

## **Christian Versus Naturalistic Attempts to Ground Morality**

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As David Catchpoole and Mark Harwood observe, “Every person has a fundamental belief system that determines how they see the world and how they respond to it.”<sup>1</sup> This belief system is known as a “worldview” and is “usually based on assumptions, or axioms, which are not directly testable.”<sup>2</sup> Someone with an atheistic worldview will necessarily be guided by those presuppositions toward certain ethical beliefs. Specifically, he cannot accept the moral authority of God. On his view God cannot be part of the grounding for morality. Catchpoole and Harwood argue that on naturalistic atheism, “there is no basis for determining value for anything aside from the shifting sands of human opinion.”<sup>3</sup> While many modern atheists would disagree with this conclusion, it is the logical outworking of a naturalistic worldview.

The dilemma for the naturalist lies in the question of grounding. Is morality ultimately subjective (i.e., grounded solely in subjects) or objective (i.e., grounded in something outside those subjects)? If the former, then it inevitably devolves into nothing more than personal preference. As Douglas Groothuis points out, some atheists attempt to argue that ethics can be relative to culture, not merely individuals. However, none of us belong to solely one culture, begging the question of which culture is supposedly determinative of the ethical norms to which we are subject. Ultimately, everyone has a unique set of cultural influences, meaning cultural relativism inevitably ends up becoming individualistic ethics.<sup>4</sup> Nobody truly behaves as if they

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<sup>1</sup> David Catchpoole and Mark Harwood, “Ethics and Morality,” in *Evolution’s Achilles Heels*, ed. Robert Carter (Powder Springs, GA: Creation Book Publishers, 2015), 234.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 339-40.

believe morality is nothing more than personal preference. When we are the victim of a perceived wrong, we clearly act as if there is an objective, transcendent moral standard which has been violated.

If morality is truly objective, then God can provide adequate grounding. Any ethical system consists of moral values and moral duties, both of which must have transcendent grounding if the system is to be truly objective. As to moral values, Groothuis explains that such values find their source in God's character.<sup>5</sup> When we describe something as "good," whether we realize it or not, we are saying it resembles (or is approaching) a particular character trait of God. As to moral duties, such duties are owed to persons, not objects. Someone who arbitrarily kicks a rock into a flower bed has not committed an immoral act against the rock. However, someone who does the same to a person is morally blameworthy. A personal God can serve to ground moral duties. Moral obligations can be owed to Him from which all other moral duties are derived.

While many atheists claim to be able to objectively ground ethics without God, their efforts invariably fail. Some are influenced by Immanuel Kant and attempt to ground an ethic in pure reason. For example, even though Kant was a devout believer in God, James Rachels argues that Kant did not resort to God in grounding his ethical system.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, when there is something we want, we recognize a course of action that we ought to follow in order to achieve that end. Kant refers to these as "hypothetical imperatives" because they are contingent upon us first having the requisite desire. Kant also claimed there was a "categorical imperative"

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>6</sup> James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 104-05.

to which all rational people must agree. Specifically, we should “act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”<sup>7</sup>

However, this ultimately provides no grounding at all. By what authority is this imperative “categorical?” An atheist who argues that people generally agree to this imperative is confusing ontology with epistemology. It is also not self-evident that reason requires Kant’s imperative to be true. It is not mandated by any formal law of logic nor is it definitionally mandated (such as saying “all bachelors are men”). Thus, without a transcendent source to ground this imperative, it turns out not to be categorical at all.

Utilitarianism relies upon a calculus of consequences to determine the greater good, whether quantitatively as proposed by Jeremy Bentham, or qualitatively as adapted by John Stuart Mill. Allegedly, objective moral values can be based in the results of this calculation. Among other issues with utilitarianism, however, is that it is circular. The moral “good” is defined as that which brings about the greatest “good.” But as Norman L. Geisler observed, how can one know what is the greatest “good” without first defining and grounding “goodness?” In the end, utilitarianism is still left in search of an absolute moral source.<sup>8</sup> Utilitarianism also suffers from the lack of a basis for moral duties. Even if we could define “goodness” based upon consequences, that in no way imposes an obligation upon us to behave in a good manner.

Atheist Sam Harris attempts to put a neuroscientific “spin” on traditional utilitarianism by claiming that human well-being (or the well-being of sentient creatures) is the ultimate value,

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, Kant had multiple ways of describing this imperative, but space does not allow for a more thorough discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1989), 76.

and from that all other moral values can be derived.<sup>9</sup> However, his system suffers from the same flaws. He never satisfactorily explains *why* it must be that human well-being is the ultimate value. Again, even if all of humanity agreed that this was the case, that would still be confusing epistemology with ontology. Further, Harris' system is incomplete because even if he was correct that neuroscience can illuminate moral values, it cannot impose upon us a duty to behave in accordance with those values.

Catchpoole and Harwood note that a common excuse atheists give for rejecting God is because He is allegedly “some kind of moral monster who commanded the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the inhabitants of the land promised to the Israelites.”<sup>10</sup> First, the interpretation of the relevant verses given by skeptics is always deceptively slanted. For example, Genesis 6:11-13 makes it clear that God acted out of judgment, not an illegitimate desire to wipe out any particular race or nationality. It was the sin that needed to be eradicated. Scripture is filled with instances in which people turned from sin and God relented. However, even more significant is that atheists fail to appreciate how to even suggest that God did something immoral requires the existence of an objective moral law by which to judge His actions. As noted above, the existence of an objective moral law requires God to be its source. The atheist's objection implicitly assumes the existence of God in its effort to disprove Him.

In short, morality must be either subjective or objective. Judging by the way we act, nobody truly believes it is subjective, but the only successful way in which objective ethics can

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<sup>9</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 198.

<sup>10</sup> Catchpoole and Harwood, “Ethics and Morality,” 239.

be grounded is in the person of God. Given that objective morality requires God, the claim that God has acted immorally is self-defeating. It first must assume God in its attempt to deny Him.