The Moral Argument and the Problem of Evil

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The problem of evil and the moral argument for the existence of God are intertwined. Specifically, when the skeptic claims that there is too much evil in the world to believe in the Christian God, he is invoking an objective moral framework. However, the existence of an objective moral framework presupposes the existence of God, the precise thing the skeptic is attempting to disprove.

As Paul Copan demonstrates, belief in the existence of objective moral values is a properly basic belief. He says, "As with science, morality begins with certain axioms or first principles. First principles are self-evident to the person who has not hardened his conscience."[1] Everyone acts as if objective moral values exist, even if they outwardly state otherwise.

If objective moral values do exist, however, they bring with them profound ramifications for the existence of God. Douglas Groothuis summarizes the argument as follows:

1. If a personal God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, a personal God exists.[2]

Premise 2 is the properly basic belief discussed by Taliaferro. In regard to premise 1 the theist can provide a consistent and plausible grounding for moral values on a theistic worldview. Specifically, moral values find their source in specific attributes of God's character.

Further, the theist can also provide multiple reasons to justify why this is a reasonable stopping point for the inquiry. First, as Taliaferro observes, "God, who is essentially perfect, does not have obligations to some external moral standards."[3] Thus, if moral values are derived

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[1] Paul Copan, "The Moral Argument," in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad Meister (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 129.

[2] Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 345.

[3] Copan, "The Moral Argument," 138.

from God's character, he can serve as a stopping point because he would owe no duties to anyone else or to some standard external to himself.

Second, if God is unchanging and eternal (whether we think of that term temporally or in the sense of transcending time), that means that moral values found in his character have always resided there. There was never a point in time in which these values did not exist within him. Thus, there is no need to look for a source "before" God or to ask how God acquired these values.

Third, the concept of a character bearing certain moral values is familiar to our experience. We all have such characters, albeit far from perfect. Perhaps someone describes us as a loving or caring person. These are character traits to describe our nature. If this is true of humanity, it is certainly reasonable to believe it is also true of God. However, with his perfection he provides the perfect, unblemished model for all of his character traits.

Finally, in addition to moral values, any theory as to the source of objective morality must also explain the origin of moral duties. Duties are owed by and to persons, not objects. The source of moral duties, therefore, cannot be an impersonal object. God, as a personal being, provides us with a plausible source for moral duties as well as values.

Therefore, the conclusion follows. If objective moral values and duties exist (as the atheist assumes they do in raising the problem of evil) then God exists.

Taliaferro also observes that many skeptics attempt to avoid this conclusion by grounding objective morality in something other than God. He states, "Various non-theistic moral realists … maintain that statements such as '*Murder is wrong*' would hold true even if God does not exist. They are simply brute facts or givens."[4] However, if the skeptic is going to stop there,

[4] Ibid., 132.

with moral values being merely "brute facts," then it is incumbent upon him to justify *why* he is stopping there. What reasons are there to believe moral values are merely brute facts and there is not something more beneath them? Without this justification, the skeptic's argument is ad hoc, in essence refusing to go deeper without justifying why the inquiry should end.

Sam Harris, in his book "The Moral Landscape," concedes that morality is objective. However, he claims the moral good is equivalent to whatever promotes the well-being of conscious creatures. According to Harris, "questions about values – about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose – are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood."[5]

Harris' argument, however, is no less ad hoc than those claiming moral values are mere brute facts. He has not explained *why* the well-being of conscious creatures is morally good. He has merely stated it. He picks a different stopping point than those who resort to brute facts, but Harris still fails to justify why his chosen point should be the end of inquiry. In other words, he has failed to ground his argument.

> Harris tries to claim otherwise. In defending his starting point, he states I think we can know, through reason alone, that consciousness is the only intelligible domain of value. What is the alternative? I invite you to try to think of a source of value that has absolutely nothing to do with the (actual or potential) experience of conscious beings. … So my claim that consciousness is the basis of human value and morality is not an arbitrary starting point.[6]

Harris goes wrong, however, in failing to appreciate that while consciousness may be related to value, they are not synonymous. Even assuming some level of moral duties are owed to all conscious creatures, it is not true to say that all conscious creatures owe moral duties.

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[5] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2010), 11-12.

[6] Ibid., 49-50.

Harris is confusing correlation with causation. There is a correlation between consciousness and morality because all moral agents are conscious creatures. That is the reason why all the moral values we imagine concern conscious creatures in one way or another. However, the converse is not true. Not all conscious creatures are moral agents. A lion does not owe a moral duty to zebra not to eat it. Thus, consciousness and moral agency are not one and the same.

Therefore, the existence of objective moral values is a properly basic belief shared by everyone, whether or not they openly acknowledge this to be true. Theism can adequately explain this existence. Competing theories fail to do so. As a result, when the skeptic raises the problem of evil as an argument against theism, and thereby assumes the existence of objective moral values, she is actually implicitly affirming the very thing she is seeking to disprove.