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Must the Moral Law Have a Lawgiver?

By John Njoroge

Atheists don’t believe we need God to understand what is right and wrong. Yet, Christians point to a moral law that is written on our hearts by God, and our conscience testifies either for us or against us with regard to morality.
Before I respond directly to the question raised in the title of this article, let me say a word about what I take to be the place of arguments for God’s existence. To the person who has walked with God for any length of time and who has experienced firsthand the reality of God’s work in his or her life, offering arguments for God’s existence can feel as awkward as planning a surprise birthday party for Auntie Jenny in her presence. I suppose most people do not believe in God as the end result of logically airtight conclusions built upon indisputable premises; they are first confronted with their own sinfulness and the need to be reconciled with a Holy God as encapsulated in the gospel message and then build a rational case for their newfound faith as questions, and sometimes doubts, arise. We should be careful not to overemphasize the intellect at the expense of the will. Just like any other good thing our Lord has freely given to us, we can use reason to conceal our flight from Him. When it comes to making a decision either for or against God, the defining issue is the deceptively simple question Jesus asked the disciples of John the Baptist who expressed interest in following Jesus, “What do you want?” (John 1:38). Doubt and skepticism are valid postures as long as they are motivated by the search for truth rather than a repudiation of it. What we want to be the case can keep us from accepting what is in fact the case, in spite of the amount of evidence at our disposal. Elsewhere, Jesus puts it this way, “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, there is indeed a place for taking a step back to consider the nature of the rational evidence that may be marshaled in defense of our faith. The process of loving God with the entirety of one’s being, including the mind—a major part of the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:37–8)—is not only commanded in the Scriptures, but it is also integral to spiritual growth. Moreover, it is true that a rational presentation of the gospel routinely serves as the catalyst that propels many to faith in God. For some people, the way to their heart is through their mind. And when the will is right—when what we want is to submit to a reality not of our own making—we find that God has really put us in a world fraught with clues of his holy pursuit. Among other things, we are rational beings, and it stands to reason that our minds, properly chastened, should not be at war with the truth, wherever it may be found. To quote the legendary scientist Galileo,

I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason and intellect has intended us to forego their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them.

So, what do our senses, reason, and intellect tell us regarding the existence of God? There are many different strands of evidence available to us in answer to this question. We could, for example, consider the origin and complexity of the universe, the presence of information in the DNA, the origin of life and consciousness, biblical history, including the resurrection of Jesus, and our immediate experience of God. In this article, I will concentrate on the moral nature of our universe, which I take to be one of the peskiest pointers to God for anyone who is intent on turning his or her back on Him.

In what follows, I will offer some of the reasons why I believe we cannot make adequate sense of our experience of morality without God. My goal is not to
focus on the moral argument as a whole but on the obligatory or normative aspect of the moral law that I will argue cries out for a moral lawgiver. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant noted several centuries ago, morality is largely constituted by categorical imperatives: nonnegotiable rules of behavior to which every human being must conform. I will argue that such a demand makes sense only if there exists a moral lawgiver who made us as moral agents capable of apprehending an objective moral standard external to us and applying it to ourselves. We exist in a world that comes packaged with a moral law that we did not invent. We discover it and once we do, we find that we are bound by it. This is, indeed, our Father’s world!

THE MORAL ARGUMENT

Like hundreds of other young men and women I have met in my travels around the globe, my first foray into systematized philosophical thinking as it applies to Christian apologetics was occasioned by a “chance” encounter with the spell-binding lectures and messages of Ravi Zacharias, especially his 1992 Veritas Forum lectures at Harvard University that eventually found their way into his provocatively titled book Can Man Live Without God. I was barely out of my teenage years, and I had traveled to the US to study medicine. But God used Ravi’s messages to lead me on a different path as I came to terms with the infinite value of God’s Word, properly communicated. The rest, as they say, is history.

