

Can There Be Good Without God?

Obligation, and What It Costs to Keep It

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I. The Claim, Stated Narrowly

The Christian claim here is much narrower than it is usually taken to be, and stating it narrowly is the only way to state it honestly. It is not that unbelievers are wicked, nor that religion makes people behave, nor that anyone needs Scripture to know that cruelty is wrong. It is that one particular feature of morality—its *bindingness*, the fact that we are obliged and not merely inclined—is very hard to account for if the world is matter and nothing else, and that the difficulty is not solved by any of the usual replies. Both sides can see the moral law. The dispute is over what sort of thing it is that both sides are seeing.

II. Four Concessions, None Grudging

Four concessions, all of them real, and none of them grudging. Unbelievers do know the moral law; the Church says so, holding that it is written on the heart and reached by

reason, so that those who never heard the commandments still “do by nature what the law requires” (Rom. 2:14–15). Unbelievers often keep it better than believers do. Evolution really has shaped our moral emotions, and there is nothing embarrassing in that for a Christian who thinks God made the world by secondary causes. And the record of religious people is in places disgraceful: the defenders of slavery quoted Scripture, and the argument of this essay would have told against them exactly as it tells against anyone else. What remains after the concessions is a question about grounds, not about behavior.

III. Anscombe’s Argument, in Detail

The sharpest statement of the problem was made not by an apologist but by Elizabeth Anscombe, a Catholic philosopher writing for other philosophers, in the 1958 paper “Modern Moral Philosophy”—and it is a strange fact that ethicists quote it more often than believers do. Her observation was lexical before it was theological. Our moral vocabulary is legal vocabulary: *obligation*, *duty*, *guilt*, *binding*, and the peculiar emphatic *ought* that appears in moral contexts and nowhere else. These words entered ethics from a specific framework: morality conceived as divine law. Aristotle does not talk this way; his ethics is about excellence and flourishing, not verdicts. The verdict-vocabulary arrived with the Jewish and Christian conviction that there is a Lawgiver, and it means what it means inside that framework.¹

Her point was about coherence, not piety. A verdict requires a court; a command requires someone who commands. If the lawgiver is removed but the legal vocabulary is retained, we are left using words that have outlived the framework which gave them sense—as though a country abolished its legislature and went on issuing statutes. Anscombe’s conclusion was severe, and it was addressed to secular philosophers: the concept of moral obligation ought to be jettisoned *if it can be*, because it is a survival from a system they have abandoned; in the meantime the emphatic moral “ought” has “no reasonable sense” outside a divine-law conception of ethics, however psychologically forceful it remains. That is not a Christian scoring a point. It is a description of the debt—made by a philosopher whose secular colleagues have spent sixty years trying to pay it.

IV. Euthyphro, and the Third Option

The standing objection is Plato’s fork from the *Euthyphro*: is a thing good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good? The first horn makes morality arbitrary decree; the second makes God answerable to a standard above Him. The dilemma is a real one against the crude view that morality is whatever God happens to decree, and Christians who hold that view deserve it. But the classical position has never been either horn, and Robert Adams has given its modern form: God is not a being who consults goodness, nor one who invents it, but the Good itself—the reality in which

everything else that is good participates, as every accurate measurement participates in the standard. Saying the standard is accurate is not a compliment to it but a statement of what accuracy consists in. Nor is the anchor arbitrary: a nature cannot be otherwise, so the worry that God might have commanded cruelty asks what would follow if God had a different nature, which is like asking what would follow if a triangle had four sides. The horns are “arbitrary command” and “independent standard,” and this is neither.²

The obvious rejoinder deserves its own answer: Scripture itself records commands to destroy the Canaanites, and rules that regulate slavery rather than forbid it (Deut. 7:1–2; 20:16–17; Lev. 25:44–46). If God’s nature cannot command cruelty, what are those?

Notice first what the objection borrows. To indict the conquest texts as atrocity is to measure them against a standard of goodness that stands above ancient Israel, above the churches that defended slavery, above every age’s conscience—which is precisely the objective standard this argument says exists and asks the skeptic to ground. The objection’s force is evidence for the premise.

