

# Know God, Know Good: God & Objective Morality (part 1 of 3)

**Description:** Is belief in God the only rational foundation for objective morality? Part 1: Defining 'objective', why morals are objective, and the implications of adopting an atheist worldview.

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Imagine you have come back from a busy day and you switch on the television. You skim through some of the channels. Shocked by a headline, you stop at a popular international news channel. Sure enough, the headline is truly appalling: *Man Beheads Five-Year-Old Boy*.



Now let me ask you a question. Was what this man did morally wrong? You, like the majority of decent human beings, say yes. Now answer *this* question: is it *objectively* morally wrong? Again, like most, you say yes.

However, here's a final question: *why is it objective?*

This is where it gets tricky.

## Defining 'objective'

In order to answer this question, the best place to start is with the word 'objective'. A basic definition is that the term refers to considering or representing facts without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions. In the case of morals, objective means that morality is not dependent or based on one's mind or personal feelings. In this sense, it is 'outside' of one's personal limited faculties. Mathematical truths ( $1+1=2$ ) or scientific truths, like the Earth going round the Sun, are true regardless what we feel about them. Therefore, if these morals are 'outside' ourselves, they have to be grounded. In other words, they need a foundation. If objective morals do not depend on our limited faculties, then answers to the following questions are required: *Where did they come from? What are their nature?* In order to answer these questions a rational foundation is required. This will explain their objective nature and provide a rationale of where they came from. These questions refer to an area in philosophy known as moral ontology.

Another way of describing objective moral truths is that they transcend human subjectivity. For instance, the fact that killing a five-year-old is morally wrong will always be true, even if the whole world were to agree that killing a young child is morally right. Not only do we recognise that some morals are objective, they also provide us with a sense of moral obligation or duty. In other words, there are some things that we ought to do and other things that we ought not to do. We have moral duties and obligations, and these seem to come from outside the limited self. Professor Ian Markham explains that our moral language denotes something above and beyond ourselves: "Embedded in the word 'ought' is the sense of a moral fact transcending our life and world... The underlying character of moral language implies something universal and external."[\[1\]](#)

## Back to the question

Coming back to the tricky question I raised earlier, let us try to answer it: *why is it objective?* The answer is simple. The morals that we consider to be objective are so because God exists.[\[2\]](#) Before I explain this further, I want to make sure that this has nothing to do with the beliefs that someone has. I am not saying "you cannot be an atheist and display moral or good behaviour" or "you have to believe in God to have moral traits such as defending the innocent or feeding the poor" or "just by being a believer you will behave well." What I am saying is that if God does not exist, then there are no objective moral truths. Sure, we can act as if moral truths are objective, and many atheists throughout history have demonstrated admirable moral fortitude without believing morality requires a Divine basis. However, what I'm arguing is that, with God out of the picture, these moral values mean nothing more than social conventions. Therefore, moral truths such as "murdering innocent people for entertainment is wrong" and "defending the innocent is good", for example, are merely social conventions without God, just like saying it is wrong to pass wind in public. This conclusion is based on the fact that God is the only rational foundation for objective morals. No other concept adequately provides such a foundation.

God provides this foundation because He is external to the universe and transcends human subjectivity. Professor Ian Markham similarly explains, "God explains the mysterious ought pressing down our lives; and God explains the universal nature of the moral claim. As God is outside the world, God the creator can be both external and make universal commands."[\[3\]](#)

In Islam, God is believed to be a Being of maximal perfection. He is maximally knowledgeable, powerful and good. Perfect goodness is God's essential nature, one of His names is *Al-Barr*, which means the source of all goodness. When God makes a moral command, it is a derivative of His will, and His will does not contradict His nature. Therefore, what God commands is good because He is good, and He defines what good is:

**"Say, 'Indeed, God does not order immorality.'" (Quran 7:28)**

Interestingly, some atheists, believing that God cannot exist under any circumstance, have understood that in absence of the Divine, there are no objective morals. The influential atheist philosopher J. L. Mackie in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, reflects

this position: "There are no objective values... The claim that values are not objective... is meant to include not only moral goodness, which might be most naturally equated with moral value, but also other things that could be more loosely called moral values or disvalues"rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an action's being rotten and contemptible, and so on."[\[4\]](#) Aside from being counter-intuitive, and not representing a mainstream atheist position, Mackie seems to have understood the implications of adopting an atheist worldview. If there's no God, there is no objective good.