One of the points Ravi emphasized in his lectures, one that I found to be quite persuasive, was the fact that there is a very compelling link between morality and God. Here is a succinct summary of his argument in response to a question:

> When you say there is evil, aren’t you admitting there is good? When you accept the existence of goodness, you must affirm a moral law on the basis of which to differentiate between good and evil. But when you admit to a moral law, you must posit a moral lawgiver.³

Now, anyone who may be unfamiliar with the academic literature on the source of our moral intuitions might be surprised to learn that most philosophers who teach ethics, including atheists, accept almost each one of the claims Ravi makes in the above quote. In popular culture (and in a few academic circles as well), there are various attempts to explain morality in terms of evolution, social contracts, relativism, etc.⁴ Much of the interaction on moral issues tends to take place at that level in popular circles. And because there exists a gap between the academy and the so-called masses (and we are all members of the “masses” outside our professional or academic disciplines), addressing these topics in the manner in which the masses grapple with them is vitally important. But academic ethicists realize that morality is too central and binding a reality in human experience to be relegated either to individual or collective human will, desires, or beliefs. Nor can it be adequately understood on the basis of social contracts or evolution.

That morality is objective, binding, and inevitable is most evident to us when we are either the victims of injustice or when our sympathies for the helpless are awakened. Everything within us cries out against such experiences. A number of years ago, I read a story about a woman who had given birth through C-section in a certain country. In the process of the delivery, something went horribly wrong. The doctors, one would hope inadvertently, inflicted deep wounds on the baby’s face. The baby could not breathe and breastfeed at the same time. The doctors assured the mother that the baby
would be fine in a couple of days and encouraged her to take the baby home.

Well, the baby got worse. When the mother took the baby back to the hospital, she discovered that, to her horror, the hospital staff had purged all the records of her ever having been to the hospital. They told her that if she ever set foot in that hospital again, they would call the police on her because of what she had done to her own baby. It is impossible for me to imagine any morally healthy person reading such a story without reacting strongly against the injustice. An unabashed craving for justice is deeply woven into the very fiber of our being, and it is strongly awakened in such moments. But as Ravi notes, such a reaction betrays the fact that we are very much aware of the existence of a moral law that applies to all of us. We can’t complain about evil without at the same time invoking the primacy of good, and to do so is to acknowledge that morality is objective.

For most people, what we have said so far is enough to establish the dependence of morality on God. All the pieces we need to build that puzzle are not only present but in their rightful places. We know that some things are really wrong. Other things are really right, and there is an objective moral standard that helps us differentiate between the two. We also sense quite strongly that this can only be true if God exists. Morality is indeed grounded in God. Once one begins to realize that morality is not relative, that it cannot be grounded in biological evolution, and that it cannot be fully explained on the basis of social conventions or individual taste, one immediately feels drawn to the conclusion that God must exist.

In my travels, I have discussed the claims I’ve made so far with a lot of people, including atheists. I find that most people accept our thinking thus far. They believe that there is something rationally duplicitous about claiming that there is an objective set of dos and don’ts imposed upon human beings while denying that God exists.

“That is simply preposterous!” one self-proclaimed atheist friend said to me. “Only a person who just wants to avoid God would grant the objectivity of morality while rejecting God. If there is an objective moral standard, then there is a moral lawgiver, which means God exists.”

We both laughed out loud when I uttered a hearty “Amen!” in response. As an aside, you may be wondering how my friend could still describe himself as an atheist if he believed morality points to God. Sadly, he chooses to deny morality. He agrees that if you accept that morality is objective, then you must believe in God. But, he reasons, if you reject morality, then you don’t need to worry about
morality pointing you to God. As we will see later, my friend is not alone in this. But yes, I did let him know that denying morality—denying that some things are really evil and some things are really good, regardless of what anyone says—is just as preposterous. That conversation reminded me of the following quip by GK Chesterton,

If it be true (as it certainly is) that a man can feel exquisite happiness skinning a cat, then the religious philosopher can make one or two deductions. He must either deny the existence of God, as all atheists do; or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do. The new theologians seem to think it a highly rationalistic solution to deny the cat.5

Our experience of morality, especially when we are the victims of injustice, is too powerful to be illusory. To deny that there are things that are right, and others wrong, is as absurd as denying the cat as in Chesterton’s example. But if the point is so obvious, and if so many have turned to God on the basis of the pressure morality puts on their unbelief, how is it possible that some of the leading ethics professors in the best of our universities around the world can affirm the objectivity of morality while rejecting God? How do they manage to have their cake and eat it too?

