

Does Morality Require God?

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About This Ebook

Almost everything in this ebook originally appeared on [Ethical Realism](#), my philosophy website.¹ These are my personal notes. I am not an expert of religious philosophy, but I have spent a great deal of time studying philosophy, ethics, metaethics, and moral realism.

Many religious arguments concerning ethics appear to require ignorance of the actual ethical arguments that philosophers are currently concerned with. Although there is currently a popular debate concerning God's relevance to morality, almost no contemporary philosophers of the academic world are part of the debate. Contemporary philosophers are almost unanimous in the opinion that God is *not* necessary for morality.

In order to know if God is required for morality, we need to know both sides. The atheistic worldviews offer alternatives to the traditional Christian worldview that many people have assumed to be true. Even if atheism is false, the atheist view that morality does not require God could be correct.

If you are not familiar with “intrinsic values” or metaethics, then I recommend that you take a look at my ebook, [“Is There A Meaning of Life?”](#)

This ebook has not been sufficiently edited and there are probably many grammatical errors that I missed.

¹ Ethical Realism is found at <http://ethicalrealism.wordpress.com/>

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Chapter 1: Should We Want Morality To Require God?

Plato might have been the first philosopher to suggest that ethics requires a "foundation," which ended up being his theory of [the Forms](#): A realm quite unlike the physical world (eternal, unchanging, perfect, and so on). An action is virtuous if it resembles the nature of the perfect human being. The Stoics and Epicureans did not agree with Plato because they only believed in the physical world. They found the Forms to require unnecessary commitments concerning reality. The physical world seemed sufficient to explain ethics. Then for a couple thousand years Christians dominated [meta-ethical philosophy](#) and agreed with Plato that a special foundation is necessary for ethics. In particular, God must exist (which, like the forms, is eternal, unchanging, and perfect). An action is virtuous if it resembles the nature of God. The Christians argued that if God doesn't exist, then nothing really matters.

The question is, "Do we need a foundation for ethics?" (Is Plato's Forms or God necessary for *anything to really matter*? If we reject the Forms and God, will we then have to reject [intrinsic value](#) and become nihilists?) I will argue that we should prefer that the answer be, "No." We should prefer to believe in intrinsic values even if the Forms or God doesn't exist. It is preferable to believe intrinsic values can exist without the Forms or God for at least three reasons:

1. The simplest explanation is preferable.
2. We don't want to be required to accept unproven facts about reality.
3. Not everyone accepts the existence of the Forms or God.

I am not arguing that the Forms don't exist, or that God doesn't exist. Even if we reject that intrinsic values could exist without the Forms or God, these parts of reality might exist.

I am not even *currently* arguing that we don't need the Forms or God in order for intrinsic values to exist. I am merely arguing that "if it is possible to rationally accept intrinsic values without the Forms or God, then we should prefer to do so."

I will discuss the recent history of Meta-Ethics and then I will address why all things equal, we should prefer that intrinsic values can exist, even if God or the Forms don't exist.

Recent Meta-Ethical History

Nietzsche's saying, "God is dead," reflected the fact that atheism was growing in respectability. An atheist would no longer be tortured or executed for heresy. In fact, God's existence was not proven, so it was quite rational for people to question his existence. Unfortunately the dogma of the time was that "God exists, or nothing really matters," so atheists could no longer justify morality. Thousands of years of Christianity (and the taboo of atheism) left atheistic ethical philosophy in shambles. No atheistic justification for morality was available. Of course, Nietzsche was only discussing facts about society. Just because people think God is necessary for morality doesn't mean it's true.

So, "God is dead" means that we are all used to relying on God, but some people of Nietzsche's time wished to no longer rely on God anymore. Science seemed to be the most fruitful intellectual activity, and the idea of God was not helpful to it.

Nietzsche did not prove God doesn't exist. The fact is that it is natural to question God's existence just because it hasn't been proven to exist. People aren't certain that God exists, but we still want them to be certain that human life has intrinsic value. Therefore, it would be preferable to find out that God isn't necessary for intrinsic value.

Even Christian philosophers at this point almost unanimously agreed that discussing God was not fruitful to philosophy precisely because of the practical considerations already mentioned. In particular, God's existence is uncertain and disagreement about God's nature could not be resolved through experience or argument.

The temptation to reject intrinsic values and believe "nothing really matters" became acceptable. It didn't take long for many philosophers to officially reject intrinsic values. Hobbes, Nietzsche, Hume, Ayer, and Hare are among the most respectable philosophers who gave up on the idea.

We can still see the effects of "God's death." People often doubt whether or not anything really has intrinsic value. Some people even suggest that a rabbit or mouse might have just as much worth as a human being. Why? Because it's all just meaningless, isn't it? We just say human beings are more valuable because *we* are human beings and we want to have the right to eat and exploit other animals. But all of this talk is really little more than skepticism towards intrinsic value. Such skepticism doesn't amount to much when given by someone with no understanding of meta-ethical philosophy.

Moreover, the metaphor "God is dead" does not refer to rampant immorality from atheists, as some Christians seem to argue. The best way to make sure we treat other people well is to understand meta-ethical philosophy. To learn about intrinsic values and our experience of morality. Persecuting atheists and forcing Christian dogma upon the masses didn't succeed in creating virtuous citizens because we can't replace a philosophical understanding of intrinsic values with obedience to a church. The terrible crimes and wars waged by Christians during the middle ages is a good reason for us to doubt that their kings and priests could really believe that people have intrinsic value.

A sincere and philosophical understanding of ethics has proven to help us behave appropriately, even when we are tempted to harm others to

benefit ourselves. Meta-ethics in particular can help remind us of the intrinsic value at stake when we have a chance to make a decision that impacts the lives of others.

Why we shouldn't want intrinsic values to require God or the Forms.

The simplest explanation is preferable.

We could think of extremely implausible explanations for our experiences. You might think that you forgot your wallet at home, but really fairies might have taken your wallet out of your pocket. You might think that dinosaurs existed, but the bones might have been left there by aliens to trick us. You might think that the universe started to exist billions of years ago, but God might have created the entire universe two hours ago and inserted memories into each of our heads. What makes each of these explanations so implausible is that they are much more complicated than they should be. They all require us to have more commitments about reality than should be necessary to explain our experiences.

As William of Occam said, "Don't multiply entities beyond necessity." If you posit the existence of new entities, like faeries, aliens, and so forth, but there are alternative explanations that don't require us to posit their existence, then we should prefer the simpler explanation. It is more likely to be true.

It seems more likely that you forgot your wallet at home than fairies moved it. It seems more likely that dinosaurs evolved on planet Earth than aliens putting their bones here. It seems more likely that the universe came into existence billions of years ago than that God created it two hours ago.

The rule of Occam could be restated to say, "All things equal, don't posit the existence of new entities." That means that bigfoot, dragons, unicorns, and fairies shouldn't be accepted unless they are required to explain our experiences. In the same way the Forms and God shouldn't be accepted unless they are required for our experiences. If our moral experiences can exist without them, then ethics is not going to be a good reason to accept the existence of the Forms or God.

We don't want to be required to accept unproven facts about reality.

Faeries, unicorns, aliens, the Forms, and God are not proven to exist. It is unreliable to base one belief on an uncertain belief. If you believe that there will be a hurricane based on the latest scientific research, then you have a good reason to prepare for a hurricane. If you believe there will be a hurricane based on the opinion of a fortune teller, then you don't have a good reason to prepare for a hurricane.

If human life has intrinsic value, then we have a reason to help save lives. If this is true no matter what, then we will be certain that human life has intrinsic value and we will probably be willing to help save lives when we can do so at little cost to ourselves. However, if intrinsic values requires the Forms or God, which are not proven to exist, then we will not be certain that intrinsic values exist. We will then be ambivalent to save lives because we won't be sure that human life has intrinsic value.

