

Description: Is belief in God the only rational foundation for objective morality? Part 3: Response to those who deny morality to be objective, conflate moral epistemology with moral ontology, conflate absolute morality with objective morality and to those who maintain morality to be relative to cultural norms.

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What if they reject objective morality?

As a last resort some atheists try to avoid intellectual embarrassment by replying to the above conclusion by denying that morality is objective. Fair enough. I agree. If someone does not accept the axiom that morals are objective, then the argument does not work. But that is a double-edged sword. The minute the atheist denies the objectivity of any moral claim, he has no right to point the finger at religion, or more specifically Islam, in any objective way. He cannot even point the finger at the KKK, ISIS or even the dictatorship of North Korea! The irony here is that this is exactly what many atheists do. They make moral judgments that have an objective flavour to them. They should put a caveat to all of their moral judgments and simply say, "This is my subjective view." Doing that renders their moral disagreements or outrage pointless. However, deep down inside, most sane human beings do not deny the objectivity of some basic morals, such as murder, theft and abuse.



Misunderstanding the argument

Some atheists, and even some academics, misunderstand the argument by conflating moral epistemology with moral ontology. The argument I have presented so far is not concerned with how we get to know what is good, which refers to moral epistemology"it directs its attention to where morals come from and their nature, which refers to moral ontology. God's commands provide the ontological foundation for morals to be objective. How we get to know what these morals are is a matter of moral epistemology.

The argument presented in this essay does not concern moral *epistemology*. This

argument is about moral *ontology*, which refers to the foundations and nature of morality. The argument in its simplest form goes something like this: if something is good, is it objectively good? If it is objectively good, then it necessitates God's existence, as He is the only foundation for objective good. The argument does not ask how we know when something is good.

Absolute vs. objective

A valid concern that can be raised by the keen and aspiring theologian is that within Islamic theological discourse (and virtually all of the justice systems in the world), certain situations exist where killing (such as defending one's self and family) becomes morally permissible. Therefore, nothing is objectively evil. This is an interesting reflection, but it conflates absolute morality with objective morality; they are very different. Absolute morality entails that a moral act is good or bad regardless of the given situation. For example, someone who believes killing is absolutely wrong would believe killing is wrong even in self-defence. Objective morality, however, readily acknowledges the context-sensitivity of some moral facts. An objective moral fact might be *killing human beings without appropriate justification is wrong*. The context-sensitive nature of this moral claim includes an important caveat that the killing must also be unjustified. For instance, killing another human being might be seen as morally justified, if the person who was killed had been indiscriminately shooting children at a local school. The argument I have presented does not involve absolute notions of morality.

A note on ethical relativism

An ethical relativist, who maintains that morality is relative to cultural norms, would argue that the discussion on absolute and objective morality proves that morals are not objective, and that they are relative. Those who maintain that morals are objective would argue that what people believe or feel or do is irrelevant, and it does not take a whit away from objective moral truths (and that is precisely the definition of objectivity). Ethical relativism is bankrupt from this perspective because it points to cultural practices to refute what is objectively true. This is doomed to failure because the definition of objective morality is that morals are independent of feelings, beliefs and cultural practices, so to use them as a means to deny the objectivity of morals is meaningless.

This essay has some striking implications for the atheist. If atheists consider some morals to be objective, they have to either admit that God exists "as He is the only rational foundation for the existence of objective morality" or they have to provide a compelling alternative. If they cannot, they have to ignore their innate disposition that recognises objective good and evil, and reject the notion of objective morals altogether. Once they do that, all their finger-pointing and moral judgements against Islam will be diminished to the level of personal subjectivity. The argument from the stance of morality truly makes sense of the Islamic conception of the Divine. God is perfectly good and wise, and His commands do not contradict His perfect nature. Therefore His commands are perfectly good. Knowing this about God gives us a foundation for objective morals. In other words, knowing God is knowing good.

Last updated 10 April 2017. Taken and adapted from my book "The Divine Reality: God, Islam & The Mirage of Atheism". You can purchase the book [here](#).

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