DENYING THE CAT: OBJECTIVE MORALITY WITHOUT GOD
If you are reading carefully, you will note that I said that most ethicists, including atheists, accept almost each one of the claims Ravi makes in the quote above. So what part of the argument do they dispute? Unfortunately, the most hotly debated part of the argument also happens to be the most important, i.e., the direct link between morality and God. The controversy is centered on the last line of Ravi’s quote: the claim that it is not possible to have a moral law without a moral lawgiver.

For reasons such as the ones we’ve already talked about, most philosophers are unwilling to deny the reality of morality. They agree that acknowledging that good and evil exist invokes an objective moral law, but they also think that the moral law stands on its own without any need for further justification. In other words, one does not need to appeal to a moral lawgiver to acknowledge that there is indeed a moral standard that is independent of human decisions, will or desires, and that helps us differentiate between good and evil. For example, atheist philosopher Louise Anthony writes,

I take it that theists and atheists will agree about what it means to say that morality is objective: first, whether something is right or wrong does not depend on any human being’s attitudes toward it, and second, moral facts are independent of human will.6

Similarly, Erik Wielenberg, also an atheist, writes, “[My view] is non-theistic in that it implies that objective morality does not require a theistic foundation; indeed, the view implies that objective morality does not require an external foundation at all.”7 Other examples could be given.

To understand how someone can accept that morality is objective while rejecting the existence of God, we will look at two of the best arguments for the position. These arguments are (1) we can make perfect sense of objective morality without God, and (2) invoking God in discussions about morality actually creates more problems than it solves.
Before we delve into the arguments, let’s first say a word about “arguments” in logic. An argument in logic is not a quarrel. It is the juxtaposition of statements in such a way that the truth of one of those statements (called the conclusion) is entailed by the other statement(s), which are called premise(s). Logical consistency is one of the tests of the truth of a worldview, so logic is extremely important. But logic calls for clear thinking, which can be hard at times. Like Apostle Peter, I invite you to “gird up the loins of your mind” and join me on a mental adventure. It will be rough going in places, but I promise you the trip is more than worth it. As followers of Jesus Christ, logic is our friend, not our enemy.

I. CAN WE REALLY MAKE SENSE OF OBJECTIVE MORALITY WITHOUT GOD?
The first argument for morality without God is fairly easy to grasp. It is simply the claim that morality is not different from other truths that we grasp about our universe without having to appeal to God. It is not different, for example, from our grasp of logical and mathematical truths. Consider the following argument, one that is found in many logic textbooks. Suppose you were given these two premises,

1. All men are mortal.
2. Socrates is a man

You know immediately that you ought to draw the following conclusion:

3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

You know immediately and instinctively that the conclusion follows from the premises. In addition, if you pardon the pun, you know immediately that 2 + 2 is equal to 4. These are truths that are simply a part of reality, truths that we employ in our day-to-day lives without invoking God, or so the argument goes. According to this thinking, moral truths work the same way. They are just there as part of reality, and we apprehend them and use them in the same way we apprehend and use truths of logic and mathematics. We do not need God to apprehend and apply these truths to our lives.

