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Do We Need God To Be Moral?

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A Debate

A "culture war" is brewing in America, and basic to the controversy is disagreement over the role of religion in public life. Religionists insist that belief in God is essential for morality. Secular humanists deny this and claim and argue that there is an alternative foundation for ethical conduct.

John Frame

If God goes not exist, says Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov, "everything is permitted," which is one way of saying that notions of good and evil lose their force when people cease to acknowledge God. The course of our society suggests he's right: we've grown noticeably more secular over the past thirty years, banning God from public education and the marketplace of ideas, and our culture's moral tone has declined. Is this merely historical coincidence, or is there a profound relationship between ethics and belief in God?

Moral values are rather strange. We cannot see them, hear them, or feel them, but we cannot doubt they exist. A witness to a crime sees the criminal and the victim, but what is perhaps most important remains invisible – the moral evil of the act. Yet evil is unquestionably there, just as moral good is unquestionably present when a traveler stops to help the stranded motorist on a dangerous stretch of highway. Good and bad are unseen but real, much as God is said to be. Does that suggest a close tie between two mysteries, moral values and God?

Before answering that question, let me make a few clarifications. The highest moral and ethical values *are absolute*. Anyone who thinks it sufficient to have merely relative standards, based on what individuals or groups feel is right, won't see a connection between God and morality. Of course, some rules are relative to situations. In some countries we drive on the right, in others on the left. But relative standards alone simply won't do. Fundamental moral principles – don't murder, don't steal, and so on – must be objective, binding on all, regardless of private opinions or emotions.

If someone robs you, your outrage is not merely a feeling, like feeling hot or feeling sad. Nor is it merely an opinion generally accepted within your society, as if a society of thieves could legitimately have a different opinion. Rather, you recognize that the thief has done something objectively wrong, something that no one should ever do, regardless of how he feels or society thinks.

A second clarification: If I say that ethics requires God, I do not mean that atheists and agnostics never recognize moral standards. Even the Bible recognizes that they do (Romans 1:32). Indeed some say they believe in *absolute* principles, though that, of course, is rare. I contend, rather, that an atheist or agnostic is not able to give an adequate *reason for* believing in absolute moral principles. And when people accept moral principles without good reason, they hold to them somewhat more loosely than others who accept them upon a rational basis. Nor do I wish to suggest that people who believe in God are morally perfect. Scripture tells us that isn't so (1 John 1:8-10). The demons are monotheists (James 2:19), but belief in the one God doesn't improve their morals. Something more is needed to become good, and that, according to the Bible, is a new heart, given by God's grace in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:8-10).

Why then should we believe that morality depends on God? To say God exists is to say that the world is created and controlled by a *person* – one who thinks, speaks, acts rationally, loves and judges the world. To deny that God exists is to say that the world owes its ultimate origin and direction to *impersonal* objects or forces, such as matter,

motion, time, and chance. But impersonal objects and forces cannot justify ethical obligations. A study of matter, motion, time, and chance will tell you what *is* up to a point, but it will not tell you what you *ought* to do. An impersonal universe imposes no absolute obligations.

But if this is God's world, a personal universe, then we do have reason to believe in absolute moral principles. For one thing, as Immanuel Kant pointed out, we need an omnipotent God to *enforce* moral standards, to make sure that everyone is properly rewarded and punished. Moral standards without moral sanctions don't mean much. More important, we should consider the very nature of moral obligation. We cannot be obligated to atoms, or gravity, or evolution, or time, or chance; we can be obligated only to persons. Indeed, we typically learn morality from our parents, and we stick to our standards at least partly out of loyalty to those we love. An *absolute* standard, one without exceptions, one that binds everybody, must be based on loyalty to a person great enough to deserve such respect. Only God meets that description.

What other basis for absolute moral standards can there be? It follows that if we are to reverse our cultural decline, we should begin to take God much more seriously, in parenting, education, and public dialogue. We need to hear much more about God in our public life, not less. And we need leaders who know God and are willing to uphold his absolute standards against the fashionable substitutes of our time. I am now giving advice to believers as well as unbelievers. Lukewarm faith, a religious veneer over a secular worldview, will only add to our present ills. But consider the likely results of a return in heart, in reality, to "one nation under God."

