



God Questions 1: Morality and the Biblical God

Carl Stecher, Peter S. Williams

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God Questions is a record of debate arising out of a correspondence between American Atheist Professor Carl Stecher and English Philosopher Peter S. Williams in 2001-2002. It is reproduced here, as edited by the authors, for the first time.

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A question that both Peter and Carl agree is fundamental to the debate about the existence of God centers on morality. Peter asserts that questions of right and wrong, good and evil, are resolvable in terms of absolute, objective values. This in turn evidences the existence of the theistic God, whose very nature is the source of these objective moral values. Carl responds that Peter's reasoning is question-begging, that there are other and better bases for morality than the presumed character of an alleged God. He also questions whether, given the evidence of the Bible, Christian theists can convincingly link their God to ideas of objective goodness.

[Peter S. Williams] Facts are either objective ($2+2=4$) or subjective (strawberry is my favorite ice cream flavor). An objective fact is independent of any finite consciousness, while a subjective fact depends upon finite consciousness. Moral objectivism asserts that good and evil are objective facts. In other words, a moral law exists independent of human opinion and convention. I believe the existence of such an objective moral law requires the existence of God.

Moral objectivism asserts that morality is out there to be discovered by us and to measure our actions against. Some actions conform to it and these we call morally good. Other acts, the immoral ones, don't conform to it. As Stuart C. Hackett put it: *"I call this moral order objective because the morally binding character of these principles is not a function of individually and culturally variable states of feeling, preference, opinion, or response... so that, far from it being the case that we legislate these principles by opting for them, it is rather the case that our legislative options are themselves to be evaluated by these principles considered as objective."*[1]

As subjects we make moral judgments, and while the existence of these judgments is subjective, they are objectively true or false as *judgments*. I may believe a potato is a tomato, without changing the objective fact of its being a potato; just so, I may be mistaken in a moral judgment, but the objective moral truth remains. As Richard Swinburne writes, moral values are facts: *"which nag at us"*, and are felt as a *"force ... from without"*. True, there is an emotional element in our understanding of moral values, but these values cannot be explained away as 'nothing but' our subjective feelings or opinions. Moral objectivists can think that pedophilia and slavery, for example, are objectively evil, and are evil even though some cultures have held these practices to be morally acceptable.

All of our experiences are necessarily subjective, but some experiences are of something which is itself entirely objective. If I hit my head on a low beam, the pain is subjectively real (if I were knocked unconscious, I would feel no pain while I was unconscious) but both the beam and the bump on my head are objectively real. Knowing something to be right or wrong is an experience of an objective fact. I employ the principle of credulity here, that we should take experiences at face value unless we have some sufficient reason not to do so. This places the burden of proof on those who hold that moral values are not objective. It is a heavy burden, for as atheist Kai Nielsen says: *"moral truisms ... are as available to me or to any atheist as they are to the believer. You can be ... confident of the correctness or, if you will, the truth of these moral utterances; [that is] they are justified. They are more justified than any skeptical philosophical theory that would lead*

you to question them."[2] My first contention is therefore that *objective moral values exist*.

My second contention is that *since there are objective moral values, God exists*. Moral values are not explicable in non-personal terms. An amoral, non-personal, and purposeless material (or pantheistic) reality can no more account for the existence of objective moral values than nothing can produce something. Three arguments show why objective moral values cannot be explained in non-personal terms:

1) In the moral law we meet commandments. Only personal beings can issue commandments; when did you last hear an article of cutlery order anything? That a computer, which is not a personal being, could 'make a demand' doesn't weaken this argument, since computers must be built and programmed by personal beings who do make demands. Therefore, because moral value is objective, there must be a moral law Prescriber beyond individual or collective humanity.

2) Moral obligation is a fact. I often have a duty to do or to refrain from doing something. But how could something impersonal obligate me? Because of gravity, when I trip I fall down. Falling to the ground is something I am *caused* to do, not something I *ought* to do. Moral laws, unlike physical laws, prescribe things I objectively ought (or ought not) to do, but which I am not caused to do. After all, while I never fail to 'obey' the laws of gravity, I often fail to 'do the right thing'! Since I cannot be morally obligated to something non-personal, I must be obligated to something personal. I cannot break a promise made to a fish-bowl!

3) Since objectively right moral judgements require an objective moral standard, and as no moral standard could exist in matter, and no objective standard could exist in finite minds, there must be an objective moral standard in an infinite mind. It follows from the definition of objective facts that this personal ground of objective moral values must be the Independent Creator who has always existed and is ultimate goodness personified.

[Carl Stecher] I agree that $2+2=4$. This is an objective fact that doesn't require a supernatural explanation. But your argument based upon your

definition of 'objective moral values' is question begging. A moral law is clearly an idea. Since your definition detaches this 'objective' moral law from any finite being or beings, you have defined it in such a way that it could only have existence in an infinite being. In turn, you argue that the existence of God, the infinite being, is proven by the supposed fact of objective moral law. You have conjured God into being by definition: "*Since there are objective moral values, God exists.*" Your three arguments linking 'objective' morality and God are only window dressing. We do meet commandments and feel obligations. Mom tells us to go to bed. The state tells us not to kill each other. Of course these commandments and obligations do not originate in cutlery or fishbowls. But they do not require a supernatural explanation.

You conclude that "*the moral law must be grounded in the existence of a transcendent personal being: God.*" I'm not sure what this means. If there are absolute, objective moral standards, do these exist because God decrees them? Or are these standards in the very nature of things, and God simply identifies them and enforces their observation? If these standards are in the nature of things, then God is not essential to their existence. But if these standards are not in the nature of things, how can we assert the goodness of God, having no independent moral standard by which to judge God? To say God is good without such a standard is a semantically empty assertion.

[PW] You are absolutely correct that 1) "*A moral law is clearly an idea.*" You are also correct to observe that, as such, 2) *if* the moral law is an objective reality then it "*could only have existence in an infinite being*". I believe that 3) the moral law is an objective reality; and so I conclude that 4) there exists an infinite personal being. This argument is logically valid and our only disagreement is whether moral law is an objective reality.

God does not make good *good* by arbitrarily decreeing it so, although He can make something an obligation by commanding it, just as children have some obligation to do what their parents tell them. Nor does He issue moral commands with reference to a moral standard outside and independent of His existence. Rather, God's commands are always in accord with his nature

and character. In other words, goodness is in the very nature of God. Thus, to say that God is good is not “*semantically empty*”; as atheist Robin Le Poidevin acknowledges: “*God’s goodness in part consists in the fact that he is the basis of ethics... that God is good ... is highly morally significant, because it points to the source of moral obligation... The theist can, surely, hold that ‘God is good’ is morally significant because it identifies the source of moral obligation, which implies that moral goodness is not independent of God.*”[3]

My three arguments linking objective morality and God are *not* “*window dressing*”. These three arguments show that only personal entities can make prescriptions, be a source of obligation or the home of an ideal. I’m glad you agree with me about this. I suspect that the only way to avoid the linking of objective moral values and God is to deny the existence of any such moral values, as you do.