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Endnotes:

[\[1\]](#) Markham, I. S. (2010) *Against Atheism: Why Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris are Fundamentally Wrong*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, p. 34.

[\[2\]](#) The arguments presented in this essay, including some of the ideas, have been inspired by and adapted from Craig, W. L. *Can We Be Good Without God?* Available at: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/can-we-be-good-without-god> [Accessed: 24thOctober 2016]; Craig, W. L. (2008) *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, pp. 172-183.

[\[3\]](#) Ibid.

[\[4\]](#) Mackie, J. L. (1990) *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin. 1990, p. 15.

## Know God, Know Good: God & Objective Morality (part 2 of 3)

**Description:** Is belief in God the only rational foundation for objective morality? Part 2: Response to Euthyphro's dilemma and some alternative explanations given by atheists for moral objectivity.

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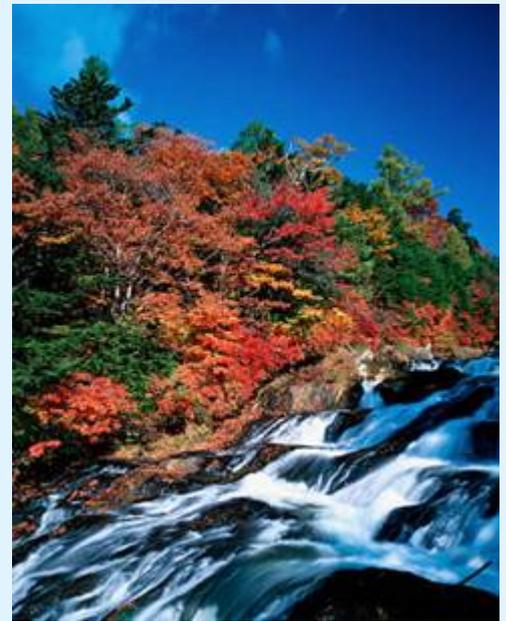
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## Euthyphro's dilemma

Many atheists respond to the above argument from morality by citing Plato's dilemma or Euthyphro's dilemma. It goes like this: *Is something morally good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is morally good?*



This dilemma poses a problem for theists who believe in an All-Powerful God because it requires them to believe in one of two things: either morality is defined by God's commands or morality is external to His commands. If morality is based on God's commands, what is good or evil is arbitrary. If this is the case, there is nothing we as humans should necessarily recognise as objectively evil. This would imply that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with, say, killing innocent children "just that God puts the 'evil' label on it arbitrarily. The other horn of the dilemma implies that some sort of a moral standard is completely outside and independent of God's essence and nature, and even God is obligated to live by this standard. However, that would be clearly undesirable for the theist, since it would make him admit that God is not All-Powerful or independent after all; rather, He has to rely on a standard external to Himself.

This intuitively sounds like a valid contention. However, a little reflection exposes it as a false dilemma. The reason is due to a third possibility: God is good. Professor of Philosophy Shabbir Akhtar, in his book *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind*, explains:

"There is a third alternative: a morally stable God of the kind found in scripture, a supreme being who would not arbitrarily change his mind about the goodness of compassion and the evil of sexual misconduct. Such a God always commands good because his character and nature are good."[\[1\]](#)

What Professor Akhtar is saying is that there is indeed a moral standard, but unlike what the second horn of the dilemma suggests, it is not external to God. Rather, it follows necessarily from God's nature. As previously discussed, Muslims, and theists in general, believe that God is necessarily and perfectly good. As such, His nature contains within it the perfect, non-arbitrary, moral standard. This means that an individual's actions "for example, the killing of innocents" is not arbitrarily bad, because it follows from an objective, necessary, moral standard. On the other hand, it does not mean God is somehow subservient to this standard because it is contained in His essence. It defines His nature; it is not in any way external to Him.

An atheist's natural response would be "You must know what good is to define God as

good, and therefore you haven't solved the problem". The simple reply would be that God defines what good is. He is the only Being worthy of worship because He is the most perfect and moral Being. The Qur'an affirms these points:

**"And your god is one God. There is no deity [worthy of worship] except Him, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful." (Quran 2:163)**

**"He is God, other than whom there is no deity, Knower of the unseen and the witnessed. He is the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful. He is God, other than whom there is no deity, the Sovereign, the Pure, the Perfection, the Bestower of Faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in Might, the Compeller, the Superior. Exalted is God above whatever they associate with Him. He is God, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; to Him belong the best names. Whatever is in the heavens and Earth is exalting Him. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise." (Quran 59:22-24)**

In summary, moral truths are ultimately derivatives of God's will expressed via His commands, and His commands do not contradict His nature, which is perfectly good, wise, pure and perfect.

