

DOES GOD EXIST? THE MORAL ARGUMENT

Is there actually such a thing as objective morality? Are right and wrong real things that all people at all times are obliged to obey or are they just matters of opinion? Was Adolph Hitler evil? If so, why and where did the standard he is judged by come from?

The moral argument for the existence of God tries to show that moral values must be objective and universal to make any sense. And if moral values are objective, the source must be a transcendent, personal being who is concerned with the actions of human beings. This is one of the most powerful arguments for God's existence because all of us have a sense of right and wrong, good and evil, and the way things ought to be. The question is how to account for why that is.

RELATIVISM

There are two basic ways to view morality: as relative or as objective. The most widely held view in our culture is called relativism. Relativism holds that societies or individuals decide what is right and wrong and that those values vary from culture to culture or person to person. There are no objective, universal moral truths—just conventions for behavior created by people and that are subject to change. There are three different forms of relativism: cultural relativism, conventionalism, and ethical subjectivism.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism is based on the observation that different cultures seem to have different values. And since they all have different value systems, there must be no right system, no objective morality. For example, some cultures, like Mexico, declare abortion to be abhorrent and have passed laws prohibiting it. Other cultures, like the United States, permit abortion as a legal option open to any pregnant woman for any reason. Still other cultures, like China, have actually required abortions under certain circumstances. Cultural relativism says that because each culture is holding to its own view of morality, and because these views differ, there must be no objective morality.

There are several problems with this line of thinking. One is that observing how cultures behave is just that: observation and nothing more. At best, these observations are simply statements of fact. Morals are not descriptions of the way things are. Morals are prescriptions of the way things ought to be. Just because things are a certain way does not mean they should be that way. When Popeye says, "I am what I am" he is making a statement of fact, not a moral claim. If he said, "I ought to be what I am," he would be making a moral claim.

Another problem with cultural relativism is its premise that different answers to a given question means there is no right answer. Just because Mexico, the United States, and China disagree on the issue of abortion does not mean there is no right or wrong approach to abortion. If two golfers disagreed on how many strokes one of them took on a hole, it does not mean there is no incorrect answer. Either both are wrong or one of them is right. They cannot both be right. When people disagree about morality it does not mean that there is no objective morality.

Finally, let's say someone disagrees with cultural relativism. If the cultural relativist is to remain consistent, they must agree that the fact that there is a disagreement means that there is no wrong view of moral theory. But as a cultural relativist they are claiming there is a correct view of moral theory and that other views are incorrect. As a result, they cannot live their own philosophy. On the other hand, if the cultural relativist claims that the opposing view is a wrong way to think about the issue, then again they show they are not actually a relativist. Thus, cultural relativism cannot give an account of the basis of morality.

CONVENTIONALISM

The view that each society decides what is right and wrong for itself is called conventionalism. In contrast to cultural relativism, which says that there is no right or wrong answer, conventionalism claims there is a right and wrong, but it varies from society to society. The majority rules and morality becomes simply what is legal.

If conventionalism is true, the results are counterintuitive and very hard to live out. For example, let's say a law was passed that made having blue eyes illegal and that the penalty for having blue eyes is death. There would not only be nothing immoral about the law, but it would in fact be immoral to have blue eyes!

But we don't need to invent absurd hypothetical situations to see what a conventionalist society would look like. Conventionalism was the philosophy of Germany in the 1930s and 40s. Thus, when the Nazis declared Jews to be sub-human and deserving of death, there was no recourse for the Jews. The law by definition was "moral." The large community of countries who protested were ignored. After all, what grounds did they have to critique German society? As a result six million Jews were systematically killed. And the defense given by Nazis tried at Nuremberg was conventionalism. "It couldn't have been wrong, it was the law," they said. "We were only following orders."

One of conventionalism's problems is that it leaves no room for society to be reformed. If society defines morality, then a person who protests against the laws of that society is, by definition, immoral and criminal. If a society were to change a law it would not change from immoral to moral or from unjust to just. The law could only change from one rule to another, it would simply be different, not better or worse.