[CS] I deny only that the moral law is an objective reality, as *you define this term*, a definition which implicitly requires the existence of God. So your three arguments for a link between ‘objective moral values’ and God are window dressing in terms of our dialogue. The *existence* of both such values and God is the question. And I still think your inability to identify any standard of goodness outside of God makes the assertion of God’s goodness *semantically empty*. It’s like asserting God is *qpyort*. And what is *qpyort*? God! *Qpyort* is in the very nature and character of God.

Your claim that God is a perfect, living embodiment of the moral law should be possible to test by comparing these supposed objective moral standards to what is revealed to us about their supposed source, God. (Since you are a Christian theist, I will here focus on a specifically Christian version of God, who is claimed to be all-good, omniscient, and omnipotent and who reveals Himself in His Holy Word, the Bible).

To be frank, I find it shocking that Christians should find the source of an absolute, perfect morality in the character of the Biblical God. Is there any moral atrocity that the God Who reveals Himself in the Bible doesn’t either commit Himself or command His people to commit? In my article I made the *prima facie* case against God’s morality. Is murder wrong? God is portrayed as murdering

indiscriminately in episode after episode, killing men, women, and unoffending children and infants. He commands his special people to commit genocide in His name (Joshua 6:17-21; 8:2; 8:26; 10:29-30, etc).

Another point. If we believe in moral absolutes, standards for all people, everywhere, always, should we follow the guidance of God’s revealed word in *Exodus* and *Leviticus* and put to death anyone who worships a strange god, or who commits adultery? Should we stone to death witches, homosexuals and children who curse their parents? Further, how can it be argued that God established an absolute standard of morality when Christianity itself has been and in many cases continues to be on every side of many moral questions, including slavery, the consumption of alcohol, the role of women in society, the use of torture, the justice of war in general and particular, abortion, birth control, capital punishment, homosexuality? If Christians are to argue for the existence of their God on the grounds that otherwise the existence of absolute moral standards are inexplicable, surely Christians should be able to identify these moral standards and demonstrate that these are clearly and consistently taught in the Word of God and reflected in the character and behavior of this God and in the ideals and behavior of God-fearing people. I challenge you or any Christian apologist to do this.

[PW] To your question about whether we should follow Old Testament laws like those in *Exodus* and *Leviticus* in such matters as putting to death anyone who commits adultery, our attitude should be like that of Jesus:

The teachers of the law ... said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say...?” [Jesus replied] “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” ... At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left with the woman still standing there. Jesus ... asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now, and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:3-11)

You claim that Christians should be able to identify the moral laws from the word of God. There is obviously some disagreement on what the specific moral laws are, but disagreement does not demonstrate the non-existence of objective morality. In fact, people don't disagree about subjective facts (e.g. whether or not strawberry is my favorite ice cream flavor); they disagree about objective facts (e.g. whether or not morality is objective). Indeed, *all the moral argument needs is acknowledgement of an objective distinction between right and wrong, irrespective of what things are right or wrong.*

[CS] But an objective distinction between right and wrong, irrespective of what things are right or wrong, does nothing to meet our real needs. What we need is a coherent moral code that we can agree on, or at least a clear standard upon which the distinction between right and wrong is to be made.

[PW] You correctly note that since you deny the existence of objective moral value you don't need to account for its existence. You nevertheless seek to use evil in a critique of theism. If you are arguing that the Christian theists' idea of God is incoherent because He is purported to do things that you consider *objectively* evil, then you admit the only premise of the moral argument that you deny! While your argument might then count against Christian theism, it would force you to accept theism *per se*. Alternatively, if you are arguing that the God of the Bible is purported to do things that moral objectivists (like myself) should consider objectively evil, then, while you escape self-contradiction, you do allow me the premise of moral objectivism that proves my theism, if not my Christian theism, coherent.

[CS] You are mistaken here. I think your definition of objective evil begs the question, 'proving' God by the existence of objective evil, and assuming God in defining objective evil. I argue that some things are evil by civilized human standards. And I think that you should consider some things that the Biblical God does evil, not because you are an objectivist, but because you are a civilized human being.

[PW] The crucial question for me here as a Christian theist is whether specifically Christian theism is internally coherent. I believe it is.

However, even granting (which I do not grant) that your arguments from Biblical evidence counted decisively against the Christian God, this is irrelevant to the question of whether or not theism in general is true.

To return to your argument from the Bible: the morality of the Biblical God can be defended in a variety of ways. One Biblical scholar points out that: *"The Christian Fathers defended [the Old Testament God] by the method of allegorical interpretation. The Canaanites, who were to be exterminated in the name of God, were allegorized as the powers of sin and evil."* Parts of the Old Testament shouldn't be taken literally; they are important theological myths. You condemn God for the slaughter of the Canaanites, but careful reading of Joshua reveals that the events recorded probably didn't happen just as described. Hyperbole was common among the chroniclers of warfare in the ancient world. We shouldn't take Biblical accounts that suggest 'genocide' to our post twentieth century minds at face value. It may also be questioned, in the context of the Bible taken as a whole, whether all the events recorded were actually caused by or commanded by God.

Nor should we forget that the Canaanites were hardly innocents: *"The Canaanites, for example, used to ritually sacrifice newborn babies by burning them alive. There's evidence that they performed a 'religious' ritual of tying together the legs of a woman in labor, and leaving her until she died!"*^[4] The Canaanites were a threat to Israel. The aim of the military campaign against the Canaanites, far from being genocide, was to evict them from the Promised Land. It may be that the Canaanite (and Jewish) deaths involved were the lesser of two evils: *"If, with this, one considers God's universal perspective, one must ask not only what is the lesser of two evils for the individuals involved, but what is the lesser of two evils for the entire world throughout history?"*^[5] Are we in a better position than God to answer this question? One final consideration: given the existence of an afterlife we cannot know the ultimate fate of the Canaanites. Some may well find an eternal home with God.

[CS] Peter, we agree that many Bible stories are legends and myths, not history, but whatever the genre, they have always been held by Christians

as revelations of God. How could they possibly be interpreted as revelations of a God who is the source of complete and perfect moral goodness? As to the divine cause of the events we are discussing, the Bible is completely explicit: Whether one looks at the Flood, the tribulations of Job, the plaguing of the Egyptians, the indiscriminate slaughter of the Canaanites, all were done either with the express permission of God, by his command, or by God himself. Were the Canaanites just being evicted? Not according to the Bible: God explicitly commands that they all be slaughtered. (*“He left no survivor, destroying everything that drew breath, as the Lord the God of Israel had commanded.”* – Joshua 10:40.)

Even worse, though, is that your argument, far from establishing an absolute morality and the existence of a good God, has the effect of undermining any morality, absolute or relative. Whatever God does, even if it appears to us foolish mortals to be an abominable crime, must be good because God did it. And those who feel themselves agents of God can claim the same righteousness. You use another tactic that is all too familiar for those who would justify evil: blame the victim by demonizing them. They deserved what they got! Look what they did to babies and pregnant women! Kill'em all! And your source for this condemnation of the exterminated Canaanites is only hearsay upon hearsay.

