

*Also by Stephen Law*  
The Philosophy Files

# The Philosophy Gym

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25 SHORT ADVENTURES IN THINKING

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# CAN WE HAVE MORALITY WITHOUT GOD AND RELIGION?

PHILOSOPHY GYM CATEGORIES  
WARM-UP  
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It's widely held that morality requires both God and religion. Without God to lay down moral rules, talk of 'right' and 'wrong' can reflect nothing more than our own subjective preferences. Without religion to provide us with moral guidance, we are set adrift, morally rudderless, with moral chaos the inevitable result.

Daniel P. Moloney, writing in *American Prospect*, provides an example of this popular belief:

Religious people are the first to admit that many religious people sin often and boldly, and that atheists often act justly. They explain these ethical atheists by noting that when atheists reject the religion in which they have been raised, they tend to keep the morality while discarding its theological foundation. Their ethical behavior is then derivative and parasitic, borrowing its conscience from a culture permeated by religion; it cannot survive if the surrounding religious culture is not sustained. In short, morality as we know it cannot be maintained without Judeo-Christian religion.\*

Is the view that morality as we know it is ultimately dependent on God and religion actually correct? This chapter introduces some of the key philosophical arguments.

## An Argument

*The scene: Mr and Mrs Schnapper are arguing about whether to send their son Tom to a religious school. Mrs Schnapper believes they should. Mr Schnapper, an atheist, disagrees.*

**Mrs S:** Tom should go to a religious school. All children should. Without religion to provide us with a firm foundation, morality collapses.

**Mr S:** Why?

\* Quoted at [www.prospect.org/controversy/lieberman/moloney-d-1.html](http://www.prospect.org/controversy/lieberman/moloney-d-1.html)

**Mrs S:** If there's no God to lay down what is right and what is wrong, then *things are right or wrong only because we say so*. But that makes morality unacceptably *relative* and *arbitrary*.

Mr Schnapper scratches his head.

**Mr S:** Why *relative*?

**Mrs S:** If things are right or wrong only because we say so, then for those who say killing is wrong, it is, and for those who say it's right, it is.

**Mr S:** I guess that's true.

**Mrs S:** But morality *isn't* relative, is it? Even if we said that killing is right, it would *still* be wrong. The fact is that killing is wrong *anyway*, whatever we might have to say about it. Right?

Mr Schnapper nods.

**Mr S:** Yes. Though I still don't see why the view that things are right or wrong only because we say so makes morality *arbitrary*.

**Mrs S:** If things are right or wrong only because we say so, then *before* we say so, nothing is right or wrong. Right?

**Mr S:** Yes.

**Mrs S:** But then our decision about what to call 'right' and what to call 'wrong' must be, from a *moral* perspective, entirely arbitrary.

## An Argument for the Existence of God

Mr Schnapper is happy to agree that morality certainly isn't a matter of personal preference.

**Mr S:** OK, I'm happy to agree that killing *really* is wrong. It's not wrong simply because we say it is.

**Mrs S:** But then you must admit that the only reason killing *really* is wrong is that *God* says it is.

**Mr S:** So you argue like this: things aren't right or wrong simply because we say so; they are right or wrong *anyway*. But that can only be because there exists a God to say what is right and what is wrong. So, as

I agree that things aren't right or wrong simply because we say so, I must accept that God exists. In effect, you're giving me *an argument for the existence of God*.

Mrs S: Exactly.

## Plato's Refutation of the Popular Argument

Mrs Schnapper's conclusion that morality is dependent on God is not new. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) is supposed to have claimed that 'If there is no God, then all things are permitted'. Even many atheists, including Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), have been prepared to accept the same conclusion.

Mrs Schnapper's argument is certainly popular. But is it cogent?

Let's agree, for the sake of argument, that Mr and Mrs Schnapper are correct when they suppose that things aren't right or wrong simply because we say so. Does it follow that morality must come from God?

No, it doesn't follow. Mrs Schnapper believes that in the absence of God morality becomes relative and arbitrary. But, as we're about to discover, the view that morality is laid down not by us but by God actually makes it no less relative and arbitrary.

The flaw in Mrs Schnapper's argument was first pointed out by Plato (c. 428–347 BC) in his dialogue the *Euthyphro*. The difficulty becomes apparent once we press the following question:

Are things wrong because God says so, or does God say that they are wrong because they are?

