**WHY BE MORAL?**

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The title question "Why be moral?" has been around a long time. One use that is sometimes made of it is to argue that the only possible basis that morality can have is one that connects it with God. Thus, it is said, theists have an answer for the question whereas nontheists have none. Part of my goal in the present paper is to refute that claim. But before addressing the title question, let us first inquire: what does it mean to *be moral*? There are at least six definitions that might be considered, as follows:

To be moral is:

D1: to follow moral rules imposed by others.

D2: to follow God's moral rules.

D3: to follow one's own moral rules.

D4: to follow my (the speaker's) moral rules.

D5: to follow the absolutely right moral rules.

D6: to be loving (i.e., unselfish and altruistic) towards others.

Both theists and nontheists could take the expression being moral in *any* of these six senses. Which of them, though, is the best definition? That is very hard to say. Instead of trying to determine which definition is best, I propose to simply consider each one, in turn, with the aim of deciding whether it permits the title question "Why be moral?" to be given any clear, unobjectionable answer.

DEFINITION D1

If D1 is used, then the title question may be reformulated as "Why follow moral rules imposed by others?" The "others" referred to here could be one's family, one's friends, or society in general. It should be noted that some answers to the question tend to reduce morality to one of the other concepts on the list. For example, to say that one should follow moral rules imposed by others because those rules came originally from God would reduce D1 to D2. There are problems with D2 that we will get to later on. What we want here is a reason to be moral, i.e., to follow moral rules imposed by others, that does not appeal to any of the concepts in D2-D6. One rather obvious candidate would be to say that one should follow moral rules imposed by others because to do so would be *expedient.* It would please people generally and they are likely to reward you or at least refrain from retaliating against you or causing you trouble. This is in accord with the old proverb Honesty is the best policy and the saying What goes around, comes around. Expediency is here understood in terms of the achievement of material benefits together with the avoidance of unpleasantness in interaction with others. The ultimate goal is happiness and peace of mind.

One objection to this appeal to expediency is that it seems not to be applicable to the case of rulers or persons in power. They are themselves the ones who reward or punish others and they need not be concerned about receiving reward or punishment themselves. We would like an answer to the question "Why be moral?" that is at least as applicable to people in power as to people who are not in power, and perhaps even more so.

Another even more penetrating objection to the given answer is that in subjugating morality to expediency, it in effect maintains that expediency is the more basic value, which tends to make morality more shallow than it really is. Many of us are inclined to say that people who are moral only for the sake of expediency have not internalized the moral rules that they follow, and so they are not moral at heart: their so-called "morality" is shallow and superficial. I do not regard this objection to be a *refutation* of the "expediency approach" except within a framework that presupposes the ultimacy of morality. For those people who do not share that presupposition, the objection may be dismissed without any violation of reason. In other words, I see no way to prove objectively, without begging the question, that expediency is not a more basic value than morality. So D1 and the "expediency approach" must remain as a possible answer to our title question, though it will probably be unsatisfactory to many philosophers and people in general. Let us see whether there is any alternate approach to the matter that might achieve a wider consensus.

DEFINITION D2

If D2 is used, then the title question may be reformulated as "Why follow God's moral rules?" This is the formulation favored by many members of the religious right in our country. We want to try to understand their point of view. To begin with, we want to look at answers to the question that do not reduce morality to any of the concepts defined by definitions D3-D6. One such answer would be to say that people should follow God's moral rules because to do so would increase their likelihood of obtaining salvation in the afterlife (i.e., getting into heaven and avoid going to hell).

Before considering this proposed answer, let us look at definition D2 itself. There are many problems with it. First of all, what is God and what reason is there to believe that God exists? This is an enormous problem that confronts D2. In my opinion, it is *not* a problem that can be overcome, but for the sake of argument, let us assume that there *is* some intelligible definition of "God" and some acceptable reason to believe that God, defined in the given way, exists.

Another problem with D2 has to do with locating some referent for the expression "God's moral rules." Why believe that that expression has any referent at all? I am not aware of any worthwhile argument to the effect that if God exists then he must have moral rules which it is possible for humans to find out about. Some concepts of God (e.g., deism) do not connect God with any moral rules, and so have no bearing whatever on our title question. But even if we assume that God has such rules, there remains the problem of figuring out what they might possibly be.