Given the choice: Either intrinsic values and God exists, or neither exists; philosophers are tempted to agree that neither exists. This is the position of Richard Dawkins as well as many respected philosophers. Dawkins argues that atheists are "moral," which just means "atheists are nice people." Dawkins just thinks we are moral because of our instincts, not because of our belief in intrinsic values or understanding of ethical philosophy.

Not everyone accepts the existence of the Forms or God.

It's just a fact that not everyone believes in the Forms or God. We want everyone to believe that human life has intrinsic value, even if they don't believe in the Forms or God. Therefore, it is preferable to find out that intrinsic values can exist without the Forms or God.

Conclusion

Simply put, we are uncertain that the Forms or God exists, but we want to be certain that intrinsic values exist. It is then preferable to be able to accept the existence of intrinsic values, even if the Forms or God doesn't exist. We aren't certain that the Forms or God exists, so if intrinsic values depend on these entities, then we can't be sure that intrinsic values exist.

The more certain we are that intrinsic values exist, the more likely we are to behave appropriately. The more certain we are that human beings have intrinsic value, the more likely we are to try to save human lives.

All things equal, we should prefer to accept that intrinsic values exist, even if the Forms or God doesn't exist. All things equal, we shouldn't want ethics to require the Forms or God. However, we still need to know if intrinsic values actually do in fact require God. That is the subject of my next post.

Chapter 2: Does Morality Require God?

Some people believe that God is required or morality will no longer be justified. In particular, God has to exist or "nothing really matters." Plato and many Christians agree that morality requires a foundation: The Forms or God. Either there is an ideal (Form) of the person that we must try to emulate, or God is the ultimate source of perfection that we must try to emulate. Without the Forms or God, supposedly there would be no [intrinsic value](#). It is true that we want morality to be based on reality. We don't want morality to be merely delusional or "just a matter of taste." However, I will argue that the reality described by science seems to be sufficient to explain how intrinsic values can exist. (i.e. We don't need a transcendent reality in order for something to "really matter.") Pain seems to be bad and giving people an aspirin to help them avoid pain makes perfect sense, even if God doesn't exist.

I will divide this post in the following sections:

1. Introduction
2. Plato's Forms
3. God
4. The world of natural science
5. Now what?

Introduction

What are intrinsic values?

The question is not, "Will we despise murder and punish murderers if God doesn't exist?" Certainly that will continue to happen whether or not such "morality" has any real basis. Instead, the question is, "Will murder 'really matter' if God doesn't exist?" or "Will anything have intrinsic value if God doesn't exist?" I am only interested in a

foundation for intrinsic value because human psychology and institutions involving "moral practice" could exist, even if they aren't justified.

I have already discussed intrinsic values in "[Is There a Meaning of Life?](#)" but I will briefly describe them again. Most values are just about how useful something is. Money is useful to buy stuff, food is useful for staying alive, television is useful to attain pleasure, and guns are useful to help us kill people. Usefulness is not intrinsic value because such goods by themselves don't really matter. Having money, food, television, and guns doesn't make life meaningful without giving us something else which has real meaning. Happiness, knowledge, and human life might have real value. These are the kinds of things that seem to "really matter." If they really matter and have intrinsic value, then they are not good because we desire them. Instead, they are desired because they are good. They are not only good if I have them; they are good no matter who has them. The more people with happiness the better.

So, food by itself is worthless. Food can be stored and never used. Food on a deserted planet won't "really matter" in any sense. However, food can be used to help us survive. If human life has value, then survival has value. In that case food can help us attain something with intrinsic value.

Why is intrinsic value important for justifying morality? One reason is because morality doesn't seem like something we can reject or dismiss. We can say, "I don't want to be a good student" or "I don't want to be a good artist," but we don't have the option to say, "I don't want to be a good person." We can reject being a student or artist without serious problems, but deciding not to be a good person does lead to big problems. We can opt out of our obligations as a student or artist, but we can't opt out of our moral obligations.

What is a foundation?

In this case a foundation is what "makes something true" and explains how it is possible. What makes the sentence "George Washington was the first president of the USA" true are the actual facts in the world (including facts about human institutions). What makes the sentence, "There is a rock in front of me" true is the fact of an actual rock being in front of me. The problem is that morality doesn't seem to be true because of facts in the same way that the above statements are true.

Russ Shafer-Landau suggested that it is possible that no foundation is needed for morality. To convince us of this he "would point to correct logical standards or physical laws... and claim that there isn't anything that makes such things true—they simply are *true* (Moral Realism: A Defense, 47). However, I think it will be fruitful to take a look at what some people propose to be the foundation for morality and why they think such a foundation could be necessary.

Plato's Forms

Plato lived at a time when people started to have doubts about intrinsic values and decided that morality was "just a matter of taste." Justifying intrinsic value seemed out of reach. In order to combat this moral skepticism and show that morality can be justified, Plato introduced his theory of the Forms.

Plato was the inventor of idealism. His Forms were originally called "Ideas," and these ideas were perfections (ideals) to be found as part of reality. So, Plato decided that part of reality is very little like the world as we experience it. The world as we experience is imperfect, it's full of change, and everything gets destroyed. In contrast, the Forms are eternal, unchanging, and perfect.

One way the Forms could justify our moral beliefs is by having a Form of the ideal person. People who approximate the ideal person are good, and people who do not are bad.

Another way the Forms could justify our moral beliefs is by trying to embody various ideals, such as knowledge and happiness. To embody something that approximates knowledge would be good, and not doing so (being ignorant) would be bad. To embody something that approximates happiness would be good, and not doing so (to be miserable) would be bad. These ideals sound a lot like intrinsic values.

Plato decided that there are gradations between the eternal and the physical parts of the world. The closer something is to the eternal, the better. So, the eternal parts of the universe that embodies perfect knowledge and happiness could have the most intrinsic value. To embody an approximation of these ideals could have some intrinsic value as well.

He thought we could learn about the Forms because our soul was a part of reality closer to the Forms. However, Plato never made it clear how we can know about the Forms. He suggested that somehow we already learned about the Forms (before we were born as free floating souls), but we have forgotten about them. So, we can somehow try to remember them. This answer is not compelling.

A major problem of Plato's Forms emerges: We have intrinsic values, but it appears impossible for us to know anything about them. We have justified intrinsic value at the cost of moral skepticism.

God

Many Christians believe that God is the source of all intrinsic value in much the same way the Plato's Forms were. Somehow God is the embodiment of all the Forms. So, instead of living up to the perfect

(ideal) person, we should try to live up to the embodiment of perfection itself (God). These Christians seem to agree with Plato that the perfections are intrinsic values. It is better to exist than not to exist, so God exists. It is best to have knowledge, happiness, and virtue, so God has these perfections as well.

These Christians then agree with Plato that to approximate perfection is good, and not doing so is bad, and they agree with Plato that existing closer to the eternal realm is better than existing closer to the physical realm. The eternal realm is the source of all intrinsic value, and the physical realm is worthless.

So, the Christian justification for morality is little more than plagiarism of Plato.

However, Christians have some additional answers to help explain our moral knowledge:

1. Divine revelation allows us to know moral facts when God tells someone what those facts are.
2. Jesus was God manifested on Earth so he could tell us moral facts.
3. We are supernatural souls and God has given us a power to know moral facts through "intuition."
4. God has given us social instincts to help guide us towards intrinsic value and help us learn what has intrinsic value.

The world of natural science

I do not wish to argue that natural science is currently able to tell us about intrinsic values. I merely want to say that the world described by science (sociological, anthropological, economic, psychological, and physical) is the same world in which moral facts appear to exist. We know at least some moral facts through direct experience, such as the

experience of pain. We know pain is bad because of how it feels, and pain itself is part of our psychology.