## **Are there any alternative foundations for objective morals?**

Many atheists argue that there are alternative explanations to answer why some morals are objective. Some of the most popular alternatives include biology, social pressure, and moral realism.

### ***Biology***

Can biology explain our sense of objective morality? The simple answer is no. Charles Darwin provides us with an interesting 'extreme example' of what happens when biology or natural selection forms the foundation of morality. He argues that if we were the result of a different set of biological conditions, then what we consider morally objective could be totally different: "If men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our un-married females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters, and no one would think of interfering."[\[2\]](#)

In other words, if morals are contingent on biological changes, it would render morals subject to these changes; therefore they cannot be objective. Extending Darwin's example, if we happened to be reared under the same conditions as the nurse shark, we would think it acceptable to rape our partner, as the nurse shark wrestles with its mate.[\[3\]](#)

Some respond by asserting that it is specifically natural selection that forms the basis for our sense of objective morality. Again, this is false. Conceptually, all that natural selection can do is give us the ability to formulate moral rules to help us survive and reproduce. As the moral philosopher Philip Kitcher writes, "All that natural selection may have done for us is to equip us with the capacity for various social arrangements and the capacity to

formulate ethical rules."[\[4\]](#)

Maintaining that biology provides a basis for morality removes any meaning we attach to morals. Morals become meaningless, as they are just a result of non-rational and non-conscious biological changes. However, the fact that morality comes from Divine commands gives morals meaning, because being moral would be responding to these commands. In other words, we have moral duties, and these are owed to God. You cannot owe anything to a collection of molecules.

### ***Social pressure***

The second alternative is social pressure or consensus. This, I believe, is where a lot of atheists and humanists face some difficulty, philosophically speaking. If social pressure really forms the basis of objective morals, then the proponents of this assertion face a huge issue. Firstly, it makes morals relative, as they are subject to inevitable social changes. Secondly, it leads to moral absurdities. If someone accepts consensus as a basis for morals, then how can we justify our moral position towards what the Nazis did in 1940s Germany? How can we claim that what they did was objectively morally wrong? Well, we cannot. Even if you claim that some people in Germany fought against the Nazis, the point is that there was a strong consensus supporting the evil. There are many other examples in history to highlight this point.

### ***Moral realism***

The final alternative is moral realism. Moral realism, also referred to as moral objectivism, is the view that morals are objective and they are external and independent to our minds and emotions. However, the difference between moral realism and what this essay has been advocating is that moral realists do not assert that they require any foundation. So moral truths such as compassion, justice and tolerance just exist objectively.

There are a few problems with this position. Firstly, what does it mean that justice just exists? Or that objective moral values just exist? This position is counterintuitive and meaningless. We simply do not know what 'justice' is, existing on its own. Significantly, one has to understand that if morals are objective (in that they are outside of an individual's personal opinion), then they require a rational explanation. Otherwise, the question *How are they objective?* is unanswered. Secondly, morality is not limited to recognising the truth of compassion or justice. Morality entails a sense of duty or obligation; we are obligated to be compassionate and just. Under moral realism such obligations are impossible, because recognising that a certain moral truth is objective does nothing to ensure that we are obligated to implement that moral truth. A moral obligation does not follow from just acknowledging that it is objective. Following through with one's moral obligations would make sense if they are owed, or if there is a sense of duty. Moral realism does not provide any reason why someone must be obliged to be moral. However, if these moral truths are Divine commands, then not only do they make these morals objective, but they establish the basis for being obligated to be moral "because we have a duty to obey the commands of God.

In light of the above discussion, it is obvious that objective morality necessitates God's existence, as He is external to the universe and can make the universal moral claim via His commands.

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Endnotes:

[1] Akhtar, S. (2008) *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind*. Abingdon: Routledge, p.99.

[2] Darwin, C. (1874) *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. 2nd Edition, p. 99. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2300> [Accessed 4th October 2016].

[3] National Geographic (1996). *Sharks in Love*. Available at: [http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/shark\\_nurse\\_mating](http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/shark_nurse_mating) [Accessed 24th October 2016].

[4] cited in Linville, M. D. (2009) *The Moral Argument*. In: Craig, W. L. and Moreland, J. P. (ed.). *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, p. 400.

## Know God, Know Good: God & Objective Morality (part 3 of 3)

**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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