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ATHEISTS AND THE QUEST FOR OBJECTIVE MORALITY

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In a recent documentary entitled *Collision*, leading atheist Christopher Hitchens and Christian theologian and pastor Douglas Wilson go on the road to discuss and debate this question: “Is Christianity good for the world?” It is a fascinating discourse covering a host of issues, but one theme continues to emerge throughout the narrative: whether atheism can provide a justification for morality. Atheists often make the claim that they can live good moral lives without believing in God.

SYNOPSIS

Atheists often argue that they can make moral claims and live good moral lives without believing in God. Many theists agree, but the real issue is whether atheism can provide a justification for morality. A number of leading atheists currently writing on this issue are opposed to moral relativism, given its obvious and horrific ramifications, and have attempted to provide a justification for a nonrelative morality. Three such attempts are discussed in this article: Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s position that objective morality simply “is”; Richard Dawkins’s position that morality is based on the selfish gene; and Michael Ruse and Edward Wilson’s position that morality is an evolutionary illusion. Each of these positions, it turns out, is problematic. Sinnott-Armstrong affirms an objective morality, but affirming something and justifying it are two very different matters. Dawkins spells out his selfish gene approach by including four fundamental criteria, but his approach has virtually nothing to do with morality—with real right and wrong, good and evil. Finally, Ruse and Wilson disagree with Dawkins and maintain that belief in morality is just an adaptation put in place by evolution to further our reproductive ends. On their view, morality is simply an illusion foisted on us by our genes to get us to cooperate and to advance the species. But have they considered the ramifications of such a view? Each of these positions fails to provide the justification necessary for a universal, objective morality—the kind of morality in which good and evil are clearly understood and delineated.

Hitchens brings this challenge to believers: “Name one ethical statement made, or one ethical action performed, by a believer that could not have been uttered or done by a nonbeliever.”¹ Another atheist, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, offers a list of “pretty good” atheists—including, he says, Thomas Edison, George Orwell, Marie Curie, and Mark Twain—and notes that they “led exemplary lives of service,” contributed greatly to the social good,” and were “kind, considerate, altruistic, and caring.” He argues that “surely someone on this long list of atheists passes muster. That is enough to refute the claim that all atheists are immoral.”² Daniel Dennett adds that “I have uncovered no evidence to support the claim that people, religious or not, who *don’t* believe in reward in heaven and/or punishment in hell are more likely to kill, rape, rob, or break their promises than people who do.”³

What’s fascinating about these claims is that they miss the real issue at hand. Many theists believe that atheists can utter profound ethical statements and live good moral lives. The apostle Paul explains one reason why this is so: “When the Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what

the law requires...they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them" (Rom. 2:14–15 NRSV).

When a person, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, or what have you, is functioning properly and not repressing or ignoring his conscience—especially while dwelling in a cultural milieu that reflects the moral truths of God—he basically knows right from wrong, good from evil. However, to know or believe that something is right or wrong is very different from justifying that thing's being right or wrong. For example, one could know that flipping the light switch in the kitchen causes the light to go on and have absolutely no understanding of why this occurs or justification for how it really does so. By arguing for a belief in or knowledge of morality without providing a justification for morality, atheists confuse moral epistemology (moral knowledge) with moral ontology (foundational existence of morality). The real question at hand is this: What grounds the atheists' moral positions? What makes their moral views more than mere hunches, inklings, or subjective opinions?

We can get to the heart of the atheist's dilemma with a graphic but true example. Some years ago serial killer Ted Bundy, who confessed to over thirty murders, was interviewed about his gruesome activities. Consider the frightening words to his victim as he describes them:

Then I learned that all moral judgments are "value judgments," that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either "right" or "wrong"...I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable "value judgment" that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these "others"? Other human beings, with human rights? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more to you than a hog's life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as "moral" or "good" and others as "immoral" or "bad"? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me—after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and uninhibited self.⁵

While I am in no way accusing atheists in general of being Ted Bundy-like, the question I have for the atheist is simply this: *On what moral grounds can you provide a response to Bundy?* The atheistic options are limited. If morality has nothing to do with God, as atheists suppose, what does it have to do with? One response the atheist could offer is moral relativism, either personal or cultural. The personal moral relativist affirms that morality is an individual matter; you decide for yourself what is morally right and wrong. But on this view, what could one say to Bundy? Not much, other than "I don't like what you believe; it offends me how you brutalize women." For the personal relativist, however, who really cares (other than you) that you are offended by someone else's actions? On this view we each decide our own morality, and when my morality clashes with yours, there is no final arbiter other than perhaps that the stronger of us *forces* the other to agree. But this kind of Nietzschean "might makes right" ethic has horrific consequences, and one need only be reminded of the Nazi reign of terror to see it in full bloom. This is one reason why thoughtful atheists, such as Christopher Hitchens, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and others don't go there.⁶