To say that pain is intrinsically bad appears plausible based on our experience, and God (or the Forms) do not seem relevant to our justification that "pain is bad." It seems absurd to tell someone, "You can't know that pain is intrinsically bad unless you find out God exists!" (If God exists, I don't think it can even experience pain.)

Still, someone might argue, "Well, pain can't just be bad for no reason because it's subjective. It might be delusional." The problem here is that pain would still be bad even if it was a hallucination. Pain doesn't pretend to be something else. It can't misrepresent reality. Pain is nothing more than a psychological experience, just like a hallucination.

It is true that some philosophers seem to believe that nothing but quarks, strings, photons, and/or electrons really exist, and everything else is a hallucination, and these philosophers will be unable to justify intrinsic values. Therefore, some other kind of understanding of reality is necessary to enable intrinsic values to exist. I propose that the foundation of intrinsic value is reality itself, but not all of reality. Moral facts are found in an emergent part of the universe. Just like many believe the mind emerges from the brain, it appears that morality emerges from certain conditions of reality as well.

There is nothing about the physical reality of quarks and strings that forces everyone to accept that they are the only real part of the world. It seems obvious enough that we have minds as well. (Try to disprove that fact!) Scientists and philosophers alike often accept that the mind is an emergent and irreducible phenomenon that is more than the sum of its parts. Morality might also be an emergent and irreducible phenomenon that is more than the sum of its parts.

So, how exactly might we get morality from the universe? First you have to get brains, which give us minds. Some mental activity is pain, which is enough to say that something intrinsically bad exists. The

moral implications of pain isn't reducible to nonmoral facts, just like mental facts don't seem reducible to nonmental facts. The mind doesn't seem to be "just the brain" just like we can't explain what pain is to someone just by pointing to various brain states. In the same way we might be unable say that the badness found in pain is nothing more than nonmoral facts about the mind. (Pain is a morally relevant mental state.) It might be that all moral facts depends on the existence of mental activity, but nonmoral mental states, such as seeing the color green are not morally relevant.

The world of natural science is the most plausible foundation for morality

If intrinsic values require a foundation, then we don't currently know for sure what it is. We can speculate that Plato's Forms, God, or the natural world could be the cause of morality, but the natural world is the most plausible answer. Plato's Forms and God should not be accepted as real without substantial evidence, and evidence of these things are difficult to provide given the fact that they appear to be separate from the natural world. (Even if we did accept that they exist, they might not help us know anything about morality.) It would be much easier to find evidence that intrinsic values from the natural world, and such a hypothesis only requires a view of the universe as a reality that causes some entities to emerge from other entities found in nature (e.g. the mind emerges from the brain).

Additionally, the view that intrinsic values emerge from the mind give us a pretty simple method of attaining moral knowledge. If intrinsic values emerge from the mind, then we will avoid Plato's problem of moral skepticism, and the Christian reliance of questionable sources of knowledge. We will not have to rely on the possibility that Jesus is God, that the Bible is historically accurate, that we have a kind of supernatural intuition, that the testimony of people who talk to God is accurate, that our social emotions are good, and so on. Such Christian forms of knowledge might be accurate, but we might never know for sure if they are.

Now what?

People have assumed God is the foundation for intrinsic value for hundreds of years, and many still do. This assumption is essential for an argument for God and an argument against intrinsic values, but these arguments don't make sense given the fact that intrinsic value does not require God.

The moral argument for God

Some people have tried to argue that God must exist because intrinsic value exists. So far that argument appears blatantly unsound. The argument looks like the following:

1. We know intrinsic values exist.
2. Intrinsic values could only exist if God exists.
3. Therefore God exists.

This argument fails for at least two reasons. One, there are other reasons that intrinsic values can exist, such as Plato's Forms or the natural world itself. So far God doesn't even appear to be the best explanation, so we can't even conclude that "God probably exists" by realizing that intrinsic values exist. Two, we have to be sure that intrinsic values exist, but many people aren't so sure.

The argument against intrinsic values

Many atheists who have rejected God's existence have decided that they should also reject the existence of intrinsic values. They seem to accept an argument like the following:

1. God doesn't exist.
2. If God doesn't exist, then intrinsic values don't exist.
3. Therefore, intrinsic values don't exist.

This argument given by atheists fails because intrinsic values don't require God's existence.

Conclusion

If my foundation for intrinsic values is plausible, then we have good reason to accept that *morality does not require God*. In that case an atheist can have a solid foundation for intrinsic values.

I have not proven that God doesn't exist. If you believe in God or the Platonic Forms, it is still preferable to account for intrinsic values in terms of our experience rather than supernatural (or non-natural) phenomena with very questionable evidence. If something ordinary and full of common sense can explain and justify morality, that seems much more plausible than a demand for faith or questionable kinds of evidence.

To accept that intrinsic values exist from the natural world is much like accepting that lightning occurs from the natural world. To say that lightning is created by God doesn't help a scientist do his job. I propose that we can know a lot about the foundation of intrinsic value within the world of natural science as well. People who argue that God must be the foundation to intrinsic value give up too fast, just like the people who argued that God is the cause of lightning.

Chapter 3: A Moral Argument for the Existence of God Based on Skepticism

Many people claim that morality requires God. There are multiple arguments that attempt to infer that God exists because morality exists. I haven't extensively read the current literature, but I am familiar with contemporary metaethics, which gives me a good idea why many of these arguments don't work. Additionally, some of these arguments are discussed on the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). I will discuss an argument by Linda Zagzebski that we either *know little to nothing about morality* or we get moral knowledge from God. Our intention of being moral requires us to know a lot about morality, so we must accept that God exists." I believe that this argument reflects a sort of [ethical skepticism that has historically plagued Christianity](#), and we have very little reason to agree with it.

I will present four objections to Zagzebski's argument. One, she requires us to accept that we could only know an adequate amount about morality if we get moral knowledge through divine revelation, but this seems false. We can know quite a lot about morality through personal experience. Two, If her argument succeeds, then I don't see why anyone who lacks moral knowledge from divine revelation should try to be moral. Three, her argument demands that we know a lot about a topic in order to rationally study it. That seems to imply that studying string theory is a waste of time, but this seems absurd. Four, her argument seems self-defeating because if her argument succeeds, then religious philosophy would be a waste of time.

I understand the argument to be the following:

1. If God doesn't exist, then we know little to nothing about morality.
2. If God exists, then we can know quite a bit about morality.
3. If we try to be moral, then we need to know quite a bit about morality.
4. We try to be moral.
5. So, we must know quite a bit about morality.
6. Therefore, rationality requires that we accept that God exists.

I will take a look at each of these premises:

Premise 1

If God doesn't exist, then we know little to nothing about morality.

Zagzebski points out that we can't try to be moral if we know little to nothing about morality, but no one is willing to reject morality altogether. Additionally, we seem to know little to nothing about morality considering the great amount of unresolvable moral disagreement. For example, the abortion debate.

I find this premise to be implausible for the following two reasons:

Objection 1: Although we might have unresolvable moral disagreements, that doesn't prove that we know "little to nothing about morality." We seem to agree that pain is bad, pleasure is good, human life has value, and so on. Disagreement arises when we have difficulty measuring the amount of value involved. Killing one life when necessary to save 100 lives seems to be right because one life isn't worth as much as 100. However, it is difficult to know if or when we should put suffering people "out of their misery." Living six hours while suffering might be worth it.

I think we know quite a bit about morality through personal experience. Experiencing pain is enough to know that pain is bad once we realize other people's pain is also bad for the same reason. Zagzebski seems to think that accurate moral knowledge could only come from divine revelation, but that is not how I know about moral truth.

Objection 2: It isn't clear that we have unresolvable disagreement about morality. We seem to resolve moral disagreements in time. At one time some people thought slavery was somehow permissible, but we now know that slavery is wrong.

