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PHI 340

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1 December 2016

The Truth Behind Morality

Many see God or Deity as an omniscient being who sees all and is perfect. He also must adhere to higher principles. Whether these principles are called the rules of the universe or something else is not important in this discussion. God provides us with moral standards and guidelines to follow which, if done, will help us in turn follow those higher principles. Morality is a word which has many connotations. Almost everyone has a slightly different view of what morality actually means and how it came to exist. Exploring various moral theories and laws will be beneficial to pinpoint the source of morality itself. More specifically, it will help to look at the possibility of God creating morality or if He simply gives us moral laws to follow which are based upon higher principles from which morality is created.

Various moral theories submit there are intrinsically good and bad things. Examples of intrinsically good things are: “happiness, autonomy, knowledge, and virtue” (Shafer-Landau 121). Examples of intrinsically bad things are: “physical pain, mental anguish, sadistic impulses, and the betrayal of innocents” (Shafer-Landau 121). Why are these things intrinsically good or bad? Were they made that way or do they just happen to be so? Intrinsically good things prompt us toward moral actions which will lead us to follow those higher principles to which God himself adheres. Intrinsically bad things tend to harm us and our progression.

[N]atural and moral philosophy can each have their empirical part, because the former must determine its laws of nature as an object of experience, the latter

must determine the laws for the will of the human being insofar as he is affected by nature—the first as laws in accordance with which everything happens, the second as those in accordance with which everything ought to happen, but also reckoning with the conditions under which it often does not happen. (Kant 3)

Here Immanuel Kant explains the difference between descriptive and normative laws or “philosophies” as he calls them. Descriptive laws are those which exist from experience; laws which things already follow. Kant calls these the laws of nature. Normative laws are laws which express what ought to happen or what human beings should do. Kant names these “laws for the will of the human being. . .” (Kant 3). An example of a descriptive law is how the earth revolves around the sun. A normative law is that we should all be kind to one another or that we should all be virtuous. Moral theories tend to derive the normative laws from the descriptive ones.

Psychological Egoism is a widely accepted moral theory based on the belief that actions are morally right if they promote self-interest. Psychological Egoism states, “There is only one thing that motivates human beings: self-interest” (Shafer-Landau 91). This theory rejects the existence of altruism, a seemingly essential intrinsic good. Altruism means doing something for the benefit of another without receiving anything in return. Psychological Egoists argue, since all actions are done out of self-interest, there can never be a truly altruistic act. The question remains: is it important to be altruistic? Human beings would instinctively say yes, it is important to be altruistic. Why do we say this? It must come from something higher than our own desires or else we wouldn’t automatically say altruism is significant.

Ethical Egoism, a counter-part of Psychological Egoism, claims, “Actions are morally right just because they best promote one's self-interest” (Shafer-Landau 107). The difference between this theory and Psychological Egoism is how it allows for the existence of altruism but

it doesn't necessarily state human beings should be altruistic. These two theories are normative theories. They put forth what ought to be done. They don't consider the existence of God as being necessary for actions to be morally right but only that one should always follow their self-interest. But this seems to go against the grain of our beings. There must be something more to the world than only pursuing one's own self-interest.

Plato believes there is more than self-interest. He believes justice is what is important and when a person is just they are at peace within themselves. He writes how people may choose between actions or qualities which make the soul more just or less just.

[A man] will then look at the nature of the soul, and from the consideration of all these qualities he will be able to determine which is the better and which is the worse; and so he will choose, giving the name of evil to the life which will make his soul more unjust, and good to the life which will make his soul more just.

(Plato *Republic*)

Where does this infatuation with justice come from? Is it because justice is a higher principle?

Philosopher Vainio Olli-Pekka, in a journal article, wrote about morality and how we must give weight to internal inclinations. He wrote:

In most general terms, moral realism refers to a stance according to which morality is somehow independent of our individual and fleeting preferences, whereas moral anti-realism entails seeing moral claims as expressions of our sentiments or of our will. Constructing a meta-ethical stance requires balancing between two poles of internal and external accommodation. On the one hand we must do justice to 'moral appearances' – to the common sense understanding of

what morality is – and this internal accommodation pushes us towards realism. . .