But what about cultural moral relativism—the view that moral claims are the inventions of a given culture? Most thoughtful atheists don't tread here either, and this is one reason why: If right and wrong are cultural inventions, then it would always be wrong for someone within that culture to speak out against them. If culture defines right and wrong, then who are you to challenge it? For example, to speak out against slavery in Great Britain in the seventeenth century would have been morally wrong, for it was culturally acceptable. But surely it was a morally good thing for William Wilberforce and others to strive against the prevailing currents of their time and place to abolish the slave trade. For the cultural moral relativist, all moral reformers—Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Jr., even Jesus and Gandhi, to

name a few—would be in the wrong. But who would agree with this conclusion? Thankfully, most leading atheists agree that moral relativism is doomed.⁷

So what do they affirm? Here are three accounts that recent atheists have defended: (1) objective morality simply “is,” (2) morality is based on the selfish gene, and (3) morality is an evolutionary illusion.⁸ Let’s take a brief look at each of them.

OBJECTIVE MORALITY SIMPLY “IS”

One approach some atheists have taken is to affirm that there are objective moral values. After all, couldn’t a person *both* believe that there are objective moral values *and* believe that God does not exist? Is the God/morality connection a necessary one? While there are some atheists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Michael Ruse, J. L. Mackie, and others, who do hold that morality cannot be objective without the existence of a God, there are others who disagree. One such person is atheist philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. He puts the point concisely: “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....[Agreeing that some acts are objectively morally wrong] implies nothing about God, unless objective values depend on God. Why should we believe that they do?”⁹

But again the question arises: What grounds moral values? Sinnott-Armstrong answers this way: “What makes rape immoral is that rape harms *the victim* in terrible ways...It simply is [immoral].”¹⁰ As already noted, being moral and having a reasonable foundation or justification for being moral are two very different issues. To use the example mentioned above, I can wholeheartedly believe that the lights in the room will turn on after I flip the light switch without any understanding of electricity. I can still function well in society, going from place to place, flipping light switches and never even entertaining the idea that electricity is involved in the process of causing the lights to turn on (at least until the light switch breaks). If, however, someone asked me to provide a justification for the lights going on when the switch is flipped, and my reply was simply, “They just do,” this is no answer at all. The fact is, the flow of an electric charge (among other factors) grounds our explanation for the lights going on when the switch is turned on. This is what gives us an ontological basis for being “light-switch flippers.” The same applies to morality and God. One may well be able to deny God’s existence and still live a moral life, but there would be no fundamental basis, no objective moral grounding, for such a life. There would be no answer for Bundy.

MORALITY IS BASED ON THE SELFISH GENE

A second approach some atheists have taken is to attempt to ground morality in biological evolution. This is the approach Richard Dawkins takes. In his book, *The Selfish Gene*, he argues that “we are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.”¹¹ On his view, our moral aspirations and beliefs are predetermined posits of our genetic machinery, selfishly programmed to advance the gene pool. He grants that selfishness does not at first glance seem to be a good foundation for a moral theory, and in his later book, *The God Delusion*, he expounds on his position. He agrees that “the most obvious way in which genes ensure their own ‘selfish’ survival relative to other genes is by programming individual organisms to be selfish.”¹² Nevertheless, he argues, sometimes selfish genes “ensure their own selfish survival by influencing organisms to behave altruistically” or morally.¹³ This happens especially with an organism’s kin—brothers, sisters, and children. For “a gene that programs individual organisms to favour their genetic kin is statistically likely to benefit copies of itself.”¹⁴ But it also happens through another means, he argues: reciprocal altruism. This is the “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” idea, and it takes place not just with one’s close relatives, but also between various members of the species and even among members of different species.

Dawkins adds two further elements to his moral account: *reputation for generosity* (that is, one acts altruistically so others will form the belief that he is generous), and *buying authentic advertising* (that is, one acts morally in order to prove that he has more than another—that he is dominant and superior—and so can afford to be altruistic and moral).

So Dawkins provides four components of an attempt to provide justification for acting morally:¹⁵

1. *genetic kinship* (helping one's family members even at one's own expense);
2. *reciprocation* (beyond one's kin, the repayment of favors given where both sides benefit from the transaction);
3. *acquiring a reputation for generosity and kindness* (convincing others one is a moral altruist);
4. *buying authentic advertising* (strutting one's good deeds before others to impress them and infer one's superiority).

In essence, this is what Dawkins seems to be saying: our genes are preprogrammed selfishly to replicate themselves. Even so, individuals don't always act selfishly because our genes—working at the level of the *organism*—sometimes act in altruistic and moral ways, as this offers better gene propagation over the long haul.

Now, an obvious and glaring problem with this view is that it has virtually nothing to do with what we generally understand to be morality—with real right and wrong, good and evil.

On Dawkins's account, a person is kind to his neighbor *because* he's been preprogrammed by his genes to do so (at least some individuals have been so preprogrammed; others perhaps not), and he's been so programmed *because* acting this way confers evolutionary advantage. There is no objective right and wrong on this view. We simply call something "morally good" because our genes have, through eons of evolutionary struggle and survival, gotten us to believe that it is so.

