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Morality and Atheism: Can atheists be moral?

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Morality is complex in its very essence, and it becomes even more entangled once the question of God's existence or non-existence enters the debate. Many religious people, especially theists, assume that the matter of morality and its source is obvious and beyond dispute. Their core claim is this: human beings can only offer subjective opinions about morality, and no individual's view carries more weight than another's. From this they conclude that an objective source of morality must exist beyond and above humanity. They identify this source as God. Since atheists reject God's existence, theists insist that atheists lack any true foundation for morality. For them, only divine command provides objectivity in defining right and wrong, good and evil, while human reason and collective experience are dismissed as unreliable. This theistic position can be reduced to two claims:

1. God is the source of objective morality, and humans must learn morality from Him; and
2. Without God, humans have no way of knowing what is moral and what is not.

The Fundamental Question: Does Morality Come from God?

For morality to come from God, God must first exist. Yet theists have never been able to prove the existence of even a single deity, which makes this entire argument baseless. As atheists, we could end the discussion right here by simply demanding that believers return to the debate only after they can prove their God exists. However, for the sake of continuing the discussion and testing the argument, let us assume for a moment that such a God does exist and see where the moral debate leads.

The first question we must ask is: how does God know which actions are moral and which are immoral? To answer this, it is useful to revisit Plato's second dialogue, Euthyphro. In this dialogue, Socrates asks Euthyphro: "Is an action good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good?" This puzzle, known in moral philosophy as the Euthyphro dilemma, has two distinct branches, each of which can be examined separately.

First Proposition: God commands an action because it is morally good.

If God is merely an agent who promotes universal morality, then morality exists independently of God, and human beings are capable of discovering it through reasoning. In this case, God is unnecessary, serving

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only as a guide who might help reveal moral truths more quickly. Thus, God's existence becomes non-essential.

Second Proposition: An action is morally good only because God commands it.

On the other hand, if something is considered moral and good solely because God has commanded it, and for no other reason, then three further sub-propositions arise:

Sub-proposition 1: God is all-knowing, and good and bad deeds are contained within His knowledge: If morality originates from God's knowledge, then the source of morality is subjective, not objective. Knowledge is not God Himself but His awareness. If awareness and knowledge can count as an objective source of morality, then atheists are already using exactly the same method—relying on reason and understanding to distinguish good from bad.

Sub-proposition 2: God experienced the actions and then decreed which are good and which are bad: This also indicates subjectivity, not objectivity. But we can push further: when God declares theft to be wrong, has He experienced theft? Or when He says rape is immoral, has He Himself been subjected to rape in order to conclude that it is wrong?

Sub-proposition 3: Neither through knowledge nor through experience, He simply declared which acts are good and which are bad: Imagine a scene where God creates humans and then arbitrarily says: "A is a good act, B is a bad act," without reason or logic, merely on a whim. Such arbitrary labeling of morality is unacceptable for rational beings like humans. Furthermore, God could change His mind at any time, reversing His earlier moral commands. In this case, God may be necessary for morality to exist, but morality would not be objective at all—it would be entirely subjective and arbitrary.

This argument leads us to the conclusion that God cannot be the source or author of objective morality. If both God and objective morality exist, then God, like us, is merely an observer of it. Theists who claim that God is the source of objective morality should read the three sub-propositions again and again.

If theists accept that their source of morality is subjective, even though coming from a god based on the sub-propositions above, this stance creates serious problems as well. The first problem is deciding which God should be the source of morality—the God of which religion? This is no trivial matter. Humanity has conceived of more than four thousand gods and thousands of religions to choose from. Examining them shows that while some moral rules overlap, even these shared rules contain deep disagreements. For instance, nearly all religions prohibit killing, yet all allow exceptions under certain conditions. These exceptions abound across religions. The differences are so profound that believers have historically slaughtered one another in the name of their gods and doctrines. With such divisions, how could, for example, Jews ever agree to derive their morality from Allah?

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Can We Be Moral Without God?

The question of whether morality is possible without God is one of the most debated topics in the philosophy of religion and ethics. The answer depends on one's philosophical, religious, or personal worldview. Humanity's ability to live a moral life without belief in God hinges on how morality itself is defined. If morality is seen as an independent system, separate from religion, many hold that humans can indeed live morally without God. But if morality is tied to divine will, then this becomes far more difficult. As we have seen, grounding morality in God already creates serious problems—so what happens when God is removed from practical life altogether?