Premise 2

If God exists, then we can know quite a bit about morality.

Either God gives us knowledge directly through revelation, or we are all born with moral knowledge, or he gives us some kind of supernatural ability to detect moral truth. Out of these possibilities unresolvable moral disagreement would indicate that only a few people possess actual moral knowledge through revelation.

I will not object to this premise. An omnipotent God's existence makes *anything possible*.

Premise 3

If we try to be moral, then we need to know quite a bit about morality. If we want to try to do the right thing, then we have to be able to know what the right thing to do is (or at least get a pretty accurate understanding of what doing the right thing would be).

I'm not sure if I agree with this argument or not. We do need to know *something* about right and wrong to rationally justify why we should try to do it, but I don't know how much we would need to know.

Premise 4

We try to be moral.

Zagzebski's argument is meant to appeal to people who will try to be moral. I suppose some people don't try to be moral. In that case we might just admit that morality is irrational. I will not question this premise.

Premise 5

So, we must know quite a bit about morality.

If we try to be moral and we need to know quite a bit about morality, then we have to accept that we know quite a bit about morality.

Zagzebski's Conclusion

Therefore, rationality requires that we accept that God exists.

If we accept the premises, then the conclusion follows. If we need to know quite a bit about morality to rationally try to be moral, and God is the only way to sufficiently know about morality, then we must believe in God. To not believe in God would make it too difficult to try to be moral because we would have little to know idea how to be good.

Three More Objections

Objection 1: The argument has an inconsistency. Unresolvable moral differences is evidence that we know little to nothing about morality *whether or not God exists*. If God's existence is reason to believe in moral knowledge, then that is just one more reason to reject the existence of God.

Of course, it is possible that some people have a sort of divine revelation that gives them moral knowledge. However, that doesn't mean that *I personally* have such moral knowledge. Assuming the argument is sound, I personally would have no reason to try to be moral because I personally lack moral knowledge. Only someone with divine revelation would have reason to try to be moral.

The possibility that some people, such as Jesus, had moral knowledge doesn't mean that I have moral knowledge. The infinitesimal amount of moral knowledge supposedly recorded in the bible doesn't help us resolve our moral disagreements. The moral law "thou shalt not kill" is already accepted by everyone, and it doesn't help us resolve the more complicated moral issues. How do we decide if killing is ever OK? Certainly killing to save 100 people could be necessary. We need to know how to measure values, but values appear to be immeasurable.

Objection 2: The argument strategy requires us to accept a belief in order to be rational, but this strategy itself seems flawed. I have to wonder if unresolvable moral differences leads to the belief in God when unresolvable scientific disagreement doesn't. At one time disagreements about the physical world were unresolvable (or seemed to be unresolvable). One person might argue that the Earth is flat, and another that the Earth is round. It could be said that physical science would be irrational at this point because of our ignorance, and the only possible way to attain knowledge about physics would be from God. However, we now know that this argument is absurd. If we gave up on physical science, then we would never have developed science into the extremely powerful source of knowledge it has become.

We still have some seemingly unresolvable scientific disagreement (such as those involving string theory), but it seems absurd to say that we should stop doing science involving string theory when some degree of progress is still being made. It would be even more absurd to ask string theorists to look for God's revelation or start reading the bible to gain knowledge involving string theory.

I want to suggest that believing in God to rationalize our moral behavior is just as absurd as using God to rationalize our scientific behavior. It doesn't seem to help. If God really did give us scientific knowledge and moral knowledge through revelation and those with such knowledge could *completely* pass it down, then physical science and moral philosophy would be a waste of time. We would indeed have access to a great deal of knowledge. That is simply not the case. Scientists and moral philosophers have thousands of books worth of knowledge that was never provided by revelation.

Objection 3: Zagzebski's argument is self-defeating because *if it is sound*, then it isn't plausible enough to avoid the need for divine revelation.

Why? I have never heard of an argument for God's existence universally accepted by the philosophical community (including religious philosophers). These arguments are never plausible enough to be accepted by all rational people. If these arguments have any degree of plausibility, then they (at best) seem to lead to unresolvable disagreement. Therefore, it isn't clear why Zagzebski thinks she can have *sufficient* philosophical knowledge to prove that God exists (or even that we must rationally assume God's existence) when such unresolvable disagreements seem to require divine revelation. Without divine revelation Zagzebski's argument would seem to imply that *religious philosophy is irrational*. Why? God has never given anyone the perfect argument for his existence through divine revelation. Therefore, Zagzebski must either reject her own argument, or she shouldn't be doing religious philosophy.

Conclusion

Zagzebski doesn't argue that God must exist or "nothing really matters." Instead, she argues that we can't know enough about

morality without God, and we can't rationally try to be moral unless we can know enough about morality.

I argued that Zagzebski's argument is unpersuasive. It (a) requires a controversial premise, (b) could not prove to anyone without divine revelation that he or she should believe in God (unless divine revelation of others could be plausibly established through the transmission of significant moral knowledge), (c) appears to be require the absurd requirement that string theorists need divine revelation, and (d) seems to be self-defeating considering that every sort of argument for god has (at best) lead to unresolvable disagreement (and thus required revelation).

Unlike Zagzebski, I do not find moral skepticism to be plausible. We know quite a bit about morality. Feeling pain is enough to know that pain is bad. We also know that intense pain is worse than slight pains, and so on.

Note that I am not very familiar with the current literature of religious philosophy (including Zagzebski's argument), so it is possible that I have misunderstood it. I relied on Peter Byrne's discussion of her argument on the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#). If this wasn't Zagzebski's argument, it is still one of the better arguments that I know of that claims that morality requires God using what I believe to be many assumptions that people have, so it is worth considering why some of these assumptions might be implausible. For example, the view that divine revelation is necessary for moral knowledge (or has even been very helpful in the past) seems to be false.

Chapter 4: Practical Arguments for the Existence of God

The [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) presents some practical arguments for the existence of God. These arguments don't claim that intrinsic values require God's existence, and they don't claim that it is irrational for atheists to try to be moral. Instead, they argue that there is some sort of benefit to believing in God. This is a very modest argument and it could corroborate the conviction many people have that believing in God is helpful in various ways. I will take a look at two arguments.

The first argument is given by R. Adams, and it states that it would be demoralizing to believe that God doesn't exist. The second argument simply states that belief in God is morally encouraging. I find these arguments to be unconvincing because (a) it isn't obvious that we get the benefits from believing in God that people seem to hope for and (b) it isn't clear that the supposed benefits accorded by belief in God would justify belief in God.

Argument 1

R. Adams's argument is the following:

1. It is demoralizing to reject that the world has a moral order.
2. The best explanation of moral order in the world is God.
3. Belief in the moral order in the world is morally beneficial.
4. We should try to do what we can to attain a moral benefit.
5. Therefore, we should try to believe in God.

A moral order is either a divine plan or the idea that "things will morally work out." If there is a divine plan, then it isn't clear that there is much wiggle room that allows us to "try to be moral," but I will

accept that morality and a divine plan are compatible for the sake of argument.

Divine plan: If the argument states that the belief in a divine plan is morally beneficial, then it is difficult to reject that God would be required to attain that benefit. No God, no divine plan. I suppose a divine plan *might* be encouraging to some people. We can expect to eventually become virtuous if there is a divine plan. This would encourage us to try to be virtuous. On the other hand, if there isn't a divine plan, some people might decide that being moral is too difficult and give up.

I don't know if belief in a divine plan is morally encouraging to everyone, some people, or no one. We would need a psychological study to find out. Additionally, perhaps morality could only be too hard given unrealistic moral goals. We should only be morally obligated to do what doesn't require excessive difficulty.