Your moral argument begins with the premise that there are things that are absolutely evil, and that these standards are for all people, everywhere, always. *Except for God!* And that the existence of these moral standards proves the existence of an all-good God. But He is free to violate these standards (and the Biblical evidence is abundant that He does violate these standards, egregiously). But that is OK, because He is God, so whatever He does must be good. This makes no sense to me.

[PW] I do not say that God is exempt from moral standards, only that somethings that are wrong for humans are not wrong for God, and that one can readily see why. God stands in a unique relationship to us as a morally perfect Creator to morally imperfect creatures, and He has unique attributes, including omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection. Particular ethical truths, such as the fact that it is wrong for one human to

end another's life without sufficient justification (i.e. 'do not murder'), flow out of God's character as what Plato called 'The Good' and Anselm dubbed 'The Greatest Possible Being'. The metaphysical and moral perfection of God is the standard of goodness by which the value of all human actions are judged.

Surely you had rules in your household that applied to the children but not to the adults. Parents' relationships with their children are analogous to God's relationship with us because humanity is made in God's 'image'. Parents can go to bed later than their children because they are adults and their children are children. God can justifiably allow, or cause, the end of someone's earthly existence where I cannot, simply because God is God and I am not. It's not that God can do anything whatever and be exempt from moral judgment. But we don't have access to the moral justifications that God has.

[CS] An interesting observation, Peter. We, as parents, determine bedtimes; God, as God, determines deathtimes. Sometimes for children. You sanitize your language when characterizing God's actions: *“God can justifiably allow, or cause, the end of someone's earthly existence.”* Imagine this courtroom scene: *“To the charge of murder, how do you plead?” “Not guilty, judge. I was merely ending his earthly existence.”*

[PW] I'm not “sanitizing” my language as you think, but calling a spade a spade. It would be inaccurate to describe God's allowing or causing death as murder. Murder is the killing of a human by someone with no right or justification so to do, and God never falls into this category.

The Bible traces the course of progressive revelation. Rex Mason writes:

“God took these people of the ancient world as and where He found them to begin His work in them and with them. But He did not leave them there. There are some very different attitudes towards ‘foreigners’ expressed later on in other parts of the Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 19:24 ff., Zechariah 7:20 ff.)... The Old Testament is the story of a growing apprehension of the true nature of God and His purpose for men in the world, a process which was to move to its fulfillment in the life and death of Jesus.”[6]

It takes time for God to reveal himself to people, and for Christians the Old Testament is to be read in the light of the New, and particularly with Jesus – as God's prime revelation – in mind. To take two parts of the Bible and contrast them as contradictory is to miss the wood for the trees, for it is the Bible as a *whole* that is the inspired literary word of God. This means reading with an eye to context, literary type, and in the light of what we reasonably believe from science, philosophy, theology, church tradition and experience. I encourage you to investigate what the Bible really teaches about the issues you raise with some good commentaries in hand.

[CS] But reading the Old Testament in light of the New, we discover that it is only in the New Testament, mostly in the words of Jesus, that God is pictured as torturing forever those who have offended him (cf. Matthew 25:46 and elsewhere.) I also find it difficult to reconcile the idea that God had to take people as he found them and had to take time to reveal Himself with the concept of God as the omnipotent creator. According to Christian belief, God creates people and has omnipotent power over them. As you expressed it yourself: *“God stands in a unique relation to humans, the relation of creator to creature... God is the author of all life.”* He can reveal himself anywhere and at any time. If he is truly all-good, why would he hide Himself? And what happens to those millions of people to whom God has not revealed Himself, or revealed Himself only in a partial and misleading way (as in the theory of progressive revelation)? And what are we to make of a God who embodies and teaches a morality that now seems appalling, if this God is said to be the source of moral standards for all people at all times? Attempts to rationalize this concept of God, such as the progressive theory of revelation, lead only to other, equally difficult problems.

[PW] One quick point: I think that the interpretation of Hell as eternal extinction is quite viable. Moreover, as I stressed in *The Case for God*, I see Hell as a natural and self-willed consequence of rejecting God, rather than as an arbitrary punishment.[7]

As a Christian, I believe God has made self-imposed limits on His omnipotence in order to

give meaningful free will to us. Sometimes God does reveal himself to people or peoples in a very direct, miraculous way (e.g. Moses), but even then it takes time to teach us because humans are finite, fallible, sinful, rebellious, and not very intelligent on the cosmic scale of IQ.

In effect, you argue: ‘The Biblical God did x; x is an evil thing to do; therefore God is evil.’ But this can be turned around to: ‘God (apparently) did x. Although x is apparently an evil thing to do, if God did it then x cannot be an evil thing for God to do since God is necessarily good.’ A case in point might be any instance where God causes – whether directly or indirectly – the death of people. Since God stands in a unique relation to humans, the relation of creator to creature, one cannot assume that moral laws applicable to humans, such as ‘thou shalt not kill’ (which has always been interpreted with certain caveats anyway) must apply to God. I certainly don’t have the right to end your life without good reason (such as self-defense, or to protect the innocent), because I would be taking what I did not give; but God is the author of all life. Besides, God, in ending a person’s life, may well have a good reason that we are unable to understand.

[CS] Let’s put this in more concrete terms. In *Exodus* God slaughters the first born of the Egyptians, including the first born of a hapless slave. How would you judge the slave woman if she killed her own child? She, after all, was the co-creator of his life, and unlike God, she carried him in her womb, suffered through childbirth, nursed and protected him in infancy. If the morality of God is defended because he is the author of all life, or because He might have a reason we don’t understand, doesn’t the slave woman have a stronger defense? What did God do for this Egyptian baby? He brought him into the world as a slave, then slaughtered him. His motive is explicit in the text: *“for I have hardened [Pharaoh’s] heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs”* (10:1). You might feel uncomfortable with this, you might find some reason to reject this portrait of God in action, but that’s what the Good Book says.

[PW] You attribute greater parental responsibility to the mother than to God, but if it were not for God, there would be no mother or child! Moreover, you ignore the point that the very

existence of creatures with original sin causes God to suffer (Matthew 25:34-45). I agree that mothers suffer in child-birth, but then an omniscient God surely feels everyone's pain. I do not believe God is remote and unaffected by the pain and suffering of this world. It just isn't true to say that "God brought him into the world as a slave." God allowed him to be born, by sustaining the laws of nature involved, but people created the institution of slavery, not God.[8]

Like the fictional character of Job, I don't need to know all the answers for my belief in the Christian God to remain reasonable. As William Dembski writes: "*Christian belief in God is not based on God's blocking every avenue of doubt, but rather on God's doing enough – both in our hearts and in the world – to elicit faith.*"[9] I think I have ample justification for living with a degree of mystery. Gregory Boyd observes:

Jesus Christ is the person in whom God is fully revealed... Whatever else God is like, He can't be different than the God I encounter here. "If you see Me," Jesus says, "you see the Father." (John 14) If something in scripture appears to contradict this, I must confess ignorance and suspend judgment. I don't always know why God did what he did in the Old Testament. But since I know on other grounds that God is all-loving and all-wise, I must simply trust that He had wise and loving reasons for doing what He did.[10]

The fact that I have a few jigsaw pieces I can't seem to fit into my picture doesn't worry me unduly because I have the corners and edges and large portions of the picture coherently assembled so that I can be confident of the picture. In other words, one has to follow the weight of the evidence. I believe it points towards the truth of Christianity: these events either happened but not by God's will, or are hyperbole, myths, or legends, or are not incompatible with the goodness of God which, because of our ignorance, is sometimes beyond our comprehension.