However, I hope you can spot a move that has been played on us, which makes this argument seem much more compelling so far than it really is. Namely, we have switched from talking about where morality comes from (what it is grounded in) to talking about how we know about morality. To use some fancy philosophical terms, the former is an ontological task (concerning the nature of reality), the latter an epistemological one (concerning the nature of knowledge and how we acquire it). Even if it is true that we apprehend moral truths in the same way that we apprehend logical and mathematical truths (which I believe is true),
Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.
it does not follow that morality is not grounded in God. It could be the case that God made us in such a way that we are in fact able to apprehend laws of mathematics, logic, and morality immediately. As a matter of fact, the Scriptures teach that this is exactly what happened, specifically with regard to the moral law. In Romans 2:14-15, the apostle Paul writes,

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

The requirements of the law are written on our hearts, and our conscience testifies either for us or against us with regard to morality. That is why God judged Gentile nations in the Old Testament for their evil behavior, even though they did not have the Bible. They ought to have known better. That is why God judges people who have never read the Bible and who may not care about it. They ought to know better. So, we should not let a skeptic get away with saying that since we can tell the difference between right and wrong without appealing to God, we don’t need God to ground morality. A good number of skeptics think pointing out that we can tell the difference between right and wrong without appealing to God, we don’t need God to ground morality. A good number of skeptics think pointing out that we can tell the difference between right and wrong without appealing to God, it is not enough. How we learn about morality and what morality is grounded in are two very different questions.

But if that were the only reason given for the claim that we can make sense of morality without God, the argument would be too weak to convince professional ethicists to accept morality while rejecting God, though it regularly works at the level of the masses. So we must now consider the second step taken in defense of the argument. Philosophers proceed to point out that logical, mathematical, and moral facts are necessary truths. When philosophers say that something exists necessarily, they mean that it has always existed and it will always exist. It is not possible for it not to exist. That, we should note, is what we believe about God. He is from everlasting to everlasting. His existence is uncaused—He simply exists.

The argument follows similar logic in maintaining that, in addition to God who is a necessary Being, there are other necessary entities, and they include the laws of mathematics and the laws of logic. Laws of mathematics and logic simply exist. Even God, who is a rational Being, must follow these laws. He cannot violate them, the argument continues, and it makes no sense to ask where they came from or what they are grounded in.

Now, if the laws of logic and mathematics can exist without any need for a logical or mathematical lawgiver, the argument continues, why can’t the laws of morality exist in the same way? Why do we need a lawgiver for the moral law but not for logical or mathematical laws? Those who insist on uncoupling morality from God obviously insist that we should understand the laws of morality in the same way that we understand the laws of logic and mathematics. The moral law also exists necessarily and it therefore doesn’t need to be grounded in anything.

I hope you can now appreciate the reason why so many philosophers find this argument in support of the claim that we can make sense of morality without God compelling. But before we offer a response, let’s review the argument briefly. We are simply aware of the laws of
morality in the same way we apprehend the laws of mathematics and logic. We responded by saying the question we are answering is not how we come to know about these laws but what they are grounded in. The part of the argument we are considering now is the claim that since these laws are unalterable, non-negotiable, and they exist necessarily, we therefore don’t need to ask where they come from or what they are grounded in. They have always existed, and they will always exist. Even God cannot change them. Now we must respond to this second strand of the argument.

In response to the argument, we begin by noting a couple of things. First, we are now well beyond the boundaries atheists normally draw around the ultimate nature of reality. We are regularly told that all of reality can be fully explained by matter, energy, and the interactions that take place among or within material particles. With the argument we are now considering, the story shifts dramatically. In addition to material particles and energy, we now have an entirely different realm of reality—a reality that consists of abstract entities that exist necessarily and to which human beings are subject. That is no small shift. We now have one foot in the unseen world, where God lives. Exit materialism, to which much of the modern atheistic movement is intricately wedded.

