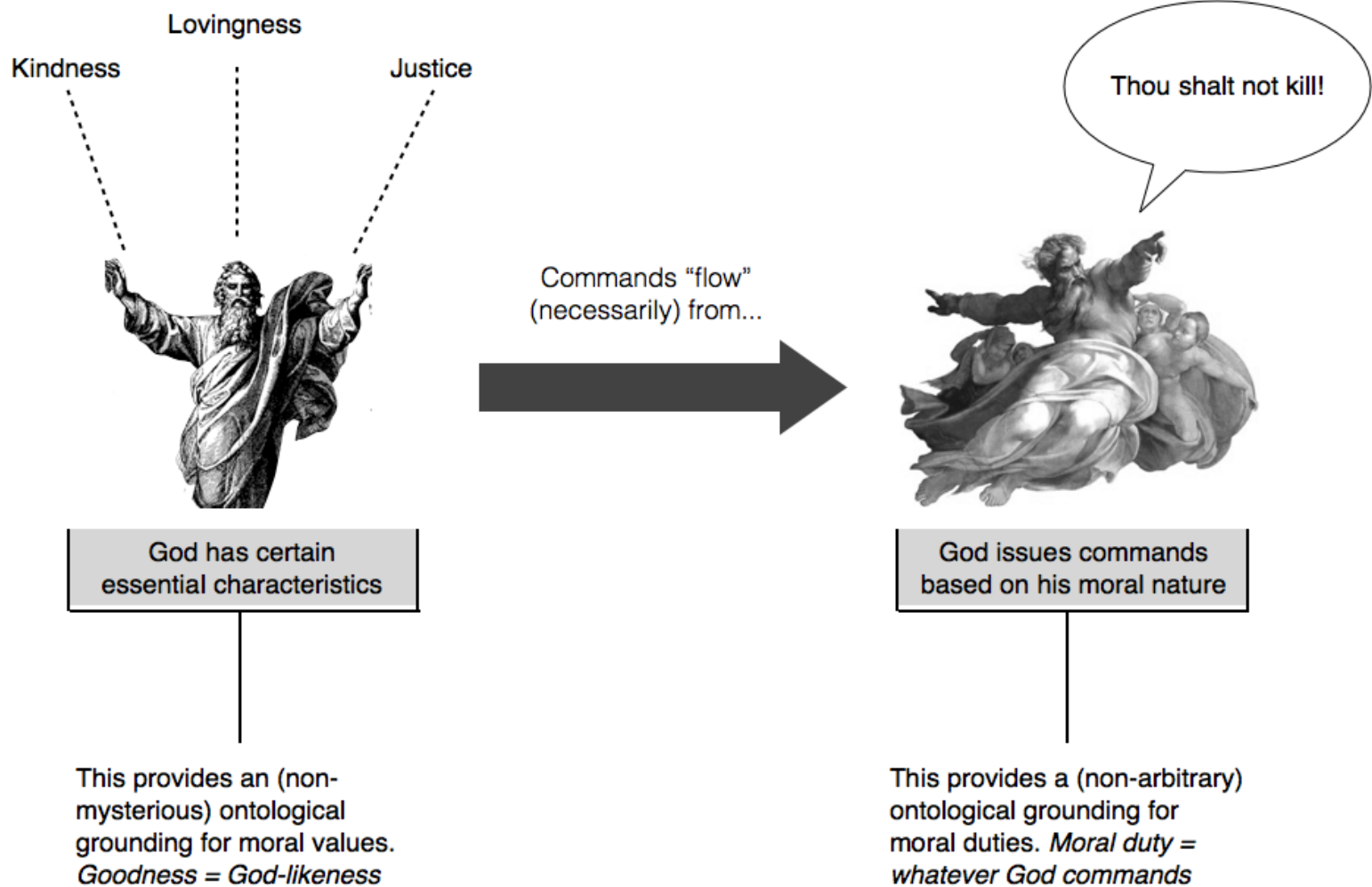
- ‘God’s moral nature is what Plato called the “Good.” He is the locus and source of moral value. He is by nature loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth.’ (Craig)
- ‘... we can think of God Himself, the individual being, as the supreme standard of goodness. . . Goodness supervenes on every feature of God, not because some general principles are true but just because they are features of God.’ (Alston)

Bill and Bill

‘So far from being arbitrary, God’s commands are an expression of his perfect goodness. Since He is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible that God should command us to act in ways that are not for the best.’ (Alston)

‘... 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.’ (Craig)

Craig's view of Moral Ontology



- (Image by John Danaher, "Philosophical Disquisitions" blog)

Features of theocentric morality

- Naturally fits with *virtue ethics*, though can be used to ground deontology or utilitarian ethics.
- Sees much of normativity in terms of *authority*. Like warrants, permits, etc.
 - Morality is demanding. It requires us to do things we don't want to do.
 - The demands of morality cannot be ignored. You can't "opt out". We all live under morality's rule.
- Knowledge of what's right comes from natural moral and rational faculties, designed by God, as well as from revelation.

Advantages of theocentric morality

- It's easy to say what moral truths are *about*. they're very concrete, necessary, significant.
- Morality is impartial, no one gets special treatment.
- Flourishing is objective, as defined by God's design
- Virtue and self interest are ultimately in harmony
- Also accounts for other kinds of normativity.

Criticism of theocentric morality

- Why accept God's authority? *Who says we should?* (Other than God, of course!)
 - If the God of traditional theism (creator, self-existent, necessary, morally perfect, omnipotent, etc.) lacks intrinsic authority, then what kind of being *would* have authority?
 - Is God's authority sufficient to ground the other kinds of normativity? Truth? The laws of logic? Health and disease?
- (Analogy of what we measure motion relative to.)