Morality is not primarily about rules, but about character and relationships. God's intrinsically valuable, holy character is most fundamentally described as *Love*. One cannot explain why love is good. It's good because it's good. This is as fundamental as the laws of logic and does not depend upon human recognition. Murder is wrong

because it is unloving as judged against God's character and because it involves abrogating to oneself a right which only God, as creator, has the moral authority and wisdom to exercise. Certain things, like forgiveness, are right, and others, like murder, are wrong as they conform to or contradict God's character. According to Jesus 'do not murder' isn't even the most fundamental of moral laws; rather, we must love God with all our heart, mind and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Of course, given belief in God, belief supported by various arguments and experiences, it follows that whatever God has done must be justified. I might conceivably be turned away from the Bible as revealing God if all it contained were apparently unjustified evils clearly commanded by God, but this simply is not the case. Some mysteries persist, but any God I can fully comprehend obviously would not be God! Moreover, it is only in the Bible that I find a God of perfect love prepared to suffer because of my sin and to forgive me the evil in my heart so that I can have eternal life. I have firsthand experience of the forgiveness and personal transformation wrought by relationship with God. I feel I know God; and while God is 'fearful' in the original sense of the term, my experience matches with the Biblical claim that "God is love".

[CS] I believe that our moral values do not originate with God. Is there any other possible source for such values? I claim no special expertise nor insight here, but I think a perfectly plausible answer can be found in our biological inheritance. I assume the basic evolutionary model of reality: Human beings are primates who have evolved as social animals distinguished by unusually large and useful brains and the consequent ability to learn and adapt to various environments. To a certain degree, our instincts are in conflict. Given the complexity of our adaptation to various environments, and the formation in many locales of large, complex societies, a hierarchy of power roles develops, resulting in much competition for status, wealth and the most desirable females of the community. This competition is often productive, but unrestrained it can become violent and even lethal. And competition between tribes can and does lead to warfare. On the other hand, the tribe survives and prospers only if it succeeds in

stabilizing itself and working co-operatively. So we have a social instinct as well as the domination instinct. In order to survive as a social unit, necessary for the survival of the individuals within the unit, the tribe establishes and enforces laws and regulations. "Thou shalt not kill" (but it's permissible to kill warriors of the tribe on the other side of the mountain). "Thou shalt give one bushel of corn every year to the King." And the King, with the support of his priests, further enforces these socially necessary rules with the supernatural. "Thou shalt obey the King, because the King is God's representative on earth."

Different societies have different histories, so there have been no absolute and universal moral standards. Witness the morality of the Old Testament, which is appalling by modern Western standards, commanding stoning of homosexuals, disobedient children and genocide of those who worship other gods. In the same time period, pagan Romans were more tolerant. But are there clear and reasonable moral standards that we can agree to? I hope so, even if we continue to disagree about the source of these standards. Do we agree that genocide, is wrong? I argue that it is wrong because it so grossly offends the sense of right and wrong that has become almost universal in Western culture. Those who violate this moral standard are criminals by international law. We need some consensus of right and wrong, not just an *"acknowledgement of an objective distinction between right and wrong, irrespective of what things are right or wrong"*, or human society is impossible or at least almost universally miserable for the individuals in such society. And humans live successfully and find content only in society. So the source of moral standards, I assert, is in the need to establish rules by which individuals can live, thrive, and find content within society. It is the survival and well-being of society and the happiness of the individuals living within it which I identify as the ultimate good. And we must recognize today that we live in a global society. If this is not an 'objective' standard of good, by your understanding, perhaps that is because the only standard you recognize as 'objective' must necessarily be, by your definition, independent of any finite being or beings. But this seems to me to be arbitrary, your subjective judgment of what constitutes an objective morality.

We do agree on one thing: the value of love. I think that love is good because without it people are unhappy and the community loses all cohesion.

[PW] You clearly indicate a belief in *subjective* moral values by asserting that: *"Different societies have evolved differently, so there has been no absolute and universal moral standards."* This implies that moral standards are the evolved products in us of a moral nature. You further argue that: *"the purposeful extermination of a tribe or ethnic group is wrong ... because it so grossly offends the sense [i.e. our subjective sense] of right and wrong that has become almost universal in Western culture."* It follows, does it not, that such extermination was not wrong before it *"became almost universal"*, and is not absolutely or universally wrong, certainly not in any sense that is independent of our moral sense (a moral sense created in us by an amoral evolutionary process). By your account of morality what is 'wrong' today in twenty-first century Western Europe was not 'wrong' in days gone by where societies had different histories. By your own admission then, your condemnation of *"the morality of the Old Testament"* is the subjective and culturally relative result of an amoral naturalistic evolutionary process! How then do you justify giving your moral judgments a position of privilege? You admit no standard by which your moral sense is right in comparison to the morality you condemn in the Old Testament.

[CS] But Peter, this is simply not the case. I identify as the ultimate good the survival and well being of the community, and the happiness of those living within the community. Do you reject this standard? Judged by it, slavery, stoning as punishment, genocide, sexual concubinage, these and other practices commanded or accepted by the God of the Hebrews can and should be judged morally offensive. And rather than saying that moral standards are *"the evolved products in us of amoral nature"*, I would characterize them as the adaptations cultures have made, always imperfectly, sometimes disastrously so, to assure the survival and well-being of the tribe.

[PW] You advance two moral standards, individual happiness and the survival and best interests of the community. How do you define the *"best interests of the community"*? Surely this

principle begs many questions about the nature of humans, human community, and human destiny – questions that receive radically different answers in theistic and non-theistic worldviews. I think that everyone becoming a Christian would serve the best interests of the community!

When you identify the “*ultimate good*” of survival and whatever contributes to survival, you are either recognizing the existence of an ideal state of affairs that you are commanded and obligated to pursue, something the goodness of which does not depend upon what you or your society believes, feels or decides about it; or are you merely *erecting* a standard that does depend upon finite minds and is therefore relative to those minds.

Do you recommend “happiness” and “survival” because you think they are means to a *good* end or are *good* ends in themselves? If the former, I fail to see how your standards qualify as *moral* standards. If the latter, but only in a subjective sense, then I am at a loss to see how you can recommend them to my belief *morally speaking*. Surely you’d have to recommend them to me on the basis of pragmatic self-interest, but how can self-interest be the cornerstone of morality? If, however, you recommend them as *objectively good*, then we are of course back with the moral argument for God.

