

Strengthening the Moral Argument

Adam Lloyd Johnson¹

Introduction

The moral argument for God’s existence has seen better days. While it has never been as popular as the other arguments for God, it is even less so today. Immanuel Kant was perhaps the most substantial philosopher of the modern period to champion the moral argument.² In fact, “his argument set the agenda for virtually all later moral arguments.”³ The real glory days of this argument were “undoubtedly the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”⁴ The rampant growth of moral relativity in

¹ Adam Johnson is currently a Ph.D. student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Associate Pastor at Tega Cay Baptist Church.

² George I. Mavrodes, “Religion and the Queerness of Morality,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 213.

³³ Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 147.

⁴ Davis, 147.

western culture has undoubtedly played a role in its fall from grace.

The moral argument has been well articulated recently by Robert M. Adams. I will begin here with a summary of his most basic, and strongest, form of the argument which he calls An Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong.⁵

1. Morality is objective, “certain things are morally right and others are morally wrong.”⁶
2. Objective morality is best explained by theism, “the most adequate answer is provided by a theory that entails the existence of God.”⁷
3. Therefore, there is good reason to think theism is true, “my metaethical views provide me with a reason of some weight for believing in the existence of God.”⁸

⁵ Robert M. Adams, “Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief,” in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C.F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 116-140. Here he presents three moral arguments for God’s existence. The other two are practical arguments which, in my view, are much weaker because they wade into the fallacy of wishful thinking. Yes, it is true that it would be demoralizing if morality was not objective, but that is not a satisfactory reason for believing it is. Objective morality should not be argued for on the basis of our desire for it.

⁶ Adams, 116.

⁷ Adams, 117.

⁸ Adams, 117.

In this paper I will attempt to strengthen this argument by offering what I find to be the strongest case for both of his premises, introducing a possible rebuttal to both, and then defending them against their respective rebuttal.

The Strongest Case for Premise One, Morality is Objective

Belief in objective morality, also known as moral realism, is “the view that there are moral facts and true moral claims whose existence and nature are independent of our beliefs about what is right and wrong.”⁹ While morality cannot be independently and empirically tested, as is the case with science or mathematics, we, meaning myself and most all other human beings, all seem to have very similar strongly held beliefs that some things are really right and other things are really wrong. As Adams wrote, “so long as we think it reasonable to argue at all from grounds that are not

⁹ David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7.

absolutely certain, there is no clear reason why such confident beliefs, in ethics as in other fields, should not be accepted as premises...”¹⁰ These confidently held beliefs are often referred to as intuitions.

Ethical intuitionism is the view that these beliefs are self-evident and properly basic (they are not based on other beliefs). “We intuitively–noninferentially, prephilosophically–recognize the existence of some basic moral values and first principles of morality that arise naturally out of our own experience.”¹¹ Thomas Reid is well known for strongly advocating just such a common sense epistemology. His “credulity principle (that we should reasonably believe what is apparent or obvious to us unless there are overriding reasons to the contrary, is

¹⁰ Adams, 117.

¹¹ Paul Copan, “Hume and the Moral Argument,” in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 213-214.

appropriate with regard to our sense perceptions, our reasoning faculty and our moral intuitions.”¹² If someone claimed not to recognize morality as objectively true in this manner, Reid quipped “I know not what reasoning, either probable or demonstrative, I could use to convince him of any moral duty.”¹³

While intuitionism goes back to at least Thomas Aquinas, it is “with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British moralists that the view as we know it now began to take shape.”¹⁴ During the early 20th century, it was strongly supported by British analytic philosophers such as Henry Sidgwick, G.E. Moore, H.A. Prichard, and W.D. Ross.¹⁵

¹² Copan, 216.

¹³ Thomas Reid, “Whether Morality Be Demonstrable,” Essay 7 in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, in *Works of Thomas Reid*, 2:381, quoted in Copan, 216.

¹⁴ Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

¹⁵ Brink, 2.

Because of their influence, intuitionism dominated moral philosophy during the first thirty years of the 20th century.¹⁶

According to Robert Audi, of all the proponents of intuitionism, Ross's explanation "is the primary one for the twentieth century and is still defended."¹⁷ His presentation of intuitionism "is still widely regarded as a competitor with the best alternative contemporary moral theories."¹⁸

Though morality cannot be proven empirically, he emphasized "that the prima facie moral duties are recognized in the same way as the truth of mathematical axioms and logical truths."¹⁹ Intuitionism waned during the rise of logical positivism and naturalism in the 20th century but is becoming more popular again today. "Particularly in recent years, intuitionism has re-emerged as a major position in ethics...there has also been renewed exploration

¹⁶ Brink, 2.

