CAN WE HAVE MORALITY WITHOUT GOD AND RELIGION?
Stephen Law

It’s widely held that morality requires both God and religion. Without God to lay down moral rules, talk of “right and “wrong” can reflect nothing more than our own subjective preferences. Without religion to provide us with moral guidance, we are set adrift, morally rudderless, with moral chaos the inevitable result.

Daniel P. Moloney, writing in American Prospect, provides a nice example of this popular point of view:

Religious people are the first to admit that many religious people sin often and boldly, and that atheists often act justly. They explain these ethical atheists by noting that when atheists reject the religion in which they have been raised, they tend to keep the morality while discarding its theological foundation. Their ethical behavior is then derivative and parasitic, borrowing its conscience from a culture permeated by religion; it cannot survive if the surrounding religious culture is not sustained. In short, morality as we know it cannot be maintained without Judeo-Christian religion.¹

But is the view that morality as we know it is ultimately dependent upon God and religion actually correct? This chapter introduces some of the key philosophical arguments.

An argument

Mr and Mrs Schnapper are arguing about whether to send their son Tom to a religious school. Mrs Schnapper believes they should. Mr Schnapper, an atheist, disagrees.

Mrs S: Tom should go to a religious school. All children should. Without a religion to provide us with a firm foundation, morality collapses.
Mr S: Why?
Mrs S: Well, if there’s no God to lay down what is right and what is wrong, that leaves the job to us.

What is the problem with the suggestion that things are right or wrong only because we say so? Mrs Schnapper proceeds to explain.

Mrs S: If things are right or wrong only because we say they are, then that makes morality both relative and arbitrary.
Mr Schnapper scratches his head.

Mr S: Why relative?
Mrs S: If things are right or wrong only because we say so, then relative to those who say killing is wrong, it is, and relative to those who say it’s right, it is. Correct?
Mr S: I guess so.
Mrs S: But morality isn’t relative, is it? Surely, killing is wrong anyway, no matter what we or anyone else might have to say about it. Someone who thinks that it’s morally acceptable to go round killing and stealing is simply mistaken. Don’t you agree?

Mr Schnapper nods.

Mr S: But I still don’t see why the view that things are right or wrong only because we say so makes morality arbitrary.
Mrs S: If things are right or wrong only because we say so, then, before we say so, nothing is right or wrong. Right?
Mr S: Yes.
Mrs S: But then our decision about what to call “right” and what to call “wrong” must be, from a moral perspective, entirely arbitrary.
Mr S: That’s true, I suppose.
Mrs S: So you see, without God, morality becomes a matter of our own personal, subjective and arbitrary whim.

An argument for the existence of God

Mr Schnapper is happy to agree that morality isn’t simply a matter of our subjective and arbitrary preference.

Mr S: I am happy to agree that killing really is wrong. It’s not wrong simply because we say it is.
Mrs S: But then you must admit that the only reason killing really is wrong is that God says it’s wrong.
Mr S: So you argue like this: Things aren’t right or wrong simply because we say so. They are right or wrong anyway. But that can only be because there exists a God to say what is right and what is wrong. So, as I agree that thing’s aren’t right or wrong simply because we say so, I am forced to accept that God exists. In effect, you’re giving me an argument for the existence of God.
Mrs S: Exactly.

Plato’s refutation of the popular argument

Mrs Schnapper’s conclusion that morality is dependent on God is not new. Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) is supposed to have claimed that “If there is no God, then all things are permitted”. Even many atheists, including John Paul Satre (1905-1980), have been prepared to accept the same conclusion.

Mrs Schnapper’s argument is certainly popular. But is it cogent?
Let’s agree, for the sake of argument, that Mr and Mrs Schnapper are correct when they suppose that things aren’t right or wrong simply because we say so. Does it follow that morality must come from God?

No, it doesn’t follow. Mrs Schnapper believes that in the absence of God, morality becomes relative and arbitrary. But, as we’re about to discover, the view that morality is laid down not by us but by God actually makes it no less relative and arbitrary.

The flaw in Mrs Schnapper’s argument was first pointed out by Plato (c.428-347 BC) in his dialogue the Euthyphro. The difficulty becomes apparent once we press the following question:

Are things wrong because God says so, or does God say that they are wrong because they are?

This question raises a dilemma for Mrs Schnapper, for she can give neither answer.

Let’s consider the second answer first: God says that things are wrong because they are. God, being infinitely knowledgeable and wise, recognises the wrongness of certain courses of action and tells us about it.

From Mrs Schnapper’s point of view, the difficulty with this answer is that it undermines her argument. If Mrs Schnapper concedes that God isn’t required to make things wrong – there is a standard of right or wrong that exists independently of God’s will – then her case against atheism collapses. For an atheist can then help him or herself to this same independent moral standard.

