

The Grounding for Moral Obligation

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The aim of this paper is to provide a coherent, sufficient foundation for objective moral obligation. Learning about the various religions, ethical theories, and cultures around the world in order to engage in some sort of morally permissible way when we visit those regions of the world is ultimately futile and self-stifling if there is no basis on which objective morals even exist. The view that I will be defending will be the idea that objective moral obligation is grounded in a personal God. For clarification, the notion is in regards to moral ontology, not moral epistemology.

The Yale philosophy professor Dr. Shelly Kagan engaged in a debate with philosopher and theologian Dr. William Lane Craig on the issue of whether God is necessary for the existence of objective morality in 2009. Despite expectations, the entire debate was essentially worthless because the two participants could not come to agree upon a shared definition of the word “objective.” Thus, let me define what I mean by “objective.” What I mean by “objective” is “existing and binding independent of human opinion or conjecture.” So, when I say morals exist objectively, I am saying, for example, that torturing a child for the fun of it is wrong regardless of what anyone thinks on the matter, even if everyone on Earth thinks it to be okay a hundred years from now. I am putting the moral realm on the same existential plane as the physical realm. It doesn’t matter what one thinks about the existence of the planet Earth, even if one is correct or incorrect about its existence, it simply exists. I will continue to define any potentially ambiguous terms as the paper progresses.

The key ingredient of any attempt towards grounding objective moral obligation is to first assign intrinsic value and worth to human persons. By “intrinsic value” I mean that something is not merely a means to an end, but an end in of itself, and to be loved or sought after for its own sake. If human persons have no intrinsic value, and are at best of extrinsic worth, a means to an

end, then the entire notion of what we intuitively understand morality to be crumbles to the ground. What then can provide us with establishing that human persons have intrinsic value?

I suggest that the only non-arbitrary way to assign intrinsic value to human persons is to assert that human persons are created in the image of a personal God. God, classically understood in the monotheistic tradition, is a maximally great being. Thus, loaded in the word “God” are inherent great-making properties that carry moral significance, such as maximal goodness, maximal worth, intrinsic worth, and worthiness of worship. So, if human beings are created in the image of such a God, then human persons require a respect that resembles respect for God, who is to be valued in Himself.

When we begin to investigate the characteristics of morality, the premise that its source is found in a personal God makes all the more sense. Morality is **prescriptive, commanding, authoritative, and objective**. Prescriptions and commands are forms of communication, and communication occurs only between persons. Morals deal with a purpose and a will, so its source must also have a purpose and a will, and purpose and will only occurs in persons. Morals are authoritative, so they must come from an authority, and authority can only be held by a person. Morals, properly and intuitively understood, are objective and transcend human individuals, society, and time, so its source must also transcend human individuals, society, and time. This brings us to a personal source that transcends human individuals, societies, and time. Since abstract objects aren’t personal, only a personal God fits the description of the source of morality.

Many object that God being the source of morality does nothing to solve the issue because it creates a fatal dilemma to theism. This objection was originally made by Plato, and is

known as the Euthyphro dilemma, which argues that either (1) if something is good only because God wills it, then the good is arbitrary and even murder or rape could have been good things; and (2) if something is only God's will because it is good, then goodness lies outside of God, which shows that He isn't the source of morality (which would also rob Him of His sovereignty and aseity!) (Plato and Grube). The dilemma, however, is a false one; there is a third option. God doesn't will something because it is good, nor is it good by an arbitrary will, but God's will and commandments flow from and reflect His character, which is the good. In other words, *He* is the good; *He* is the moral standard. Thus, morality is not something that is created *ex nihilo*, but is changeless and eternal, so as the character and the will of the Source.

Speaking of Plato, another objection sometimes made is that of moral Platonism, which asserts that morals are abstract entities that exist independently of any person, human or divine – they are ideals that exist in the realm of “the Forms” (Kraut). There are two problems with this, though. Firstly, morals can't be abstract platonic forms floating around in Plato's Heaven existing independently of persons, because morals are completely dependent on persons, as mentioned earlier. Although moral Platonism can account for moral objectivity, it is persons, not ideals, who issue commands, prescriptions, and hold authority. Duties only arise in relation to people, not metaphysical concepts. Secondly, there is no way to assign intrinsic value to human persons on moral Platonism. The same problems arise in trying to ground moral obligation in an impersonal “God,” such as the ones in Eastern religions. Francis Schaeffer said that “if one starts with an impersonal beginning, the answer to morals eventually turns out to be the assertion that there are no morals. This is true whether one begins with the Eastern pantheism or with energy particles. With an impersonal beginning, eventually morals are just another form of metaphysics, of being. Man has a feeling of moral motions, yet in the universe as it is, his feeling is

completely out of line with what is there, and we are left with a feeling of cosmic alienation. There is no standard in the universe which gives final meaning to such words as *right* and *wrong*. If you begin with the impersonal, the universe is totally silent concerning any such words. Thus, to the pantheist, the final wrong or tension is the failure to accept your impersonality,” and morality is, ultimately, illusory.

Immanuel Kant once said that we should treat people not just as means but as ends in themselves. In contemporary American culture a common argument for grounding moral obligation begins with oneself. The argument goes: I value myself, and I expect others to treat me with respect, so, by logical extension, I ought to treat others with the same respect. So, respect for other human persons arises by logical consistency with valuing and respecting oneself. The problem with this, however, is that it assigns intrinsic value to persons (myself) from the beginning, which is question-begging. The argument begins with the descriptive statement that I value myself, but ought I do so? Moreover, what would give me the value that I claim? This basis for moral obligation is entirely self-imposed/subjective, and fails to give an account for objective intrinsic value of human persons both individually and collectively. The same problems emerge from a theory of moral obligation that is simply socially imposed.

It doesn't matter which way you turn. Attempting to ground objective moral obligation in oneself, society, a platonic realm, or even an impersonal “God” are all insufficient. The former half of these attempts are inherently subjective, the latter half of these attempts are impersonal, and none of them can assign intrinsic value to human persons. The only way to ground objective moral obligation is if there is a personal, eternal, immutable, maximally great God, whose nature is the standard of what is good, and we as human persons are created in His image. Jean-Paul Sartre recognized this reality when he said, “It [is] very distressing that God does not exist,

because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. As Dostoyevsky said, 'If God didn't exist, everything would be possible.'"

References

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