

"CAN THERE BE AN OBJECTIVE MORALITY WITHOUT GOD?"

by Raymond D. Bradley

[Debate with Paul Chamberlain, Simon Fraser University, 1996]

Clarification of central terms in the dispute:

The question before us is "Can there be an objective morality without God?" By the term "God" we shall mean the God in whom Christians believe, the God of the Bible, not some abstract Higher Power or New Age deity. Dr. Chamberlain believes that the biblical God exists, and that if he didn't exist, there could be no objective moral truths. For myself, I once believed in such a God, but no longer do. My non-belief, however, doesn't mean that I am a moral nihilist, denying that statements about right and wrong are ever objectively true. On the contrary I will argue that there can be objective ethics in the absence of any god whatever. And I'll argue, further, that the existence of objective moral truths actually requires the non-existence of such a God.

Many people, including some philosophers, think that moral judgments are merely matters of personal taste or cultural perspective and hence are beyond rational discussion. Such persons are called moral subjectivists.

Others, myself and Dr. Chamberlain included, think that there are certain moral truths which, in the words of The Dictionary of Philosophy, "would remain true whatever anyone or everyone thought or desired." We believe that certain ethical principles are objectively true.

Let me give you . . .

Some examples of moral principles which I take to be objectively true.

Don't just accept my word as gospel about any of them. For each case I invite you to put on your moral thinking caps, as it were, and see whether you agree.

Let's start with one of the Ten Commandments, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill". Do you think that there are any possible circumstances in which it is morally permissible to kill someone? Before you answer, think! I can imagine some Christians immediately answering "No" on the grounds that the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was supposedly handed down to Moses on Mt. Sinai. But how about the sort of situation in which killing a would-be murderer is the only way of saving one's own or someone else's life? It just won't do to cling to the Mosaic law in such a case or pray to Jesus for delivery from your

dilemma. He is unlikely to oblige. But help may come from another source: a little learning and careful reasoning. It would help to learn that the Hebrew word which was translated as "kill" in the King James version of the Bible is better rendered as "murder". And a little reasoning about the concept of murder, roughly the concept of wanton slaughter, would help still more. For then one might come to realize that although the statement "It is morally wrong to kill" stands in need of all sorts of qualifications, the principle

P1: It is morally wrong to murder [i.e., to wantonly slaughter] innocent men, women, and children

is arguably an objective moral truth. A particularly gross violation of this principle is to be found in the genocidal policies of the Nazi SS who, following the orders of Hitler, slaughtered 6 million Jews, together with countless Gypsies, homosexuals, and other so-called undesirables. It is no excuse, as I [and I hope you] see it, that they believed themselves to be cutting out a cancer from society, or that they were, as Hitler explained in 1933, merely doing to the Jews what Christians had been preaching for 2000 years.¹

Here are some more examples:

P2. It is morally wrong to provide one's troops with young women captives so that they can be used as sex-slaves.

This principle, or something like it, lies behind our moral revulsion at the policies of the German and Japanese High Commands who selected sexually attractive young women, especially virgins, to give so-called "comfort" to their soldiers. It is irrelevant, I want to say, that most societies, historically, have regarded such comforts as among the legitimate spoils of war.

P3. It is morally wrong to take revenge on your enemies by having their wives raped and their children dashed to pieces before their parent's eyes.

This kind of action, too, has been accepted by many as a corollary of war. Yet from that sociological fact it doesn't follow that such acts are morally legitimate, even if - as in the case of many religious wars such as the Crusades - the perpetrators believe that their victims are infidels with no moral rights of their own.

P4. It is morally wrong to demoralize people by making them cannabilize their own children.

¹ Evans and Berent, *Fundamentalism*, 120-1. Also Haught, *Holy Horrors*, 163.

Perhaps we can imagine situations - such as the plane crash in the Andes - in which cannibalistic acts might be exonerated. But making people eat their own children - as certain South Pacific tribes are reputed to have done - in order to horrify and strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, is totally unconscionable.

P5. It is morally wrong to offer people as sacrifices, by burning or otherwise.

To be sure, human sacrifice was widely accepted by the tribes against whom the children of Israel fought, and - nearer at hand - by the Aztecs and Incas. But this - I hope you'll agree - doesn't make the practice acceptable, even if it was done to appease the gods in whom they believed.

P6. It is morally wrong to torture people for holding beliefs different from your own.

Perhaps we can think of situations in which it would be permissible to torture someone who is himself a torturer so as to obtain information as to the whereabouts of prisoners who will otherwise die from the injuries he has inflicted on them. But cases like that of Pope Pius V² who watched the Roman Inquisition burn a nonconforming religious scholar in about 1570, fall beyond the moral pale and can't be justified on the grounds that he thought he was thereby saving the dissident's soul from the eternal fires of Hell.

