

From God? A Debate
Between a Christian
and an Atheist

(Oxford, 2004) by
William Lane Craig
and Walter Sinnott-
Armstrong

Craig's part:

**3. God Makes Sense of Objective
Moral Values in the World**

If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. When I speak of *objective* moral values, I mean moral values that are valid and binding whether anybody believes in them or not. Thus, to say, for example, that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right and that it would still have been wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everyone who disagreed with them. Now if God does not exist, then moral values are not objective in this way.

Many theists and atheists alike concur on this point. For example, Bertrand Russell observed,

... ethics arises from the pressures of the community on the individual. Man ... does not always instinctively feel the desires which are useful to his herd. The herd, being anxious that the individual should act in its interests, has invented various devices for causing the individual's interest to be in harmony with that of the herd. One of these ... is morality.²⁸

Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science at the University of Guelph, agrees. He explains,

Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are 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.²⁹

Friedrich Nietzsche, the great nineteenth century atheist who proclaimed the death of God, understood that the death of God

meant the destruction of all meaning and value in life. I think that Friedrich Nietzsche was right.

But we must be very careful here. The question here is *not*: “Must we believe in God in order to live moral lives?” I’m not claiming that we must. Nor is the question: “Can we *recognize* objective moral values without believing in God?” I think that we can. Nor is the question: “Can we formulate an adequate system of ethics without reference to God?” So long as we assume that human beings have objective moral value, the atheist could probably draft a moral code that the theist would largely agree with.

Rather the question is: “If God does not exist, do objective moral values exist?” Like Russell and Ruse, I don’t see any reason to think that in the absence of God, the herd morality evolved by *homo sapiens* is objective. After all, if there is no God, then what’s so special about human beings? They’re just accidental by-products of nature that have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and that are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. On the atheistic view, some action, say, rape, may not be socially advantageous, and so in the course of human development has become taboo; but that does absolutely nothing to prove that rape is really wrong. On the atheistic view, there’s nothing really *wrong* with your raping someone. Thus, without God there is no absolute right and wrong that imposes itself on our conscience.

But the problem is that objective values *do* exist, and deep down we all know it. There’s no more reason to deny the objective reality of moral values than the objective reality of the physical world. As John Healey, the Executive Director of Amnesty International, wrote in a fund-raising letter, “I am writing you today because I think you share my profound belief that *there are indeed some moral absolutes*. When it comes to torture, to government-sanctioned murder, to ‘disappearances’—there are no lesser evils. These are outrages against all of us.”³⁰ Actions like rape, cruelty, and child abuse aren’t just socially unacceptable behavior—they’re moral abominations. Some things are really wrong. Similarly love, equality, and self-sacrifice are really good. But if moral values cannot exist without God and moral values do exist, then it follows logically and inescapably that God exists.

We can summarize this argument as follows:

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Again, let’s consider possible objections that might be raised against this argument.

Some atheist philosophers, unwilling to bite the bullet and affirm that acts like rape or torturing a child are morally neutral actions, have tried to affirm objective moral values in the absence of God, thus in effect denying premise (1). Let’s call this alternative Atheistic Moral Realism. Atheistic moral realists affirm that moral values and duties do exist in reality and are not dependent upon evolution or human opinion, but they insist that they are not grounded in God. Indeed, moral values have no further foundation. They just exist.

I must confess that this alternative strikes me as incomprehensible, an example of trying to have your cake and eat it, too. What does it mean to say, for example, that the moral value *Justice* simply exists? I don’t know what this means. I understand what it is for a person to be just; but I draw a complete blank when it is said that, in the absence of any people, *Justice* itself exists. Moral values seem to exist as properties of persons, not as abstractions—or at any rate, I don’t know what it is for a moral value to exist as an abstraction. Atheistic moral realists seem to lack any adequate foundation in reality for moral values, but just leave them floating in an unintelligible way.

Further, the nature of moral duty or obligation seems incompatible with Atheistic Moral Realism. Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that moral values do exist independently of God. Suppose that values like *Mercy*, *Justice*, *Love*, *Forbearance*, and the like just exist. How does that result in any moral obligations for me? Why would I have a moral duty, say, to be merciful? Who or what lays such an obligation on me? As the ethicist Richard Taylor points out, “A duty is something that is owed. . . . But something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as duty in isolation. . . .”³¹ God makes sense of moral obligation because His commands constitute for us our moral duties. Taylor writes, “Our moral obligations can . . . be understood as those that are imposed by God. . . . But what if this higher-than-human lawgiver is no longer

taken into account? Does the concept of a moral obligation . . . still make sense? . . . the concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain but their meaning is gone."³² As a non-theist, Taylor therefore thinks that we literally have no moral obligations, that there is no right or wrong. The Atheistic Moral Realist rightly finds this abhorrent, but, as Taylor clearly sees, on an atheistic view there simply is no ground for duty, even if moral values somehow exist.