Think about what this means: if conventionalism is true then people like Gandhi, Jesus, and William Wilberforce would be among the most egregious criminals that ever lived! Their crime? They thought society could be changed for the better. The criminalization of such moral reformers is, of course, wildly counterintuitive and helps show the bankruptcy of the conventionalist view.

Ultimately, conventionalism is about power, not morality. Whichever way the wind blows, the will of the majority is what is moral. Like a gang of bullies forcing into submission those who would dare oppose them, conventionalism forces its preferences on everyone by defining itself into power. And like cultural relativism, this fails to account for morality.

ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

The most widespread form of relativism is ethical subjectivism. In this view, individuals decide what is right and wrong for themselves and themselves only. Morality is nothing more than personal preference and opinion. "What's true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is

true for me.”

One of the major problems with ethical subjectivism has to do with language. Conversation about values and moral topics becomes completely incoherent. No longer could anyone say something was right or wrong with any meaning. The best you could say is, “I choose not to do that because it is wrong for me,” or “I do not prefer that.” An ethical subjectivist could not meaningfully call the terrorist attacks on September 11 evil or wrong. And they could not call the rescue workers good or heroic and make any sense. When an ethical subjectivist makes a statement about the morality of an event or action they are not talking about anything other than their opinion of it, not about the thing itself.

The fatal flaw in this view is that it is clearly self-refuting. Again consider the statement, “What’s true for you is true for you, and what’s true for me is true for me.” The statement makes no sense. It says that truth claims only apply to the person making them. The problem is that if this statement is true it applies to everyone, which, of course means the statement is false!

A very effective way to expose the bankruptcy of Ethical Subjectivism is by using examples of obvious moral clarity that apply to all people at all times in all places. “Torturing babies for fun is wrong,” is a well-known example. When confronted with this statement, an ethical subjectivist would then be in the unenviable position of having to argue against it. They may not personally think it is right, but they could not say it is wrong and be consistent. Just imagine what kind of people this system produces. In this system an ethical subjectivist must walk past a rape in action since they cannot condemn it for anyone but themselves. An ethical subjectivist must allow trespassers into their home, thieves to burgle it, and arsonists to burn it as long as the trespassers, thieves, and arsonists don’t believe their acts are wrong. But nobody lives this way. Or do they?

One way to judge a moral system is to look at the kind of heroes the system produces. Take the objective moral stance of the Judeo-Christian view. The heroes are many and mighty: Jesus, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr. immediately come to mind.

But what kind of hero best exemplifies ethical subjectivism? Lived consistently, it produces moral monsters, people who see no need to care about others, and are unaccountable to anything but their preferences. Jack the Ripper. Ted Bundy. Albert Fish (one of the inspirations for Hannibal Lector). Ed Gein (the inspiration for Psycho, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, and the Buffalo Bill character in Silence of the Lambs). These are the heroes of ethical relativism.

OBJECTIVE MORALITY

Morals are not opinions or personal, private decisions. And they are not descriptions of behavior. They are prescriptions for behavior and motives that have the force of a command. They have a sense of obligation and oughtness that is universal, authoritative and applies to all people in all places at all times.

One way we come to moral knowledge is directly. We know it through intuition. This immediate knowledge is important because some things are only known in themselves. No investigation of facts or reasoning is required. This is precisely what is demonstrated by clear case examples like, “Torturing babies for fun is wrong.” Nobody has to investigate this claim before they can take a moral stance on it. Our intuition enables us to recognize it as self-evident. Just because we have a moral intuition does not mean we do not have to develop it, however. Even though we have an

intuition for logic, we still have to cultivate a reasonable mind to better act on that intuition. The same is true with moral intuition; we have to cultivate our minds to be sensitive to it and to act on it.