On all of these examples, I'm sure, Dr. Chamberlain will agree with me. Where we disagree is over two questions. First: What sorts of facts are they that make these moral claims objectively true? And second: How can we come to know whether a moral claim is true or false?

What are the foundations of objective moral truths?

Note that Dr. Chamberlain really has gone way out on a limb. In giving a negative answer to the question "Can there be an objective morality without God" he commits himself to saying that the biblical God provides the only possible ground.

He is vulnerable, therefore, on two scores. His position will be refuted if I can show either that there are other possible objective grounds for morality, or - pressing the attack still further - can show that the commands of the biblical God are in fact incompatible with objective moral truths such as P1 through P6.

I will start with pointing out that there most certainly are

² [later sainted]

Other Possible Grounds for Objective Moral Truths.

Refuting his position on this first score turns out to be remarkably easy. For the history of philosophy is replete with examples of ethical theories that offer objective explanations of morality. Among these is:

* Kantian ethics, according to which [roughly] an act is wrong if it violates the Golden Rule - pronounced by Confucius 500 years before Jesus - viz., "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you".

This case alone refutes Dr. Chamberlain's position. To deny its objectivity, or its soundness, would be to assert that Jesus subscribed to a subjective or flawed ethic. And I don't think he'd want to say that.

But, in any case, other objectivist theories abound; among them:

* Ideal World theories, according to which [roughly] an act is wrong if it would have no place in an ideal world³; and

* Utilitarianism, according to which [roughly] an action is wrong if it inflicts harm on the persons affected by it.

It isn't too hard to see that any of these theories, if sound, would provide an objective basis for the moral truths listed above as P1 through P6.⁴

Having refuted Dr. Chamberlain's claim, I could let my case rest right here. But I want to go further by showing that

The God of Revelation isn't a Possible Ground for Objective Morality.

Christians have sometimes claimed that an act is right if God commands it and wrong if God forbids it. This theory - known as the Divine Command theory of ethics - has been around for a long time. So has its refutation. Well before Christian theologians formulated it, the Greek philosopher, Plato, had shown that it falls afoul of a simple dilemma:

Does God forbid certain acts because they are wrong? Or are those acts wrong because God forbids them?

³ See C. B. Daniels, *The Evaluation of Ethical Theories*, [Halifax, Nova Scotia: Dalhousie University Press, p.1.]

⁴ So, too, does the account offered by Christian philosopher Peter Geach who writes: "One obviously relevant sort of reply to a question 'Why shouldn't I?' is an appeal to something the questioner wants, and cannot get if he does so-and-so. I maintain that only such an answer is relevant and rational." As another Christian philosopher, Brian Davies, comments in his widely used text *Philosophy of Religion*: "though this kind of view allows that a moral judgment can be absolutely true, though it is as objectivist a theory of moral judgment as one could desire, . . . it does not seem to imply that there is a God any more than the truth of an assertion like 'If you want to get to Paris by 3 o'clock then you need to catch the train by 2 o'clock.'"

If one opts for the first alternative, then one is saying that there are reasons, independent of anything that God says, for holding those acts wrong and that this is why he forbids them. Thus one might say, in support of this first alternative, that acts like those envisaged in P1 through P6 would be wrong even if there wasn't a God who forbade them. But this would make moral truth independent of God.

How about the second alternative? Can't one say that an act's wrongness stems from the fact that God has forbidden it? The trouble with this second alternative is that if God were to command us to kill people indiscriminately, to set up comfort camps, to rape and pillage, etc., then - according to the theory - those acts would be good, indeed obligatory. But that would make morality an arbitrary matter subject to the whims of God.

How will Dr. Chamberlain deal with this familiar dilemma? I'm going to second-guess him by predicting that he'll argue that the test of whether an act is right or wrong is indeed a function of what God commands and forbids, but will say that God's commands, and his prohibitions, issue from his unchanging, essentially good, nature. On this more sophisticated version of the Divine Command theory, there is no risk of arbitrariness in morality, or of an act being potentially right at one time and wrong at another.

What is my response? Well, I concede that an objective morality could be grounded in the nature and commands of some ideal god. But not only does this account presuppose an independent notion of what goodness is. At best, such a god is merely the creation of philosophers' wishful thinking.⁵ Such an ideal god

⁵ The theist's god has such properties as omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, etc. But the god of the Bible has none of these.

Not Omnipotent: Judg. 1:19 And the LORD was with Judah; and he drave out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron. .

Not Omnipresent: Gen. 3:8 And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. Gen. 11:5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

Not Omniscient: Gen. 3:9 And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? 2Chr. 32:31 Howbeit in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to inquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart.