Finally, it is fantastically improbable that just that sort of creature would emerge from the blind evolutionary process who corresponds to the abstractly existing realm of moral values.³³ This seems to be an utterly incredible coincidence, when you think about it. It is almost as though the moral realm *knew* that we were coming. It is far more plausible to regard both the natural realm and the moral realm as under the hegemony or authority of a divine Designer and Lawgiver than to think that these two entirely independent orders of reality just happened to mesh.

Thus it seems to me that Atheistic Moral Realism is not a plausible view, but is basically a halfway house for philosophers who don't have the stomach for the moral nihilism or meaninglessness that their own atheism implies.

What, then, about premise (2) **Objective moral values do exist**? Some people, as we have seen, deny that objective moral values exist. I agree with them that IF there is no God, then moral values are just the products of socio-biological evolution or expressions of personal taste. But I see no reason to think that that is in fact all that moral values are. Those who think so seem to commit the genetic fallacy, which is trying to invalidate something by showing how it *originated*. For example, a socialist who tried to refute your belief in democratic government by saying, "The only reason you believe in democracy is that you were raised in a democratic society!" would be guilty of the genetic fallacy. For even if it were true that your belief is totally the result of cultural conditioning, that does absolutely nothing to show that your belief is false (think of people who have been culturally conditioned to believe that the Earth is round!). The truth of an idea is not dependent upon how that idea originated. It's the same with moral values. If moral values are *dis-*

covered rather than *invented*, then our gradual and fallible apprehension of the moral realm no more undermines the objective reality of that realm than our gradual, fallible apprehension of the physical world undermines the objective reality of the physical realm. We know objective moral values exist because we clearly apprehend some of them. The best way to show this is simply to describe moral situations in which we clearly see right and wrong: torturing a child, incest, rape, ethnic cleansing, racism, witch burning, the Inquisition, and so forth. If someone really fails to see the objective moral truth about such matters, then he is simply morally handicapped, like a color-blind person who cannot tell the difference between red and green, and there's no reason to think that his impairment should make us call into question what we see clearly.

From the truth of the two premises the conclusion follows logically that (3) **Therefore, God exists**. Thus, God makes sense of ethics in a way that atheism really cannot. So in addition to the metaphysical and scientific arguments for God, we have a powerful moral argument for God.

It is important to get this argument out of the way right at the start, because it leads many religious believers to think that all atheists are immoral and dangerous. This is false. Many atheists are nice (including me, I hope). Craig admits this, but then he writes, "On the atheistic view, there's nothing really *wrong* with your raping someone." (18) Such misleading and inaccurate allegations inhibit mutual understanding.

In fact, many atheists are happy to embrace objective moral values. I agree with them. Rape is morally wrong. So is discrimination against gays and lesbians. Even if somebody or some group *thinks* that these acts are not morally wrong, they still *are* morally wrong, so their immorality is objective by Craig's own definition (17). Craig and I might not always agree about what is objectively morally wrong, but we do agree that some acts are objectively morally wrong.

This admission implies nothing about God, unless objective values depend on God. Why should we believe that they do? Because Russell, Ruse, and Nietzsche say so? But their claims are denied by many philosophers, atheists as well as theists. Even Russell and Ruse themselves denied these claims at other times in their careers. So Craig needs a reason to believe some authorities rather than others.

Craig does give some reasons to back up his authorities. One is that atheists see morality as a biological adaptation, but moral values are not objective if they depend on our biology. This argument commits a fallacy of *equivocation*. When anthropologists talk about a culture's morality, they describe a group of beliefs about what is right and wrong or good and bad. In contrast, when philosophers present a moral system, they seek a set of rules or principles that prescribes what really *is* morally right and wrong or good and bad. Morality in the philosophical sense can be objective, even if people's beliefs about it are subjective. After all, scientific beliefs have biological and cultural origins as well. Just as it is objectively true that the earth moves around the sun, although biology and culture lead some people to believe otherwise, so rape is objectively morally wrong, although biology and culture lead some people to believe otherwise. At least this position is not excluded by the biological and cultural origins of moral beliefs, so atheists can recognize those origins and still consistently believe in objective values.