Things will morally work out: If the argument states that "things will morally work out," then it is clear why we need to believe in a moral order. We need to believe that our moral goals can succeed or we have no reason to have them. However, it isn't clear why God is necessary for things to morally work out. Maybe things will morally work out just because we know enough about the world to make sure of it.

Why can't we just learn enough about the world to have realistic moral goals? A doctor can have goals of giving surgery to people who need it. We shouldn't have goals of giving surgery to people who need it when we aren't qualified to do so.

Argument 2

This argument is the following:

1. If God exists, then he will help us accomplish our moral goals.
2. The belief that God helps us accomplish our moral goals is morally encouraging.
3. If a belief is morally encouraging, then it is morally beneficial.
4. We have reason to do what is morally beneficial.
5. Therefore, we have reason to believe in God.

This argument doesn't force us all to believe in God because we aren't obligated to do everything morally beneficial possible. It *might* be morally beneficial to believe in God, cure cancer, and save thousands of lives; but it might not be realistic to do all of these things.

I agree that if God exists, then it might help us accomplish our moral goals. I agree that this belief could be encouraging. I agree that we should do what is morally beneficial. However, it isn't clear that all morally encouraging beliefs are morally beneficial. Why? Because we need to have realistic moral goals. Thinking God will help us out might encourage people to have unrealistic moral goals, such as trying to give others surgery despite being unqualified. We should have moral goals that don't need God's existence.

Two More Objections

Objection 1: The most common objection against these sorts of arguments is that we can't (or shouldn't) believe something just because it benefits us to do so. I can't believe in unicorns, for example, just because such a belief would make the world more wondrous and give me a warm and fuzzy feeling.

Objection 2: Even if we grant that the benefit accorded by a belief is some reason to accept it, it isn't clear how much reason a benefit gives us to believe something. If I found a benefit to believing that the Earth is flat (such as getting a huge amount of publicity), that still doesn't seem sufficient reason to believe it. Why? Because we know it's false.

If we had equal reason to believe in God as to disbelieve, then perhaps a practical argument would be relevant. However, this agnostic position hasn't been established. We have some reason to reject God just because we have some reason to doubt the existence of any given entity without appropriate proof. We have reason to doubt the existence of ghosts, leprechauns, unicorns, and bigfoot just because we shouldn't believe something exists without proof. It seems likely that someone misidentified something everyday for something new, or someone just made up the existence of these things.

Conclusion

It might *not* be morally beneficial to believe in God, so these arguments are far from persuasive. Even if we established that it is morally beneficial to believe in God, it is still unclear that we have sufficient reason to believe. We might still have more reason to disbelieve than to believe.

Chapter 5: William Lane Craig's Argument from Morality

William Lane Craig argues that [intrinsic values](#) (real objective moral value) requires God. We can be nice to each other if God doesn't exist, but it wouldn't "really matter." (You can find his argument [in text format here](#) or as a [free streaming video here](#).) He basically argues that we have to either be reductionistic materialists or theists, but reductionistic materialists can't believe in intrinsic values. We know intrinsic values exist, so we have to be theists (believe in God).

I have already argued that [intrinsic values don't require God](#) precisely because materialists don't have to be reductionists. It is possible that the human mind and intrinsic values are an emergent part of the universe. Craig does not say why such a view can be dismissed despite being widely accepted by philosophers. There are contemporary philosophers who believe in intrinsic values and don't think they require God, and Craig's argument would not phase these philosophers because they accept irreducible facts. Craig seems to completely disregard the worldview of such contemporary philosophers.

Craig's Argument

Craig's argument is the following:

1. Either we must be reductionistic materialists or theists.
2. Reductionistic materialism can't account for intrinsic values.
3. Theism can account for intrinsic values.
4. Intrinsic values exist.
5. Therefore, God exists.

Reductionistic materialism is the view that the only real parts of the universe are the smallest material parts (particles and energy). Everything else is an illusion. Intrinsic values are not particles or energy, so intrinsic values (by definition) would be rejected by reductionistic materialists. (Of course, mental events would also have to be rejected by reductionistic materialists, and that seems to be sufficient reason to reject reductionistic materialism.)

How Plausible is Craig's Argument?

I have two major objections against Craig's argument. One, his argument is a false dilemma. Two, it could be a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Objection 1: His argument requires a false dilemma.

I agree that reductionistic materialists can't account for intrinsic values, and I agree that intrinsic values exist. Therefore, I agree that we have to reject reductionistic materialism. However, I don't agree that we "have to be theists." Why? Craig presents us with a [false dilemma](#). We don't have only two choices (to be reductionistic materialists or theists). We could be atheistic platonists (people who believe intrinsic values constitute a separate reality), dualists (people who view the mind and body as two different sorts of reality), pluralists (people who think there are multiple sorts of reality), or [materialistic emergence theorists](#) (people who think that there is only one reality with multiple irreducible elements). Right now I find some sort of materialistic emergence to be plausible.

What is materialistic emergence? The view that material conditions give rise to new sorts of reality. The brain isn't the mind. Instead, the mind exists as an irreducible part of reality that can't be fully described in non-mental terms. However, the mind exists because of the brain. Additionally, the mind is part of material reality. It isn't a separate substance or property. I think that intrinsic values exist from some sort of emergence as well.

Objection 2: He Provides a *Reductio ad Absurdum*.

William Lane Craig seems to think that he proved that God exists, but it seems more likely that he proved that one of his premises is false. I find his argument to be a *reductio ad absurdum*. The conclusion, "God exists," is not something anyone has to accept, so one of his premises is almost certainly false. Many people will then say, "Well, I guess intrinsic values don't exist then," and reject premise 4. However, I think premise 4 is true and I disagree with premise 1 instead. (I disagree that we either have to be reductionistic materialists or theists.)

One kind of bad argument: Premises of an argument should be more plausible than the conclusion. We need to start with things that are pretty certain to lead us to a conclusion that is no more plausible than the premises. There is something wrong with an argument if the conclusion is more certain than the premises. For example, "If I am in a dream world, then I can sit on this chair. I am in a dream world. Therefore, I can sit on this chair." We know I can sit on this chair, but we don't know I am in a dream world. We find it very implausible that I am currently in a dream world, so such premises don't seem to give "evidence" of the fact that I can sit on this chair.

Another kind of bad argument: An even worse mistake for an argument is to provide a conclusion that we find to be more *plausibly false* than the premises are plausibly true. Plausible premises should lead to somewhat less plausible conclusions, but a bad argument can have seemingly acceptable premises that lead to an *implausible* conclusion. For example, "Killing is always wrong. If killing is always wrong, then we shouldn't kill one person to save thousands of lives. Therefore, killing to save thousands of lives is wrong." Some people would agree with both of the premises, but the conclusion is almost certainly false.

If an uncertain premise leads to an obviously false conclusion, then we have an example of a "*reductio ad absurdum*." These are arguments

should be meant to show that an uncertain belief is probably false because it leads to absurd consequences. The belief that killing is always wrong seems to lead to the absurd consequence that killing one person to save thousands of lives is also wrong.

Craig's argument seems to be implausible for this reason. The premises might be accepted by some people, but it seems to lead to an absurd consequence. If we are to ever accept an argument for God, then the premises will have to be very close to certainty rather than merely "accepted by some people."

Some Additional Constructive Criticism

Not only is Craig's argument based on a fallacy, but I believe he uses some questionable methods of persuasion. His arguments might be made to "trick people to convert people to theism" rather than to rationally change people's mind. (I think Craig is too intelligent and well-informed to use these fallacies on accident.) Consider the following:

Suppressed Evidence

To use [suppressed evidence](#) is to refuse to mention certain essential factors that could plausibly undermine an argument. We might not want to mention objections to our arguments when those objections might prove us wrong.

