

## The Second Premise of the Moral Argument

We've been talking about the moral argument for God's existence. I've completed my defense of the first premise of that argument that if God does not exist (that is to say, if atheism is true), then objective moral values and duties do not exist.

Today we want to move to the second premise of that argument, that objective moral values and duties do exist. I initially thought that this would be the weak and more controversial premise in the argument. In my debates with atheistic philosophers, however, I find that virtually nobody denies this premise. Virtually everyone affirms that some objective moral values and duties do in fact exist. In fact, it might surprise you to learn that actual surveys taken on university campuses indicate that professors are more likely to believe in the objectivity of moral values than students, and that of the faculty, philosophy professors are more likely to believe in objective moral values and duties than professors in other disciplines!

Why is that? Philosophers who reflect upon our moral experience would say that just as I justifiably believe that there is a world of physical objects around me that I am sensing unless I have some overriding reason to distrust my senses, similarly, in the absence of some overriding reason to distrust my moral experience I should also accept what my moral experience tells me, namely, that some things, at least, are objectively good or evil, right or wrong.

Notice that this doesn't require that our moral experience is infallible in telling us which moral values and duties are objective. Neither are our five senses infallible. The stick that is in the jar of water looks bent. The highway appears to have water on it in the

distance on a hot day. Our senses can mislead us. Nevertheless unless we have some sort of overriding reason to distrust our five senses, we generally believe what they tell us – that there is a world of physical objects around me which I perceive. In exactly the same way we may grow in moral knowledge as we discern certain things to be right or wrong that we didn't see before. I think that in the history of mankind there has been moral progress. But that presupposes that objective moral values and duties do exist which we fallibly and defeasibly apprehend. In the absence of some sort of overriding defeater or reason to doubt our moral experience we should believe that there are objectively existing moral values and duties.

I think that most of us recognize this. Most of us would agree that in moral experience we apprehend a realm of moral values and duties that impose themselves on us as objectively binding and true. For example, several years ago I was speaking on a Canadian university campus, and I noticed a poster on the wall put up by the Sexual Assault & Information Center. It read as follows: "Sexual assault: No One Has the Right to Abuse a Child, Woman, or Man." I think most of us would recognize that that statement is true. Sexual abuse of another person (actions like rape or child abuse) aren't just socially unacceptable behavior—they're moral abominations. Some things, at least, are really wrong. By the same token, love, generosity, and self-sacrifice are really good. People who fail to see this are just morally handicapped. They are like the person who is vision-impaired and can't see clearly the objects around him. There is no reason to let their impairment cause us to call into doubt what we clearly perceive.

I've found that although many students give lip-service to relativism, 95% of them can be very quickly convinced that some moral values and duties do objectively exist. All you have to do is produce a few illustrations, especially those that are tailored to the persons you're talking to, and let them decide for themselves. For example, you can ask them what they think of the Hindu practice called suttee (which was the practice of taking a widow and burning her alive on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband) or what they think of the ancient Chinese custom of tightly binding the feet of female babies, thereby crippling them for life, because they wanted to make them resemble lotus-blossoms. You can especially make this point effectively by appealing to examples of atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion. Ask them what they think of the Crusades or the Inquisition. Ask them if they think that it's all right for Catholic priests to sexually abuse little boys and then for the Church to try to cover it up by moving the priest to another diocese. If you're dealing with someone who is honest and not just trying to have an argument, I can guarantee you that almost every time that person will agree that there are some objective moral values and duties.

Of course sometimes you may encounter hardliners who will just dig in their heels. But usually their position is seen to be so extreme that other people are just repulsed by it. For example, many years ago I attended a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature which featured a panel discussion on "Biblical Authority and Homosexuality." All of the panelists endorsed the legitimacy of the homosexual lifestyle. One panelist dismissed the biblical prohibitions against this activity on the grounds that they reflect the cultural context in which they were written. Since this is the