Not Unchanging but vacillating: [he repents often] Exod. 32:14 And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people. 1Sam. 15:35 And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death: nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul: and the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel. Jer. 42:10 If ye will still abide in this land, then will I build you, and not pull you down, and I will plant you, and not pluck you up: for I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you.

Not Just: Num. 14:18 The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. 1Sam. 6:19 And he smote the men of Beth-shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter.

Not Perfectly Good:
Isa. 45:7 I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. [Plus the list of morally evil acts he commits, commissions, or permits.]

is certainly not the God in whom most Christians believe, the god whose nature and commands are supposedly revealed in the Bible.⁶

Let's take a look at

The Biblical Theory of Morality.

The Biblical Theory of Morality embraces two essential claims:

- (1) Anything that God, in accordance with his holy nature, commands us to do, we are morally obliged to do.
- (2) God's holy nature and his commands to us are revealed in the Bible.

This theory may sound alright in the abstract. But as soon as we look at the actual content of the Bible, we find that it collapses. We find that

The Biblical God repeatedly acts in violation of objective moral truths.

Let me read out the list of charges. The Bible portrays a God who, either in his own actions, or in his commands, or in what he condones, repeatedly violates every one of P1 through P6. [For chapter and verse, see my Handout, p.3]

In violation of P1, God ordered others to kill old and young, little children, maidens, and women [Ezek. 9:6-7]; and he himself wantonly slaughtered 250 people who had offered him incense [Num. 16:35], cynically manipulated 31 kings and their kingdoms so that he might "destroy them utterly" [Josh. 11:18-20], and drowned the whole human race except Noah and his family [Gen. 7:23].

In violation of P2, after commanding soldiers to slaughter all the Midianite men, women, and young boys without mercy, God permitted the soldiers to use the 32,000 surviving virgins as sex-slaves. [Numbers 31:17-18].

In violation of P3, God had people's wives raped and their children dashed to pieces in front of their parent's eyes. [Isaiah 13:6, 13:16]

In violation of P4, God repeatedly made people cannibalize their own children, friends, and parents. [Deut. 28:15 Deut. 28:53-58 Lev. 26:29 Jer. 19:9 Ezek. 5:10]

⁶ [the God of pulpit and pew]

In violation of P5, God made people sacrifice their children by fire in order to demoralize them. [Ezek. 20:26 Ezek. 20:31]

Finally, in violation of P6, God and his own sacrificial "Lamb", Jesus, will watch as he tortures most members of the human race for ever and ever, mainly because they haven't believed in him. In an ultimate demonstration of moral depravity, the book of Revelation tells us that "all . . . whose names are not written in the book of life" [Revelation 13:8] will go to Hell where they "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb; and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day or night." [Revelation 14:10-11].⁷

These are but a few of the moral atrocities for which the biblical God is responsible. [For others, see page 4 of my Handout.] The fact is that it is hard to think of any wickedness that God hasn't either permitted others to do, ordered others to do, or performed himself. No human fiend - a Hitler, a Stalin, or a Pol Pot - comes close to God's barbarities. As for the Devil, I would challenge you to find a single passage in the Bible that reports him as having violated any of the above moral principles - unless, as in the case of Job, with God's permission.⁸ By way of comparison with the biblical God, the biblical Satan is a paragon of virtue.

It is little wonder that those who worship the God of the Bible have been guilty of similar atrocities: the horrors of the Crusades, the various Inquisitional practices, massacres of other religious sects, witch burning, and the like. After all, they have had their God to emulate. Thus, one might well ponder the fact that Pope Pius V, when burning the nonconformist religious scholar, was simply doing to one person what Jesus - according to the book of Revelation - is going to do to billions. As the Christian philosopher, Pascal, put it: "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."⁹

Some Possible Replies Examined.

How might a defender of Biblical ethics reply to all this?

⁷ See also: John 3:17-18, 14:6 Acts 4:12 2Ths. 1:7-9.

⁸ Note that I use the past tense. It is true that the book of Revelation claims that the will - some day in the future - do battle with the saints [Rev. 12:7-9] and unsuccessfully tried to drown a woman. But so far as his past deeds are concerned, the worst he is reported as having done to anyone is to give Job a bad case of boils. And even that he does only with God's explicit permission. It is true that Job's oxen, asses, and camels were stolen by roving bandits; that his sheep were burned by "the fire of God" [Job 1:16]; and that his children were killed by a great wind. But none of these events are laid at Satan's feet. on the contrary, the last chapter of Job tells how Job's friends "comforted him over all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him." [Job 42:11]

⁹ [Holy Horrors, 12]

One ploy would be distinguish between the God of the Old Testament, admitting that he is portrayed as morally contemptible, and the God of the New Testament, concentrating on the person of Jesus and the moral values he is said to have taught.

