

The Will of God: Pure Fiction

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The theme of today's Symposium is phrased as a question, “God: Fact or Fiction?” I can answer that immediately. Of course “god” is a fiction. I am an atheist. I do not believe in the existence of any god or gods because I see no evidence whatsoever for such illusions. Yes, god is nothing but a fiction in which some people choose to believe. But not me. It is the obligation of those who say god exists to prove their extraordinary assertion. No proof of **non-existence** is required. Furthermore, belief in god is based on faith, and religious faith is an irrational conviction, asserted without proof. If there were any proof of the existence of god, then faith would not be necessary.

My work is done. I could end my talk right here. But I have much more to say.

Now many of you here today apparently believe in the existence of some kind of god, and I am probably not going to convince you otherwise in a talk lasting some twenty minutes. I have decided therefore, to approach the topic in an indirect way. I want to talk not so much about the reality or unreality of “god” but rather about the so-called “will” of god. In other words, I want to discuss the issue of morality. In particular I want to discuss the differences, if any, between the morality of those who believe in god and the morality of those who do not. That is, theistic morality versus atheistic morality.

You see, people who believe seriously in the existence of a god, especially those who are monotheists, that is, who believe in a single omnipotent god, creator and ruler of the universe, base their morality on what they believe their god wants, that is to say, on the will of that god. Thus, knowing what god wants—assuming that he, she or it exists—is key to knowing how to behave. Philosophers have an expression for this: they call it “**divine command theory**,” the theory that an action is morally good if and only if it is commanded by god. To be a good person is to follow god's commands.

So, theistic morality consists in obeying god's will, in doing what we think god wants. Atheistic morality, on the other hand, must have some other basis, because atheists do not believe in god. This has generally led to an odious prejudice against atheists, based on the idea that atheists have NO morality because—it is claimed—the only valid basis of morality is obedience to god. This prejudice is called “atheophobia” and it is completely false. It is simply not true that atheists are not as moral as religious believers.

In fact, there is strong evidence to suggest that atheists are at least as moral as everyone else and possibly even **more** moral than those who believe in god. A recent scientific article comparing children of religious and non-religious parents concluded that the non-religious are at least as altruistic and tolerant, and possibly more, so than the religious. Studies by Gregory S. Paul and sociologist Phil Zuckerman have shown a strong negative correlation between religiosity and societal health. That is, societies which are more secular are healthier as measured by crime rates, STD rates, poverty and other measures.

Let us take a closer look at so-called “divine command theory,” the idea that morality is what god commands. Some two and a half millenia ago, ancient Greek philosophers already pointed out a serious flaw with this idea. Of course the ancient Greeks had many gods, they were polytheistic, but whether you believe in one god or many, the flaw is the same. In the dialogue “Euthyphro,” Plato reports that Socrates asks a religious person a very simple but disturbing question: *Is the good good because the gods say so, or is it good in and of itself.* The answer, if any, is of little consequence because just the question alone says a lot. If the good is only good because the gods say it is, then goodness, i.e. morality, is just a caprice, that is, whatever the gods order. If the gods order you to murder or steal or lie, then that action becomes moral, by definition. This is hardly a desirable situation. On the other hand, if the good is good in and of itself, this implies that there exists some standard of goodness, some measure of morality, which is independent of the gods: in other words, the gods become irrelevant to the question of morality. The gods are no longer required.

Thus, Socrates' insightful question leads us to conclude that basing our morals on the will of god or gods means either that morality is arbitrary, or it has nothing to do with divinity.

There are other serious problems with the idea that morality means following god's will. Obviously that idea is tenable only if (1) one is first convinced of the existence of “god.” Then (2) one must establish that that “god” indeed has a “will,” that is, he, she or it can in fact want something. And finally, even if one is convinced of both the existence of “god” and the existence of god's will, (3) one must still have some way to access knowledge of that will, some way of knowing what god wants. All three of these issues pose serious problems.