But do Dawkins and other atheists who affirm this view really believe that rape, murder, and the like are not truly and universally evil, but are merely socially taboo for purposes of evolutionary advantage? Are good and evil just illusions conjured up by our genes to get us to behave in certain ways? This leads to the third view.

MORALITY AS AN EVOLUTIONARY ILLUSION

A third approach to an atheistic account of morality has been put forth by evolutionary ethicist and atheist philosopher of science Michael Ruse and his colleague Edward Wilson. Here is how they describe it:

*Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. Hence the basis of ethics does not lie in God's will—or in the metaphorical roots of evolution or any other part of the framework of the Universe. In an important sense, ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate. It is without external grounding. Ethics is produced by evolution but is not justified by it because, like Macbeth's dagger, it serves a powerful purpose without existing in substance....Unlike Macbeth's dagger, ethics is a shared illusion of the human race.*¹⁶

Morality, on this view, is something most of us believe in, follow, and practice, even though it doesn't exist in reality; it's just an illusion foisted on us via evolution so that we don't kill ourselves off as a species.

Such a view has dire consequences. Indeed the *Edinburgh Review*, one of the most respected British magazines of the nineteenth century, observed that if Darwin's evolutionary account of morality turns out to be right, "most earnest-minded men will be compelled to give up these motives by which they have attempted to live noble and virtuous lives, as founded on a mistake; our moral sense will turn out to be a mere developed instinct....If these views be true, a revolution in thought is imminent, which will shake society to its very foundations by destroying the sanctity of conscience and the religious sense."¹⁷

In order to have a consistent and reasonable objective moral stance—a moral view in which you can substantiate a claim that *this* is right and *that* is wrong, *this* is good and *that* is evil—you need to have an objective moral basis. As C. S. Lewis argued so well, there must be a universal moral law, or else moral disagreements would make no sense. But a universal moral law requires a universal Moral Law Giver—

an objective grounding for that moral law.¹⁸ None of these atheistic accounts provides us with one. No atheistic account has ever provided one. We can put the atheist's problem concisely:

1. If moral notions such as good and evil exist objectively, then there must be an objective foundation for their existence.
2. Atheism offers no objective basis for the existence of moral notions such as good and evil.
3. Therefore, for the atheist, moral notions such as good and evil must not objectively exist.

While it is good that Ruse and Wilson acknowledge this conclusion and don't try to smuggle in an objective morality in their atheistic worldview, I wonder if they have contemplated the moral ramifications of their position. On their worldview, we are merely evolved brutes whose very existence is derived from the naturalistic laws of evolution, including random mutation and survival of the fittest in which the strong survive and the weak die off (and sometimes the strong kill off the weak in their struggle for survival). We are simply the byproducts of a "nature red in tooth and claw," to quote the poet Tennyson. Is it any wonder that the atheistic regimes of Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, and Pol Pot—devoid as they were of any significant Christian influence—were responsible for the mass murder of over 100 million people in their quest for dominance, more lives destroyed than in all of the religious wars in the history of the human race? These regimes were not discordant with an atheistic basis of morality; they were consistent with it.

Christopher Hitchens and his ilk are wrong: Christian morality, rooted as it is in a transcendent, personal, omni-benevolent God, has truly been good for the world. Heaven help us if an atheistic morality, rooted in evolutionary theory or otherwise, should ever become the guiding moral force on a global scale.

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NOTES

1. Christopher Hitchens, "An Atheist Responds," www.washingtonpost.com, Saturday, July 14, 2007, A17.
2. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality without God?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22–23.
3. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 279.
4. For more on this, see Paul Copan, "The Moral Argument," in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad Meister (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 127–41.
5. A statement by Ted Bundy, paraphrased and rewritten by Harry V. Jaffa, *Homosexuality and the National Law* (Claremont Institute of the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1990), 3–4.
6. For more on the New Atheists' views of morality, see my essay, "God, Evil, and Morality," in *God Is Great, God Is Good: Why Believing in God Is Reasonable and Responsible*, ed. William Lane Craig and Chad Meister (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 107–18.
7. Sam Harris, for example, recognizes the inherent dangers of moral relativism and speaks out against it in his book, *The End of Faith* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 170–71. Unfortunately, he doesn't tell us what his moral theory is.
8. Utilitarianism is another approach that an atheist could take, but this is not commonly done—especially by the new atheists.
9. William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33.
10. *Ibid.*, 34.
11. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), preface to 1976 edition, v.
12. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 216.
13. *Ibid.*, 216.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Dawkins summarizes these components himself in *ibid.*, 219–20.
16. Michael Ruse and Edward O. Wilson, "The Evolution of Ethics," in *Philosophy of Biology*, ed. Michael Ruse (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 316. In Shakespeare's tragedy, when Macbeth is about to kill King Duncan, he has a hallucination of a dagger floating in the air.
17. As quoted in Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 327–28.
18. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), chaps. 1–5.