This question raises a dilemma for Mrs Schnapper, for she can give neither answer.

Let's consider the second answer first: God says that things are wrong because they are. God, being infinitely knowledgeable and wise, *recognises* the wrongness of certain courses of action and tells us about it.

From Mrs Schnapper's point of view, the difficulty with this answer is that it undermines her argument. If Mrs Schnapper concedes that God isn't required to make things wrong – there is a standard of right or wrong that exists independently of God's will – then her case against atheism collapses. For an atheist can then help him or herself to this same independent moral standard.

Now let's turn to the first answer: things are wrong *because* God says so. That is to say, God actually *makes* certain courses of action wrong by decreeing them to be so. Had God decreed that killing is a good thing to go in for, then it would have been.

Unfortunately for Mrs Schnapper, this answer also undermines her argument. Mrs Schnapper argued that killing cannot be wrong merely because we say so: that would make right and wrong relative and arbitrary. But, as Mr Schnapper now points out, the suggestion that things are wrong only because God says so makes morality no less relative and arbitrary.

Mr S: In your view, morality is *relative* to whatever God says, correct?

Mrs S: Yes.

Mr S: If God had said that killing is right, then it would have been. True?

Mrs S: I suppose so.

Mr S: But a minute ago you said that killing is wrong *anyway*, whatever we might have to say about it. Well, surely the same is true of God: killing is wrong *anyway*, whatever God might have to say about it. So you see, in your view, morality is no less unacceptably relative.



Mr S: Also your view that things are right or wrong only because God says so makes morality *arbitrary*.

Mrs S: Why do you say that?

Mr S: You believe that killing is wrong not because we say so, but because God says so.

- Mrs S:* That's right.
- Mr S:* But then you must believe that, *prior* to God decreeing that killing is wrong, it *wasn't* wrong.
- Mrs S:* Yes, I suppose I do.
- Mr S:* But then, from a *moral* perspective, God's choice was *entirely arbitrary*. Morally speaking, He might just as well have flipped a coin. So you *see*, the very same problems that you had with the view that things are right or wrong only because we say so are also problems for the *theory* that things are right or wrong only because *God* says so.

Surely Mr Schnapper is right: if Mrs Schnapper's objections to the view that morality is ultimately laid down by us are good objections, then they are just as effective against her own view that morality is laid down by God.

- Mr S:* So, *by your own reasoning*, we should agree that morality is ultimately independent of both our own will *and God's too*.

The view that things are right or wrong simply because God says so is called the *divine command theory*. Those who believe in God are certainly not obliged to accept the divine command theory. In fact, many important theists, including St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), reject the divine command theory precisely because they recognise that it falls foul of Plato's dilemma.

### The 'But God Is Good' Reply

In defence of the divine command theory, Mrs Schnapper might claim that while killing is wrong only because God says so, God never would have said otherwise. This is because God is good. A good God would never instruct us to go round murdering each other.

One difficulty with this reply is that by describing God as 'good', we presumably mean *morally good*. But on the divine command theory, to say that God is morally good is to say no more than that He says He is. But then that is something that even a God who instructs us to murder each other can say.

### The Commands–Need–a–Commander Argument

Mrs Schnapper's first argument for morality being dependent on God fails. But she's not disheartened. She has another argument up her sleeve.

- Mrs S:* Look, moral principles take the form of *commands*, don't they? They say, 'Do not kill', 'Do not steal', and so on.
- Mr S:* Yes, they do.
- Mrs S:* Now, these commands are not simply *our* commands, are they?
- Mr S:* I've already agreed that things aren't wrong simply because we say so.
- Mrs S:* Well, where there is a command, there must be someone who has issued that command. If the command-issuer is not us, then who is it?
- Mr S:* God, you will no doubt say.
- Mrs S:* Precisely. So the existence of moral commands requires the existence of God.

Again, this is a well-worn line of argument. Unfortunately for Mrs Schnapper, it's also flawed.

### Refutation of the Commands–Need–a–Commander Argument

One of the flaws in Mrs Schnapper's second argument becomes apparent once we ask why we ought to obey God's commands.

- Mr S:* But why ought I to obey God? The mere fact that someone issues commands does not entail that anyone ought to obey them. If I command you to do the washing-up, that does not put you under any moral obligation to do it, does it?
- Mrs S:* Definitely not.
- Mr S:* So why ought we to obey God's commands? You want to ground all moral obligations in God's commands. But commands, by themselves, do not generate moral obligations.
- Mrs S:* *Your* commands do not create moral obligations. But God's commands do.
- Mr S:* Why?