. [M]oral facts create obligations. (Olli-Pekka 584-92)

Olli-Pekka admits there are built-in inclinations which require accommodation and these are independent of our will or wants. Did these internal accommodations come from God or through Him from a higher principle?

Among philosophers, an ancient argument about God’s commands is named “The Euthyphro Argument” (Shafer-Landau 69). The argument is essentially this: either God has reasons for His commands or He does not. The relevant premises are these:

1. Either God has reasons that support His commands, or God lacks reasons for His commands.
2. If God lacks reasons for His commands, then God’s commands are arbitrary—that renders God imperfect, undermining His moral authority.
3. If God has reasons that support His commands, then these reasons, rather than the divine commands, are what make actions right or wrong.
4. God is not imperfect. (Shafer-Landau 69)

The Christian belief defines God as perfect and almighty while being completely just in all things. If that definition is taken and applied to this argument, it is logical that a God who is able to arbitrarily change His commands would be imperfect and probably not just implying He would not be a God after all. This statement, God is not a God, is obviously not true which means God has to have reasons for His commands. The reasons behind His commands are those higher principles of the universe spoken of earlier. We as human beings are not yet masters of these higher principles which is why we need commands from God. When he is obeyed, we will be closer to God and to discovering those higher principles. Truth is truth and will always be

truth. God knows this and wants us to know it as well. He does this by giving us commands and helping us progress in our knowledge and understanding of those higher principles. God isn't the creator of morality, but He helps us eventually come to understand it by providing commands along the way.

Some moral theories claim the existence of Strictly Conscientious Action (Shafer-Landau 96). These theories define Strictly Conscientious Action as doing an action when it is your duty even if your desires draw you another way. But why do people do this? What makes them follow their duty when it would be plausible and understandable for them to go after their personal desires instead? There must be some other reason. As the Euthyphro Argument stated earlier, the reason is the higher principles which exist in the universe. They can influence us to do things because they are above our own desires.

Another widely held view is called the Natural Law Theory. This theory states humans are drawn to intrinsically good things and following these inclinations for good is moral but going against them is immoral. This theory presents four things which it calls the four basic human goods: life, procreation (including rearing children), knowledge, and sociability (Timmons 2002). Everyone has inclinations towards these four things which make them applicable to each person. Why are we as humans drawn to these four things? It is because they appear to be intrinsically good. Philosopher Thomas Aquinas argues pursuing these basic human goods is moral and we should do so (Timmons 2002). The fact they apply to everyone is important to understand. If everyone is under the moral obligation to follow their inclinations towards these basic human goods, the belief in the existence of God is not essential to follow these inclinations. It continues to appear as though things can be intrinsically good on their own

and therefore don't need to be qualified as "good" or "moral" by God in order to be such. The Natural Law Theory appears to show God is not the creator of morality.

G.B. Siniscalchi, a professor of theology, wrote:

Individuals do not have to believe in the Christian God to know and act in response to objective moral principles. Says Wielenberg: 'The foundation of morality is a set of axiomatic necessary moral truths. No being, natural or supernatural, is responsible for the truth of or has control over these ethical truths' (Wielenberg 66). Consequently, not only can we know that moral truths exist without belief in God (as revealed in Christ or through some other supernatural disclosure), but we should be able to know and abide by them even if nobody recognizes them as such (Wielenberg 66). Paul Kurtz writes: 'I would argue that certain moral principles of morality are true regardless of their origin, and generally they are warranted independent of their religious foundations or lack of them' (Kurtz 1988).

One of the largest and most poignant arguments against morality claims there can be no morality if a belief in God is not present. However, Siniscalchi states a belief in God is not necessary in order to follow moral truths. This points to the fact God doesn't create morality. Siniscalchi is on the right track.