First of all, there is no evidence for (1) the existence of god. The classic arguments for god (ontological, cosmological, teleological, and so on) traditionally put forward by various theologians have all been refuted countless times. The only argument which had any semblance of plausibility—the design argument, that we need a designer to explain complexity—was challenged even before Darwin and is now utterly discredited. We now know that evolution explains the complexity of biological diversity. No designer is required.

Furthermore, even without the explanation which evolution provides, the design hypothesis merely moves the problem to a new location. If a designer created our universe, then who or what created the designer? We would need a designer of the designer! The problem is not solved; rather it has been made more complicated! This leads to an infinite regression with no solution.

Every scientific advance, no matter how minor, increases our understanding of the world and constitutes yet another nail in the coffin of the god-hypothesis, because that hypothesis is only a gap-filler, and the gaps in our knowledge are getting smaller. Hypothesis (1) must be rejected.

But even if (1) were established, (2) concerning the “will” of god presents a different but equally serious problem. The god of each monotheism, such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam (listing them in historical order), is generally considered to be all-knowing, all-powerful, infinitely good, eternal, present everywhere and the creator of everything. How can an infinitely omniscient and omnipotent agent have any wants? Given that god knows what will happen, anywhere and everywhere, and given that he/she/it has the ability to do absolutely anything, any “desire” would be fulfilled instantly—no, way **before** the current instant: it would be

accomplished at the beginning of time (assuming that time has a beginning), because god knows the future completely.

The very idea of a “want” implies dissatisfaction with an existing situation, and that could not possibly happen. How can a perfect god be dissatisfied with anything which he/she/it created? Thus, the concept of willing anything is incompatible with the qualities which are normally attributed to god. Furthermore, why would such a being even care about those minuscule little creatures we call humans – us! – located on speck of dust we call Earth located in an unremarkable galaxy in an enormous universe? After all, our solar system is only one of hundreds of billions in our galaxy. Our galaxy the Milky Way is only one of some 100,000 galaxies in our local supercluster of galaxies. And our local supercluster, named Laniakea, is only one of millions in the observable universe. I think the ruler of the universe might be too busy to care about what you ate for lunch.

As if that were not bad enough, point (3) is similarly intractable. Even if we simply assume that god exists and has a will, how can we know what god wants? What is the line of communication, the source of information? In the three major monotheisms, that source is provided by revelation as implemented in writings which believers consider to be holy scriptures. I am sorry, but as a source of information, revelation is about as reliable as dreams. Someone’s claim that god has revealed a message to them tells us nothing about anything other than the mental state of the person making the claim. As for scriptures, they were written thousands of years ago – some a little more recently – by human beings, they are replete with contradictions (even within a single religious tradition) and are essentially pious legends of greater or lesser literary value. They give us a glimpse of the history, practices and culture of some ancient societies, but little beyond that. We certainly have no credible guarantee that their authors have any reliable knowledge to impart to us about the will of god.

Summing up, in order to ascertain the will of god we have a three-step process – the existence of god, the existence of god’s will, and knowledge of god’s will – each step presenting insurmountable difficulties. The bottom line is this: nobody has a clue what god wants. **I, an atheist, know as much about the will of god as does any pope, imam, rabbi, priest or pastor, and I know absolutely nothing about the will of god.** Which is exactly what everyone else knows, regardless of what they claim. No-one knows.

Since the will of god is unknowable, theistic morality is utterly arbitrary. Anyone can simply state whatever ideas come into his or her head – for example, “God forbids eating red fruits on Tuesdays” or “I must wear this tin-foil hat at all times or God will be angry with me” – and those ideas are as dependable a reflection of the will of god as the tenets of any religion. The famous statement “Without God, everything is permitted,” attributed to a character in a Dostoyevsky novel, turns out to be backwards. In reality, if morality is based on god, then anything can be permitted – or forbidden – arbitrarily and with no way of resolving disagreements, because there is no way to test any assertion about what god wants and no way to decide among competing assertions.

