

Thomas W. Smythe and Michael Rectenwald

ABSTRACT: In this paper we critically evaluate an argument put forward by William Lane Craig for the existence of God based on the assumption that if there were no God, there could be no objective morality. Contrary to Craig, we show that there are some necessary moral truths and objective moral reasoning that holds up whether there is a God or not. We go on to argue that religious faith, when taken alone and without reason or evidence, actually risks undermining morality and is an unreliable source of moral truths. We recommend a viewpoint on morality that is based on reason and public consensus, that is compatible with science, and that cuts across the range of religious and non-religious positions.

THERE IS AN HISTORICAL DEBATE in philosophy that begins with Plato's *Euthyphro* on the relation between the omniscient authority of God and morality. We do not intend to rehash the vast literature on this topic.¹ Instead we will concentrate on the arguments given by William Lane Craig, a well-known philosopher of religion whose influence on Christians is considerable. Craig has given a moral argument for the existence of God.² If he is correct, then non-believers and non-theistic moral theories are inadequate. We regard Craig's view as invalid and in need of correction. We contend that the argument Craig gives is unsound. Let us first state the argument as Craig gives it:

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists. (p. 19)

The argument is deductively valid because if (1) and (2) are true, then (3) must be true. However, the argument is unsound because, as we will show, (1) is clearly false.

¹Some of the more salient work in this area includes Peter Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion* (Edinburgh UK: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1998), and his "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (London UK: Pemberton Books, 1973), one of the first recent attempts to divorce morality from religion; P. H. Nowell-Smith, "Morality: Religious and Secular," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. John Edwards (New York NY: Macmillan, 1967); Plato, *The Euthyphro*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York NY: Pantheon Books, 1961), pp. 169–85; and Philip Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1978) are among the vast literature.

²William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate between A Christian and an Atheist* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 17–21, 67–69. In the introduction the debaters say that this is a popular debate and not professional philosophy, which would be more detailed and careful (pp. x–xi). However, Craig does not appear to have discussed this issue more professionally elsewhere, and since he influences the beliefs of a goodly number of people, we think it is worth pursuing the difficulties with his views. Hereafter, the page numbers in parentheses in the main text will be to this volume.

We will prove this by showing that (a) Craig has given no good reason for supposing that (1) is true, and that (b) there is excellent reason for supposing that (1) is false. We hold that there are objective moral values, in Craig's sense of that phrase, even if there is no God. We will then argue that it is desirable for pragmatic reasons to take the justification of morality out of the hands of religion entirely.

First, we argue that (a) the author gives no good reason for believing that (1) is true. Let us look at the reasons that the author gives us for (1). The author must show that objective moral values are impossible without God. What is an objective moral value? Craig says that objective moral values are "values that are valid and binding whether anyone believes them or not" (p. 17). An example that the author gives is that the Holocaust was objectively wrong regardless of whether or not the Nazis, or anyone else, believed it was wrong. The author quotes non-theistic philosophers Bertrand Russell, Michael Ruse, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who all denied that there are any objective moral values. It should be mentioned here that there are plenty of non-theistic philosophers who have defended objective moral values.³ In addition, simply finding a few non-theists who disclaim objective moral values is not a good reason to think that they do not exist if there is no God. We raise some questions about Craig's conception of objective moral values. First, is a proposition binding independently of what anyone thinks *sufficient* for objectivity? We take Craig to be saying that it is sufficient. Secondly, if being valid and binding independently of what anyone thinks is *necessary* for objectivity in morality, then we believe this condition can be met by a non-theistic moral theory. But let us look at the arguments of the author.

The author says that in the absence of God there is no reason to think that, if we evolved through a process of evolution only, that there could be objective values.⁴ The author says if one person were to rape another and if the rapist were an atheist, there would be nothing wrong with it. In short, if God does not exist, there is really nothing wrong with raping someone (18). We think that the author commits a form of the genetic fallacy here. His reasoning seems to be something like this:

1. Without God the morality of human beings simply evolved by natural processes.
2. Any moral code that evolves by natural processes cannot be objective.
3. Therefore, a non-theistic morality cannot be objective.

Again, the argument is deductively valid but nevertheless unsound. It is unsound because premise (2) is false. Premise (2) is false because it assumes that if morality is something that is only conceived by human beings, then since human beings conceive it, it cannot be true independently of our beliefs. But a human origin for morality does not negate its truth as something independent of the beliefs of any

³Russ Shafer-Landau, Michael Smith, James Rachels, and others have argued for the objectivity of morality without theism. One example is James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, chap. 11, "Ethics and Objectivity," in *Problems From Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2005).

