**Response to “Can We Be Good Without God?”:**

**Yes, but it makes no sense.**

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In “Can We Be Good Without God?” William Lane Craig argues that if God exists then objective morality is real, and if God does not exist then morality is entirely subjective. Craig goes through a number of reasons why objective morality is irrational without the notion of God, then claims that objective morality is obviously true, so this provides good grounds for the belief in God. As a believer in Christ, I appreciate Craig’s sentiment, but I believe he has made some important errors that are worth exploring. While an argument for belief in God is probably a good thing overall, I prefer a *good* argument over a bad or confusing one. Craig maintains that there is simply no logical explanation for morality without God. He discusses three categories of objective morals: values, duties, and accountability, and contends that without an all-powerful, loving God these notions are irrational.

“Objective moral values” are the notion that if something is morally right or wrong, it is so “independently of whether anybody believes it to be so” (Craig). We may believe our values are morally right, and most people probably do believe this, but we may be wrong. The moral rightness or wrongness of our beliefs, worldview, ideology, etc. is not contingent on our personal understanding of them. For Craig this is because objective morality emerges from God. God is the “locus and source of moral value”, who is perfectly truthful, just, kind, etc (Craig). While I would agree with Craig’s description of God as perfectly good, we should be careful about accepting his assertion that God is the *locus and source* of objective morality. As my instructor Julien Beillard pointed out, if this is true then we are back to Plato’s famous “Euthyphro dilemma”.

Plato tells us of a meeting between Socrates and Euthyphro, when the famous philosopher asks his friend, “Is the pious (τὸ ὅσιον) loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” If objective morality is something independent of God, then it is truly objective, i.e. it is not contingent on what anyone believes, including God Himself (the pious is loved because it is pious). If on the other hand, God is the source of objective morality (i.e. pious because it is loved by the Gods), then morality is not objective at all, but merely the commandment of God. This creates a problem in that it means that what is morally right is merely dependent on God’s will, or whatever pleases God. If He is currently pleased that we love our neighbour, His will may change tomorrow and then we should consider it morally right to hate our neighbour. It means we are nothing more than God’s slaves, forced to obey Him for reasons we cannot know or explain, simply because He is God. Even Craig’s description of God as perfectly good is a meaningless descriptor because whatever is good is whatever God says, meaning moral “goodness" is just a circular relation to God’s will. This conflicts with our moral intuition, because if morality is objective then it is universal, meaning even God must obey it.

Craig rationally justifies the notion of objective moral duties with Christ’s explanation of the greatest commandments of God, “First, you shall love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your soul and with all your heart and with all your mind, and, second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Craig). While this will certainly square with most people’s apprehension of objective morality (i.e. “love worketh no ill to his neighbour” and so forth) it leaves a problem of why we should consider this to be morally good in itself. Are we merely God’s obedient lackeys, forced to love one another out of subservience to His divine will? Even God must have some source of justification for morality, beyond His own will, or the whole notion of morality becomes a futile exercise in circular reasoning. Why would I love someone who I do not know? Why love someone who has wronged me? Why love my enemy? By this logic, the only reason is because God told us to, because it is His will. It renders love *and* objective morality meaningless. But if it is morally right to love one another, regardless of God’s will or anyone else’s, then that is objective morality and something worthwhile that we should strive to live by.

Finally Craig contends that the fact that God holds people accountable for their actions in life indicates that objective morality is rational. Because faith in God means we believe we will be judged on the moral rightness and wrongness of our actions, we have a rational reason to do the right thing. Otherwise, why would we make moral decisions that are contrary to our own desires? Why would we make sacrifices for moral purposes without the idea of a divine judge watching over us, who would reward our sacrifice in the next life? Of course this presents the problem of making morality contingent on punishment and reward. The reason to be moral by this account is for the selfish purpose of getting into heaven and avoiding hell, meaning morality is not objective, but dependent on consequences. But what do consequences have to do with objective morality? If morality is dependent on the rewards we receive, or on accountability, then it is not morality at all and not objective.

Some might point out that without the notion of a righteous judge who issues punishments and rewards after our death, many people will never get what they deserve. If morality is objective, then it seems as if people would deserve things as part of any such scheme, so that the bad people would deserve to be punished and the good people would deserve to be rewarded. But many evil people seem to be very happy in life and many good people seem to get the short end of the stick all the time. If people simply blink out of existence at the end of their lives, these people would never be punished or rewarded, which would mean they do not get what they deserve. My point is that the question of whether people get what they deserve is a different one from whether “deserve” is a real thing. If people deserving things are a part of objective morality, then people simply deserve things. That has nothing to do with whether they actually get what they deserve. Maybe life is just completely unfair, but that would not affect whether morality is objective. The Christian worldview Craig espouses would seem to describe a life of suffering and service to God, with rewards in the next life, meaning that life as we know it *is* unfair as an article of the faith.

