



Good Without (Belief in) God

Morality and Theism

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Can one be good without God?

- Yes, of course.
- But, on reflection, ...
 - What exactly is being asked?
 - Several related questions...
 - Consider opposing reasons:
 - Why would anyone answer “No”?
 - Trivial reason: No God → No us.

Reasons why morality requires God

1. Without belief in God, we are unable to do good.
2. Without belief in God, we have no motivation to do good.
3. Without God, *right* and *wrong* are meaningless.
4. Without belief in God, we cannot know what is morally right or wrong.
5. Without God, morality has no objective foundation.

1. Without belief in God, are we unable to do good?

Suppose a child is drowning and Amy saves him.

Q: Did she do the right thing? Did she do something good?

To answer, we don't first need to ask:

“What is Amy's religion?”

“Does God exist in this scenario?”

1. Without belief in God, are we unable to do good?

Calvinists: But what about “total depravity”?

- Q & A 5

- Q. Can you live up to all this [love God and love your neighbor as yourself] perfectly?
- A. No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.

- Q & A 8

- Q. But are we so corrupt that we are *totally unable to do any good* and inclined toward *all evil*?
- A. Yes, unless we are born again by the Spirit of God.
– Heidelberg Catechism

- Dilemma:

- Either : “Good” acts are bad if done by atheists
- Or: Many atheists are “born again”!

2. Without belief in God, have we no motivation to do good?

- Mitchell & Webb clip
- Some think: Without God, there's
 - no reward for good behavior or punishment for bad;
 - no one to please by our actions;
 - no one to whom to express gratitude.
- If one's only motivation is reward/punishment, is one good?
 - Lawrence Kohlberg 6 stages of moral reasoning
- Non-theist Motivations:
 - We understand the badness of being harmed, which motivates us to prevent it in others.
 - We can please and express gratitude to other people.
 - When we all do good, we're all better off.

2. Without belief in God, have we no motivation to do good?

- But what about ultimate justice?
 - If there's no God, didn't Hitler get away with his crimes?
 - If we can get away with a life of self-serving evil behavior, why not?
- Some might, but ...
 - Exceptions don't show we have no moral motivations.
 - Haven't theists also lived selfishly, despite belief in God?
 - Ultimate justice for Nazis vs. Jews?

3. Without God, are *right* and *wrong* meaningless?

Isn't morality *defined* by God's will?

- Divine Command Theory of Ethics:
 - "[Action] is right" means "God wills [action]."
- But ... Euthyphro dilemma: Consider any morally right action.
 - A) Is it right because God commands it?
 - B) Or: Does God command it because it's right?
- If A, God's commanding anything would make it right.
 - But would it?
- If B, what makes the action right is something else about it.
 - "Right," then, should be defined in terms of *those* features.
- Practical problem: which God, ₈ commands, interpretations...?

3. Without God, are *right* and *wrong* meaningless?

Positive proposals for the meaning of *right*:

- “Right action” is defined in terms of the (un)happy consequences of the action.
 - Utilitarianism: “A is right” means “A maximizes happiness.”
- “Right action” is defined by some feature of the principle on which one intentionally acts.
 - Golden Rule, Kant’s Categorical Imperative
- “Right action” is defined by what a virtuous person would do.
 - Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics

4. Without belief in God, can we not know what is morally right?

- Some argue: we can only know *right/wrong* by knowing God's will, believing God's word, following God's prophets, etc.
- But if "right" is defined by something other than God's will, then we may be able to know it regardless of God's existence or our belief.
- Can't we know:
 - Likelihood of producing more net happiness?
 - How we would like to be treated; etc.?

5. Without God, has morality no objective foundation?

- Cause: how did we come to understand right and wrong or to behave morally if God didn't give us that? (Ravi)
 - Evolved as social creatures; theory of mind; reasoning skills.
- If morality is just a matter of human/animal happiness, isn't it relative?
 - What makes me happy might make you unhappy.
 - What one culture approves of another may forbid.
 - Best "godless" ethical theories are not relativist.
- As cognitively limited beings, are we getting it right?
 - Not necessarily, but we can make progress if...
 - We go out of our way to read/hear from those who disagree.
 - Evaluate reasons for and against each position.
 - Does invoking God, scriptures help?

Goals:

- Not:
 - De-convert anyone, attack religion.
 - Convince us non-religious people are better than religious.
- Help more people understand how non-religious people, non-theists can think coherently about morality and behave morally.
- Instead of opposing some ideas, policies, behavior due to (non-)religious tribalism, let's work together for the good of all.