Now let’s turn to the first answer: things are wrong because God says so. That is to say, God actually makes certain courses of action wrong by decreeing them to be so. Had God decreed that killing is a good thing to go in for, then it would have been.

Unfortunately for Mrs Schnapper, this answer also undermines her argument. Mrs Schnapper argued that killing cannot be wrong merely because we say so: that would make right and wrong relative and arbitrary. But, as Mr Schnapper now points out, that the suggestion that things are wrong only because God says so makes morality no less relative and arbitrary.

Mr S: A minute ago you suggested that killing is wrong not because we say so, but because God says so. God made killing wrong by decreeing it to be wrong. Correct?
Mrs S: Yes.
Mr S: But then you're claiming that, prior to God decreeing that killing is wrong, it wasn't wrong.
Mrs S: Yes. I suppose I am.
Mr S: So in fact, from a moral perspective, God’s choice was also entirely arbitrary. He might just as well have flipped a coin.
Mrs S: I suppose so.
Mr S: Also, on your view, morality is relative to whatever God says, correct?
Mrs S: Yes.
Mr S: So if God had said killing is right, then it would have been. True?
Mrs S: I guess that’s true.
Mr S: But that’s not true, is it? Surely killing is wrong anyway, whatever God might have to say about it.
Mrs S: Hmm. Perhaps you’re right.
Mr S: So you see, the problem you had with the view that things are right or wrong only because we say so – that it makes morality relative and arbitrary – simply rearises on your own theory that things are right or wrong only because God says so.

Surely Mr Schnapper is right: if Mrs Schnapper’s objection to the view that morality is ultimately laid down by us is a good objection, then it’s just as effective against her own view that morality is laid down by God.

Mr S: So, by your own reasoning, we should agree that morality is ultimately independent both our own will and God’s too.

The view that things are right or wrong relative not to what we might happen to decree, but to whatever God decrees – is called the Divine Command Theory. Those who believe in God are certainly not obliged to accept the Divine Command Theory. Many important theists, including St Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-74) and Leibniz (1646-1716) have rejected the Divine Command Theory precisely because they have recognized that it falls foul of Plato’s dilemma.

The “But God is good” reply

In defence of the Divine Command Theory, Mrs Schnapper might claim that while killing is wrong only because God says so, God never would have said otherwise. This is because God is good. A good God would never instruct us to go round murdering each other.

One difficulty with this reply is that by describing God as “good”, we presumably mean morally good. But on the Divine Command Theory, to say that God is morally good is to say no more than that He says He is. But that’s something that even a God who says that murder is good thing to go in for can say. Even a God who commanded us to kill each other would be entirely free to decree that He himself is “good”.

The commands-need-a-commander argument

Mrs Schnapper’s first argument for morality being dependent on God fails. But she’s not disheartened. She has another argument up her sleeve.

Mrs S: Look, moral principles take the form of commands, don’t they? They say “Do not kill”, “Do not steal”, and so on.
Mr S: Yes, they do.
Mrs S: Now these commands are not simply our commands, are they?
Mr S: I have already agreed that things aren’t wrong simply because we say so.
Mrs S: Well then, where there is a command, there must be someone who has issued that command. And if the command-issuer is not us, then who is it?
Mr S: God, you will no doubt say.
Mrs S: Precisely. So the existence of moral commands requires the existence of God.

Again, this is a well-worn line of argument. Unfortunately for Mrs Schnapper, it’s also flawed.
Refutation of the commands-need-a-commander argument

One of the flaws in Mrs Schnapper’s second argument becomes apparent once we ask why we ought to obey God’s commands.

Mr S: But why ought I to obey God? The mere fact that someone issues commands does not entail that anyone ought to obey them. If I command you to do the washing up, that does not put you under any moral obligation to do the washing up, does it?
Mrs S: Definitely not.
Mr S: So why ought we to obey God’s commands? You want to ground all moral obligations in God’s commands. But commands, by themselves, do not generate moral obligations.
Mrs S: Your commands do not create moral obligations. But God’s commands do.
Mr S: Why?

This is a question that those who wish to ground morality in God’s commands need to answer. Mrs Schnapper makes the following suggestion.

Mrs S: Because we are already under a general moral obligation to obey God, that’s why.
Mr S: But why, in turn, does this general obligation exist?
Mrs S: Hmm. Good question.
Mr S: The problem you face is this. You want to ground all moral obligations in God’s commands. But that raises the question why are we morally obliged to obey God’s commands. So there is still an obligation that you have yet to account for.
Mrs S: Perhaps this general obligation exists because God commands us to obey all his commands.
Mr S: I’m afraid that won’t do. After all, I can command you to obey all my commands, can’t I? That still doesn’t put you under any moral obligation to do the washing up, does it?
Mrs S: No. I guess not.