⁴We want to point out that these two alternatives are not exhaustive. Human beings could have been put here by a giant gorilla, a nonbenevolent deity, two or more Gods, or an endless list of other possibilities.

person or group. We think that we can allude to universal moral truths that are true independently of what people think and that are true universally by virtue of the meaning of the terms involved: they are logically necessary moral truths. The explicit recognition of these truths evolved as mankind did, yet they are universally necessary moral truths that are being expressed in the ways in which our language is actually used.

One example of a universal moral truth that is logically necessary and true independently of anyone's belief is the statement "murder is morally wrong." The term "murder" means "to kill unlawfully and with malice" or "the unlawful and malicious killing of a human being by another." It is universally and necessarily true that "murder is wrongful killing," whether anyone believes it or not and whether or not there is a God.⁵

The author has a further argument. Suppose "moral values do exist independently of God. . . . How does that result in a moral obligation for me? . . . Who or what lays such an obligation on me?" (p. 19). Our question here is why do moral values have to be given by someone, or laid on us, to have a foundation? Why cannot moral agents, or humans, give themselves moral obligations by virtue of the relations in which they stand to each other, and by virtue of the common moral language they use? Such moral obligations, once conceived, would be binding on all moral agents whether they believe so or not.

The author argues that without God there would be no foundation or ground for morality (p. 20). Even if objective moral values existed, according to the author, there would be no grounds for our moral obligations. Our reply is that utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics, ethics of virtue theories, and social contract theories of ethics have all provided grounds and foundations for morality that meet the conception of objective moral values that the author has specified. On any one of these moral theories reasons can be given to ground our moral theories. We do not need a deity to do the job.⁶

We now argue (b) that there are excellent reasons for supposing that (1) is false. Consider our moral language. Our moral language is enough to provide for an objective morality that is true independently of anyone's thinking so. Consider the following moral argument:

1. Lying tends to harm other people.
2. Harming other people is presumptively morally wrong.
3. Therefore, lying, when it results in harming other people, is presumptively morally wrong.

This is a sound and valid deductive moral argument. The argument is sound independently of whether anyone believes it or not. If someone were to accept (1) and

⁵We do not think we have to show how these moral truths deriving from humans and encoded in human language became logically and objectively true. That would take a book. Craig does not have to show how humans developed a belief in God as the author of moral truths either.

⁶We believe we can make this point that possible nontheistic grounds can and have been given by ethical theorists without going into the details or trying to establish those theories. We assume the knowledgeable reader can fill in the details.

(2) but deny (3), one would simply be mistaken. Premises (1) and (2) logically imply (3) whether any moral agent makes an inference from premises (1) and (2) to the conclusion (3) or not. It is just as if one were to fail to make the inference from $3x = 3$ to $x = 1$. Both would be logical errors. This consideration completely satisfies the author's conception that objective moral values are valid and binding whether anyone believes them or not. We need no appeal to abstractions or moral entities or divine commands. The objectivity of moral values lies in moral reasoning and moral logic.

Does Craig think that God has moral authority because he knows moral truths? If so, why can't we know them as well? God may be better placed epistemically by being omniscient. That will still not show that moral truths do not exist independently of God. Craig may mean that God is the originator of moral requirements by divine fiat. This may be true, but it is not necessarily the case and the absence of divine fiat does not abrogate the possibility of an objective morality.⁷

Craig makes no good reply to the famous *Euthyphro* dilemma of Plato's. Is abusing children immoral because God forbids it, or does God prohibit us from abusing children because it is wrong? The author says nothing to show that abusing a child is not objectively wrong if God does not exist. His command—like His existence—is not necessary to make child abuse immoral. It is necessarily true that child abuse is immoral whether there is a God or not. The author does not show "how" God underwrites morality in any meaningful way.

According to William Hasker (in correspondence), we have still not given a compelling reason for thinking that justice and other moral values could be objective if there were no God.⁸ Craig could very well say that "(2) Harming other people is presumptively morally wrong" is true only because there is a God, and would not be true otherwise. So, according to Hasker, we have not refuted Craig's position.

We agree that we have not refuted Craig or shown that he is wrong to hold his position. Indeed, objective morality may exist due to divine fiat. However, we have shown that it is possible to hold an alternative position. Craig is claiming that objective morality is impossible without God, but by showing that it is possible to hold another position, we have shown that no one is compelled to hold Craig's position. We think we have a plausible alternative view to the author because he has not shown just exactly how God underwrites an objective morality, or why no alternative position can be true.

The author may say that he is arguing that only an omniscient being who can take a view *sub species aeternitatis* can be morally objective, since there would be a correct answer to every moral question from such a point of view. However, the author never makes this clear. One problem with this view is that it does not help us to solve moral dilemmas. If that is the case, then there is no source of knowledge for human beings on certain moral quandaries such as the rights of workers, the effects of capitalism, stem-cell research, and cloning human beings. If the sole goal of moral agents is to find out what God wants us to do, there is no reliable

⁷We are indebted to Doug Long for the ideas in this paragraph. Long points out that even though God can punish us, that may or may not have anything to do with moral truths.