The main problem with Craig’s account of objective morality is his need to explain it rationally. The fact that morality is objective may have no logical explanation, but that does not indicate that it is not real or true. As Craig himself asks later in the piece, “could anything be more obvious than that objective moral values *do* exist?” Objective morality seems to be real because we apprehend it. We have an intuition about morality and we have no good reason to doubt our intuition, so it is real. We simply *know* that it is morally wrong to kill innocent people, we simply *know* that it is morally right to help people when they are in trouble, etc. We all know love is right and hate is wrong. If we start from these kinds of basic assumptions we can sketch out a system of ethics based on objective morality, but these are unprovable assumptions emerging from our basic moral intuition. Sometimes we have disagreements, but this is because individuals may have moral blind spots or may have experiences which rendered their moral intuition defective at times. They or we are simply mistaken. We may have no way of demonstrating that objective morality is real, or explaining it rationally, but that is a separate issue.

Craig is confusing the epistemological questions of how we know what objective morality is and how we prove it, with the ontological question of whether objective morality is a real thing that exists independently of our own mind and heart. He quotes Paul Kurtz, “The central question about moral and ethical principles concerns this ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they purely ephemeral?” While Kurtz has framed this as an ontological question, because he is asking whether morals are purely ephemeral, his preface about whether they are derived from God is irrelevant to the ontology of objective morality. The real nature of his question is epistemological: if there is no God, how can we *know* whether objective morality is real? How can we *explain* it? For Kurtz and Craig, the idea that we have no rational explanation for objective morality without God means that there can only be objective morality with God. This assumes that objective morality can only be true if we have an explanation, but there are many things for which we have no explanation which no one denies are real. We have no explanation for the placebo effect, yet it has been observed numerous times and people’s health has improved in their real lives because of it. We have no explanation for consciousness, yet we must conclude it is a real thing (e.g. Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am”). The fact that we cannot explain something does not mean that it is not real.

Craig goes into some detail about the problems with the atheistic view of morality and how it necessarily implies nihilism, but I think here he is laboring under the same misconception of epistemology vs. ontology. He notes that it seems to be well established among atheist philosophers that there is no rational explanation for morality without some kind of religious or faith-based assumptions about what is good and what is bad. For Craig the naturalistic worldview of atheism leads inevitably to two problems for objective morality: materialism and determinism. If man is merely a smart ape with no soul, as the materialist contends, then we have no reason to consider our moral worth to be greater than that of animals. If man’s actions are entirely determined by the input of our senses and genes, as the determinist suggests, then we have no grounds for assessing moral praise or blame. But does the fact that we have no rational basis for these things invalidate them in and of itself? Is there a rational explanation for “love”, the core duty of Christ’s commandments and the basis of Craig’s moral worldview? Craig is imposing other philosophical and scientific assertions onto the atheistic worldview, which he thinks imply that objective morality is not real, yet atheism does not necessarily imply that these assertions are true. Most atheists probably believe in the theory of evolution, many probably also adhere to naturalism or materialism or both, but these are certainly not required for the atheistic proposition to be logically consistent. Even if we do subscribe to these ideas, they still do not necessarily imply subjective morality or nihilism. They simply make it difficult or impossible to rationally *explain* objective morality.

Craig also points out that in naturalism we have no accountability for our moral choices in the hereafter, because the hereafter is just a dirt-nap. But what does this have to do with the objective moral rightness or wrongness of something? If morality is objective, it cannot be contingent on our punishments or rewards in the afterlife, so this just confuses the issue. According to Craig and the modern philosophers he quotes, we cannot logically demonstrate that people should not be completely selfish egoists or amoralists either. We have no logical reason to act in any way but our own self-interest. This means we have eliminated any need to be humble, to serve our fellow man, or to act out of self-sacrifice. But this brings us back to his unstated but implicit claim that because we have no logical explanation for something, that it is therefore not real and true. Why does it matter that we cannot logically explain the moral rightness of self-sacrifice or the moral wrongness of selfishness? We know these things in our heart and we have no reason to think otherwise, which is enough to settle the question of ontology, if not epistemology.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I agree with Craig’s overall message. I just think he has posed this argument a bit backwards. The basic structure of his argument is this:

Premise 1: If there is objective morality, there is a God.

Premise 2: There is objective morality.

Conclusion: There is a God.

This is structured as a deductively valid argument, meaning that if the two premises are correct, the conclusion must be correct. It is tempting to take this kind of tack in arguing for God, but it always ultimately fails. We simply cannot “prove” the existence of God, no matter how well we argue, so a rigid, deductive argument for belief in God will generally fall flat. But with that said, a lot of what Craig goes over in this paper is worth salvaging in defense of theism.