The attempt to ground moral obligation in God’s commands is doomed to fail. For commands can generate moral obligations only where there already exists a moral obligation to obey them. So the Divine Command Theory of moral obligation actually ends up presupposing what it is supposed to account for: the existence of moral obligations.

We have just looked at two arguments for the conclusion that only a theist can allow for genuine moral values. We have also seen that neither argument is cogent.

Will we be good without God?

Let’s turn to a slightly different sort of argument. Mrs Schnapper now suggests, not that there cannot be good without God, but that we will not be good without God.

Mrs S: Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps atheists need be no more or less committed to morality being relative and arbitrary than theists. Still, without God, we no longer have any real motivation to behave morally, have we? We’re unlikely to bother with being good unless we believe that God exists.
Mr S: Why not?
Mrs S: Because it’s our fear of divine disapproval and punishment that keeps us in line. Unless we believe that there is a God, any reason we might have for behaving well evaporates. That’s why we should send Tom to a religious school.
Many agree with Mrs Schnapper that unless people believe in God they are unlikely to act morally. Voltaire (1694-1778), for example, refused to allow his friends to discuss atheism in front of his servants, saying, “I want my lawyer, tailor, valets, even my wife to believe in God. I think that if they do I shall be robbed less and cheated less.”

But is it true that unless we believe in God we are unlikely to behave morally? Many now happily admit to being atheists. Yet these atheists do, for the most part, behave pretty morally.

Indeed, as Mr Schnapper now argues, it’s difficult to defend even the view that theists are more likely to be moral than atheists.ii

Mr S: While there have been many selfless and noble believers, there have also been a great many self-serving and ignoble ones. There are innumerable examples of disgustingly brutal and immoral things being done in God’s name, from the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition to the destruction of the World Trade Centre. In fact it seems to me that religious belief is just as likely to promote immorality as it is morality.

Mrs S: Perhaps.

As Mr Schnapper also points out, those who do the right thing primarily out of fear are not generally considered particularly morally worthy.

Mr S: Someone who does the right thing, not out of fear of punishment, but out of respect and concern for other human beings, is surely far more moral than is someone who acts solely out of fear of punishment. So it seems to me that if, as you suggest, the religious do the right thing mainly out of fear, then they are actually less moral than are atheists who do it out of respect and concern for others.

Mrs Schnapper is prepared to admit that someone who acts simply out of fear is not particularly moral.

Mrs S: You may be right. But not all religious people do the right thing out of fear, do they? It’s only those that do that fall foul of your criticism.

Mr S: That’s true.

Mrs S: And suppose I concede that most atheists do seem to behave morally, perhaps even morally as those who believe in God. Still, that may only be because they have been brought up within a culture that has, or until recently, had a strong religious tradition. The atheist’s good behaviour is a carry-over from this tradition. But it seems to me that if religion continues to wane, moral chaos must be the inevitable result. First generation atheists may not be particularly immoral. Second or third generation atheists will be.

Mr S: An intriguing suggestion. But you haven’t given me the slightest reason to suppose it’s true, have you?

Mrs S: Well, not yet. No.

Mr S: In fact, not only have you not given me any reason to suppose it’s true, it’s very obviously not true.

Mrs S: How do you know?

Mr S: Because there have been cultures that have had a highly developed morality, but that have either not had religion, or else have not had a religion that’s much concerned with laying down morality.

Mrs S: For example?

Mr S: The Ancient Greeks. They weren’t perfect, of course. They had slavery. But then so did the highly-religious southern states of America. The Ancient Greeks were morally sophisticated. Their moral code was very similar to our own. Ancient Greece was a civilized place to live. Yet their religion was not at all concerned with laying down right and wrong in
the way ours is. You don't find Zeus and the other Greek gods handing down moral commandments.

Mrs S: Interesting.

Mr S: In Ancient Greece, religion and morality were essentially separate domains. So there have been entire civilizations, morally highly developed civilizations, that have done very well indeed without a religiously-based morality.

Mrs S: Perhaps that's true.

Mr S: So then why send Tom to a religious school? Your claim that, without a religiously-based morality, civilization must inevitably collapse just doesn't hold water.

Is moral knowledge dependent on religion?

Many believe that, without religion, moral knowledge is impossible. Only a religious text and tradition can provide us with the kind of objective yardstick we need if we are to be able distinguish what is right from what merely seems right to us. Or so Mrs Schnapper now argues.

Mrs S: There's still a huge problem facing atheists like yourself, a problem we believers do not face. The problem is to explain how we come by moral knowledge.

Mr S: What's the problem?