There are several ways to show that all people, even self-professed relativists, actually believe in objective morality at their core. As we have seen, one way is through clear case examples. These examples don't have to be confined to outlandish claims like the torture example. Often conversations present opportunities to make this point in a much more personal way. Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer was a master at this. He once had a conversation with several students, one of whom disagreed with Schaeffer's moral objectivism. The student claimed there was ultimately no difference between cruelty and non-cruelty. Another student who was listening decided to put that belief to the test. He picked up a teakettle full of boiling water and held it over the first student's head as if he were about to pour it onto the student. He then said, "There is no difference between cruelty and non-cruelty." The first student realized that in his worldview he could not object to the threat and got up and left the room disillusioned. What makes these kinds of situations so powerful is that they are opportunities to take the conversation out of the abstract and put into the everyday world we all live in. In this light, the force of the objectivist position is undeniable no matter how hard someone tries to resist it.

Another way of exposing objectivism in a relativist is to discover their passion and relativize it. Let us say, for example, a relativist believed deeply in animal rights. A moral objectivist could tell the relativist how he is trying to find a new shampoo and just tested out a couple brands by rubbing the shampoo into the eyes of a dog to see if there was any adverse reaction. The relativist will betray what they say they believe and object to these actions. And rightly so. But by objecting they demonstrate the reality of moral objectivism: moral laws are not personal opinions. So, objectivism stands as the only coherent view of morality and the only way that can be consistently lived out.

At this point in the argument, all that has been shown is that there are very good reasons for believing that objective morality exists. Two questions now arise: "Where did morals come from?" and, "Why should we obey them?" To find the source we should look at the characteristics of morality. Morality is:

- Prescriptive
- A command
- Universal
- Objective
- Authoritative

Prescriptions and commands are forms of communication, and communication happens only between minds. Also, because morals deal with purpose and will, the source of morality must also have purpose and a will. Because morals are universal and transcend individuals, societies, and time, the source must be universal and transcendent. Since morals are authoritative they must come from an authority, and authority can only be held by a person. Finally, this person must have the power to impose his moral will on us and provide us with an ability to know their moral will through intuition. Thus, morals come from a transcendent person who has the power and authority to impose a moral law on us. And we call this person God.

Another indication of where morals come from is found in what happens when we violate the

moral law. We've all ignored our moral intuition and done what we know is wrong, and the result has been guilt. Sometimes it is obvious to us whom we feel guilty towards. At other times the object of our guilt is not so clear, like when our guilt stems from our own thoughts or motives. To whom do we feel guilty then? The answer is in the question: "whom," not "what." We feel guilty towards persons not objects. And we do not just feel guilt toward the person we deceived or harmed, but we understand the law came from someone, not something, and we feel guilt towards that person.

But is something good just because God says it is or is there a standard that God is using? If something is good because God says it is then the standard is arbitrary since it could have been something other than what it is. Or if God uses something outside himself as a standard to judge things, then God is truly God since he relies on something outside himself. Either way is a fatal flaw against the claim that God is the source of morality. However, those are not the only options. A third option says that things are good because they reflect God's nature and character. God's character is the standard of goodness and his preferences are extensions of his character, not arbitrary decrees. Because God does not change the standard does not change. And because the standard is internal God is not dependent on anything outside himself.

The argument from morality for the existence of God can be made in a couple of ways. A modest case uses it along with other arguments as only one part of a whole case. Others have made transcendental arguments with it. This approach asks what the necessary preconditions are for objective morality and argues that only the God of the Bible can account for it. This is obviously a more ambitious take on the argument, but it can be extremely effective. Both methods rely on the same claim: that objectivism is the only coherent view of morality and the only view of morality that can be lived consistently. And it points very strongly towards the existence of a transcendent, powerful, personal God.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

***Apologetics Study Bible* Articles:**

- Does the Moral Argument Show There Is A God? by Paul Copan, 1687.
- Can Something Be True for You and Not for Me? by Paul Copan, 1608.
- Is the Old Testament Ethical?, 116.

Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*

Chapter 4, Does God Exist? The Moral Argument.

Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-air* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer someone who claimed that morals were simply discovered through experience and passed down for the good of the human race?
2. How would you answer someone who attacked objective morality by pointing to moral failures often associated with the church such as the Spanish Inquisition, or the Salem Witch Trials?
3. What is wrong with the statement, "Don't push your morality on me?"
4. What other clear-case examples of objective morality can you think of?
5. Think of some you know who holds to relativism. How would relativise something they

believed to show their inconsistency?

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