Although a belief in God is not required to follow moral laws, He provides us with additional moral laws which we may never have discovered on our own. He will guide us and help us determine the correct decision when faced with moral dilemmas and seeming contradictions.

The Divine Command Theory is a widely held view which stands in opposition to some of the theories discussed above. This theory argues God is the creator of morality and actions are morally right just because God commands them while actions are morally wrong just because God forbids them (Shafer-Landau 67). This theory falls apart easily. Everyone who doesn't believe in or rejects the reality of God will not consider this argument for very long. Also, if we do believe in God, how are we to know what the commands of God really are? Sacred religious texts are not identical; there are contradictions galore within the sacred texts of even a single religion (Shafer-Landau 72). Since the commands of God are sometimes very difficult to determine one cannot accept this argument as correct. It rather shows God cannot be the sole reason for things to be moral or immoral. There must be something more.

Kant has his own personal moral theory and it doesn't even mention God or any sort of Deity. He argues for Strictly Conscientious Action as mentioned earlier in this paper. He states morality is doing things strictly out of duty; basic rules of morality do not depend on our desires.

Schafer-Landau, a modern philosopher, had this to say about Kant:

. . . Kant . . . [believed] the basic rules of morality do not depend on our desires. If they did, then moral rules would fail to apply to everyone, since our desires can differ from person to person. This would make morality too variable, and make it possible for people to escape from their moral duty just by changing what they want. Kant thought that he was defending common sense when he claimed that morality is, in this sense, universal—that everyone who can reason must obey its commands. (Shafer-Landau 168)

Is it plausible everything about human nature is necessary for our progress in this life? If so, emotions would play a large role since they are an essential part of our identity as human

beings. Imagine a world in which there were no emotions. What would it look like? More importantly, how would people act towards themselves and others? It would be a dismal world indeed without them. Emotions are needed in life and will consequently take part in motivating our actions. Thus, emotions do participate in assisting us to choose moral actions. This conclusion shows the error of Kant's argument of morality consisting of doing things purely out of duty. He is correct, however, in his belief that morality is universal. It does apply to everyone and all ought to follow it.

Stephen C. Evans, another philosopher, uses a very convincing argument about God and morality. He writes:

We know how human laws come into existence. They are enacted by legislatures (or absolute monarchs in some countries) who have the authority to pass such laws. How then should the existence of moral laws be explained? It seems plausible to many to hold that they must be similarly grounded in some appropriate moral authority, and the only plausible candidate to fulfill this role is God. Some philosophers have dismissed an argument of this type as "crude," presumably because its force is so obvious that no special philosophical training is necessary to understand it and see its appeal. The fact that one can understand the argument without much in the way of philosophical skill is not necessarily a defect, however. (Evans 2014)

Evans is a proponent of God being the creator of morality. He has many good points in his arguments which seem especially logical. Moral laws must come from somewhere. Some of God's commands may seem as though they have no reason for existing, but in reality, they do.

Evans continues:

If an awareness of moral obligations is in fact an awareness of God's commands or divine laws, then the ordinary person who is aware of moral obligations does have a kind of awareness of God. Of course such a person might be aware of God's laws without realizing that they are God's laws; she might be aware of God's commands without being aware of them under that description. (Evans 2014)

Whether or not people believe in God, Evans concludes, they still have some knowledge of Him. God loves us and wants us to follow higher principles. These moral inclinations could be His way of helping us get there.

Humans have a natural inclination to do good and to be moral. This inclination can be suppressed over time but it is still there in all of us. Most of the moral theories addressed in this paper tend to show there is something beyond human beings which gives us this inclination towards good. Some moral theories say this thing is from God, others say it is from something higher than God. The conclusion which seems to make the most sense is this: God does not create morality but he does give us moral standards to live by which will help us be moral creatures. A belief in God allows for us to discover these moral truths more quickly, helps us understand why they truly are important, and even provides us with the desire we may lack to act according to them. Although God isn't the creator of morality, He still plays a central role in it.

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