Mrs S: Morality is rooted in religious texts such as The Bible. There's the authority of a text and a tradition to which believers can appeal. If I want to know whether something is wrong, I look to The Bible. There is something firm and immovable to which I can turn for guidance.

Mr S: Like a lighthouse in a storm?

Mrs S: Exactly. But atheists are cast adrift without any means of distinguishing right from wrong except how they feel. Atheists lack the lighthouse of an external authority to which they can turn for help. Morally speaking, there's no way for atheists to distinguish how things seem to them from how things really are.

Mr S: Hmm.

Mrs S: But if you cannot distinguish appearance from reality, then you cannot be said to know, can you?

Mr S: I suppose not.

Mrs S: But then atheists can't really to be said to know right from wrong, can they? So you see, for moral knowledge, you need religion.

Again, this is a prevalent line of argument. But Mr Schnapper is not persuaded.

Mr S: I don’t see that the religious have any less of a problem with moral knowledge.

Mrs S: Why not?

Mr S: Well, as I have already pointed out, it’s not true that morality is inseparable from and rooted in religion. The Ancient Greeks were morally pretty sophisticated and aware. Yet their religion was not at all concerned with morality.

Mrs S: True.

Mr S: So it seems humans have an in-built sense of right and wrong that operates anyway, independently of their exposure to religion. Indeed, even those who believe in God need to rely on this prior moral sense in deciding whether or not to continue to accept the religion with which they were brought up. They also need to rely on it when deciding how to interpret that religion's commandments.

Mrs S: How do you mean?

Mr S: Well, *Leviticus* says that it is sinful to lend money for interest, to eat shellfish and to wear jackets made from a linen/wool mix. The New Testament also suggests that the rich should give away their money. Yet you, a Christian, ignore all these Biblical instructions.

Mrs S: Yes, I suppose I do.
Mr S: *The Bible* also says that it is wrong to kill. Yet plenty of Christians favour the death penalty. So these Christians have a particular *interpretation* of that commandment don’t they?

Mrs S: Yes. They interpret it to mean something like, “Don’t kill the innocent”.

Mr S: Right. So Christians pick and choose from what it says in *The Bible*, and then go on to interpret those passages they are prepared to accept in sometimes highly idiosyncratic ways. Now how do they do this without relying on some prior moral sense?

Mrs S: I’m not sure.

Mr S: You see? How to tell right from wrong is no less a problem for the religious than it is for the atheist. I admit there is a difficulty about explaining how we come by moral knowledge. But religion doesn’t solve that problem.

As most societies that we would call civilized also have (or until recently, had) a moralizing religion, many (such as Daniel P. Moloney, quoted at the beginning of this chapter) infer that a moralizing religion must be a necessary condition of both morality and civilization. Take the moralizing religion away and both morality and civilization must inevitably collapse.

But why infer that? It certainly doesn’t follow. Indeed, what evidence there is seems to suggest, not that morality and civilization cannot flourish without a moralizing religion, but that moralizing religions tend merely to reflect a morality that is inclined to flourish in any case.

The Ancient Greeks, for example, had a great civilization and a morality not significantly different from our own. Yet they had no moralizing religion. So the Ancient Greeks provide some grounds (though hardly conclusive grounds, of course) for supposing that there is a more or less universal moral code – a code that includes prohibitions on killing and stealing, for example – to which human beings are drawn *anyway*, whether or not they happen to be exposed to a moralizing religion. What evidence there is seems to suggest that, where there is a moralizing religion, it tends not to challenge this basic code but merely to formalize it and add a few refinements of its own (such as prohibitions on eating certain foodstuffs).

Certainly, we are usually prepared to accept a religion only to the extent that its moral code coheres with our existing moral point of view. Those parts that clash with the dominant moral perspective tend either to be ignored (like the Old Testament prohibition on eating shell-fish or the New Testament’s insistence that a rich man is no more likely to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than a camel is likely to pass through the eye of a needle) or reinterpreted.

**Conclusion**

My conclusion is not that we shouldn’t attempt morally to educate our children. In fact I can’t think of anything more important. Nor am I suggesting that this should never be done in religious schools. My aim has simply been to question the increasingly popular assumptions that morality is dependent upon God and religion, that there cannot be moral value without God, and that we will not be good unless religion is there to show us the way.

**Further reading**

Incidentally, as some atheists have pointed out, the statistics indicate that, among US citizens, those who believe in God are over forty times more likely to end up in prison than are atheists. See, for example, http://freethought.freeservers.com/reason/crimestats.html. Of course, these statistics do not establish that religion is actually a cause of unlawful behaviour. Belief in God is more prevalent among the less well-off, who are also much more likely to end up in prison.

1 Quoted at http://www.prospect.org/controversy/lieberman/moloney-d-1.html

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