¹⁷ Audi, 5.

¹⁸ Audi, 5.

¹⁹ Audi, 29.

of intuitionism as an ethical theory that uses intuitions as data for moral reasoning and makes a basic commitment to the power of intuition as a rational capacity.”²⁰

Intuitionists maintain that morality cannot be verified in a scientific sense. Attempting to do so makes the “mistake of supposing the possibility of proving what can only be apprehended directly in an act of moral thinking.”²¹ Though they cannot be proven empirically, because they are self evident and properly basic, they are directly known to be true as soon as they are sufficiently comprehended. While such intuitions “are not infallible or indefeasible, we justifiably believe them in the absence of any overriding considerations or undercutting defeaters.”²² It is to such a possible defeater that I now turn.

A Possible Rebuttal to Premise One,

²⁰ Audi, ix.

²¹ H.A. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” *Mind* 21 (1912); reprinted in his *Moral Obligation* (Oxford: clarendon Press, 1949), 16.

²² Copan, 214.

Morality is Objective

David Hume was the first major modern critic of objective morality. He argued that moral judgments are subjective and not demonstrable; hence morality is essentially a human construct and does not reflect objective reality.²³

His argument fails overall because his declaration that we can only know what can be empirically proven cannot itself be empirically proven. Regardless, the view that morality is essentially a human invention has become more popular as more people have accepted the theory of evolution. Some proponents of evolution claim that our moral intuitions can simply be reduced to feelings, the germination of which can be explained through the process of natural selection.

Such proponents agree that nearly all people find themselves having strong feelings²⁴ of admiration and

²³ Copan, 203.

²⁴ Virtually everyone agrees that feelings are included in our attitude towards morality. The question is, can our intuitions be simply reduced to such feelings?

appreciation towards some moral actions and feelings of anger and repulsion towards others. Of course, these feelings arise in us most powerfully when such actions are taken against us. We find these feelings to be held in common by the great majority of other people and cultures as well. They argue though that these feelings have just been programmed into us through an evolutionary process. For example, the anger we experience at the mere idea of killing babies is just an inner feeling which, for obvious reasons, was a beneficial trait that was then selected by nature. Through natural selection we have come to assign value to things that result in the survival of the fittest. Evolution then provides an explanation of where these collective moral feelings came from.

The cognitive dissonance we experience between selfish motives (what is best for me) and moral motions (what is best for others) is the balancing act between two survival instincts. To be entirely selfish would hinder

working together as a group, and clearly a cohesive group will always be able to out-compete even the strongest individual. On one hand then, it does provide survival benefit to work together well with a group. On the other hand, doing what is best for the group at all times would limit your individual survival, e.g. sacrificing yourself for the sake of the group. Though this may be very good for the group as a whole, for you it brings an abrupt end to all reproductive opportunities.

The consternation we feel then between what we call right and wrong is simply the tension inherent in the balance between wanting what is best for ourselves individually and what is best for the group we are a part of. Therefore morality is entirely conventional. According to these evolutionary proponents then, there are no objective moral truths; feelings of right and wrong have simply arisen accidentally over the course of human evolution. We only have them because such an adaption has been of

evolutionary worth. In the end, morality has just been an aid to survival; ultimately objective morality is illusory.

Most have an initial knee jerk reaction against this conclusion because they hold moral concepts in such high regard. It is not rational however to continue believing that morality is objective just because we hold it dear and wish it to be so. In fact, we tightly hold on to this idea because “humans function better if they are deceived by their genes into thinking there is a disinterested objective morality binding upon them, which we should obey.”²⁵ Those who hold this view do not necessarily advocate that people should reject their moral feelings or cease being moral, as morality is conventionally understood in whatever respective culture they happen to be a part of. Many, if not most, argue for robust moral living, either for utilitarian purposes or simply because it is still advantageous for your

²⁵ Michael Ruse and Edward O. Wilson, “Moral Philosophy as Applied Science,” *Philosophy* 61, no. 236 (April 1986): 179.

survival and reproductive chances. They simply believe that there are no objectively true moral facts that are externally true outside of our own subjective feelings and relative preferences.

Could it be that maintaining objective morality as a properly basic belief was legitimate in the past, but now, in light of our modern understanding of evolution, this naïve understanding is no longer appropriate? Should we therefore not trust our intuitions to guide us to objective truths? What else would such a position logically lead us to? It is this epistemological issue that will be addressed next.