Craig neglects to show that the very people who might disagree with him (e.g. emergence theorists) do exist, and their worldview is considered to be very plausible by the experts. Such a worldview is apparently "not worth mentioning." Even worse, many philosophers will reject reductionistic materialism and theism as plausible views. (I certainly think that reductionistic materialism is much less plausible than emergence materialism.) Craig *assumes* that we either have to be

reductionist materialists or theists. Those might not even be plausible options. Instead, the more plausible options seem to include Platonism and emergence materialism, for example.

Moreover, Craig gives a list of "testimonials" from professional philosophers who seem to agree that materialism is incompatible with intrinsic value. For example, he quotes Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science from the University of Guelph, as saying the following:

The position of the modern evolutionist . . . is that humans have an awareness of morality . . . because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' they think they are referring above and beyond themselves Nevertheless, . . . such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction, . . . and any deeper meaning is illusory

Obviously he didn't quote the opinion of professional emergence theorists. This gives the impression that the majority of professional philosophers agree with him. The fact that some philosophers disagree with him is not mentioned at all, and he does not consider any serious objections to his own argument.

Appeal to Ignorance

An [appeal to ignorance](#) is perfectly blended with suppressed evidence to give us the impression that theism is the only possible foundation for intrinsic values. An appeal to ignorance is the suggestion that "we don't know how to explain something being true, so it must be false." However, failing to explain something doesn't mean it's false. For example, we didn't always know how to explain what causes lightning without referring to God, but that doesn't mean God really does cause lightning.

Supposedly we are expected to agree that since atheists can't explain where intrinsic values come from, they have to reject intrinsic values altogether:

First, if atheism is true, objective moral values do not exist. If God does not exist, then what is the foundation for moral values? More particularly, what is the basis for the value of human beings? If God does not exist, then it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special or that their morality is objectively true. Moreover, why think that we have any moral obligations to do anything? Who or what imposes any moral duties upon us?

No serious attempt to actually answer the question is ever given. The question is taken to somehow vindicate his position despite the fact that some atheistic philosophers really do try to answer this question.

Moreover, philosophers don't have to explain everything just like scientists don't have to explain everything. Scientists didn't need to explain the cause of lightning before being able to do so, and we shouldn't feel the need to explain the cause of intrinsic values before being able to do so.

Conclusion

William Lane Craig might have a much better argument that morality requires God elsewhere. Perhaps this argument is just the one meant for the masses rather than for other philosophers. Either way, his use of fallacies seem to lack integrity and I see no reason to think intrinsic values could only exist with God, as I have argued for [elsewhere](#).

William Lane Craig is a major philosophical figure for many conservative Christians, and many people agree with his arguments, so it is worth our time to figure out where his arguments go wrong.

Chapter 6: Everyday Arguments that Morality Requires God

Whether or not morality requires God is a popular topic of conversation to laymen. It is worth considering arguments given by laymen because philosophers should stay close to real life and try not to drift into armchair abstraction that lacks real world application. Laymen argue about what matters to them based on everyday assumptions and concerns. I will take a look at some arguments given by laymen that morality requires God. In particular, an argument given by Ray Cotton, Marvin Olasky, and Luke Pollard. I will describe their arguments and I will explain why I do not find their arguments to be persuasive.

Ray Cotton's Arguments

Ray Cotton seems to assume that the only people who would ever think morality without God would be possible would be an atheist, but that is simply false. If I found out that God exists, I still wouldn't be sure that his existence is the source of [intrinsic value](#) (objective value). However, he does present several objections to the belief that morality could exist without God²:

1. Atheism is dangerous.

Cotton tells us that atheism is dangerous. Atheism leads to dictatorships and so forth.³

2 Cotton, Ray. "Morality Apart From God: Is It Possible?" Leadership U. 11 February 2010. <<http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/god-ethi.html>>.

3 "The U.S.S.R. tried to build an empire on godless atheism, and it failed miserably. Today in Russia we still see the results of the ethics of atheism. You would think that the Russians, having suffered so much under a totalitarian regime, would strive to do the right thing in appreciation for their new freedoms. Many have, but Russia today is torn apart by crime, greed, lawlessness, and immorality. Why? Was it merely too much freedom too soon, or are they still reaping the rewards of the ethics of atheism?"

My objection: There is two problems with this argument. One, the problems that might arise from atheism wouldn't prove atheists to have false beliefs. Two, no good argument is put forth to make me think that atheism will lead to horrific behavior anymore than religion already does. Fanatical suicide bombers wouldn't exist without religion, for example.

2. What is ethics without God? Relativism!

Cotton suggests that without God, we would end up creating moral principles because there couldn't be moral facts separate from our opinions.⁴ For example, morality could be based on our instincts.

My objection: This argument begs the question. We need to know: Do we need God to have intrinsic value? Cotton seems to just assume it is impossible. However, I believe in intrinsic values, but I don't think God has to exist for there to be intrinsic values.

3. Morality must come from creation!

I believe that Cotton wants to argue that God made everything, and morality is part of the universe.⁵

My objection: I agree that if God created everything, then morality would be part of it. However, we should stay away from such armchair

(ibid.) He also said, "If we don't believe we are created by God, but simply highly evolved animals, and if we believe we have accountability only to society, then there is no end to the depths of depravity that we can go in our search to justify our actions. Corrosion of morals begins in microscopic proportions, but if not checked by a standard beyond ourselves, it will continue until the corrosion wipes away the very foundation of our lives, and we find ourselves sinking in a sea of relativity.." (ibid.)

4 "From the time of the Greeks, there have been many philosophers who have sought to prove that it is possible to have a universal morality without God. There have been many arguments presented to support this position, and in theory they may be right, depending on what one means by the word universal. They would say, all you have to have is a consensus on what is considered right and wrong behavior." (ibid.)

5 "God is the creator and sustainer of all things [sic]. We would not even be self aware, let alone aware of right and wrong, if God had not created within us His image, and therefore the ability to make moral distinctions. The truth is we have no reference point for all this discussion about morality except as God reveals it. For us to argue with the source of morality is for the clay to argue with the potter." (ibid.)

abstract concerns when possible. I believe we have no more reason to talk about God creating the universe to explain morality than we need to refer to God creating the universe to explain lightning. We are interested in the everyday causes of morality and lightning, not just the extremely abstract cosmological problem of the beginning of the universe.

4. We couldn't know how to be moral without God!

Cotton assumes that we have been corrupted somehow through “original sin.” I don't know what that means. However, he also argues that God is the ultimate source of knowledge, so we couldn't know much about morality without his help⁶:

So the question of right or wrong has everything to do with the origin of our belief, not just the substance of it. No matter how sincerely I believe I am right about some moral decision, the true test is in the origin of that belief. And God is the only universal and absolute origin to all morality. (ibid.)

My objection: The problem with this argument is that we seem to know a lot about morality through personal experience, and we seem to know almost nothing about morality from the Bible. Buddhists in China know just as much about morality as Christians despite not reading the Bible. (Most people probably don't read the Bible, even if they are Christians.) Instead, everyday experiences seem to be enough to know quite a bit about morality. For example, my experience of pain seems to be enough to know that it is wrong to cause people pain.

6 “The second problem with these arguments is that they fail to recognize the nature of man. If man were not fallen, i.e., not corrupted by sin, we would have limitless potential to create from within ourselves a universal moral code. But, we are a fallen lot, every last one of us, and therefore incapable of fully knowing what is good (Rom. 3:23). We are even incapable of carrying out what we do know to be good (Rom. 7:18-21).” (ibid.)

5. There is no plausible worldview that could explain morality without God.

Theists could possibly explain that morality comes from God, but Cotton only finds one other worldview, which could provide for an explanation of morality without God: Naturalism, which is the view that science can explain everything. Apparently naturalism is the only other worldview worth mentioning, but Cotton assures us that it's an implausible view (despite being widely accepted by the experts).