But this will not do. For Christian doctrine holds that Jesus is in some mystical way identical with the God of the Old Testament. But in that case, then Jesus himself is responsible for the moral atrocities I've listed. Moreover, the scriptural Jesus is far from being a paragon of virtue. Rather, as Mark Twain put it: "the palm for malignity must be granted to Jesus, the inventor of hell . . ." [Letters From the Earth, p.47.]

A second ploy would be to take refuge in the sort of ideal God who has been postulated by Jewish, Christian and Islamic philosophers - a God who is said to be perfectly good by definition.

The trouble with the philosopher's God is that he bears no resemblance to the God of the Bible and that the philosopher's God, unlike the biblical one, certainly hasn't revealed himself to us, let alone given us any moral codes to live by.¹⁰

So Christians are faced with a real problem. They tell us that they believe in the existence of God. But which one?

If it is the biblical God, then - despite all evidence of biblical error and inconsistency - they can intransigently cling to their belief that he reveals himself to us in the Bible. But, for the reasons given, they can hardly say that he is good, let alone that he is the source of moral values.

If it is the God hypothesized by the philosophers, then they can more plausibly say that he is the source of moral values, but would have to admit that, since he hasn't revealed himself to us, we don't know what those values are except to the extent that we reason them out for ourselves and project them on to him.

Needless to say, Christians can hardly believe that both these Gods exist, since that would mean that there are two conflicting sources of moral commands, and two omnipotent beings to enforce them. Most Christians, because of ignorance (sometimes wholly willful) of the Bible's contents, vaguely equivocate between belief in these two gods, thereby foisting on themselves, and others,

¹⁰ Steve Allen: "I am, as a result of the present study, now of the firm opinion that to the extent that the total goodness of God can be defended as a philosophical position, the last place to which the devout believer should turn for supporting evidence is the Bible." [On the Bible, Religion, and Morality]

one of the most duplicitous forms of thinking that could ever infect our deliberations about the nature and grounds of morality.

Nevertheless, I now want to offer

A Minor Concession to the Thinking of Those who Believe in the Philosopher's God.

In postulating such a God as the source of moral values, they are along the right track. For if there were such a God, one who was both supremely good and totally knowledgeable of the human condition, then we might expect him - out of concern for our welfare - to tell us how we ought to behave in order to promote our well-being both individually and communally. Ideally, he would offer us advice, backed up with rational considerations, rather than authoritarian commands backed up with threats of punishment. Obviously, if there were such a god, we'd do well to take his advice since he'd know best where our interests lie.

The trouble is that the Philosopher's God is not only unknown to us; his very existence as perfectly good, all-knowing, and all-powerful is called into question by the presence in the world of the kinds of moral evils allegedly perpetrated by the Biblical God, and by such naturally occurring evils as drought and flood, earthquakes and tornadoes, human and animal suffering. He doesn't create us. We create him, as a projection of what we would like to be the case but know not to be so.

The only thing worth salvaging from the idea of the philosopher's God is

The Idea of an Ideal Observer

who can be invoked as a hypothesis to help us understand how moral truths can be absolute even though neither the biblical God nor the philosophical god exists

I invite you now to join me in a two-stage thought- experiment.

In the first stage, imagine if you will a Purely Hypothetical Ideal Observer who is perfectly good and all-knowing. Let's call her PHIO for short. We don't have to credit PHIO with being all-powerful or any of the other properties that philosophers have projected onto their creation. It suffices that we think of PHIO as knowing enough about us and our condition to be able to see what

consequences our actions will have, how acting in this way or that will promote or detract from our well-being and the achievement of our noblest aspirations.

If PHIO existed, we would expect her to reveal herself to us in some way or other - at least to the extent of giving us some rules of thumb for guiding our behavior. She might do this by heightening our rational powers so that we would see for ourselves the desirability of working together to produce a more ideal world, the desirability of acting in accordance with the Golden Rule, and the desirability of taking into account the happiness or harm that our actions produce.

Obviously, if such an Ideal Observer existed, we would have an objective basis for morality, since the question whether a given action is right or wrong would depend upon features of the action itself, not on how we felt about it. If the existence of an ideal God, such as the philosopher's God, is compatible with objective values, so is an ideal observer such as PHIO.

But now suppose, as a second step in our thought-experiment, that PHIO is - as I stated from the start - a mere hypothesis invented by us in order to facilitate our thinking about moral matters. In short, she doesn't really exist. So let's drop the fiction of an Ideal Observer altogether and consider a world where all we have to go on are the kinds of rational considerations that PHIO would have led us into had she existed. What do we have left? What we have left are the various attempts at formulating ethical theories - like the Ideal World theory, Kantian ethics, and Utilitarianism - that will explain, more or less adequately, why certain actions are morally right and others morally wrong. With or without PHIO we would still have an objective basis for moral truths.