Secondly, the claim that the laws of logic, mathematics, and morality do not need to be grounded in anything since they exist necessarily needs to be defended, not just asserted. Showing that something exists necessarily is not the same thing as showing that it needs no explanation for its existence. To state the point differently, something can exist necessarily and still require an explanation for its existence. As far as I know, there is no good reason to think that once one shows that something exists necessarily, questions about what explains its existence become irrelevant. As a matter of fact, argues William Lane Craig, such a position can be shown to be false. He writes,

The assumption here seems to be that necessary truths cannot stand to one another in relations of explanatory priority. Not only do I see no reason to think that assumption true, but it strikes me as obviously false. For example, “States of consciousness exist” is necessarily true, since “God exists” is necessarily true. That is to say, the fact that a personal, metaphysically necessary being like God exists explains why it is necessarily true that states of consciousness exist. To give a non-theological example, the axioms of Peano arithmetic are explanatorily prior to “2+2=4,” as are the axioms of Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory to the theorems thereof.

Consequently, it is not enough for one to point out that the laws of logic, mathematics, and morality exist necessar-

The claim that the laws of logic, mathematics, and morality do not need to be grounded in anything since they exist necessarily needs to be defended, not just asserted. Showing that something exists necessarily is not the same thing as showing that it needs no explanation for its existence.
ily. One must also offer valid reasons as to why we should think that they do not need to be grounded in anything and are not in need of any explanation. As Craig puts it, “…if necessary truths can stand to one another in asymmetric relations of explanatory priority, then there is no objection ... to holding that moral values exist because God exists.”

Thus one can argue that the laws of mathematics, logic, and morality are all grounded in God. They exist necessarily, but they are also in need of explanation, and that explanation is God. Although much more could be said about this, I would like to pursue a different line of thinking in order to show that the moral law does indeed require a moral lawgiver. I will argue that, even if we grant for the sake of the argument that we don’t need to appeal to God to explain the laws of logic and mathematics, morality is sufficiently different from logic and mathematics to demand a moral lawgiver. Specifically, my claim is that the fact that morality contains within it a normative or obligatory character does indeed presuppose the existence of a lawgiving, transcendent Personal Being. In other words, morality is *agent-centered*—it requires a thinking being with the authority to issue commands. But before we look at that response in more detail, let us examine briefly the second argument given for the claim that morality is not grounded in God.

2. DOES INVOKING GOD IN MORALITY CREATE MORE PROBLEMS THAN IT SOLVES?

At this point, the skeptic has another weapon in his arsenal. For someone who is not philosophically inclined, the subtlety of this argument can easily make it seem quite abstract and irrelevant, not to mention bewildering. So, once again, I implore you to gird up the loins of your mind. We’ve come too far—it’s too late to turn back now!

Here is the argument: If we say that moral obligations are commands that God issues and which He requires us to obey, we must be assuming that we are already obligated to follow God’s commands even before He issues any command at all. In other words, the fact that we have the obligation to obey commands issued by God is itself an obligation that is simply true—it is not one of the commands God issues. You obey God’s commands because you already have the obligation to obey God. God cannot make it the case that you ought to obey the commands He issues if it weren’t already the case that you ought to do so.

An example might be helpful here. Suppose you are made aware of the command that you must set aside Wednesday as a holy day and you are to do no work on that day. You ask who issued that command. Would you really feel obligated to do so if you found out that the order to keep the Sabbath on Wednesday came from your next-door neighbor, Bill? I suppose the answer is “No!” You are under no obligation to keep any commands issued by Bill. So, why think that we have the obligation to obey God’s commands but not Bill’s? J.L. Mackie stated the objection as follows:

The commands of a legitimate human ruler do not create obligations: if such a ruler tells you to do X, this makes it obligatory for you to do X only if it is already obligatory for you to do whatever the ruler tells you (within the sphere in which X lies). The same applies to God. He can make it obligatory for us to do Y by so commanding only because there is first a general obligation for us to obey him. His commands, therefore, cannot be the source of moral obligation in general."
We could respond by saying that God has the authority to issue commands, yet a human being, like Bill, doesn’t. Given who God is, I am under his authority and I must obey his commands. The crucial point here is this: Just as Bill cannot make it the case that you ought to obey the commands he issues just by issuing that as a command, God cannot make it the case that you ought to obey Him just by commanding you to do so since, if you are not already obligated to obey Him, you would not need to worry about this command either. You obey his commands because there is an antecedent, independent obligation owed to Him simply because of who He is, whether He has issued any commands or not.