What sort of explanation for morality has been developed by naturalists? An explanation based on evolution:

To these naturalists, all humans are born with a moral sense which becomes a habit of virtue as we practice comradeship and work through our common struggles. It is merely the result of a social instinct born within us. (Ibid.)

Additionally, he argues that naturalism is not plausible because it states that only a material world exists when our minds are not material.⁷

My objections: There are at least three major problems with his argument:

1. Inadequacies with naturalistic explanations must be contrasted with inadequacies with theism and other worldviews. It is quite possible that naturalism is the best worldview, even if it has inadequacies. (All worldviews might have inadequacies.)
2. The view that evolution can fully explain morality is merely a rejection of intrinsic value. Again, he begs the question by assuming that naturalists can't explain intrinsic values. In fact, some naturalists do believe in intrinsic values.

⁷ "As Christians, we recognize that man is more than just material; there is a lot more to us than just the physical body. We see this in our ability to mentally stand back and evaluate our lives, our ability to know right from wrong, and our self awareness and personality that make us unique from the rest of God's creation." (ibid.)

3. Not all naturalists reject the existence of mental phenomena. He seems to assume that all naturalists are reductionists and only believe particles are real. That is not the case. Mental and moral elements of reality could be irreducible but emergent parts of the universe that exist when certain material conditions cause them. The brain, for example, seems to cause the mind to exist.

6. What about the Bible?

Cotton asserts that the Bible is an important source of moral knowledge because it comes straight from God.⁸

My objection: I simply don't experience the Bible as an important source of moral knowledge. Many people even think the morality found in the Bible is atrocious. Ethical philosophers have always been some of the world's moral experts and they continue to be. They have generally found that reference to God does not help them provide us with good explanations or arguments.

Marvin Olasky's Argument

A college professor said that abortion should be legal (and paid by health insurance) because he was an atheist. Therefore, atheists can't be moral.⁹

8 “Because of our Christian perspective, we are interested not just in the physical evidences to the realities of life, but in the metaphysical evidences as well. For example, we have this book called the Holy Bible. It obviously is physical in nature because we can hold it and feel it and read it. But is there valid evidence that this book contains a message from God? Yes, in fact there are countless other books writtAen to affirm that there is, in the pages of the Bible, a metaphysical message from the Creator of the Universe. The historic testimony of the ages confirms to our satisfaction that this book is the very communication from God to us. Can we prove this with scientific experiments? No. But, we have experienced countless testimonies and evidences that this book is more than just physical in its nature.” (ibid.)

9 Olasky, Marvin. “Morality Without God?” Townhall.com. 11 Februrary 2010.
<http://townhall.com/columnists/MarvinOlasky/2009/11/11/morality_without_god.>

Olasky seems to give nothing more than testimonial evidence that atheists can't be moral. The college professor admitted that abortion might be wrong (cause too much harm), but it should be legal (and covered by a company health plan) because we don't know for sure.¹⁰ He then seems to think all atheists must think this way, and must allow all sorts of immorality until proven to be wrong.

My objections: I have the following two objections:

1. I suppose Olasky could take the professor to be an “expert,” but this would certainly be a fallacious “appeal to authority.” Why? Because the professor is certainly not representative of all atheistic philosophers.
2. I highly doubt that any ethical philosopher would have such a simple argument for abortion's legality. More likely is that Olasky failed to understand the arguments or failed to represent them properly.

Luke Pollard's Argument

Pollard argues that we experience ourselves as having moral duties, which must ultimately be to God¹¹:

But aren't we also obligated to [be moral]? We feel guilt when we go against the “good”; if we steal something from a shop, or lie for no good reason. And guilt is only felt when some obligation or duty is broken. So we do, it seems, have a duty to the “good”.

A duty, then, is defined as being held to account for our actions. But surely only a personal being can do that. For instance, I cannot have a duty to, say, a rock, but I can to a human being.

¹⁰ “WSA suggested in his book *Moral Skepticisms* (2006) that since we don't know whether abortion is morally wrong, it's unfair for employers to insist that health plans not pay for abortions.” (ibid.)

¹¹ Pollard, Luke. “Does Morality Point to God?” bethinking.org. 11 February 2010.
<<http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=305>>.

Hence, it would make sense to say that this objective “good” is not only unchangeable, but that he is also personal, because we are obligated to him. This, I believe to be a suitable candidate for the label that is “god”.

In this short article, we have established a choice; on an over-all level morality is either relative or objective. We have to make a decision, but relativism leads to infinite practical problems to the point that it is unworkable. So we chose the view that does appear to work – objectivism.

But we also have a duty to this objective “good”. When we go against it, we feel guilt, which we can only have towards a personal being. So, the “good” is alive, and interactive. We have a personal duty to an objective “good” being, so, it seems that he is deserving of the name “god”. (ibid.)

I don't quite understand Pollard's argument. I would think we have duties to other people. When do we have a duty to God but *not* a duty to anything else?

I suppose Pollard might be referring to the old idea that laws require a lawgiver. If there are moral laws, then someone must make the laws. Well, either that is true, but we might make our own moral laws based on our interest in benefits and harms, or there might not need to be a lawgiver at all. Moral laws are merely requirements that must be met in order to treat people well. What determines if someone is treated properly has more to do with helping them avoid pain or giving them something of intrinsic value, such as happiness or survival.

Pollard seems to transform the word “good” into God because we are taken to be held accountable and given obligations by it. Well, I think pleasure is something good, and I think that is quite relevant to my moral obligations. However, I feel no need to say that God is somehow making the pleasure good, or that God *is* the good found in pleasure.

Conclusion

Everyday arguments that morality requires God are not persuasive. The most relevant possibility is that God created everything including the moral part of the universe, but this issue is probably beyond our grasp of reality and is not relevant to our everyday concerns.

I suspect that the most relevant issue to everyday life is the possibility that atheists will be immoral, but I see no reason they would be. I suppose we could suspect that those who don't believe in intrinsic values might be more immoral than usual, but atheists can believe in intrinsic value.

Chapter 7: Kant's Argument for Faith in God

Many people believe that morality “requires” God. Without God, nothing would really matter. One philosopher who many refer to as supporting this claim is Immanuel Kant. In particular, his work The Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals, the Critique of Practical Reason, and Opus Postumum. However, Kant's argument is greatly misunderstood and it has a lot of “if-and-or-buts” involved. Kant does not believe that we ultimately have to believe in God. “Thou shalt believe in God” would certainly be out of the question. Instead, we merely have some reason to have faith in God (or whatever else could do the job). Why? Because God can make sure we can achieve our moral goals.

I am not an expert Kantian, but I do know the basics of Kant's argument. A good place to learn more about Kant's argument is Ethics Vindicated: Kant's Transcendental Legitimation of Moral Discourse by Ermanno Bencivenga. All of my citations are from this book.

There are multiple practical problems with morality. Assuming that we ought to do X, we need to be able to do X. “Ought” implies “can.” Why might we be unable to do X? Either because of inner or outer factors:

1. If we are “the slaves of our passions” as Hume thought, then morality will make no difference. We will do whatever we most desire to do rather than what practical reason requires. The solution: Free will.
2. Even if we can *try* to do the right thing, it might be impossible to actually succeed. The solution: God

Free will

It is possible that we aren't merely driven by irrational desires. Instead, we might have the freedom to do what is rationally required of us. Kant believes we have "free will" *if practical reason can determine our actions*.¹² We don't know if we have the free will required by morality, but we have reason to believe that we do. Why? Because denying that we have free will would be to give up on morality entirely.¹³ To repeat: Kant does not use the word "free will" the same way many other people use the word. He merely means that we have free will if practical reason can determine our actions.