⁸William Hasker has kindly read our paper and made some comments on it.

answer to that question. Consider the methods for finding out what God wills us to do. Religious faith is one such resource. But religious faith causes some people to behave abominably and to commit crimes against humanity in the name of God. Sacred texts, like the bible, provide another way. But nothing is true just because it is in the bible or in other sacred texts. When someone is telling other people how to live their lives, or what they ought to do, one needs reasons for acting on what any sacred text commands or forbids. If one can give no reasons, then there is not yet a good reason why anyone should or should not do it. This is especially true because there are diverse religions with diverse sacred texts that are not all compatible. We do not find the method of revelation to be a reliable indicator of what is right and wrong for human beings to do. We firmly believe that revelation never has been and never will be a reliable guide to understanding the reasons why something is morally right or wrong. Some people are not graced with such revelations, and thus revelation misses some of the very people who need instruction the most. Revelation may be a ground for a personal relationship with a deity, but it is not a reliable basis for telling other people how they ought to live their lives *vis-à-vis* other methods like evidence and reason.

There is a more perspicuous way that we can bring out our argument. Consider child abuse. We think that it is a necessary truth that “it is wrong to abuse someone.” It is objectively wrong in the same way that a truth of arithmetic is true, whether anyone believes it or not, independently of what anyone thinks. If someone thinks that “it is wrong to abuse someone” is not true by virtue of the meaning of the terms in the statement, then we would ask him to describe a logically possible situation in which it would be all right to abuse someone. We submit that it cannot be done. To abuse means “to use wrongly, to misuse; to mistreat.” The statement “it is wrong to abuse someone” is necessarily true independently of anyone’s belief whether there is a God or not. On the other hand, if somehow God willed that we should abuse a child, then God would be wrong. Even if there were no God, then it would still be objectively and necessarily true that it is wrong to abuse someone.

Craig admits this point himself when he argues that objective moral values exist. He says: “We know objective moral values exist because we clearly apprehend some of them. The best way to show this is to describe situations in which we clearly see right and wrong: torturing an child, incest, rape . . .” (p. 21). We agree, and we see these truths to be the case independently of what anyone may think (thus they are objectively true) and whether or not there is a God. So, we may conclude that these truths exist independently of God’s will and do nothing to show that God exists. Further, it is just not true that if there were no God, then ethical judgments would be a matter of “expressions of personal taste” (p. 20). There are objective ethical truths for both the believer and non-believer alike.

The author’s argument can be interpreted in another way. Premise (1) says that if God exists, there are objective moral values. That is true. If God exists, and he wills that stealing is wrong, then it is an objective truth that stealing is wrong because God says so, whether anyone believes it or not. The argument then goes on that since objective moral values exist, there is a God. However, that does not follow. Since there are other ways of accounting for the existence of objective moral values, their

existence does not entail the existence of a deity. The argument is invalid. It has the form if p, then q; q, therefore p. This pattern is clearly an example of affirming the consequent, which is a deductively invalid argument form. Nor is it a good inductive argument or an argument from the best explanation. We thus conclude that the values that the author cites are necessarily good or bad independently of anyone's thinking so, and good or bad whether or not there is a God. Craig has not shown premise (1), namely, that if there is no God, objective moral values do not exist, to be true. There are excellent reasons to think that it is not true. Hence, his moral argument for the existence of God is unsound or invalid.

We now argue that for pragmatic reasons we should reject moral arguments from the existence of God as well as the position that morality is somehow dependent on religion, because to do so actually undermines morality. We begin by noting what William K. Frankena said in a paper on the logical relation between morality and religion: "one cannot help but wonder if there is any rational and objective method of establishing any religious belief against proponents of other religions or irreligion." He warned us against introducing "into the foundations of morality . . . all of the difficulties involved in the adjudication of religious controversies." Such a view "encourages ethical and political skepticism in those who cannot accept the required religious beliefs." He adds that "if one is honestly to hold that morality can be established if and only if it is grounded in religion, then one must also believe that religion has adequate grounds to stand on."⁹ We maintain that morality does not have to be grounded on religion, and, further that an effort at a religious grounding undermines morality. Frankena was much too kind and subtle.

Religious faith is compatible with a lack of evidence and a lack of reason. So, if morality depends in the strong sense on religion, the foundation of morality will have to be religious faith. But blind faith of any sort (including religious) has not proven to be conducive to producing truth. If I have blind faith that someone who has gone off to fight in the war in Iraq will return unscathed, that is not a reliable indicator of the truth of such a belief. We think it is better to base morality on scientific knowledge and human reasoning as much as possible.

