

Can atheists develop a moral code that isn't simply subjective personal opinion?

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The Moral Argument

- P1 If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist
- P2 Objective moral values do exist
- C Therefore God exists

(Used in various debates and books by Dr. William Lane Craig)

Definitions

Moral relativism: The idea that the existence of transcendent, objective, moral law is a fiction (or the view that ideas of right and wrong are more like ice cream than insulin).

Moral objectivism: The view that moral truths exist whether we believe in them or not (or that ideas of right and wrong are more like insulin than ice cream).

Moral epistemology: Knowledge of moral values. How do we *know* what is moral or immoral?

Moral ontology: Existence of moral values. Do moral values really *exist*, or are they human constructs?

To be clear

- ▶ Some people get upset when the moral argument is presented
- ▶ This may be because they think the Christian (or theist) is saying “atheists are immoral’ or “atheists cannot live a moral life”
- ▶ This is certainly *not* what the argument is claiming
- ▶ The argument is speaking to (i) the ontology of moral values (P1), and (ii) the epistemology of human moral knowledge (P2)

Richard Dawkins

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. **The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.**

– River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life, 1995

Michael Ruse and E. O. Wilson

The time has come to take seriously the fact that we humans are modified monkeys, not the favored Creation of a Benevolent God on the Sixth Day..... As evolutionists, we see that no justification of the traditional kind is possible. 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..... 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 illusory inasmuch as it persuades us that it has an objective reference.** This is the crux of the biological position. Once it is grasped, everything falls into place.

– Religion and the Natural Sciences, 1991.

A couple more quotes

Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might as well just try to imagine a country where two plus two equals five.

– C. S. Lewis

The man who says it is morally acceptable to rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says $2+2=5$.

– Michael Ruse

Question: If Michael Ruse believes that ethics is illusory (previous slide) then can he logically assert that rape is wrong? Why or why not?

Thanks

Thanks to Matthew Willey for his kind invitation to discuss these slides with Skeptics in the Pub.