Rather than trying to prove the bold claim that without God there is no objective morality, Craig could have tried a more subtle approach. Most of his paper seeks to demonstrate that without God we cannot *explain* objective morality, which is probably a better path to promote belief in God. Craig makes a logical leap from the idea that without God there is no explanation for objective morality, to the idea that without God there is no objective morality, but this does not follow. He is seeking to make an airtight case for belief in God, with deductive logic, but this is too ambitious. There is no way to get people to believe in God based on pure logical deduction, because there are always elements which cannot be proven, which are based on pure assumption, or on faith. The deductive argument seeks to prove things beyond the shadow of a doubt, so this kind of approach comes off as awkward.

Instead Craig might have tried being less heavy-handed. He quotes numerous philosophers in making his case for the irrationality of objective morality without God, so he is on fairly solid ground making that argument. He could have started with the assumption that objective morality is obviously real, because we apprehend it and we have no reason to believe otherwise. Assert that it is obviously true that genocide, child abuse, and wars of aggression are morally wrong, quote a few philosophers, etc. Then once he established that objective morality is real, he could propose that the best explanation for this fact is the existence of God. As he quotes numerous atheist philosophers, and argues quite persuasively himself, pure logical reasoning simply has no explanation for objective morality. The atheist is left either accepting the notion of objective morality, without any rational explanation for it, or attempting to defend nihilism. But the theist might use abductive reasoning, or inference to the best explanation, to come up with the solution: God.

Craig quotes several philosophers in making his case for the nihilistic nature of the atheist worldview. While I disagree with him that atheism necessarily implies nihilism, it certainly fails to provide a logically coherent explanation for objective morality. Atheist philosopher Kai Neilson of the University of Calgary tells us, “Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality.” The storied ethicist Richard Taylor writes, “The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, not noticing that, in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well.” These ideas are also alluded to in Hume’s “Is-Ought” fallacy, which maintains that we cannot derive an “ought” from an “is”, meaning that we cannot determine our moral duties and values by simply observing the real world. An atheist might develop a rationally consistent system of ethics by starting with a basic moral assumption (e.g. “it is morally wrong to harm people”, or “it is morally wrong to use people as mere means to an end”), then building up further rules by inferring other values and principles from this axiom. But this initial assumption is in no way provable using pure logic; it is basically a faith-based assertion, similar to religion.

Yet there are certain aspects of morality which are impossible to deny and seem to be objective. Examples might include the notion that it is wrong to hurt people for fun, or the idea that sacrificing one’s life for others is somehow praise-worthy. How can we account for this, if we have no religious or theological assumptions? Here Craig’s analysis of Christian theism can be useful, since he has explained numerous reasons why our commonplace assumptions about morality are perfectly logical, if we have faith in Jesus Christ.

God’s perfectly good nature offers an explanation for objective moral values, in the sense that if God is perfectly good, then He would create us to understand and serve the purpose of moral goodness. I disagree with Craig that God is the source of these values, since that notion brings us back to the Euthyphro dilemma, but it seems clear that the Christian worldview offers a valid and logically coherent explanation for objective morality. As Craig illustrates, God’s commandments also provide an explanation for moral duties such as love, sacrifice, generosity, and compassion, as well as moral proscriptions such as selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination, and oppression. Christ’s commandment to love thy God and love thy neighour as thyself encompasses all of these notions through inference, which we can see in such examples as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Finally as Craig points out, the doctrine of God as an omniscient judge in the afterlife provides an explanation for moral accountability in the hereafter. For those of us who need some reassurance of just reward and punishment for our moral doings in this life, the theistic notions of heaven and hell provide this. This last part is not a necessary condition for an explanation of objective morality, but it lends more explanatory power to the theoretical framework.

Craig has written a thoughtful apologetics piece here, but there are serious problems with his use of logic and his argument. His assertion that there can be no objective morality without God seems to be over reaching, since he cannot prove such an assertion and resorts to arguing that without God objective morality is irrational or impossible to explain, but this is not the same thing. He also makes too strong of a deductive argument for belief in God, based on too little supporting evidence, which fails on closer examination because his premises simply do not stand up to scrutiny. I agree with him that morality makes no sense without resorting to an explanation from theism, and that morality is objective, but I think he would have been better served by proceeding from an abductive or “inference to the best explanation”-type argument. Most people will agree that morality is objective, given that to deny such an assertion is to deny commonly held notions of morality. Most modern philosophers agree that without a theological basis, there can be no rational explanation for morality. Rather than a direct, deductive argument attacking this problem, Craig should have taken a more tactful approach and offered the Christian theistic worldview as simply the best explanation for objective morality.

# Works Cited

Craig, W. L. (n.d.). *Reasonable Faith.* Retrieved from Can We Be Good Without God?: http://www.reasonablefaith.org/can-we-be-good-without-god