Paul Kurtz

Can one lead a meaningful life, be a loving parent and a responsible citizen without being religious? Many disciples of the Christian Coalition admonish us that anyone who does not believe in the Bible is immoral. Yet tens of millions of Americans are unchurched, and millions are secular humanists, agnostics – even atheists – and they behave responsibly. Indeed, many heroes and heroines of American history have rejected biblical morality and led ethical lives, such as Tom Paine, Robert Ingersoll, Mark Twain, Clarence Darrow, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Sanger, and Isaac Asimov. Humanistic ethics has deep roots in Western civilization, from classical Greece and Rome, through the Renaissance to the development of modern democratic societies.

The history of philosophy demonstrates the efforts of great thinkers – from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, and Sidney Hook – to develop a rational basis for ethical conduct. Ethics, they said, can be autonomous and needs no theological justification. These philosophers have emphasized the need for self-restraint and temperance in a person's desires. Plato argued that the chariot of the soul is led by three horses – passion, ambition, and reason – and he thought that the rational person under the control of wisdom could lead a noble life of balance and moderation. The goal is to realize our creative potentialities to the fullest, and this includes our capacity for moral behavior. A good life is achievable by men and women without the need for divinity. It is simply untrue that if one does not believe in God, "anything goes."

So many infamous deeds have been perpetrated in the name of God – the Crusades, the Inquisition, religious-inspired terrorism in Palestine, the carnage going on among three religious ethnicities in the former Yugoslavia – that it is difficult to blithely maintain that belief in God guarantees morality. It is thus the height of intolerance to insist that only those who accept religious dogma are moral, and that those who do not are wicked.

The truth is that, from the fatherhood of God, religionists have derived contradictory moral commandments. Muslims, for example, maintain that polygamy is divinely inspired; Catholics believe in monogamy and reject divorce; most Protestants and Jews accept divorce under certain conditions. God's name has been invoked for and against slavery, capital punishment – even war. The German and French armies sang praises to the same God as they marched off to slaughter each other in the world wars.

Perhaps one should ask, can a person be truly ethical if he or she has not developed a caring moral conscience? It need not be based upon the fear or love of God, nor on obedience to his commandments, but rather on an internalized sense of right and wrong. We live in a multicultural world with various religious and secular traditions. Chinese, Japanese, and Indian cultures do not accept Western monotheism, yet persons in those societies can be as virtuous, kind, and charitable as Westerners. Every civilized community, whether religious or secular, recognizes

virtually all of what I call the "common moral decencies": We ought to tell the truth, keep promises, be honest, kind, dependable, and compassionate; we ought to be just and tolerant and, whenever possible, negotiate our differences peacefully.

In my book *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (Prometheus Books, 1988), I provide a detailed explanation of these common moral virtues. I compress the argument thusly: One needs no theological grounds to justify these elementary principles. They are rooted in human experience. Living and working together, we test them by their consequences; each can be judged by its consistency with other cherished principles. A morally developed person understands that he ought not to lie – not because God or society opposes lying, but because trust is essential in human relations. No human community could endure if lying were generalized. Genuine moral awareness needs to be nourished in the young; we need to develop character, but also some capacities for ethical reasonings. It is by education that we can develop the best that is within us.

Clearly, there are moral disagreements; and there are new moral principles that have emerged historically. Often the battles for them have been long and arduous, such as the struggle against slavery and for the recognition of women's rights. The need today is to extend our ethical concern to all members of the world community and to find common ground with men and women of differing faiths and ideologies. Christians, Muslims, and Jews believe in the promise of eternal salvation for those who obey God's commandments. Humanists prefer to focus on this life *here and now*, and they strive to develop the arts of intelligence to solve human problems. They wish to rely on education, reason, science, and democratic methods of persuasion to improve the human condition.

What is the goal of humanist ethics? It is to mitigate suffering and to increase the sum of human happiness, both for the individual and the community at large. Although interested in social justice, humanists nevertheless emphasize the virtues of individuality. They wish to provide the opportunities for individuals to lead the good life on their own terms, though with sensitivity to others' rights. They believe in cultivating the conditions for moral growth. They affirm that life is worthwhile and that it can be a source of bountiful joy. They believe in developing self-reliant persons, who are rational and responsible, who can discover and appreciate truth, beauty, and goodness, and who are able to share these stores of wisdom with others.