But that creates a problem for our original claim that our obligations are commands issued by God. We have said that God doesn’t need to issue any commands for it to be the case that I am obligated to obey his commands. But if I am already obligated to follow God’s commands before He issues any commands, then it follows that there is at least one obligation that is simply true, i.e., one that is independent of any commands issued by God, why can’t we say the same thing about all the other obligations, especially if we concede that moral truths exist necessarily?

In other words, we are left with no possible way of offering an explanation for the source of our moral obligations. The skeptic set out to uncouple obligation from God and ended up making the idea of obligation even more mysterious. The reason this has happened is because the attempt to show that obligations do not come from God rests on an equivocation. Consider these two statements:

1. We are obligated to do what God commands.
2. There exists an antecedent obligation to obey whatever God commands.

In order to make the argument against explaining our moral obligations in terms of God’s command work, the skeptic must assume that the second statement above is true. But the theist is not at all committed to the second statement; all the theist needs is for the first statement to be true. There is no antecedent, mysterious obligation that needs to be explained.
The skeptic set out to uncouple obligation from God and ended up making the idea of obligation even more mysterious. The reason this has happened is because the attempt to show that obligations do not come from God rests on an equivocation.

The moral of the story thus far is that even the best of the reasons routinely given for thinking that we do not need to appeal to God to ground morality do not succeed. If there is a moral law, there must be a moral lawgiver. But we can strengthen the argument even further by showing that morality, and specifically moral obligation, is both agent-relative (it can only arise in the case of persons) and objective (it transcends human will). If moral obligation is grounded in a person (or persons) and it is not dependent on human beings, then it must be grounded in a supernatural Person, i.e., God.

MORAL OBLIGATION AS AGENT-RELATIVE

We normally take it for granted that we have obligations to do or not do certain things. When tragedy strikes, our political leaders invoke this sense of obligation to justify the actions they believe we should support. Speaking about the need for the US to take care of its veterans, President Obama stated, “The bond between our forces and our citizens has to be a sacred trust, and that for me, for my administration, upholding our trust with our veterans is not just a matter of policy; it is a moral obligation.” It’s a common assumption that we have the moral obligation to act in certain ways. Morality binds us, leaving us with no choice in the matter. Shame and guilt are the result of disregarding the dictates of morality.

But as far back as 1958, Cambridge philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe argued that the concept of moral obligation in Western philosophy has its roots in Christianity, which conceives of ethics, and especially moral obligation, in terms of laws given by God. With the abandonment of Christianity among many in Western philosophy, Anscombe counseled her fellow philosophers to jettison the concept of obligation as well since its metaphysical foundation was no longer plausible for them and talk of obligation has thus become incoherent.

When we consider what it means to say that we have moral obligations or duties, we quickly begin to see the validity of the point that Anscombe was making. The eminent moral theorist John Stuart Mill described the concept of moral duty as follows:

We do not call anything wrong unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it—if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience.... It is a part of the notion of duty in every one of its forms that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfill it. Duty is a thing which may be exacted from a person, as one exacts a debt.

Not only are certain things wrong to do, we are prohibited from doing them. Not only are some things good to do, we are required to do them. As Mill notes, duty is something we owe in the same way we owe debts. One is hard-pressed to make sense of owing duties
(and debts) to no one in particular. The best way to make sense of talk of duties is in a social context where duties (like debts) are owed to other persons.