The usual approach is to maintain that the Bible is "God's Word" and that the moral rules contained therein are God's moral rules. But this will not do, for several reasons. First, the Bible contains so many contradictions and factual errors that it seems unlikely, if not impossible, that it is the word of an all-powerful sovereign deity.[1]

Second, even the ethical principles contained within the Bible are inconsistent. For example, there are two quite different sets of rules, at Exodus 20 and at Exodus 34, both referred to as "The Ten Commandments." Consider also that God is supposed to have said "Thou shalt not kill" but then to have ordered the Israelites to go out and kill all the people in neighboring tribes who had a different religion from theirs. And there are conflicts between Old Testament morality and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Another inconsistency has to do with whether or not the OT rules have been superseded. And there are other inconsistencies as well, which I shall not pursue here.

A third problem with Biblical ethics is that it does not square with our current conceptions of morality. For example, we no longer condone slavery as the Bible does.[2] We no longer execute people for having the wrong religion or for working on the Sabbath or for a few dozen other (at best) minor offenses.[3] The Bible discriminates against women.[4] We now believe in women's rights, children's rights, and animal rights, all of which are ideas totally foreign to the Bible. God is supposed to have ordered female virgins to be taken as war plunder (Num. 31:18-40) and to marry their attackers if they are seduced or raped (Exod. 22:16, Deut. 22:28-29). Such ideas are totally foreign to modern morality. Even the Sermon on the Mount presents us with impossible standards. Jesus tells us there to not resist evil, not defend ourselves against violence, and give away everything that anyone might ask of us (Matt. 5:38-42), but really if people were to follow such advice then they would not survive long in our world. Maybe among the extinct tribes of the world there are some who actually tried to live by the Sermon on the Mount. Anyway, our current conceptions of morality have very little to do with what is written in the Bible. I think that most people who advocate Biblical ethics are simply ignorant about the Bible and unaware of what that ethics amounts to.

Well, is there some other holy book that might plausibly contain God's moral rules? Certainly I have not located any. Perhaps there isn't any divinely inspired holy book but some manmade source. How about the U.S. Constitution? Clarence Thomas thinks that humans can ascertain the mind of God by appeal to natural law, which is discoverable by our moral intuitions. Again, I know of no good argument that connects manmade law with divine law. I think our quest for "God's moral rules" is a hopeless one.

To go back to the original issue, there does not seem to be much point in trying to answer the question "Why follow God's moral rules?" if we are unable to locate any referent for that expression. But even apart from that, the usual answer "because it can get you into heaven" is itself fraught with difficulties.

First of all, there is the problem of the afterlife. Can any sense be made out of *that* idea? Elsewhere, I give reasons for a negative answer.[5] But let us assume for the sake of argument that the idea of enjoying heavenly bliss is intelligible.

There is another problem, and that is to connect heavenly bliss (whatever that is supposed to be) with following God's moral rules (whatever they are supposed to be). Why believe that there is any connection at all? The Bible is inconsistent on the matter.[6] In some passages it connects salvation with one's behavior but in other passages it connects salvation with one's *beliefs.* If one believes in God's son, one will inherit the kingdom of heaven, and that's all there is to it. Associated with this outlook is the idea that to focus on behavior is incorrect. That's what the Pharisees did, and Jesus called them "hypocrites". What is important is not rule-following but sincere acceptance of Jesus as one's savior. Certainly that would count against this entire appeal to D2 to try to answer our title question. In still other passages the Bible says that our salvation is all predestined anyway. According to Calvinists, if God has picked you to be saved, you're O.K., otherwise not, and trying to follow God's moral rules is irrelevant to your destiny. The Bible is not even consistent on the matter of whether or not *everyone* will get into heaven. Although it is usually taken to be negative on that matter, there are a few passages that support universalism. Anyway, there is no clear Biblical support for the idea, implicit in the appeal to D2 under consideration, that following God's moral rules will get you into heaven.

A final difficulty with the appeal to heavenly reward is that it subjugates morality to a kind of expediency. It is ultimately selfish and therefore objectionable in the same way that D1's "expediency approach" was objectionable, at least to some people. There is a genuine failure in both approaches to make morality the ultimate value and to internalize the moral rules that they claim we ought to follow.

Could there be some *other* answer to our title question that appeals to D2? Instead of saying that one should follow God's moral rules in order to get into heaven, how about saying that one should follow them simply because God is our creator and we ought to always try to do what our creator wants us to do. In many ways, this is preferable. At least it avoids the problems connected with the idea of salvation in the afterlife. Of course, it still succumbs to the objections to D2 itself, including our failure to locate a referent for the expression "God's moral rules."

Furthermore, there are two additional problems. First, why believe that God is our creator? Not all theists make that claim. People at least slightly familiar with science maintain that humans evolved from other primates by purely natural causes and are not the special creation of God.