Rebuttal Paul Kurtz

Statements like John M. Frame's that "we need leaders who know God and are willing to uphold his absolute standards" scare the hell out of Americans who believe in liberty. We may ask Mr. Frame: Which absolutes? And whose God? And what would happen to our constitutional secular democracy and the First Amendment principle of separation of church and state if your views were to prevail? What moral standards are "without exception"? The Bible states, "Thou shalt not kill"; yet believers condone killing in times of war ("Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition") and the death penalty. Likewise, many defend voluntary euthanasia for terminally ill patients out of moral compassion. Yes, in principle we ought not to kill, but this is a *general* rule, not an absolute. And we ought not to steal; yet some justify Robin Hood's actions, particularly when the sheriff of Nottingham is a tyrant.

Many moral dilemmas that we face in life are not between good and evil (a simplistic view of morality), but between two or more conflicting goods, or the lesser of two evils. Here there is no substitute for rational ethical inquiry in evaluating competing goods and rights. This does not imply a breakdown of morality. Surely religionists and atheists have moral principles and values in common. Their application, however, depends upon intelligent reflective inquiry in concrete cases. Reasonable persons will draw upon objective criteria: the facts of the case, a cost-benefit analysis, weighing the consequences of alternatives, cherished moral principles, etc. It is especially important in our pluralistic democracy, where there are competing conceptions of the good life, that we justify our moral choices on rational grounds.

It is presumptuous of Mr. Frame to proclaim that *his* values are absolute and sanctified by God. Would Mr. Frame accept the pope's proclamation that contraception and divorce are absolutely wrong? Apparently most Roman Catholics do not. Would he accept the Ayatollah's death sentence against Salman Rushdie for blasphemy? If not, on what grounds?

Second, it is downright false to assume, as Mr. Frame does, that without God "everything is permitted." The lessons of history demonstrate that unbelievers can be good and believers wicked. All too many absolutists are intolerant and mean-spirited, and have committed all too many infamies. The "road to hell" is paved by fanatics seeking to impose their moral absolutes on others. Secular humanists have a deep sense of moral obligation to their fellow human beings – without need of clergy or divine sanctions. I would urge Mr. Frame to exercise tolerance (a key humanist virtue) toward those who do not accept his faith. It is unfair to blame the decline of morality in America on secularism. The level of church-going in America is higher than that in other secular Western countries; yet we have the highest rates of violence, crime, and people in prisons. What we need is *not* a return to the old-time religion, but a commitment to reasoned dialogue and the cultivation of ethical wisdom.

Rebuttal

John M. Frame

Much of Paul Kurtz's article belabors obvious truths that I stated in my own contribution: that atheists and humanists do honor moral standards and that theists sometimes do wrong. He also addresses the question I posed, namely, "*Why* be moral?" but his response is very confused. He gives at least three different answers, which arise out of different (and conflicting) philosophical viewpoints. The first is that ethics is based on "an internalized sense of right and wrong." But what moral standards should we internalize? Those of Confucius? Tom Paine? Charles Manson? As Mr. Kurtz points out, theists have had ethical disagreements; but consider the amount of disagreement among those who base their ethics on "an internalized sense of right and wrong." Is there any horrible felon in the history of the world who has not claimed to be motivated by an internalized sense of right and wrong?

Mr. Kurtz's second answer is that we should test moral principles "by their consequences." But of course we know only the short-term consequences of our decisions. History is not easy to anticipate. How could Columbus have imagined the consequences of his western journeys? And even if we had a crystal ball to tell us the long-term consequences of our decisions, we would still need an additional standard to *evaluate* those consequences. Mr. Kurtz thinks that "human happiness" is a good thing. But how do we determine that? And would it be right to seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number, even if that makes a minority totally miserable (as in Hitler's Germany)? Obviously we need a principle other than "the consequences" if we are to choose between one set of consequences and another.

Mr. Kurtz's third answer is that we test each principle "by its consistency with other cherished principles." But which principle should we cherish most? Do we compromise B to maintain consistency with A, or the reverse? Equality of wealth or of opportunity? The right of a woman to choose or the right of a child to life? Or is the highest principle, after all, the law of God, with which absolutely every other principle must be made consistent? Not for Mr. Kurtz – but what principle does he cherish above all others, and why? He has no answer. So his "principled" approach is at bottom another form of arbitrariness.

Mr. Kurtz has done us a favor by summarizing the three most common ways in which people have tried to justify ethics without God. But those ways have failed. When you think of it, any terrible crime can be justified by any of Mr. Kurtz's three types of ethics. The conclusion stands: Without God, anything is permitted.