[CS] I disagree with you that “*everyone becoming a Christian*” is a worthy goal, since the historical record makes clear that such uniformity of religious belief can only be enforced by a co-operative tyranny between kings and priests, or their equivalents. Of course my basis for moral judgments does not address many questions of application. I recommend the standards of individual happiness and the well being of the community because, from a human standpoint, I think it self-evident that these are good.

You argue for the existence of objective moral values originating in God and true for all people everywhere. The Pope and millions of Catholics believe it a mortal offense against God to practice birth control. Hundreds of millions of Muslims view it a divine command that women should be shrouded from head to foot and should be totally subordinated to their husbands or fathers. An entire tribe of Hebrews thought it morally

permissible to sell their daughters into concubinage (Exodus 21:1-4). Do you accept any of these moral values? Let me put to you the question you have asked me: “*How then do you justify giving your moral sense a position of privilege?*”

[PW] You have criticized me for an inability to wheel out a list of universally acknowledged and detailed moral laws, but now you admit: “*Of course my basis for moral judgments does not address many questions of application.*” So it seems that while we share many moral intuitions, we both have some difficulties when it comes to the details of application. Such ethical debates, however, are irrelevant to the meta-ethical question of the very status of moral value, and we can answer the latter question without answering the former.

I never laid claim to moral infallibility Carl! Indeed, only on an objectivist account of morality is it possible to be wrong about what is truly right and wrong. What I do claim is that I can be right about moral claims, just as I can be wrong about moral claims; either way there is a standard independent of me by which my moral opinions can be judged. This is also true for human societies. Societies (like Nazi Germany) can be morally wrong about things. I happen to think that Catholics are wrong about birth control.

Why all the moral brow furrowing if one realizes that morality is simply an expression of feeling, or the issuing of commands in line with the subjective preference of individuals or ‘society’? And surely, on any naturalistic account of morality what is subjectively and contingently ‘right’ is going to be obvious; it will be whatever you or your culture of your species feel, decide, agree or order it to be! And if you can’t agree, then it’s whatever *you* want it to be!

You don’t attempt to answer how you justify giving your moral sense a position of privilege. Would you claim *not* to give your moral sense a position of privilege? You condemn the morality of the Old Testament (as you interpret it). But you cannot justify this with anything beyond your subjective moral ideas. As a moral objectivist I both privilege my moral sense because it is always wrong to go against one’s conscience, and humble it because there is a genuine possibility that I am wrong with reference to the objective standard of goodness.

As a relativist, you have nothing to humble your moral sense before and therefore nothing to justify placing a premium on what you think the moral truth is; your moral opinions can never rise above the level of what you or your society think, because other people and societies think differently and there is nothing morally relevant in the distinction between you. Your adaptations may have more or less survival value than other people's – but unless survival is *an objectively good goal* – so what? Your society may be more powerful than a different society with different goals; but does might make right? No; only on the objectivist theory can we account for the reality of moral disagreement, justify moral criticism, or establish the reasonable possibility that we might actually be wrong.

If moral values are objective, they are not constituted by our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, desires, decisions, inter-subjective social conventions, etc. An objective moral value is an ideal prescription about what ought to be the case that we are obligated to obey. Matter is incapable of containing an ideal, issuing a prescription or obligating me. Objective moral values must therefore be constituted by something immaterial that *can* contain an ideal, issue a prescription and obligate me. We have already ruled out finite minds as an explanation for objective value, and now we have ruled out matter. What does that leave us with?

[CS] Peter, we seem to be even more at odds than I thought. If I understand you correctly, you are dismissing my standard for making moral judgments – whether something enhances or degrades the human community and its individual members. You seem to be questioning whether the survival and welfare of the community and the happiness of people is an objectively good goal. What can I say? I'm also confused by your statement that you privilege your moral sense because *"it's always wrong to go against one's conscience"*. But how does that allow you to *"rise above the level of what you or your society thinks"*?

You also seem strangely insistent upon differentiating between 'objective' and 'subjective' moral values, defining objective values in such a way that, by the process of elimination, they must have their source in God. Therefore, as you put it,

"God exists and is totally good." Perhaps the deficiency of this argument can be made clear if we simply substitute giraffes for God. *Objective moral values exist. Objective moral values are [by the way 'objective' is defined] necessarily grounded in the character of giraffes. Therefore giraffes exist and are totally good.* The logic of this slightly altered argument is exactly the same. You simply assume the existence and goodness of God and then arbitrarily define objective moral values as grounded in God; I assume the goodness of giraffes (we all know they exist) and arbitrarily define objective moral values as being grounded in them.

[PW] I agree that the logic is the same, but it is patently absurd to suggest that giraffes command the moral law. It is not absurd to suggest that a transcendent, wholly good, necessary personal being ('God') contains, obligates and commands the moral law. Moreover, the moral argument does not, as you suggest, assume the existence and goodness of God before defining moral values as grounded in his character. Rather it begins by arguing that moral values are objective, and proceeds to argue that the existence of God is a necessary precondition for this to be true.

I reject your *account* of your standards precisely because they are *your / our* standards, rather than *the* standards. I don't doubt that the survival and welfare of human community is an objectively good thing, but you do! You doubt it because you do not believe that anything is an objectively good thing in the sense of being good irrespective of what we think, feel or decide about the matter. Of course, you think that they are good things in the sense that they are things you value; but if I were to ask you whether or not you are right to value them, such that someone who didn't value them holds a false set of values as opposed to merely a different set of values, it seems obvious to me that your answer would have to be in the negative.

[CS] Then you are wrong. I think these values are self-evidently good for all humans, everywhere. And we certainly don't need an infinite mind to tell us this. Is nourishing food good for human beings? Do we really need a circular, question-begging argument that food is good for human beings independent of any finite opinion, and that therefore there must be a God? Where different cultures have varied has been more on how to

balance the needs of the community against the happiness of the individual, or how to gain these goals, rather than on the goals themselves.

In my mind, the supposition of a God existing who is morally perfect is no more plausible than giraffes being the source of all morality. Obviously you disagree. But you do concede the logic of my argument. And that was really my point; the deficiency of your argument could be shown by arbitrarily substituting giraffes for God. It is implicit – indeed, inescapable – in your definition of objective morality that it can only originate in God. Therefore this alleged objective morality cannot be used as evidence for God, any more than my definition of objective morality can be used as evidence for moral giraffes.

[PW] Substituting giraffes for God shows nothing about the logical validity of the moral argument and everything about how unsound a premise it is that giraffes are a more plausible ground for objective morality than God! Your *reductio* argument supports the moral argument by illustrating how only God is a plausible ground for objective morality.