A Defense of Premise One, Morality is Objective

Before I address this rebuttal, let me first say that it is not profitable to accuse moral non-realists of being sociopaths. Technically, sociopaths are people who lack moral feelings altogether because they have no sense of responsibility or

social conscience. Though it may be possible in a public debate to make a non-realist look contemptible by pushing them into a corner where they have to admit they do not believe torturing babies is objectionably wrong, such emotionally charged tactics are not helpful if pursuing the truth in love is our goal.

Non-realists are just as repulsed as realists are at the thought of torturing babies. They want to express that agreement in the strongest possible sense they can. The difference is that they just do not believe that such repulsion comes from objective moral facts that exist outside of our own subjective opinions. To call such a person a sociopath is inflammatory language at best and a straw man tactic at worst. Moral realists and non-realists share the same moral intuitions and feelings, they only disagree on the basis for them. I think it is acceptable to warn people that the non-realist position is *potentially* more dangerous because it can provide justification for

someone's sociopathic tendencies. In addition, the non-realist position has no ultimate grounds to tell the sociopath that what he is doing is wrong. But these reasons by themselves are not sufficient to reject non-realism.

As for evolution then, one strategy would be to argue against the theory of evolution on purely scientific grounds. I myself do not find the case for evolution to be very strong and so I would be in favor of such a defense. But for the sake of argument, even if we grant that evolution, as it is commonly taught, is in fact true, this does not necessarily mean that morality is not objective.

Let us begin first with another but similar perception that evolution has supposedly resulted in – our sight. Just because a story can be told about how our eyes have evolved over time so that now we can now perceive real things such as trees, rocks, and other people, this in no way undermines our belief that the things we see are actually there, that they exist objectively outside our own thinking.

The same could just as well apply to our moral perception, i.e. our moral intuition. Let us say for the moment that evolutionary processes are to account for our ability to recognize moral truths; this in no way speaks to the veracity of those moral beliefs. Merely suggesting an evolutionary origin of our ability to perceive morality does not in and of itself discredit it from being objectively true.

This issue applies not only to our sensory perception but to all our cognitive faculties, if in fact they have resulted from evolution. The pertinent issue then is whether we think these cognitive processes, such as our sight perception and our moral intuitions, are aimed at the production of beliefs that are true or beliefs that are adaptive, but not necessarily true.²⁶ The problem is exacerbated by the fact that science itself cannot tell us

²⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 151.

whether our cognitive faculties are truth-aimed or not. If they are not, we would never know any better because our own cognitive faculties are all we have to work with in order to prove the case.

If we conclude that our moral beliefs should not be trusted because they have come about through evolution, then to be consistent, this doubt should be similarly applied to all of our belief producing cognitive faculties. Charles Darwin understood the weight of this concern; he wrote “With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”²⁷

²⁷ Letter to William Graham Down, July 3, 1881, in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, ed. Francis Darwin (London: John Murray, Abermarele Street, 1887), 1:315-16.

If we accept this evolutionary rebuttal then suddenly we find ourselves, if we are consistent, having to doubt all of our beliefs, even our beliefs about evolution itself. This is why some have argued philosophically that holding to naturalism (the idea that God does not exist) and evolution together is a self defeating position. Alvin Plantinga's summary of this problem is worth quoting in its entirety:

First, the probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable, given naturalism and evolution, is low. (To put it a bit inaccurately but suggestively, if naturalism and evolution were both true, our cognitive faculties would very likely not be reliable.) But then according to the second premise of my argument, if I believe both naturalism and evolution, I have a *defeater* for my intuitive assumption that my cognitive faculties are reliable. If I have a defeater for *that* belief, however, then I have a defeater for *any* belief I take to be produced by my cognitive faculties. That means that I have a defeater for my belief that naturalism and evolution are true. So my belief that naturalism and evolution are true gives me a defeater for that very belief; that belief shoots itself in the foot and is self referentially incoherent; therefore I cannot rationally accept it.²⁸

²⁸ Plantinga, 314.

Most people believe our basic cognitive faculties to be truth-aimed and working properly. But if this evolutionary rebuttal is applied consistently, then we should not be so confident. It renders all our beliefs as purely subjective and potentially unreliable and there is no way for us to know if they are or not. Giving up our moral intuitions leads us logically to a truly crushing skepticism about all our beliefs. Therefore it is not rational to reject our intuitions about objective morality even if they have come to us through an evolutionary process.

Before I move onto the next premise, I would first like to clarify something. I have been arguing that, by itself, believing in an evolutionary explanation of our cognitive faculties, which include moral intuitions, should not necessarily cause someone to doubt the truthfulness of such intuitions. But, as Plantinga points out, if someone believed that our cognitive faculties were produced by evolution *and also* believed that God does not exist, then they should be

skeptical about the reliability of all of our cognitive faculties, including our moral intuitions.