A second problem is *why* should a creature try to do what its creator wants it to do? That in itself is a kind of moral rule, and it is unclear what could possibly justify it. Suppose one's creator were evil and issued immoral commands. Wouldn't the *right* thing to do in that case be to disobey the commands? We can imagine a kind of Nuremberg trial for created beings that concluded that they should have disobeyed their creator. The principle that creatures should always obey their creator, no matter what, seems not to have any rational basis.

The answer to our question "Why be moral?" that is connected with definition D2 (and advocated by many members of the religious right) is that it comes down to following God's moral rules, and that is something we should do, either to get into heaven or simply because God is our creator. I hope to have shown that this answer suffers from insuperable difficulties.

DEFINITION D3

In our consideration of D1 and D2, there was a call for an internalization of the rules of morality, and definition D3 heeds that call. According to D3, to be moral is to follow one's own moral rules. This has the peculiarity of relativizing the issue. Consider the example of two pregnant women, A and B, who are contemplating abortion. If A regards abortion to be wrong but B does not, then according to D3, for A to be moral she must refrain from having an abortion, but B could go ahead and have one and still be moral. Such relativity would be seen by some as a fatal objection to the definition. But let us, for the sake of argument, side-step this problem and pursue our title question in terms of D3.

In terms of definition D3, the question "Why be moral?" reduces to "Why follow your own moral rules?" One possible answer to it is that following one's own moral rules has to be the top priority with a person. The idea here is that if anything supersedes your morality, then that really wasn't your morality after all. Morality *must* be ultimate. If woman A, who regards abortion to be wrong, nevertheless goes ahead and has one, out of expediency, then what that shows is that she really didn't regard abortion to be wrong after all. The answer to the question "Why follow your own moral rules?" is that morality must be ultimate. Nothing can supersede it. In a certain way, this makes the title question meaningless, since to ask "Why do X?" presupposes that X is not ultimate and can be superseded. Like other questions with false presuppositions, the question "Why be moral?" is a meaningless one. If you think it makes sense, then you are simply mistaken.

There is a certain conceptual framework in which morality must be ultimate or top priority, and, to be sure, within that framework our title question is meaningless. But I think that it is possible to have a different conceptual framework and to view morality differently. One can view it as just a set of rules governing one's conduct towards others, and as just one value among other values. And one of the other competing values could be expediency. Thus, woman A could still go ahead and have an abortion out of expediency even though she regards it to be morally wrong. She could say, "I know I shall feel great guilt over this, but I must do it anyway." I suspect that some may be inclined to reply, "That's unintelligible" but others may be inclined to say, "That makes perfectly good sense." I can only suggest that the two groups have two different frameworks in which the concept of morality plays a role, and it is actually a different role in the two cases. I like to think of myself as somehow outside both frameworks and finding both of them to be comprehensible, though it is not clear to me whether that makes any sense, and I am quite sure that people in the first framework would relegate me to the second one by declaring me to be *amoral.* And they may be right. Perhaps just acknowledging the possibility of the second framework places one inside of it. I am unsure about that.

It should be noted that a person who makes morality necessarily ultimate or the top priority in his/her system of values is probably *not* a theist, since theists usually place submission to God above everything else. Such a person would also need to declare the title question meaningless, whereas most theists like to say they have an answer to it. It should also be noted that such a person could be an ethical relativist or subjectivist. There is no inconsistency in regarding values (including morality) to be relative or subjective while at the same time placing morality as the top priority in ones own system of values.

So, what is the upshot here? When our title question is interpreted according to definition D3, then it either becomes meaningless or not. It would be meaningless within a conceptual framework that makes morality necessarily ultimate or the highest priority. But in some other conceptual framework the question could make sense and then it might be answered by saying something like "One should almost always follow one's own moral rules because that is a high priority." This allows that there could conceivably be a situation in which something supersedes morality. In such a situation there could emerge the puzzling pronouncement "one ought not be moral." Here the "ought" is not the moral "ought" but some more basic use of the term, a use not even conceded within the first conceptual framework, which shows that these are also two different linguistic frameworks. In the first framework, the sentence "There are situations in which one ought not be moral" is meaningless nonsense. I am not able to evaluate the two systems of thought and speech beyond saying that I comprehend both of them.