[CS] A problem in your assertion of objective morality can be seen in the illustration you used at the beginning of the chapter. You wrote that if you hit your head on a low beam, the pain would be subjective but the beam and the bump on your head would be objective facts. A wooden beam, however, is easily verifiable; it can be both seen and touched. But how can anyone discover the allegedly objective fact of a moral value? Clearly not through a study of God's word, the Bible, unless slavery, rape, homicide, genocide, and torture through all eternity are moral goods. And not through a study of God's created world, a world full of natural and moral evil. And not through the teachings of God's church, which has taught love and self-sacrifice but which has also sanctioned slavery, war, witch burning, torture and mass murder. And not through the witness of the behavior of individual Christians, who have been sinners and saints in equal measure. If moral values are objective, discoverable facts, why are Christians unable to agree on the morality of homosexual relationships, abortion, capital punishment? So how does a finite mind come to know a moral truth completely independent of finite minds?

[PW] In general terms, discovering moral values takes place by simply seeing that some things (e.g. love) are clearly good and others (e.g. hate) clearly evil. You might as well ask, "How does one discover the law of non-contradiction?" Isn't this your moral experience? Do you really find yourself without any moral intuitions before you invent your subjective standards? In more specific terms, moral intuition goes hand-in-hand with a process of applying general moral principles to particular circumstances, thereby informing the conscience.

Because we are fallen, fallible beings with limited knowledge, we sometimes misinterpret or poorly apply objectively true moral values, especially when we are faced with new circumstances, as in medical ethics. Nevertheless, there is an almost universal recognition of certain moral principles such as the golden rule and moral truisms, which you obviously share even though you try to give them a non-theistic foundation. For the Christian, the character of Jesus offers a perfect ethical model. Moreover, as the Greeks recognized, morality is not simply a matter of right action, but of good character. The Christian aspires to grow in "*the fruit of the spirit*" (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – Galatians 5:22) and in the theological virtues, faith, hope and love; especially love, for: "*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*" (1 Corinthians 13:7-8)

While it is sometimes hard to know what the good is, the very agony we take over moral dilemmas testifies to the objectivity of value and the consequent importance of moral decision-making. Moral disagreement testifies to the same reality. Examples of moral truisms abound: 'Do not kill another human without sufficient justification', 'Torturing babies for fun is evil'. Besides, in the final analysis, all the first premise of the moral argument requires is that the distinction between good and evil is an objective distinction, that 'good' and 'evil' are objective. You treat this fact as irrelevant in practice, but clearly it makes a huge difference whether or not we think our moral

debates and judgments should even *aim* at discovering the truth! We objectively ought to *try* to do good and avoid evil! The existence of this distinction, as well as a huge number of moral truisms, is agreed upon by common-consent, including the vast majority of traditional philosophical authorities and a large number of contemporary philosophers. Belief in this distinction is in accord with the principle of credulity and with the nature of our moral intuitions and disagreements. Moral subjectivists have not provided any argument able to counter the burden of proof that rests upon anyone who wishes to deny the *prima facie* objectivity of the moral law.

[CS] Peter, I agree that many moral truths are almost universally acknowledged, but this is because all societies have found these truths indispensable. A society that tortures babies is unlikely to survive. I think moral values are social constructs responding to biological needs – the survival of the tribe and well-being of individuals. As such, they don't require the God hypothesis.

[PW] The Aztecs used to sacrifice some of their babies; and managed to be a viable civilization for quite some time! You have reduced morality to survival value, but the value of survival is a question in itself.

A question-begging argument is one that begins by assuming what it sets out to prove. The moral argument doesn't beg the question. It is a question of fact, disputed by many, as to whether or not there is an objective moral law and whether or not such a law entails God's existence. You take me to use the term 'objective': "[to] mean coming from God' or 'grounded in God', or some such." While I do of course think that all objective reality apart from God "comes from God" or is "grounded in God" this is not the definition of objective employed by the moral argument. 'Objective' simply means 'independent of any finite mental state or states'. I assure you that this is a standard philosophical definition of 'objective'. According to Norman L. Geisler and Paul Feinberg, a subjective fact: "depends entirely on the attitude, opinion or belief of the speaking subjects." [11] An objective fact, as Peter Kreeft writes, is: "Something independent of me, my mind, my opinions and feelings and beliefs and desires and experiences." [12] Everyday phrases such as "it's all in your mind"

depend upon the same distinction, between the definitions 'objective' and 'subjective', that the moral argument draws upon.

Now, one can't deny a definition. The only question, given a definition, and assuming it is not self-contradictory (and this one isn't) or meaningless (and this one isn't), is whether or not there is anything that falls within this definition. Moral value either does or does not fall within this definition. I think it does, you think it does not. Neither definition makes any reference to God, no questions are begged.

[CS] First, if my analysis is correct that moral values are social constructs based upon biological needs, they clearly are objective according to all the authorities you quote above. Second, that you define 'objective morality' without explicit reference to God is disingenuous. Saying that an objective moral fact is independent of any finite mind, is much like saying that George is a human being who is not a woman. True, the statement does not make any reference to his being a man, but the inference is inescapable.

[PW] Suppose I were to argue thus: 'George is a human being who is not a woman', 'Human beings who are not women are male', 'Therefore, George is a male.' Suppose I were to argue: 'Moral values exist that are not grounded in finite minds', 'Moral values that are not grounded in finite minds must be grounded in an infinite mind (not in anything impersonal, whether material or immaterial)', 'Therefore, there exists an infinite mind.' The first argument is logically valid and so is the second. If the premises of either argument are both correct, then so is the conclusion. I presume you agree with both premises of the first argument, and hence with the "inescapable" conclusion. The only way to avoid the conclusion of the first argument is to disagree with one of the premises. Likewise, the only way you can dismiss the conclusion of the second argument is to disagree with one its premises.

[CS] This is a clever display of logic, but misleading. Instead of saying 'George is a human being who is not a woman,' given the only alternative, you could be more direct and say 'George is a man'. Likewise, given the only alternative, you are really saying 'Objective values [by definition] are grounded in an infinite mind.'

But this clearly begs the question because it assumes an infinite mind in defining objective values.

You argue that objective morality is knowable by intuition, and is indicated by moral truisms. You give as an example of a moral truism, *“Do not kill another human without sufficient justification”*. But what is a sufficient justification? For some people, it would be that a stranger pushes you off the road. Historically, for many theists the sufficient justification has been that someone worships the wrong God, or worships the right God in the wrong way. Without *sufficient justification* defined, this moral truism – or ‘objective morality’ – has no definite meaning. We agree, I am sure, as do the vast majority of people in almost all cultures, that it is wrong for someone to murder innocent children. But was it wrong in World War II when Allied bombers attacked German cities where armaments were manufactured, but also where civilian casualties and the death of innocent children would be unavoidable? Is abortion the murdering of an innocent child? Does the fact that the mother-to-be is a fourteen year old raped by her stepfather bear upon our moral judgment? Or that the fetus is horribly malformed, and will face a life of severe pain and an early death? In terms of the underlying biological needs, the problems are multiplied, because the freedom of the individual is often in conflict with the need for stability for the tribe; productive behavior has to be rewarded but the powerless must have some protection. In real life, as opposed to theological speculation and abstraction, moral issues are often deeply ambiguous and confusing. But we do make and enforce moral judgments, sometimes disagreeing, but always striving for a consensus. As people of good will, we keep trying to identify and do what is right, whether or not we believe in some absolute, God-given morality.