This is a question that those who wish to ground morality in God's commands need to answer. Mrs Schnapper makes the following suggestion.

- Mrs S:* Because we are already under a *general* moral obligation to obey God, that's why.
- Mr S:* But why, in turn, does this *general* obligation exist?
- Mrs S:* H'm. Good question.
- Mr S:* The problem you face is this. You want to ground *all* moral obligations in God's commands. But that raises the question of why we are morally obliged to obey God's commands. So there is still an obligation that you have yet to account for.
- Mrs S:* Perhaps this general obligation exists because God commands us to obey all His commands.
- Mr S:* I'm afraid that won't do. After all, I can command you to obey all *my* commands, but that *still* doesn't put you under any moral obligation to do the washing-up, does it?
- Mrs S:* No, I guess not.

The attempt to ground moral obligation in God's commands is doomed to fail. For commands can generate moral obligations only where there already exists a moral obligation to obey them. So the divine command theory of moral obligation actually ends up presupposing what it is supposed to account for: the existence of moral obligations.

We have just looked at two arguments for the conclusion that only a theist can allow for genuine moral value. We have also seen that neither argument is cogent.

## Will We Be Good without God?

Let's turn to a slightly different sort of argument. Mrs Schnapper now suggests, not that there *cannot* be good without God, but that we *will not* be good without God.

- Mrs S:* Perhaps you're right. Perhaps atheists need be no more or less committed to morality being relative and arbitrary than theists. Still, without God we no longer have any real *motivation* to behave morally, have we? We're unlikely to bother with being good unless we believe that God exists.

- Mr S:* Why not?
- Mrs S:* Because it's our fear of divine disapproval and punishment that keeps us in line. Unless we believe that there is a God, any reason we might have for behaving well evaporates. *That's* why we should send Tom to a religious school.

Many agree with Mrs Schnapper that unless people believe in God they are unlikely to act morally. Voltaire (1694–1778), for example, refused to allow his friends to discuss atheism in front of his servants, saying: 'I want my lawyer, tailor, valets, even my wife to believe in God. I think that if they do I shall be robbed less and cheated less.'

But is it true that unless we believe in God we are unlikely to behave morally? Many now happily admit to being atheists. Yet these atheists do, for the most part, behave pretty morally.

Indeed, as Mr Schnapper now argues, it's difficult to defend even the view that theists are *more* likely to be moral than atheists.\*

- Mr S:* While there have been many selfless and noble believers, there have also been a great many self-serving and ignoble ones. There are innumerable examples of disgustingly brutal and immoral things being done in God's name, from the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition to the destruction of the World Trade Center. In fact, it seems to me that religious belief is just as likely to promote immorality as it is morality.
- Mrs S:* Perhaps.

As Mr Schnapper also points out, those who do the right thing primarily out of fear are not generally considered particularly morally worthy.

- Mr S:* Someone who does the right thing, not out of fear of punishment, but out of respect and concern for other human beings, is surely far more moral than is someone who acts solely out of fear of punishment. So it seems to me that if, as you suggest, the religious do the right thing mainly out of fear, then they are actually *less* moral than are atheists who do it out of respect and concern for others.

\* Incidentally, statistics indicate that, among US citizens, those who believe in God are over forty times more likely to end up in prison than are atheists. See, for example, [www.freethought.freesevers.com/reason/crimestats.html](http://www.freethought.freesevers.com/reason/crimestats.html) Of course, these statistics do not establish that religion is actually a *cause* of unlawful behaviour. Belief in God is more prevalent among the less well-off, who are also much more likely to end up in prison.

Mrs Schnapper is prepared to admit that someone who acts simply out of fear is not particularly moral.

*Mrs S:* You may be right. But not *all* religious people do the right thing out of fear, do they? It's only those who do who fall foul of your criticism.

*Mr S:* That's true.

*Mrs S:* And suppose I concede that most atheists *do* seem to behave morally, perhaps even as morally as those who believe in God? Still, that *may* only be because they have been brought up within a culture that *has* or, until recently, had a strong religious tradition. Whether or not *they* realise it, the atheist's ethical commitments derive from that religious tradition. But if religion continues to wane, moral chaos must be the inevitable result. First-generation atheists may not be particularly immoral. Second- or third-generation atheists will be.