What remains is a genuine question about texts, and the Church answers it as one. Catholic teaching reads the Old Testament as a divine pedagogy addressed to a people in a brutal age—the Catechism says plainly that its books contain “matters imperfect and provisional” (CCC 122)—and brought to its term in Christ, who forbade retaliation and told Peter to put up the sword. And within the conquest narratives the “utter destruction” formula reads as the war-rhetoric of its time: cities said to be annihilated are inhabited again pages later, and Joshua’s “left none remaining” stands beside Judges’ Canaanites everywhere. However those texts are finally weighed, they pose a question about how God condescended to speak—not a counterexample to what goodness is. The standard by which the skeptic condemns them is the standard whose existence this page defends.

V. The Evolutionary Account, and Its Sting

The evolutionary account of the moral sense is almost certainly true, and it is beside the point—not because it is too weak but because it answers a different question. It tells us why creatures like us have moral emotions. It cannot tell us whether the content of those emotions is correct, because a story about the causes of a belief is not evidence for the belief. We can explain why humans fear the dark without settling whether anything is in it.

And the account has a sting its friends do not always notice. If our sense that some things are simply forbidden was installed because it helped our ancestors cooperate, then it was installed for its usefulness and not for its accuracy, and we have no reason to expect it to track any truth. Michael Ruse, who has argued the evolutionary case as forcefully as anyone, accepts this and says so plainly: “Ultimately, morality is an illusion put in place

by our genes to make us social facilitators.” That is not a defense of morality against the theist. It is an agreement with the theist about what morality would have to be if there is no God, offered by someone content with the result. And the debunking blade does not stop at ethics: the reasoning faculties deployed to make the debunking argument are themselves products of the same selection, rewarded for usefulness rather than truth. The debunker who trusts his logic while dismissing his conscience owes an account of the difference.³

VI. Wielenberg’s Brute Facts, at Their Strongest

The most serious secular reply concedes objectivity and drops the lawgiver: moral facts exist as brute necessities, true in every possible world, requiring no author—the position Erik Wielenberg has defended with more rigor than anyone. Pain is bad, cruelty is wrong, and these are simply bedrock, as two and two making four is bedrock. The position deserves respect; it is not evasion, and it may be the strongest available to an unbeliever, which is why it is taken at full strength here.⁴

But notice what has to be bought. Mathematical truths do not tell anyone to do anything. Moral truths do, and obligation looks like a relation between persons rather than a property floating free of them. I can be obliged to a neighbor, to a promise, to a child; it is much harder to say what it would mean to be obliged to an abstract fact, or how a necessary truth about pain could impose a demand on me and hold me guilty when I ignore it. This is the point C. Stephen Evans presses: duties are the sort of thing that get laid on someone by someone, so an account of obligation without a person in it has kept the word and dropped the thing it named. Wielenberg’s facts, moreover, must not merely exist but *connect*: something must make the wrongness of cruelty reach out and bind an evolved primate on a middle-sized planet, and on the brute-fact account the connection is one more brute fact. Bills multiply. At some point the theist’s single explanation is cheaper than the naturalist’s growing stack of unexplained necessities.⁵

VII. Mackie Grants the Premise

It is worth noticing who agrees about the price. J. L. Mackie, the most formidable atheist writer on this subject, argued that objective values would be entities of a very queer sort, unlike anything else in the universe, knowable only by a faculty of moral perception unlike any other faculty we have. He was right, and he drew the consistent conclusion: since a purely material world contains no such things, there are no objective values, and ordinary moral talk is systematically mistaken—an *error theory* of ethics. The theist accepts Mackie’s premise entirely and denies his minor. Objective values *are* queer: strange, unlike the furniture of a purely material world, exactly as he said. Where the two part company is that Mackie inferred there are none, while the theist observes that they show

every sign of existing and asks what sort of universe would contain them. The dispute is not about whether moral facts fit comfortably into naturalism. Both sides agree they do not.⁶