[PW] Of course one could simply use the premise ‘George is a man’, but then we’d have to be discussing a different argument. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with arguing: ‘Objective values [by definition] are grounded in an infinite mind’, ‘Objective values exist’, ‘Therefore an infinite mind exists’. This is most certainly a logically valid argument. The only question is as to the truth of the premises. Your unique objection that the moral argument begs the question is off beam.

You say that: *“As people of good will [how do you define a ‘good’ will?], we keep trying to identify and do what is right, whether or not we believe in some absolute, objective morality.”* I agree; but if you don’t believe in objective moral laws or *distinctions*, why do you keep trying to identify and do what is ‘right’? If there is no moral law, then surely morality is a matter of private or social opinion, decree, or invention; or maybe it is the result of evolutionary programmed *instinct*, the result of matter plus time plus chance. Either way, how does one make the leap from what *is* the case to what *ought* to be the case? You ask what constitutes sufficient justification for killing another human being. On the objectivist account of morality there is a right answer to this question. We might disagree about the answer, but if we disagree then at least one of us is wrong. On the subjectivist account of morality, there is no right answer to your question ‘out there’ that we should strive, however fallibly, to discover; and if we disagree about the answer then neither of us is wrong. Besides, I doubt you would acquit someone of murder because you couldn’t provide an exhaustive or precise definition of what ‘without sufficient justification’ means. We obviously don’t need such a definition in order to recognize clear cases of murder; we know more than we can say.

As to the question of abortion, if a fetus is a person (a question there is much disagreement about) abortion is murder unless it can be sufficiently justified as the lesser of two evils.[13] This is an extremely important issue because *“If the unborn child is a person, then the American slaughter of nearly 1.5 million unborn babies annually, over 4,000 a day (about one every twenty seconds), is ... an American holocaust.”*[14] Unless we are very sure that a fetus is not a person, we ought therefore to err on the side of caution.

[CS] Another perspective on this question of objective moral values being grounded in God – and I think this might be the most significant. I am indebted to you in the analysis that follows for introducing me to the concept of category fallacy. You quote Moreland to define the term: *“the fallacy of assigning to something a property which applies only to objects of another category”*. We both think it important that we differentiate *categories* of facts. A rock, for example, or any material object, is clearly an objective fact

independent of any finite mind. For such material objects, as well as certain observable facts about the relationships between objects (two rocks plus two rocks equals four rocks) it can certainly be said that a fact is an *objective* fact only if it is the case regardless of how anyone thinks or feels about the matter. By contrast, ideas, emotions, moral values, are facts in a different category, since they clearly are dependent upon a mind. And we know finite minds exist; an infinite mind (God) is the point in dispute. We agree that there can be no thought without a thinker, no hate without a hater, no love – even Christian love – without a lover. So of facts within this category – love, hate, calculation of self-interest, judgment of right and wrong – it cannot be said that these are facts regardless of how anyone thinks or feels about the matter. Facts in this category exist *only* as thoughts and feelings, whether these be of a finite or infinite mind. Love is not a fact, like a rock; love exists only if someone feels the emotion. But *within* this category of real things, it is much more difficult to differentiate absolutely between the three – thoughts, emotions, moral values – because they are often inextricably intermixed. Consider the following statements. *Robert is a good person. Robert's many charitable acts make him a good person. I love Robert for his goodness.* It seems impossible to separate thoughts, emotions and moral values in these statements.

Moral values are clearly ideas – love is good; murder is evil. We agree that these ideals are real; they actually exist. Where we differ is that I hold they have this existence, this reality, even if they are believed only by finite minds. Their reality does not require an infinite consciousness (God). This should be clear because some ideas, emotions and moral values, as they are inextricably mixed, couldn't possibly have their origin in the God of theism. Fear, like Christian love, is a real emotion, but it can't have its origin in the character of God. And consider the following statement, an intermixture of thought, emotion and moral value: *Jews are sub-humans cursed by God; the world must be cleansed of all Jews for the good of humanity.* As evil and demented as this statement is, some people have thought this way: this is a statement of a real but evil morality. False ideas, unworthy emotions, evil moral values are, unfortunately, as real as true ideas, worthy emotions, good moral values. Evil moral values

are maladaptations to biological needs. And since all of these are in the same category of real things, their origin is, and must be, in finite human minds.

I therefore reject your clear implication, that you believe in “real” moral values, while I do not. Where we clearly differ is in our beliefs about the *source*, and, as you see it, the nature of *true* moral standards. You have been using the term assuming the truth of moral values, and assigning their origin to God. But moral values, true or false, are in the same category of existing things. Since false moral values cannot have their origin in God, there is no reason to think God necessary for true moral values.

I contend that the underlying standard for moral judgment is the survival and welfare of the community and the freedom and happiness of those within it, and that these standards are objective even by your definition because they are based upon biological needs, not opinions or feelings. I concede that this principle leaves many specific and practical questions unanswered. And it is here where morality must necessarily have a subjective element, where human communities must struggle to achieve and enforce a social consensus. Your moral values grounded in the character of God have much worse limitations, since the phrase “the character of God” provides only a nebulous and uncertain standard. Whose God? Your God? The God of ancient Hebrews? The God of Christian Scientists? Of Mormons? Of Hindus? Of Islamic fundamentalists? It would be nice, of course, if the answers to all moral questions were written in stone for all to read, but alas, such is not the case, and we must decide whether the freedom of the individual to smoke marijuana overrides the concern of the community to protect the health of its young people, whether a fetus is a person or only the biological potential of a person, whether or not God demands the death of infidels. I find it hard to see how an appeal to the ‘character of God’ provides any guidance for these moral dilemmas.

And so I return to the position that I took in my opening statement. How can one understand the nature of God? It is possible to see God embodied as substance and energy in the whole awesome, wonderful universe, but this is a totally amoral God. If we wish to find a God that

exemplifies our moral values, we must see this God as within the same category of reality as our ideas and emotions – love, fear, hatred, compassion – whether these be positive or negative. How else can we account for a God – always within the theist definition of God – who inspires St. Francis and Mother Teresa, the building of hospitals and the creation of sublime works of art, but who also instructs his faithful to slaughter Canaanites, to enslave black people, to fly airplanes into great buildings full of mothers, fathers, and children?

We both hold that it is meaningless to think of love, justice, goodness, outside of a personal frame of reference. As you stated, *“Objective moral values are not explicable in non-personal terms.”* But we differ in that you assert for it to be objective, morality must be grounded in the infinite. I argue that this is both arbitrary and fuzzy. It conjures God into existence by the arbitrary definition of objective values, but leaves unanswered the question of what, exactly, constitutes the goodness of God, and how do we discover it? I have listed all the places where it can not be found: The Bible, God’s supposed Word (I might add here the Koran); the natural world, God’s supposed creation; the decrees and actions of God’s supposed church, the behavior of God’s supposed people. If not in any of these, I must ask again – where? When I ground morality in human needs and human welfare, I am grounding it in a different frame of reference, one which provides a clearer standard for morality. Human happiness and the welfare of the community are good in themselves. We are human beings, and it seems to me self evident that these are good for human beings, whether or not God exists.