*Mr S:* An intriguing suggestion. But you haven't given me the slightest reason to suppose it's *true*, have you?

*Mrs S:* Well, not yet, no.

*Mr S:* In fact, not only have you not given me any reason to suppose it's true, but it's very obviously *not* true.

*Mrs S:* How do you know?

*Mr S:* Because there have been cultures that have had a highly developed morality, but that have either not had religion, or else have not had a religion that's much concerned with laying down morality.

*Mrs S:* For example?

*Mr S:* The ancient Greeks. They weren't perfect, of course. They had slavery. But then so did the highly religious southern states of America. The ancient Greeks were morally sophisticated. Their moral code was very similar to our own. They, too, thought it wrong to murder, steal, and so on. Ancient Greece was a civilised place to live in. Yet their religion was not particularly concerned with laying down right and wrong in the way ours is. You don't find Zeus and the other Greek gods handing down moral commandments.

*Mrs S:* Interesting.

*Mr S:* In ancient Greece, religion and morality were largely separate domains. So there have been entire civilisations – morally highly

developed civilisations – that have done very well indeed without a religiously based morality.

*Mrs S:* Perhaps that's true.

*Mr S:* So then why send Tom to a religious school? Your claim that, without a religiously based morality, civilisation must inevitably collapse just doesn't hold water.

As most societies that we would call civilised also have (or, until recently, had) a moralising religion, many infer that a moralising religion must be a necessary condition of both morality and civilisation. Take away the moralising religion and morality and civilisation will inevitably collapse.

But of course, the mere fact that civilisations tend to have moralising religions doesn't establish that such religions are a necessary condition of civilisation. After all, most successful civilisations tend to have swimming pools, yet no one would suggest that without swimming pools civilisation will collapse, would they?

True, there is no obvious link between swimming pools and morality, as there is between religion and morality. But, as Mr Schnapper points out, the religions of several successful civilisations – including those found in ancient Rome and Greece – have been largely unconcerned with laying down right and wrong. Still more interestingly, when religions do go in for moralising, it turns out to be roughly the same moral code they lay down every time, even when the religions involved otherwise differ greatly. All this tends to suggest, not that morality and civilisation cannot flourish without a moralising religion, but that moralising religions reflect a morality that exists and is inclined to flourish in any case. There seems to be a more or less universal moral code – a code that includes prohibitions on murder and stealing, for example – to which human beings are drawn anyway. Where religion exists, it tends not to challenge this basic code but merely to formalise it and add a few refinements of its own (such as prohibitions on eating certain foodstuffs).

Daniel P. Moloney, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, boldly asserts that the atheist's morality is parasitic upon religious morality (and Judeo-Christian morality at that). In fact, Moloney appears to have things back to front: it seems that *religious morality is ultimately parasitic upon non-religious morality*.

## Is Moral Knowledge Dependent on Religion?

Many believe that, without religion, moral knowledge is impossible. Only a religious text and tradition can provide us with the kind of objective yardstick we need if we are to be able to distinguish what *is* right from what merely *seems* right to us. Or so Mrs Schnapper now argues.

*Mrs S:* There's still a huge problem facing atheists like yourself, a problem which believers do not face. The problem is to explain how we come by moral *knowledge*.

*Mr S:* What's the problem?

*Mrs S:* Morality is rooted in religious texts such as the Bible. There's the authority of a text and a tradition to which believers can appeal. If I want to know whether something is wrong, I look to the Bible. There's something firm and immovable to which I can turn for guidance.

*Mr S:* Like a lighthouse in a storm?

*Mrs S:* Exactly. But atheists are cast adrift without any means of distinguishing right from wrong except how they feel. Atheists lack the lighthouse of an external authority to which they can turn for help. Morally speaking, there's no way for atheists to distinguish how things *seem* to them from how things *really* are.

*Mr S:* I see.

*Mrs S:* But if you cannot distinguish appearance from reality, then you cannot be said to *know*, can you?

*Mr S:* I suppose not.

*Mrs S:* But then atheists can't really to be said to *know* right from wrong, can they? So you see, for moral knowledge you need religion.

Again, this is a prevalent line of argument. But Mr Schnapper is not persuaded.