Imagine that you like people and help an old lady to cross the street. If you did it just because of your desire to help, then you would have done it even if morality dictated the opposite. It might not seem so bad to be compelled to do the right thing, but compulsion doesn't always seem to make us do the right thing. Sometimes compulsion makes us do the wrong thing, such as those who swindle old ladies through pyramid schemes through the desire for money. Compulsion is morally irrelevant. If we want to be good people, we have to find out what actions are good and make sure we do it.

Free will as defined by Kant does appear to be a necessary assumption for morality to be possible. Without free will, some actions would harm people and others would benefit people, but there would be no reason to have moral laws. We couldn't decide to obey a moral law, so

12 "[I]f some behavior of mine, in addition to whatever heteronomous account it receives, could also be seen a *rational* behavior, as a manifestation of reason, as reason showing itself to be *practical*, to have concrete currency in the world, then it could be judged spontaneous behavior on the part of a rational being like myself. There would be no superordinate explanation in which such a rational account could be incorporated; the account itself would be self-contained (again, independently of what *other* accounts of the same behavior could also be given)" (Bencivenga 34).

13 "According to Kant, reason never directly engages the natural inclinations: 'sensory impulses... stand in no connection with the moral law. The latter is simply an idea of... [man's] reason, and hence we no more find a necessary agreement of sensory urges and inclinations with the moral law, than we do a contradiction, since there is no linkage at all between them'" (44).

it would be pointless. Kant doesn't prove free will exists. He only proves that if anyone is moral, he or she will have to assume free will is real.

God

It is possible that the natural world just so happens to make it possible for our moral endeavors to be successful. However, just the opposite seems to be the case and we never know for sure if our moral goals are really possible. "Ought" implies "can."¹⁴ If our moral obligations are impossible, then they aren't really moral obligations after all. Kant argues that we must *assume* that our moral goals can be achieved, and somehow this requires us to assume the existence of God.¹⁵

It might be possible that there are other ways for our goals to be achievable (other than *God as traditionally conceived*). Kant admits that "[f]rom the practical point of view, it is one and the same thing whether one finds the divinity of the [moral] command in human reason, or finds it [in] such a person [as God], since the difference is more one of phraseology than a doctrine which amplifies knowledge" (108).¹⁶ I understand this to say that God is a metaphor for the ability for our moral goals to succeed. We take ourselves as having rationally founded obligations, but we don't know for sure that these obligations could be fulfilled.

14 "There is a sense in which 'ought' implies 'can,' we noted already. It is not a cognitive sense; it cannot be. It cannot be the case that, because I consider myself subject to the moral law, I also know that I am able to obey it" (101).

15 "[T]o trust that she will be able to behave rationally in the end *is* to trust that *the world* will become rational—in light of the limitations of her finite being, she can hope for no favorable outcome unless everything else is cooperating in the same enterprise. Therefore, a presupposition of her behavior is that a universal teleology be intrinsic to nature: a plan guiding all of its concrete, empirical workings toward a final agreement with reason. Which in turn requires a perfect rationality having enough power to determine rational ends for all of nature and willing to exercise such power—and that is just our ordinary understanding of God" (104).

16 "Our previous analysis of object-based formulation of what could be said with no reference to God (or any other object); hence to say that one trusts that God exists is only another, more colorful and possibly more attractive, way of saying that one trusts that things will (rationally) work out" (105).

I don't fully understand Kant's argument, but I will give two interpretations of his argument to help us examine it:

Interpretation 1

1. We conceive of an obligation to promote the greatest good. (Perhaps we conceive that "I ought to promote the greatest good" is true through an intuition of practical reason.)
2. If we have an obligation to do something, then it must be possible to do it.
3. "God" is a metaphor for the possibility of achieving the greatest good.
4. Therefore, the assumption that we have an obligation to promote the greatest good logically implies the belief in "God."

Kant thought the greatest good was to be perfectly virtuous and happy.¹⁷ It seems correct to say that we ought to promote perfect virtue and happiness, which implies that we can do so. But we can't become perfectly virtuous and happy in the material world, so either (a) we ought not promote perfect virtue and happiness or (b) something other than the material world is making it possible to promote perfect virtue and happiness. For example, God as traditionally conceived could make people perfectly virtuous and happy in the afterlife.

However, this interpretation of Kant has two problems. One, it appears to misunderstand what ideals are. To ideally become virtuous and happy isn't necessary to promote *perfect* virtue because we can try to become more and more virtuous without ever being done. We could imagine that perfect virtue would be limitless, but that doesn't imply that perfect virtue could really exist. Such a concept might be nonsense. No matter how much virtue we have, we might be able to have more. It would be great to cure cancer, but it might be even

¹⁷ "This perfect being would guarantee the possibility of the perfect combination of virtue and happiness virtue deserves... which is inevitably presupposed by virtuous behavior" (105).

better to cure all disease, but it might be even better to cure all diseases that ever existed, and so on.

If our ideals are based on intrinsic values, then virtue and happiness might have intrinsic value. In that case, the more virtue and happiness the better. To idealize intrinsic values and suppose a maximal (perfect) manifestation of intrinsic value is unnecessary.

Two, whether or not virtue is possible in the afterlife is irrelevant to my attempt to achieve virtue *in this world*. If perfect virtue must be possible in order to justify our obligation to promote virtue, then it would seem that Kant already gave up on the idea of promoting virtue *in this world*. In that case we might as well give up now.

Interpretation 2

1. We conceive that we ought to do something.
2. If we ought to do something, then it must be possible.
3. It is only possible to achieve our moral obligations if “God” exists (because “God” is a metaphor for “it is possible to achieve our moral goals.”)
4. Therefore, if we assume that we ought to achieve a moral goal, then we must also assume that “God” exists.

Under this interpretation we have to assume that our moral goals can be achieved or we can't have them. Morality requires “God” because it would be impossible to have any moral obligations if it is impossible to achieve them (by definition).

However, this argument seems trivial. If “God” is just a metaphor for “there are moral goals that can be fulfilled,” then the conclusion is merely true by definition and no substantial claim is being made.

Still, Kant might be making a trivial argument just to point out that we don't have to believe in obligations at all. Perhaps all obligations are impossible to fulfill. Additionally, saying that “God” is “the possibility

of fulfilling our moral goals” is compatible with the Christian God as traditionally conceived. It might be that one way moral goals can be achieved is if an omnipotent entity makes sure of it.

Conclusion

Kant does not argue that we know God exists (as traditionally conceived). He merely argues that certain moral beliefs might imply God's existence *in the sense that we assume that we can accomplish our moral goals*. Our ordinary understanding is that God is a perfect and all powerful being that can assure us that we can accomplish our moral goals, but that is just one way of understanding the word “God.”

Additionally, Kant does not discuss intrinsic values in detail. It seems like a safe assumption to think that intrinsic values can exist even if God does not exist. We can harm people even if we are unable to rationally stop doing so. If we can find out about what intrinsic values exist and we are able to use that information to change our behavior, then we will be able to live a moral life.

At best, Kant showed religious people *a reason* to believe in a perfect and all powerful God as *one* way to make sense out of certain moral beliefs. At worst, he failed to prove that *we need to assume that perfect moral success is possible*. We could base our decisions on the best information we can find rather than on perfect knowledge. We might need to believe that our moral goals are generally possible without demanding that they be perfectly successful.

Conclusion

Where does morality come from? If you want to know the answer, then you should know what contemporary philosophers have to say about it. Almost no contemporary philosophers think God is required for morality, and the arguments that morality does require God appear quite ignorant of contemporary philosophy involving the origins of morality. I have found them to be unconvincing.

Further Reading

If you want to know more about meta-ethics and what contemporary philosophers have to say about the origins of morality, then you might be interested in the following:

- [My Free Philosophy Ebooks.](#)
- [Metaethics @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Moral Realism @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Moral Anti-Realism @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Essays on Moral Realism edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord](#)