So I find myself in full accord with you when you state *“murder is not wrong because we think, feel, decide, or agree that it is wrong... we feel that it is wrong because it is wrong.”* You think murder to be wrong because it is in contradiction to the character of God; I think murder is wrong because it clearly is counter to the need of human beings to live together in community.

As to your argument, *“Prima facie, the experience of moral value as something which nags at us as a ‘force ... from without’ establishes the nature of moral value as something which transcends the*

individual...” again, I find myself in agreement. But you and your theistic allies, I think, are mistaken in attributing this to God. Quite clearly, we aren’t born with moral values. We encounter them and internalize them as they are expressed and enforced by the community – parents, teachers, clergy, civil authorities, peers, etc. And these have become community values, almost universally, because without moral values the human animal is maladapted for survival. Occasionally a truly exceptional and visionary person, a Jesus, Buddha, or Socrates, will challenge the community’s moral ideas and teach a more enlightened morality. But there is no need for a supernatural God for there to be such values. Relevant here is a passage from Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck is agonizing over a moral decision: should he return his friend Jim, the runaway slave, to his owner, or help him escape?

And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman’s nigger that hadn’t ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there’s One that’s always on the lookout, and ain’t agoing to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn’t so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, “there was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you’d a done it they’d a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I’d been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire.”

I think this passage particularly valuable because it so clearly illustrates how moral values – in this case unworthy moral values – come from the community, from a social consensus, and how these values can then be mistakenly attributed to God.

Peter, from the beginning of our discussion, I have written of God as *“real, as real as any idea. And God is a tremendously powerful idea, an idea that can transform individuals and worlds.”* And so also are our moral ideas. *“Let us have a God who embodies only our highest ideals.”* I argue that both God and moral ideas are real, but real in a

different way than a rock. I also argue that the God of the Bible does not embody our highest ideals. I stand by the arguments I have made on the questions of objective morality as you define it, on the relationship between this morality and God's existence, and on the morality of the Biblical God.

[PW] It seems to me that you make an unjustifiable leap from biological needs to what is right, from things that contribute to biological survival to things that contribute to the greater good. Indeed, this is the classic naturalistic ('is-ought') fallacy, moving straight from a non-moral premise to a moral conclusion.

I believe in *objectively real* moral values to which some of our subjective moral ideas correctly correspond. You believe in *subjectively real* moral values that vary from culture to culture. I think that moral value is objective (like a rock) while you think it is subjective (like your idea of a rock), albeit related to non-moral facts about biology and survival. Moral value is either an objective reality or not. You talk of "*unworthy moral values*", and a God who doesn't meet with your approval, but deny the existence of any objective standard of worthiness by which to judge either. True, a rock is an objective fact not dependent upon finite minds, but moral ideals are personal, and the moral law cannot be constituted by anything impersonal.

We agree that Huck's society had unworthy moral values, but are these values merely *different* to ours, or are they objectively *worse* than ours? If moral values are only "*as real as any idea*", and different people have different ideas, by what criteria is one of those ideas better than the other? On the subjectivist account, none at all. You cite survival as an intrinsic good, but while you subjectively value survival this still doesn't touch upon the question of whether it is *good* that you do so. For subjectivism, this depends upon whether you or your "tribe" value survival, and this might be biologically determined. On a subjectivist account then, the value of survival is not intrinsic in the sense of 'being a part of the mind-independent nature of reality', but is relative to our valuing of it. As C.S. Lewis wrote:

"Since 'right' means 'agreeable to the rules' it is senseless to ask if the rules themselves are 'right';

we can only ask if they are useful... Those rules are to be accepted which are useful to the community... [Therefore] if we admit that there are some things, or even any one thing, which a community ought not to do however much it will increase [the likelihood of its survival], then we have really given up the position. We are now judging the useful by some other standard... [since] very shocking things may be likely to ... preserve its existence."[15]

Perhaps you find it hard to distinguish between the emotional and moral content of statements like "*Robert is a good person*" because you believe that emotions and moral values are both subjective. Suppose I feel Robert is a good person. This is a subjective judgment, but the truth can only be known with an objective standard of Goodness. Otherwise Robert's 'goodness' will depend upon whose subjective standard we use. Suppose Robert is a Nazi death-camp commander. Is Robert a 'good person'? You would surely say no, but Hitler would say yes. On a subjective account of morality, you are both right! Where your subjective standards come from, whether from the individual, society, law makers or from nature is irrelevant; this is the logical outcome of moral subjectivism. Only the moral objectivist can justifiably say that while Hitler thinks Robert is a good person, Hitler is just plain wrong.

Writing as "*an agnostic Jew with no religious axe to grind*", Janet Daley makes an important point: "*It is a fundamental logical error to think that you can choose between cultures when a given culture, with its explicit moral program, is the only equipment we have for making social choices. Carried to its logical conclusion, cultural relativism produces not tolerance, but nihilism. If everyone is right, then no one is.*"[16]

The moral argument does not merely depend upon the definition of 'objective' used, but upon the cogency of arguments showing that moral values require explanation in terms of a personal being who grounds, commands and obligates us to obey these values. You have done nothing to rebut the arguments I have given for this conclusion; you simply reject the premise that moral value is objective. The concepts of moral accountability, evil, praise, blame, justice, fairness, moral improvement, moral discourse,

and tolerance all depend upon the existence of an objective, external moral standard for their reality and application. If moral subjectivism is true, then we must dismiss all these moral notions. That is a price I am not willing to pay. These moral concepts are indispensable, and an external, objective standard is therefore an equally indispensable component of a sane and moral worldview. Thus moral subjectivism must be false. This is the dilemma I am posing; not that you cannot recognize evil when you see it, but that you cannot do so without embracing a contradiction between your conscience and your worldview.

Nothing objective (be it God or a turnip) depends upon a finite individual or collection of individuals for its existence. A moral law, however, must depend upon something personal. As you admit: "it is meaningless to think of love, justice, goodness, outside of a personal frame of reference." Therefore, the existence of an objective moral law proves the existence of an infinite personal reality: God. Nothing we have discussed about the morality of various Biblical episodes has any force against this conclusion, but relates only to the secondary issue of whether the Bible is credible as a revelation of this God.

I checked your answer to the question I e-mailed to you: "is our existence the result of an intention or purpose, or not?" You answered: "Not." You believe that the cosmos has no objective, given purpose, no goal our existence is intended to fulfill, and it has no objective value. Denying God means embracing subjectivism and accepting that life is purposeless, meaningless, and ultimately futile. Such a worldview provides no solid grounds for moral outrage, only despair.

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