This leads us to the problem of religious authority. The arbitrariness of theistic morality makes it dangerous. Religious authorities may sometimes promote positive behaviour, but that does not solve the problem. If believers treat others in a friendly manner because they have been told

that that is what god commands, then they are just as capable of behaving with hostility if someone convinces them that god so commands – or if they lose their faith.

Anyone in a position of authority who pretends to have knowledge of the will of god and to speak for god, and succeeds in convincing others of this, can easily manipulate and exploit those others. This makes religious authorities very dangerous, and the credulous who believe them very vulnerable.

Summing up, we see that divine command theory based on the will of god is full of holes. Theistic morality is completely vacuous. Even if one insists on believing in god, we have no reliable way of knowing what he, she or it wants, if indeed he/she/it wants anything. So we are on our own. The verdict is in: we cannot rely on “god.”

And this is where atheistic morality comes in. We atheists take as our starting point the verdict that I just stated: that we human beings are alone, with no “god” to guide or command us. Well not completely alone. We share a small and beautiful planet with many other animal species. I say other, because we humans are animals too, a little more evolved than most, and with a capacity for rational reasoning that others lack. So if we do not get our morals from “god,” where do we get them?

We get them from evolution. Human beings are social animals. Social interactions and mutually beneficial relationships are a winning survival strategy used by humans as well as many other species. We live in societies where we depend very much on each another for survival. Hermits – people who isolate themselves completely from others – may exist, but they are very rare. We need each other for our physical survival. We need each other for our physical, mental and emotional health. To be totally deprived of interaction with other human beings is one of the worst possible punishments. As social animals we have evolved ways to cooperate – in finding or growing food, in building and maintaining shelter, in caring for each other, in raising our young, in dealing with sickness and hardship, in countless other activities.

Morality evolves. Compassion, altruism, trust, friendship, sharing, cooperation, kindness, deference, all the well known virtues are part of our catalogue of possible behaviours and have evolved out of necessity, because they help us to survive, in society, with our fellow humans. Negative behaviours have also evolved, because they too are sometimes necessary: hostility, antipathy, mistrust and so on are sometimes necessary for defence and security.

Our evolution is first and foremost biological. And our species is not the only one. There are many other social species besides us. You can probably think of many examples of altruistic behaviour by non-human animals, for example dogs cooperating with each other or with humans, birds nurturing their chicks, chimpanzees grooming each other. On YouTube you can find any number of striking videos highlighting animal behaviour which looks remarkably human to us: dogs trying to make friends with cats, sometimes even successfully, a bear helping a drowning bird, an ostrich doing a sort of happy dance when it succeeds in finding a ball a human has just thrown, a cat who communicates with its deaf master by imitating his hand gestures. Of course we can find plenty of examples of destructive and hostile behaviour among animals too, just as we find it among humans.

Some people seem to get upset by this sort of comparison with other animals, by the recognition

that we, homo sapiens, constitute an animal species ourselves. I disagree completely. I think that our belonging to the animal kingdom – the fact that we and all other animals have common ancestors if we go back far enough, often very far back – to be an incredibly rich heritage. It connects us with other animals in a very real way. Their behaviour often appears somewhat human to us because we are animals too. They are our distant cousins.

Our evolution is also cultural, and cultural evolution is much more rapid than biological evolution. It may take millions of years for a new species to evolve from a previous one. But a new cultural norm may evolve in a much briefer time – in millenia, or centuries or even decades – and very different cultural norms may evolve in different communities of the same species. Yet despite that diversity, there are common moral principles that we all recognize, regardless of our background, regardless of our religion or lack of religion.

We atheists base our morality on the virtues with which we are all familiar, which are part of our common evolved heritage. We atheists view those virtues through the lens of real-world considerations. We know that we only have this one life to live, so we value it supremely. We know that we will not get another chance, no second life after death, no heaven to reward us or hell to punish us. It all happens here and now, in this life. Happiness and enjoyment are to be sought here and now, in this life. Justice must be built by us humans here and now, because we no “god” will mete our rewards and punishments in some fictional afterlife.