It is better to begin this discussion by asking: what does it mean to be moral? Consulting dictionaries offers little help, since in dictionaries “morality” simply refers to habits and behaviors that may be good or bad.

Two points are crucial here. First, an action can only enter the realm of morality if it affects other humans or living beings, whether positively or negatively. For example, how you treat a stone has no moral dimension unless it impacts other people or creatures—that is, unless it extends beyond the private sphere. Thus, morality revolves around behaviors that leave the private realm and affect others.

Second, we must clarify what makes something good or bad. From the theistic perspective, morality is inherently tied to God, and an action is good only because God commands it. But from a naturalistic (atheistic) perspective, what defines good and bad? Is there a measure within naturalism that allows us to judge whether act A is good or act B is bad? Four perspectives attempt to answer this:

1. The Secular Perspective:

Here, morality is understood as independent of religion and God. Secular philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Jean-Paul Sartre argued that humans can construct moral systems through reason, experience, and empathy. For example, Kant believed moral principles arise from “practical reason” and demanded that we act only in ways we could universalize as a law. This is known as the Categorical Imperative. Its everyday equivalent is the saying: “Do not treat others in ways you would not want for yourself.”

2. Natural Ethics:

Some philosophers argue that morality is rooted in human nature and developed through evolution. Traits like empathy and fairness, as Richard Dawkins and other evolutionary psychologists argue, are products of natural selection, enabling societies to survive and flourish.

3. The Existentialist Perspective:

Thinkers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Daniel Dennett, and Sartre contend that in the absence of God, humans themselves must create meaning and moral values. This view emphasizes human responsibility:

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because we are free to choose, we are responsible for our actions. Morality, therefore, has nothing to do with God or the supernatural; it arises from human freedom and accountability.

4. Scientific Ethics:

Contemporary philosopher Sam Harris, in *The Moral Landscape*, argues that morality can indeed be objective without relying on God. He believes empirical sciences—especially neuroscience and psychology—can help us define and understand moral values. Harris insists that belief in God is unnecessary for objective morality. He also critiques religious moral systems for promoting values that harm human well-being, such as banning women from education, endorsing child marriage, or practicing stoning and executions. In his view, science provides a better foundation for morality because it can establish conditions for human flourishing based on evidence and reason.

My Perspective?

In my view, morality cannot be fully objective. I align with the first three approaches—secular, natural, and existentialist—because they logically and realistically show how humans can shape moral values without appealing to God or the supernatural, while also taking responsibility for their actions. However, I disagree with Sam Harris's claim that morality can be made entirely objective and extracted from empirical science. Morality is constantly evolving: first shaped by human evolution including brain (rationality), then by the complex interplay of social and cultural forces. It cannot be reduced to a rigid set of scientific principles.

Conclusion:

Morality has always been a point of contention between theists and atheists. This article examined the theistic claim that God is the source of objective morality and that atheists, lacking belief in God, cannot live moral lives. Based on the arguments presented, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. *The theistic argument suffers from internal contradictions:* As shown by the Euthyphro dilemma, if morality exists independently of God, then humans can discover it through reason and logic, making God unnecessary. If morality depends solely on God's commands, then it cannot be objective, since those commands stem from knowledge, experience, or arbitrary decision. In every case, God cannot be the true source of objective morality.
2. *Religious diversity undermines the idea of a single moral source:* The conflicting moral claims across thousands of religions demonstrate that no universal agreement exists among believers on what constitutes moral truth. This is a major challenge to the theistic notion of one absolute and objective moral foundation.

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3. *Atheists are fully capable of building and following moral systems:* Without appealing to God, atheists can and do construct logical, consistent, and human-centered moral frameworks. Secular ethics, natural morality, existentialism, and even scientific approaches show that morality can arise from reason, evolution, freedom, and empirical knowledge. While belief in God may inspire morality for some, philosophical and scientific inquiry reveals that morality does not depend on God and can be defined independently for the sake of human well-being and flourishing. Contrary to the theistic claim, atheists are not only capable of living moral lives—they actually do so, as evidenced by the tangible progress and improvement seen in many modern societies.