DEFINITION D4

Here each speaker has a set of moral rules and takes "being moral" to mean no more than "following *m*> moral rules." In some cases, this would reduce to D5, following the absolutely right moral rules, and we will consider *that* concept below. But it is not necessary for D4 to reduce to D5. A person could have moral rules without regarding them to be absolute or objective. Think of the analogy of ice cream flavors. I may have my own favorite flavors and yet grant that someone else's preferences are equally valid. Suppose someone were to say to me, "The flavors you like are inferior; there are others that are better tasting." In a sense, I would disagree with that. And yet, I need not regard the person as being mistaken about the matter. I could have my preferences in taste while allowing that others' preferences are equally valid. Well, it could be the same way in my preferences regarding human conduct. I could say that a certain action is morally wrong without having to regard the alternate view, that the action is not morally wrong, as a mistake. There is a kind of relativity here, but it is of a different sort from the kind that was introduced with definition D3, above.

On this interpretation of D4, for one speaker to ask "Why be moral?" it could emerge as a different question from that of a different speaker employing the same words in the sense of D4. In each case, the speaker is making reference to himself/herself and is asking "Why should people generally follow *my* moral rules?" But there would be no implication that the moral rules referred to are in any way absolute or objective. It would be like asking, "Why should people generally eat the flavors of ice cream that *I* prefer?"

Well, what is the *answer* to the question "Why should people follow *my* moral rules?" where that is taken in the relativistic way described? There is no definite answer. To go by the ice cream analogy, I suppose it should simply be "I find those rules to be the best." Well, the best in what way? Is this an appeal to expediency as in "Honesty is the best policy"? Not necessarily, though it *could* be that. I think that when "being moral" is taken according to D4, then not only the meaning of the title question, but the force of it, the implications of it, etc., would all become speaker-relative. And some speakers might simply declare that there just is no reason to follow their own moral rules. Each person must find his/her own morality and basis for it. To go that route would, in effect, push the title question back into the definition D3 framework. But it would not be necessary to go that way. I think there are interpretations of D4 that do not revert either to D3 or to D5. But not much more can be said about them except that they would be speaker-relative.

DEFINITION D5

People uneasy about the relativity of D3 and D4 might want to replace it by D5 according to which being moral is a matter of following the *absolutely right* moral rules. Here the right rules are the ones carved in stone, so to speak, except with no reference to God. In other words, morality is absolute. If two people have different sets of moral rules by which they live, then necessarily one of them is mistaken about the matter.

I am inclined to reject this definition out of hand, for I think there simply is no referent for the expression "the absolutely right moral rules." In opposition, there are persuasive reasons in support of some kind of metaethical relativism. But this is another issue beyond the scope of the present essay. Many years ago I presented a paper entitled "A Defense of Metaethical Relativism."[7] I still hold the relativistic views that I defended there.

Aside from rejecting definition D5, I think that the same bifurcation between two conceptual reference frames mentioned above in connection with D3 would apply to it. In other words, assuming that there *is* such a thing as "the absolutely right moral rules," in that case people could be divided into two groups. There would be people who feel that the rules of morality are necessarily ultimate and to discover those rules and then follow them has to be one's top priority if one has any conception of morality at all. To take anything else as superseding the moral rules is to simply be *amoral.* For that group of people, the question "Why be moral?" (or "Why follow the right moral rules?") would be a meaningless question. On the other hand, there would be another group of people who concede that there is an absolutely right set of moral rules but who do not regard them as necessarily ultimate or top priority in one's overall system of values. And for that group of people, our title question would not be meaningless. It is in terms of such a bifurcation between two different conceptual frames of reference that I would pursue our title question if its interpretation by means of definition D5 were at all defensible. But that is *not* defensible, and so I shall not pursue that line of investigation further.

DEFINITION D6

It is not necessary to define "being moral" in terms of rule-following. Definition D6 illustrates a quite different approach. According to D6, to be moral is to be loving (i.e., unselfish and altruistic) towards others. So, taken in that way, our title question becomes the question "Why be loving towards others?"

The big issue here is that of emotional voluntarism. Whereas rule-following is a set of actions and therefore subject to the will, it is unclear whether there is anything subject to the will in the case of being loving in the relevant sense. If you are not unselfish and altruistic, then can you make yourself to be that? It does not seem possible to me. It may be that some people can influence their own emotions and attitudes to some extent, but the amount of control that the average person has here does not seem sufficient to warrant a voluntaristic outlook. The question "Why be loving?" presupposes an amount of control over one's emotions and attitudes that does not exist. For that reason, the question has a false presupposition (namely, that unloving people can make themselves loving) and is therefore a meaningless question. It makes no sense to ask "Why be moral?" if "being moral" is defined according to definition D6.