The Strongest Case for Premise Two, Objective Morality is Best Explained by Theism

The second premise claims that if morality is truly objective, then it is more likely that God does exist than He does not. This premise seems to me much stronger than the first; at least it strikes me as more obviously true. “The connection between God’s existence and objective moral values has been noted by even non-theistic thinkers of all stripes.”²⁹ If someone agrees that morality is objective then you are well on your way to the argument’s goal of establishing theism. On the other hand, if a person strongly maintains that morality is not objective, then the argument is stuck in its tracks. This is not a weakness of the moral argument per se; this is just the nature of argumentation.

²⁹ Copan, 221. See for instance Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Kurtz, Richard Dawkins, and J.L. Mackie.

All I mean to say is that the first premise appears to me more difficult to establish than the second; thus it is important the first be thoroughly understood and accepted before continuing to the second.

C.S. Lewis teased this second premise out beautifully. He agreed with the intuitionists that objective morality is not something that can be proven empirically. But he argued that this is what should be expected if theism were true. Science, by definition, is unable to discover if there is anything behind the behaviors and appearances of things. If all we had were external observations, we would never become aware of this objective morality. “Anyone studying Man from the outside as we study electricity or cabbages, not knowing our language and consequently not able to get any inside knowledge from us, would never get

the slightest idea that we have this moral law.”³⁰ We, as human beings, are different because we are not limited to this external perspective; we have an insider’s view so to speak.

These intuitions lead us to conclude “that there is more than one kind of reality.”³¹ If morality is objective then this gives us good reason to believe there is more to the universe than just the material; it causes us to look for a non-natural foundation for these truths.

We want to know whether the universe simply happens to be what it is for no reason or whether there is a power that makes it what it is. Since that power, if it exists, would not be one of the observed facts but a reality which makes them, no mere observation of the facts can find it... If there is a controlling power outside the universe, it could not show itself to us as one of the facts inside the universe – no more than the architect of a house could actually be a wall or staircase or fireplace in that house. The only way in which

³⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity and the Screwtape Letters: Complete in One Volume* (1952; repr., New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 23.

³¹ Lewis, 20.

we could expect it to show itself would be inside ourselves as an influence or a command trying to get us to behave in a certain way.³²

Therefore objective morality points us to a supreme moral law-giver, one who transcends our universe.

A Possible Rebuttal to Premise Two, Objective Morality is Best Explained by Theism

In his well known work “Religion and the Queerness of Morality,” George Mavrodes explained how odd objective morality would be if there were no God. If our intuitions are correct, if morality is truly an obligation and not just feelings hoisted upon us by evolution, this objective morality would be quite out of place in a universe without God. Richard Taylor, clearly not a proponent of objective morality, agrees. He wrote “the concept of moral obligation

³² Lewis, 24.

(is) unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone.”³³

Mavrodes admitted that the strongest reply against his position was the notion that objective morality was just a brute fact of the universe.³⁴ Why could it not be that objective morality just happens to be an ultimate fact, similar to $2+2=4$? Theists have already agreed that morality is self-evident. If this is so, then there is no need to posit God as an explanation; moral objectivity just is and that is all that needs to be said. Some atheists take this very route to try and defeat premise two. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong agrees that morality is objective but then maintains it is unnecessary for God to exist in order for us to know this fact.

³³ Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 84.

³⁴ Mavrodes, 224.

In his debate with theist William Lane Craig, both Sinnott-Armstrong and Craig maintained that some actions (the example they used was rape) were just morally wrong. In this situation then the atheist fully agreed with the first premise, that morality is objective and self-evident. He claimed that if something is self-evident, then by very definition we do not have to give a reason for it. If it is objectively true, then it just is. If it is known self-evidently, then we do not need the concept of God to explain or defend it. Rape is just wrong because it is; and this is exactly what the theist is saying as well. Since rape is self-evidently wrong there is no need to go further and explain why it is.

If morality is objective then you do not need to posit God to know that it is, it just is by itself. Being a brute fact of the universe, there is no need to resort to the idea of God to explain it. “You don’t need to add that humans were made in God’s image or that we are His favorite species or

anything religious.”³⁵ There is no need to posit the existence of God in order to know or justify that belief. A self-evident brute fact does not need an explanation; that is what it means to be self-evident. Atheists such as Sinnott-Armstrong argue that we do not need a basis for saying morality is objective if it is self-evident. They reject premise two because they think that if premise one can be granted without God, then the argument can end right there. If something is self-evident then it needs no further explanation.