To take an example from the contemporary scene, President George W. Bush, the leader of the free world in 2008, believes that frozen embryos are fully human beings and ought not to be used for stem cell research. His belief is based on the view that the embryo embodies a human genome at the time of fertilization, and this seems to be a scientifically established fact. But scientific knowledge shows that the human embryos that are destroyed for stem cell research do not have brains, or even neurons. There is no reason to believe that they suffer their destruction in any way at all. Even though they contain human genomes, it does not follow that they are fully-fledged human beings. Killing a fly may cause more suffering than killing a human blastocyst. As a result, we may be unnecessarily prolonging the misery of millions of human beings who could probably be helped by the development of stem cell research. We find this morally suspect.

⁹William K. Frankena, "Is Morality Logically Dependent on Religion?" in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 30.

Another example is that of a pope who apparently advocates that people in poor countries should not have abortions or use other methods of contraception. Instead he seems to recommend that they use one of the methods of natural family planning, but we believe that such methods may prove less effective than contraception, thereby allowing them to have numerous children, even though they are suffering from lack of food and housing, and contributing to population explosion. Again, we find this sort of position advocated by a world leader morally suspect.

Another way that religious faith may undermine morality has to do with moral knowledge. How do we know what God requires of us? This is usually done by appealing to some sacred text such as the bible. Although we do not have the space here to go into the matter sufficiently, the bible was probably written by human beings, and nothing is true necessarily just because it is uttered in the bible. Instead, its propositions require independent moral reasoning if it is to be established as acceptable morality. It is quite controversial whether the entire bible is to be regarded as the inerrant word of God, and we will not enter into that thicket here. We point out that the bible documents such things as slavery, killing homosexuals and adulterers, killing prostitutes, killing children who curse their parents, burning witches, and dozens of other questionable precepts. Although the bible does not approve of everything it mentions, we think that there are morally suspect directives implied or explicitly mentioned therein, and we think it sufficient to point out that if morality can be established without such controversial foundations, it is worth doing so.

We think it is relevant to point out here that classical utilitarians such as David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John S. Mill formulated the principle of utility without any mention of God's will. These theories are compatible with theism, but the non-believer can just as well adopt these theories too. Kantian deontological ethics is based on what is rational to do, and, although it is compatible with theism, it can be held without any dependence on a deity. The social contract theory of ethics does not depend on a deity for the social contract to be objective, once consent is given. The ethics of virtue, as formulated by Plato and Aristotle, does not depend on a deity. There is a certain kind of person that we ought to be for humans to thrive, independent of any deity. This remains true for more recent ethics of virtue theories.¹⁰

Religious ethics may also undermine morality by its tendency to be authoritarian. Religious authorities such as priests or preachers may be presumed to have been authorized to tell others what God wants them to do or to avoid. But we find the whole idea of such authorities problematic insofar as they obstruct our access to moral truths, and we find this to be a further way in which religion risks undermining morality. We do not think appeals to such moral authorities are preferable. As we have suggested, in some cases they may implicitly or explicitly maintain morally suspect positions. Instead, morality ought to be like science, in which a community of scholars searches for truth using reliable epistemic norms. We feel that morality should change as the facts, situations, and findings of science change. Such a view

¹⁰We take it that the typical reader of this paper knows these ethical theories well enough so that we do not have to go into the details to show that each of them is compatible with nontheism.

is incompatible with most religious means for gaining knowledge about reality and morality, such as revelation and scriptural authority.

When reasonable persons morally disagree, we do not want to accept without further qualification that one of them speaks for God, or that the other is attacking God, being blasphemous, or committing a heresy. Moral disagreement should be reasonable and open to public debate, with participants arriving at consensus based on reasonable considerations, without reversion to religious authority that may stifle such debate and consensus.

We conclude that an objective morality is possible without God. We find this liberating, uplifting, and beneficial to everyone concerned. We can direct our own lives by basing morality on evidence and reason rather than satisfying divine directives. If we see no compelling reason to do otherwise, we are happy non-diviners. In addition, we find it necessary for pragmatic reasons not to ground morality on religion since religious based morality may prove in some cases to be inimical to human welfare. Religious faith may inhibit the development of competent moral agents. We agree with those philosophers who advocate having a common morality for all of mankind based on evidence, reason, and justified belief independently of any particular religion.¹¹ We need a philosophically justified common morality that cuts across religious differences and irreligion.

¹¹Nothing we have said rules out adopting religious faith as a source of comfort, meaning, and purpose in life for believers. We are only against using such faith as a basis for telling everyone else how they ought to live their lives without appeal to evidence, reason, and justified belief. We do realize that many theists are reasonable moral agents. We just do not think it is because they are theists. We are concerned with the ones who are not morally reasonable because they are theists. We think the philosophy of William Lane Craig promotes intolerance towards other people because they are not theists.