case for everything that Scripture says – it wasn't written in a vacuum after all – he concluded that, “There are no timeless, normative moral truths in Scripture.” In the discussion from the floor, I pointed out that such a view leads to socio-cultural relativism which makes it impossible to condemn a society whose moral values permit the abuse and the persecution of homosexuals. Who is to say that that society's values are wrong? He responded with a fog of theological double-talk, and then claimed that there is no place outside of Scripture either where we can find timeless moral values. I responded, “But that just *is* what we mean by moral relativism. In fact, on your view there is really no content to the notion of the goodness of God. He might as well be dead. And Friedrich Nietzsche recognized that if God is dead that leads immediately to nihilism.” At that point one of the other panelists jumped in with the knock-down refutation, “Well, if you are going to get pejorative, we might as well not talk about it!” So I sat down. But the point wasn't lost on the audience. The next man who stood to his feet said, “Wait a minute. I am rather confused. I am a pastor, and people are always coming to me, asking if they have done something wrong and whether they need forgiveness. For example, isn't it always wrong to abuse a child?” I couldn't believe the panelist's response to this pastor's question. She said, “What counts as abuse differs from society to society. So we can't really use the word ‘abuse’ without tying it to a historical context.” Well, the pastor was insistent. He said, “You call it whatever you like, but child abuse is damaging to children. Isn't it always wrong to damage children?” And she still wouldn't admit it! This sort of hardness of heart ultimately backfires, I think, on the moral

relativist and exposes in the minds of most people the bankruptcy of such a worldview.

So I think that on the basis of our moral experience we are justified in affirming a realm of objective moral values in the same way that on the basis of our sense experience we are justified in affirming a world of physical objects around us.

Now the question arises: Do we have some overriding reason to distrust our moral experience, to think that we are the victims of some gigantic illusion?

Some people have claimed that the socio-biological account of the origins of morality undermines our moral experience. Remember, according to that account, our moral beliefs have been ingrained into us by biological evolution and social conditioning. Does that give us reason to distrust our moral experience that there are objective moral values and duties?

The socio-biological account clearly does nothing to undermine the *truth* of our moral beliefs. For the truth of a belief is independent of how you came to hold that belief. In fact, this objection seems to be a textbook example of what is called the genetic fallacy, which is trying to invalidate a person's point of view by showing how that person came to hold that point of view. For example, someone might try to indict your belief that representative democracy is the best form of government by saying the reason you believe that is because you were born in the United States. But if you had been born in Saudi Arabia, you would have held a different belief. That is the genetic fallacy – trying to invalidate the truth of a belief by showing how the person came to hold it.

How you came to hold the belief has no effect on its truth. You may have acquired your moral beliefs through a fortune cookie or through reading tea leaves, but they could still happen to be true. In particular, if God exists, then objective moral values and duties do exist regardless of how we come to learn about them. The socio-biological account at best proves that our perception of moral values and duties has evolved. But if moral values and duties are gradually discovered, rather than invented, then our gradual and fallible apprehension of the moral realm no more undermines the objectivity of that realm than our gradual, fallible apprehension of the physical realm undermines the objectivity of the physical world.

Taken as an objection to the truth of premise (2), this objection simply commits the genetic fallacy.

But perhaps the socio-biological objection is not intended to undermine the *truth* of our moral beliefs, but rather our *justification* for holding such beliefs. If your moral beliefs were based on reading tea leaves, they might accidentally turn out to be true, but you wouldn't have any justification for thinking that they were true. So you wouldn't know that they were true.

Similarly, the objection here could be that if our moral beliefs have been produced by evolution, then we can't have any confidence in the truth of those beliefs. Why not? Because evolution aims merely at survival, not at truth. Our moral beliefs are selected for their survival value. The fittest are the ones that survive. If having moral beliefs will be conducive to the perpetuation of your species, then these moral beliefs will be selected for in the process of evolution. And since evolution is aiming merely at survivability, not truth, we

can't trust our moral experience. So we can't know that premise (2) of the argument is true. The objection is aimed not at the truth of premise (2) but at your justification for believing premise (2).

My claim is that we are justified in believing premise (2) on the ground of our moral experience unless and until we have some overriding defeater of that experience, just as we are justified in believing that there is a world of physical objects around us on the ground of our sense experience unless and until we have an overriding defeater of that experience. Such a defeater would have to show not merely that our moral experience is fallible or defeasible, but that it is utterly unreliable – that we may apprehend no objective moral values and duties whatsoever.