VIII. What the Denial Costs

The price of denial is usually paid quietly, so it is worth setting out. “Torturing a child for entertainment is wrong” becomes a statement about the speaker rather than the act. Moral progress becomes unintelligible, since progress is movement toward something, and if there is no standard there is only change: abolition was not an improvement on slavery, merely a later fashion. And the lone reformer, right while his entire society is wrong, has to be redescribed as someone deviating from his community’s values—which is precisely what his enemies said at the time. Almost nobody can live in that account, and the ones who defend it do not try to. The man who says morality is a useful fiction still resents being cheated, and resents it as a wrong done to him rather than as a breach of a convention he happens to favor. That is not a proof. But when a theory cannot be inhabited even by the people who hold it, that is worth something.

IX. The Atheist Who Keeps the Commandment

One last observation, and it is the natural-law tradition’s own. The atheist who keeps the commandments he does not believe in—who tells the truth at cost, keeps faith with a dying spouse, returns the dropped wallet—is not an embarrassment to the Christian account but a confirmation of it. The Church has never taught that the moral law reaches only the baptized; she teaches that it is written on every heart, promulgated in creation itself, and that whoever obeys it is responding—anonously, perhaps unwillingly—to its Author. Paul’s Gentiles who “do by nature what the law requires” are “a law to themselves” and show “what the law requires is written on their hearts” (Rom. 2:14–15). The good atheist is therefore not evidence that morality floats free of God. On the natural-law account he is what a creature made in God’s image looks like when he follows the writing without reading the signature. His goodness is real. The question this essay has pressed is only what makes it *binding*—and to that question his own practice, which treats the law as no mere preference, is the theist’s best exhibit.⁷

X. The Reply in Brief

Grant everything that should be granted: that unbelievers know the moral law and often keep it better, that evolution shaped our moral feelings, that religious people have used God to justify appalling things. One thing is still unaccounted for. Obligation is law-language, and law is the sort of thing somebody lays down. Explaining why we feel bound is not explaining why we are bound; brute necessities that command nobody cannot bind

anybody; and the ablest atheists—Anscombe’s colleagues, Ruse, Mackie—have seen the situation exactly and accepted one half of it. The Christian accepts the other half: the law is real, the bindingness is real, and both are at home in a universe whose deepest fact is not matter but a Person—in whom the good we can all see, believer and unbeliever alike, has its unborrowed home.

Endnotes

1. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, *Philosophy* 33 (1958), summarized in detail; the *no reasonable sense* judgment and the jettison recommendation are hers.
2. Plato, *Euthyphro* 10a; Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (1999), summarized. The triangle analogy for the necessity of the divine nature is the tradition’s.
3. Michael Ruse, quoted exactly from the survey of the evolutionary argument held in the site’s reference library (*God, Evolution and Morality*); the debunking-cuts-reason point follows Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism, summarized.
4. Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (2005) and *Robust Ethics* (2014), summarized at their strongest, as the invitation on the site’s panel promises.
5. C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (2013), summarized.
6. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), ch. 1 (the argument from queerness), summarized rather than quoted.
7. Romans 2:14–15, RSV; Catechism of the Catholic Church 1954–1960 on the natural law, summarized.

For Further Reading

Modern Moral Philosophy, by G. E. M. Anscombe—*Philosophy* 33 (1958).

God and Moral Obligation, by C. Stephen Evans.

Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics, by Robert Merrihew Adams.

Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, by J. L. Mackie—the case against objective values.

After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, by Alasdair MacIntyre.

The Abolition of Man, by C. S. Lewis.

Veritatis Splendor, by John Paul II—on conscience and objective moral truth. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.

Address to the German Bundestag, by Benedict XVI—on the foundations of law. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1949–1986 on the moral law; §§1954–1960 on natural law. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

Atheism: A Philosophical Justification, by Michael Martin—the systematic case the opposing panel draws on; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/atheismphilosophoooomart>.

Why I Am Not a Christian, by Bertrand Russell—readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/whyiamnotchristiooooruss>.

Society Without God, by Phil Zuckerman—the Scandinavia argument in its source; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/societywithoutgooooozuck>.

* * *

“He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” — Micah 6:8

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the moral argument and the natural-law tradition*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.