Sinnott-Armstrong's part:

1. Morality

One example of a questionable appeal to authority occurs in Craig's argument from objective morality. Craig quotes Russell, Ruse, and Nietzsche, saying that there could not be objective values without God. Then he claims that there are objective values. He concludes that God exists.

Craig next asks, "If God did not forbid rape, what makes rape immoral objectively?" This question is supposed to be hard for atheists to answer, because Craig seems to assume that on "the atheistic view" (which one?) what makes rape wrong is some cost to the rapist or to society. (18) These views are inadequate because rape would still be immoral even if the rapist got away with it and even if society was not harmed. But atheists can give a better answer: What makes rape immoral is that rape harms *the victim* in terrible ways. The victim feels pain, loses freedom, is subordinated, and so on. These harms are not justified by any benefits to anyone. Craig still might ask, "What's immoral about causing serious harms to other people without justification?" But now it seems natural to answer, "It simply is. Objectively. Don't you agree?"

This simple answer implies nothing like "in the absence of any people, *Justice* itself exists," so atheists can agree with Craig that they "don't know what this means." (19) Atheists can also agree with Craig and Taylor that "A duty is something that is owed. . . . But something can be owed only to some person or persons." (19) The duty not to rape is owed to the victim. Thus, Craig's criticisms of "Atheistic Moral Realism" attack a *straw man*.

Craig suggests a deeper problem when he asks, "what's so special about human beings?" (18) If harm to the victim is what makes rape immoral, why isn't it also immoral when a lion causes harm by having forced sex with another lion? Atheists can answer that lower animals, such as lions, are not moral agents. They do not make free choices. Their actions are not determined by any conception of what is moral or not. That explains why moral rules and principles do not apply to lower animals any more than they apply to avalanches that kill people. You don't need to add that humans were made in God's image or that we are His favorite species or anything religious.

Philosophers still might long for deeper explanations of why it is immoral for moral agents to cause unjustified harm. Many atheists offer various explanations, but I do not want to commit myself to any particular account here. And I don't need to. Even if atheists were stuck with saying, "It *just is* immoral," that would be a problem for atheism only if theists could give a better answer. They cannot.

In the end, Craig himself says, "If someone really fails to see the objective moral truth about [rape], then he is simply morally handi-

capped." (21) This is no better (or worse) than saying, "Rape just is morally wrong."

Theists might give deeper accounts of morality, but atheists can adopt or adapt the same accounts—with only one exception. The only theory of morality that atheists cannot accept is one that refers to God, such as when theists claim that what makes rape immoral is that God commands us not to rape. This view faces a difficult question: Why should we obey God's commands? The answer cannot be that God will punish us if we disobey, since might does not make right. Even if a government commands you to turn in runaway slaves and will punish you if you don't, that does not make it morally wrong to hide runaway slaves. Some theists answer that we should obey God's commands because God gave us life. But our parents also gave us life, and yet, at least in modern societies, we do not have to marry whomever our parents tell us to. Theists might answer that it is simply immoral to disobey God, but that claim is no more illuminating than when atheists say that it is simply immoral to cause unjustified harm. A better answer is that God has good reasons for his commands. God commands us not to rape because rape harms the victim. But then that harm (not the command) is what makes rape immoral. Rape would be just as harmful without God, so rape would be morally wrong without God. To think otherwise is like a boy imagining that, once his parents leave, he may beat up his little sister, because the only thing that makes it wrong for him to beat up his sister is that his parents told him not to.

This basic point was presented long ago as a dilemma in Plato's dialogue, *The Euthyphro*: Is rape immoral because God commanded us not to rape or did God command us not to rape because rape is immoral? If God forbids rape because it is immoral, rape must be immoral prior to His command, so His command is not necessary to make it immoral. On the other hand, if God forbids rape but not because it is already immoral, God could have failed to forbid rape, and then there would be nothing immoral about raping whenever we want. That implication is unacceptable. Theists often respond that God cannot fail to command us not to rape, because He is good, and rape is bad. That response brings us right back to the first horn of the dilemma. If God's nature ensures that He will forbid rape because of how bad rape is, then God's command is not needed to

make rape wrong. Rape is immoral anyway, and God is superfluous, except maybe for punishment or as a conduit of information.

This dilemma arises not only for rape but for all kinds of immorality. God's commands are arbitrary if He has no reason to command one act rather than another; but, if He does have reasons for His commands, then His *reasons* rather than His *commands* are what make acts immoral. Divine command theorists think that they can solve this dilemma, but all of their solutions fail, in my opinion. Anyway, I don't need to claim that much here. My current task is only to refute Craig's argument, so all I need to show is that atheists can coherently believe in an objective morality. They can, and I do.