Among the finest expressions of atheist morality are the various human rights codes which have evolved in recent human history. They are not perfect, they are not all identical, they continue to evolve, but the best of them have much in common: a desire for equality of opportunity among humans, a desire for gender equality, for freedom of conscience and expression, for an end to racial discrimination, homophobia and other social ills, and so on.

Religions themselves are products of cultural evolution, which is why there is such a wide diversity of religions. Indeed, there would be even more if some did not have the dubious habit of eradicating their competitors whenever possible. Many previously existing religions have been totally or greatly erased from history by the conquering steamroller of intolerant monotheisms such as Christianity and Islam.

Let us return to discussing those two religions. In particular let's take a look at the so-called “holy” books. What kinds of moral prescriptions do these books contain?

The bible contains a wide variety of moral commands. For example, Luke 6:31 instructs us to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This wise counsel is the famous Golden Rule and can be found in many traditions, including non-religious ones. On the other hand, Luke 14:26 states that “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple.” This certainly does not sound like great advice. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus states, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” This apparently means that any prescription in the law in the Old Testament must continue to be obeyed, and that includes some pretty nasty things, such as the death penalty for apostasy, calls for genocide against certain peoples and a ban on clothing containing interwoven wool and linen.

This small sampling of biblical rules illustrates that any reasonable person could not possibly obey everything in the bible. They might indeed choose to follow the Golden Rule, but probably not the others. Indeed, only a fanatical fundamentalist totally devoid of reason or scruples would even consider the death penalty for apostasy, that is, for changing one's religion. In other words, it is necessary to pick and choose among the prescriptions one can find in the bible. Thus, the bible is not a reference for morality. We must use some other criteria, independent of the bible, in order to decide which prescriptions to follow and which to ignore.

Let us turn now to the quran. Surah 2 verse 256 is famous and includes the phrase that "there is no compulsion in religion." This certainly sounds like a wise statement indicating respect for freedom of conscience. On the other hand, surah 3 verse 56 condemns non-believers, "As to those who reject faith, I will punish them with terrible agony in this world and in the Hereafter, nor will they have anyone to help." As for the rights of women, Surah 2 verse 282 states, "call to witness from among your men two witnesses; but if there are not two men, then one man and two women," thus indicating that the testimony of a woman is worth only half the testimony of a man.

Again, this sampling is very small, but we find in the quran both respect for and rejection of freedom of religion. And we find gender inequality. So once again, no reasonable person who respects human rights could possibly accept a literal interpretation of everything in the quran. As with the bible it is necessary to be selective. Thus, the quran is not a reference for morality. We must use some other moral criteria, independent of the quran.

And this is the point I wish to stress. Just as Socrates' insightful question about the nature of goodness showed that we must locate our moral compass somewhere other than in the gods if we want to avoid arbitrariness, a reading of the so-called sacred scriptures of Christianity and Islam leads us to the same conclusion: we must look elsewhere for consistent moral principles. Fortunately, that is what modern religious believers do in practice.

Only the most backward and dangerous fundamentalists and extremists would accept the entire bible or the entire quran as the literal absolute word of god and expression of his will. In fact, scriptural literalism is undoubtedly one of the worst possible strategies for building moral systems. All reasonable believers know that, as moral guidebooks, scripture must be used metaphorically and selectively if it is to be used at all.

The moral principles that both atheists and modern believers use, principles which are independent of any god or gods, are those which we human beings have evolved over millions of years of biological evolution and thousands of years of cultural evolution. Principles of reason, honesty, respect for other human beings, fairness, equality before the law, gender equality, freedom of conscience and expression, critical inquiry, maximizing quality of life for all, respect for scientific rigour, and so on. These principles are our common heritage, shared by people of good will—of all faiths and of none.

Thank you.