CONCLUSION

By some of the definitions, the question "Why be moral?" is spurious or meaningless. That is the case with D2, D5, and D6. But in the case of the other definitions, D1, D3, and D4, it is possible to understand the question and even to answer it. For example, one might say, One should be moral for the sake of expediency. In other words, if you are immoral (whether that is defined by D1 or D3 or D4), then you will probably suffer for it later and end up regretting having been immoral. This answer could be given just as well by a nontheist as by a theist.

Let us apply this result to a specific instance. Take the case of rape as an example of an immoral act. The question could be posed: why should people not rape? The Bible is unsatisfactory on this point. It says that any betrothed virgin who is raped within a town or city is equally culpable for not screaming for help and is to be executed, along with the rapist (Deut. 22:23-24). If the rape occurs out in the country, then she may be excused, but if she is a virgin not already betrothed, she must marry her attacker (Deut. 22:25-29). There is no biblical injunction whatever against the rape of a non-virgin who is neither married nor betrothed. Rape is viewed in the Bible as a kind of property crime against the man who owns the woman, which is either her husband (or future husband for one who is betrothed) or father. Thus, the Bible provides no general answer to the question Why should people not rape? and is very unsatisfactory in conveying the immorality of the act.

If there is to be an answer to the question, presumably it is that rape is an immoral act, meaning that it violates others moral rules (D1) or that it would violate the rapists own moral rules (D3) or that it violates my (the speakers) moral rules (D4). In each case, there comes the further question Why follow those moral rules? Depending on ones conceptual framework, one could appeal to expediency as an answer: dont rape because if you do, you would most probably suffer later and regret having done it. Nontheists could reply in this way just as well as theists.

Sometimes the further question is raised: suppose you see you could get away with it and not suffer later. Why refrain from raping in *such* circumstances? An advocate of definition D3 could reply, You would feel guilt over it, which is a good reason not to do the act. Also, there is the general reply that the given circumstance *never* actually obtains. One can never know beforehand that one would not suffer later for some action. The future is way too unpredictable for that. Also, the risk of extreme retaliation in the case of rape is huge. For anyone to run such a risk would be asinine. Again, nontheists could give such replies just as well as theists.

Not everyone will find such questions or answers intelligible. As pointed out above, some people, mainly nontheists, have conceptual frames of reference in which morality is necessarily ultimate or the top priority. It is clear that the question "Why be moral?" which by its very nature presupposes the absence of such ultimacy, cannot be given any meaning within such frames of reference. Thus, there is a question that is prior to Why be moral? It is the question whether or not morality is an ultimate value. If it is, then Why be moral? is a meaningless question; otherwise, the question could make sense, and definitions D1, D3, and D4 supply three intelligible interpretations for it.

So, is morality an ultimate value or not? This most basic question cannot be given any objective answer. There is no fact of the matter. It is for the most part an issue of values and is therefore ultimately relative and subjective, as is morality itself. Some say yes and others say no, and neither side is mistaken about the matter. Many nontheists would take our title question to be meaningless, and I have no good argument against their outlook.

**NOTES**

[1] For examples of such errors, see my web essay at the following address: <http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore\_drange/bible.html>.

[2] Gen. 9:25; Exod. 21:2-6,20-21; Lev. 25:44-46; Deut. 15:12,17, 28:68; Jer. 27:8,12; Joel 3:8; Eph. 6:5-7; Col. 3:22; 1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18-21.

[3] Exod. 12:15,19, 20:3,7,8, 22:18-20, 31:14-15, 35:2-3; Lev. 3:16-17, 7:22,25-27, 11:4-8,10-11, 17:10-16, 20:6,13,18,27, 24:10-23; Num. 15:32-36; Deut. 13:1-15, 17:2-5, 18:10-11,20, 21:18-21; Josh. 23:7,16; 1 Ki. 18:40; Gal. 5:19-20. In some passages the penalty is said to be cut off from the people, but it is clear that that means to be executed, as shown by Exod. 31:14 and Lev. 20:2-3.

[4] Gen. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:34-35; Eph. 5:22-23; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:9-14; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1. When Jesus forbade divorce and remarriage (Matt. 5:32, 19:7-9), that was a way of preserving wives as mens property.

[5] Theodore M. Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998), Appendix E.

[6] See my essay Biblical Contradictions Regarding Salvation (*Free Inquiry* 14, Summer 1994), pp. 56-57.

[7] The paper is published in the Fall 1975 issue of *The Journal of the West Virginia Philosophical Society.*