*Mr S:* I don't see that the religious have any less of a problem with moral knowledge.

*Mrs S:* Why not?

*Mr S:* Well, as I've already pointed out, it's not true that morality is inseparable from and rooted in religion. The ancient Greeks were

morally pretty sophisticated and aware. Yet their religion didn't lay down moral commandments.

*Mrs S:* True.

*Mr S:* So it seems that humans have an in-built sense of right and wrong that operates *anyway*, independently of their exposure to religion. Indeed, even those who believe in God need to rely on this prior moral sense in deciding whether or not to continue to accept the religion in which they were brought up. They also need to rely on it when deciding how to interpret that religion's commandments.

*Mrs S:* How do you mean?

*Mr S:* Well, Leviticus says that it is sinful to lend money for interest, to eat shellfish and to wear jackets made from a linen/wool mix. The New Testament also suggests that the rich should give away their money. Yet you, a Christian, ignore all these biblical instructions.

*Mrs S:* Yes, I suppose I do.

*Mr S:* The Bible also says that it is wrong to kill. Yet plenty of Christians favour the death penalty. So these Christians have a particular *interpretation* of that commandment, don't they?

*Mrs S:* Yes. They interpret it to mean something like: 'Don't kill the innocent.'

*Mr S:* Right. So Christians pick and choose from what it says in the Bible, and then go on to interpret those passages they are prepared to accept in sometimes highly idiosyncratic ways. Now, how do they do this without relying on some *prior* moral sense?

*Mrs S:* I'm not sure.

*Mr S:* You see? How to tell right from wrong is no less a problem for the religious than it is for the atheist. I admit there *is* a difficulty about explaining how we come by moral knowledge. But religion doesn't solve that problem.

Certainly, we are usually prepared to accept a religion only to the extent that its moral code coheres with our existing moral point of view. Those parts that clash with the dominant moral perspective tend either to be ignored (like the Old Testament prohibition on eating shellfish or the New Testament's insistence that a rich man is no more likely to enter the kingdom of heaven than a camel is likely to pass through the eye of a needle) or reinterpreted.

## Conclusion

My conclusion is not that we shouldn't attempt morally to educate our children. In fact, I can't think of anything more important. Nor am I suggesting that this should never be done in religious schools. My aim has simply been to question the increasingly popular assumptions that morality is dependent on God and religion, that there cannot be moral value without God, and that we will not be good unless religion is there to show us the way.

### What to read next

Chapters 7, Does God Exist?, and Chapter 1, Where Did the Universe Come From?, also discuss arguments for and against the existence of God.

### Further reading

James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 1999), Chapter 4.

## 11

# IS CREATIONISM SCIENTIFIC?

PHILOSOPHY GYM CATEGORY

WARM-UP

MODERATE

MORE CHALLENGING

What makes for a good scientific theory? The answer to this question isn't as obvious as you might think. Even scientists struggle with it. This chapter examines the claims and methods of creationists in order to bring out some of the difficulties in pinning down precisely what good science really is.

## Creationism v. Orthodox Science

Creationists believe that the biblical account of the creation of the universe is literally true. God brought into existence the earth and all its life forms in just six days. According to creationists, this event took place less than 10,000 years ago (they base their calculation of the age of the universe on the number of generations listed in the Bible). They also believe that the biblical account is at least as well supported by the available scientific evidence as its rival.

The overwhelming majority of contemporary scientists, however, hold that the universe is much, much older. The universe, they say, started between ten and twenty billion years ago with the Big Bang, an unimaginably violent explosion in which matter, space and time itself came into being. The earth, according to the orthodox theory, is approximately four and a half billion years old. The first embryonic life forms emerged some three and a half billion years ago. Evolution, via the process of natural selection, then produced more complex life forms, including the first mammals about 200 million years ago and modern man – *Homo sapiens* – some 120,000 years ago.

Creationism has its own institute – The Institute of Creation Science – as well as its own conferences, publications and PhD-qualified researchers. For many of these people, creationism isn't just a scientific crusade, it's a moral crusade. According to H. M. Morris, a leading creationist:

Evolution is the root of atheism, of communism, nazism, behaviourism, economic imperialism, militarism, libertinism, anarchism, and all manner of anti-Christian systems of belief and practice.\*

\* H. M. Morris, *The Remarkable Birth of Planet Earth* (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1972), p. 75.