Defending Premise Two, Objective Morality is Best Explained by Theism

When atheists claim it is sufficient to merely know that some moral actions are wrong, in this instance rape, they are confusing moral epistemology with moral ontology. Their rebuttal then only works at the level of knowing, not

³⁵ Sinnott-Armstrong in Craig/Sinnott-Armstrong, 34.

the level of being. Craig responded simply by making this distinction and explaining that Sinnott-Armstrong's mistake was to "think that our ability simply to see that rape is wrong implies that no account need be given of why rape is wrong."³⁶

The difference is between knowing *that* something is and knowing *why* it is. Theists and atheists alike can know something is morally wrong self-evidently but explaining what actually makes it wrong is something else entirely. In other words, people can know *that* morality is objective, *that* rape is wrong, without appealing to God, but not *why* those things are so. This is the primary reason that theism provides a more fitting explanation for objective morality than atheism; not because it helps us know *that* morality is objective but because it provides an explanation for *why* it is.

³⁶ Craig in Craig/Sinnott-Armstrong, 69.

This is a critical point to understand; theists do not claim that atheists are somehow inferior in their ability to recognize objective moral truths. In fact, they may even be superior in doing so at times. The Christian belief system teaches that we all possess this ability because God has placed this objective moral code within us (Rom. 2:14-15). Christians believe that everyone is able to “recognize the same sorts of moral values Christians can. Atheists don’t need the Bible to recognize basic objective moral values. They have been created or constituted to be able to recognize them—even if they disbelieve. All humans are hard-wired the same way: they are made to function properly when living morally.”³⁷ Being aware of objective moral truth is part of God’s general revelation. As Lewis explained, it is one of the ways God communicates His existence to us.

³⁷ Copan, 221.

What theists argue however is that atheists do not have a sufficient explanation as to *why* morality is objective. This is a more fundamental issue than merely knowing that morality is objective. It is not necessary to believe in the existence of God in order to apprehend moral truths but without God's existence there is no foundational basis to believe that they are objective. "They [atheists] do not have to believe in God to know right from wrong... [but their explanation of objective morality's] more fundamental level of being – that is, the actual ground or basis (which makes moral knowledge possible) – is inadequate."³⁸

In contrast, theism provides a solid ontological explanation of objective morality because it posits a God who made us in His own image. The existence of God is "necessary to ground the instantiation of moral properties; his own existence as a personal Being instantiates these

³⁸ Copan, 223.

properties, and by virtue of our creation in God's image, we human persons are further instantiations of these properties."³⁹ If we are truly God's image bearers, then by that fact alone we are endowed with greater worth and dignity. Only under theism are human beings intrinsically valuable.

If human beings have no more intrinsic significance than other animals, if we are say just a slightly higher form on the evolutionary chain, then morality has no more hold over us than it does over chimpanzees or insects. Within the belief system of atheism, when it is combined with a belief in evolution, there is no rational reason to think that the material atoms which make up human beings are more intrinsically valuable than any others, say of trees or rocks. Ultimately we have arisen from chance with no ultimate meaning beyond what we make up for ourselves. Copan

³⁹ Copan, 224.

puts it well: “from valuelessness, valuelessness comes.”⁴⁰ If this were the case, killing the sick, handicapped, or the elderly is really no different than putting down a sick dog.

Conclusion

Many believe morality is objective because they first believe in theism. Theists often claim that God’s nature is the source of objective moral standards. The moral argument attempts to run this process in reverse; beginning with objective morality and from that concluding that God must exist. For the argument to work then, objective morality must be able to stand on its own. To do so, we begin with an inner moral standard we all adamantly hold others accountable to, as well as ourselves, although not as

⁴⁰ Copan, 223.

consistently. Clearly there are some major cultural differences around the periphery – marriage practices, appropriate attire, and adolescent behavior just to name a few. At the core however, we all carry within us the same view that it is right to keep promises, wrong to tell lies, and reprehensible to torture babies for fun.

Even if these intuitions arose from an evolutionary process, this does not necessarily mean they are any less truth-aimed than our other cognitive faculties. Rejecting our properly basic intuitions carries with it a huge price; it leaves us floundering in complete skepticism about everything. If we accept morality as objective, we are then set on a pursuit to discover how this could be so. Because morality is not empirically ascertained, but intuited, we are led to look outside of nature for its source. It is not enough to simply know that it is objective; the more foundational question is “why is it objective?” The best explanation is that theism is true. If God exists as an infinite-personal

being, then His moral nature provides the ontological foundation for morality.