Our moral experience is so powerful, however, that such a defeater would have to be incredibly powerful in order to overcome our moral experience, just as our sense experience is so powerful that a defeater of my belief in the world of physical objects I perceive would have to be incredibly powerful in order for me to believe that I might be a brain in a vat of chemicals or a body lying in the Matrix. But as Louise Antony, an atheist philosopher, put it in our debate on the foundations of moral values, any argument for moral skepticism will be based on premises which are less obvious than the existence of objective moral values and duties themselves. That is to say, any argument for moral skepticism will rely upon premises which are less obvious than premise (2) of the moral argument, and therefore could never be justified.

So what is, then, this allegedly super-powerful defeater of premise (2) that shows that my moral experience is utterly untrustworthy? Is it just that our moral beliefs are the result of evolutionary

development, and therefore they are aimed at survival, not at truth? Is that the whole objection? If that is it, we need to ask ourselves what is the evidence for that? In fact, there is no compelling evidence that our moral beliefs are the products of biological evolution.

In a complex survey of literature on this topic by the biologist Jeffrey Schloss, Schloss examines contemporary work on evolutionary theories of morality and he reports, “not only do we lack currently a fully adequate evolutionary account of morality, but the manifold accounts we do have are also disparate and are often represented by prominent exegetes as having resolved issues that are still in dispute.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, Schloss is saying that these accounts offered by evolutionary psychology are mutually contradictory and that the proponents of these theories are making claims that in fact they cannot support. In personal correspondence, Schloss elaborated,

the evolutionary debunking argument . . . assumes that moral beliefs are in fact adequately explained by natural selection. . . . there is little question that they are not. Dispositions toward certain behaviors . . . (reciprocity, parental care, etc.) do have fairly compelling evolutionary explanations. But . . . we don’t actually have a plausible evolutionary proposal for the moral beliefs associated with these behaviors. I’ve done a fairly recent review of the

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1 Jeffrey P. Schloss, “Darwinian Explanations of Morality: Accounting for the Normal but not the Normative,” in Hilary Putnam, Susan Nieman, and Jeffrey Schloss, eds., *Understanding Moral Sentiments: Darwinian Perspectives?* (Piscataway, N. J.: Transaction Publishers, 2014), p. 83.



literature. . . , and I can't find any coherent account for moral beliefs or even normative intuitions.<sup>2</sup>

Yet how easily we allow the evolutionary debunker to get away with mere hand-waving and generalizations in trying to undermine the veridicality of our moral experience. The powerful defeater of our moral experience simply does not exist.

Secondly, moreover, the assertion that because our moral beliefs have evolved, they are aimed at survival, not at truth, presupposes atheism. For if God exists, then plausibly our moral beliefs, though evolved, will be generally reliable. God would want us to hold generally reliable moral beliefs. The defeater presupposes that naturalism is true. That begs the question in favor of atheism. Only on the assumption that atheism is true is it the case that our moral beliefs are aimed at survival rather than at truth. It is actually the debunker of our moral experience who has the burden of proof here if he is to give a sufficiently powerful defeater of our moral experience. He needs to prove that God does not exist. He claims that our beliefs are not aimed at truth if they are evolved. But if God exists, that is obviously not the case. You have to presuppose atheism in order for this objection to get off the ground, and that is question-begging.

Finally, the objection turns out to be self-defeating. On atheism and naturalism, all of our beliefs, not just our moral beliefs, are the product of evolution and social conditioning. Thus, the evolutionary account would lead to skepticism about knowledge in general. But this is self-defeating because then we should be skeptical of the evolutionary account itself, since it, too, is the

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2 Jeffrey Schloss to WmLC, Sept 17, 22, 2015.

product of evolution and social conditioning! Therefore the objection undermines itself. This is in a nutshell Alvin Plantinga's celebrated Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism. Naturalism has a built-in defeater. If our beliefs are aimed at survival rather than truth, then the naturalist can have no confidence in the truth of naturalism. Therefore this objection would undermine not only our moral beliefs but all of our beliefs including the belief in naturalism.

It seems to me that given the warrant for premise (2) provided by our moral experience, we are justified in thinking that objective moral values and duties exist.

### Conclusion

Let's draw our conclusion. From the two premises of the argument it follows that God exists. The moral argument complements the contingency and cosmological and mathematical and teleological arguments by telling us about the moral nature of the Creator and Designer of the universe. It gives us a personal, necessarily existent being who is not only perfectly good but whose nature is the standard of goodness and whose commands constitute our moral duties. So it really rounds out the case for theism.