In support of the claim that obligation requires agency, Yale philosopher Stephen Darwall argues that neither the moral “ought” nor practical reason is sufficient to bring about obligation. One can have very good reasons to do something morally right and still not be obligated to do it. Accountability and responsibility are also needed, and we are responsible to someone. Darwall notes that such diverse philosophers as Suarez in the late 16th and early 17th century, John Stuart Mill, and Nietzsche have defended this view. He says,

> I think it’s a conceptual truth that what we are morally obligated to do is what we are responsible to the moral community for doing. Exactly who is the moral community is itself contestable. Theological voluntarists might believe it is really just God. You and I might believe it is just persons—people who are capable of holding one another morally responsible.¹⁶

As is evident from the quote, Darwall defends a secularist approach to morality. Similarly, Susan Wolf, another secularist philosopher, points out that it is not enough to say that moral requirements are requirements of morality; that to follow moral obligations is simply to do what morality requires of us. When we demand of people that they live up to their moral duties, “…we mean to say that

we require [them to do so] on moral grounds or for moral reasons.” For Wolf, the “we” that stands behind these requirements is the social community. In other words, human beings are the moral community that gives obligation its normative force.

The point made thus far is that moral obligation is a social concept. Accountability makes sense only if we are accountable to other persons. In the next section, we will see that the Person we are ultimately responsible to is God. Since obligation is not only a social concept but also an objective one, the existence of God makes the most sense of our experience of morality. Human societies or communities cannot adequately account for moral obligation.

> But it is important to address a common misconception about the normative character of morality in a more direct way. It is often assumed that reason by itself is adequate to give us all we want in terms of knowing and acting upon our moral obligations. What is moral to do, the claim goes, is what is reasonable to do. But although morality is indeed reasonable, the relationship between the two is not as clear cut as the foregoing claim implies. It is one thing to have good reasons to do something and quite another to be obligated to do it. Having reasons to perform an action does not necessarily imbue one with the kind of obligation morality requires.

An illustration given by C. Stephen Evans might be helpful here.¹⁸ Suppose someone is offered, say $5,000, to deliver a lecture he has delivered several times before on an afternoon when he is free

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¹⁶ I think it’s a conceptual truth that what we are morally obligated to do is what we are responsible to the moral community for doing.

¹⁷ For Wolf, the “we” that stands behind these requirements is the social community.

¹⁸ An illustration given by C. Stephen Evans might be helpful here.
and has nothing to lose should he accept the offer. He would have a very good reason to perform that act. But he would not be considered morally blameworthy should he choose to play golf instead. The point, once again, is that having good reasons to do something is not the same thing as being obligated to do it. Alternatively, violating rationality is not the same thing as violating moral obligation. As Robert Adams puts it,

To the extent that I have done something morally wrong, I have something to feel guilty about. To the extent that I have done something irrational, I have merely something to feel silly about—and the latter is much less serious than the former.¹⁹

The only time when failure to heed the demands of reason bears serious consequences is when there is a moral component involved. For example, an error of calculation in designing a bridge is more serious than getting an answer wrong on an engineering examination. Moral obligation has a certain, distinct characteristic that gives it its compulsive force with blameworthiness or guilt attached to it. Moral obligation has the unique capacity to override any other reasons we may have to do or not to do something. Such a decidedly law-like character of obligation makes sense within a social context where demands or imperatives and accountability are in force. Moral obligation is a social concept: it is based on the assumption that there are persons involved.

**MORAL OBLIGATION AS OBJECTIVE**

So far we have seen that we have good reasons to think that moral obligation is a social concept. As already mentioned, many philosophers agree with this conclusion. Some of those who argue that obligation is a social concept claim that human societies can adequately account for it. It is the society, period, that places moral demands on its individual members. But while it is true that we have obligations that are created by the societies to which we belong, the imperatival force of morality makes it doubtful that appealing to the society can account for the entire range of the obligations we acknowledge.

To begin with, societies often err in prescribing behavior for their members. For example, those who obediently followed the laws issued by the Nazis during the Second World War were indeed carrying out their societal obligations. But their society was gravely mistaken about the obligations morality prescribed for its citizens. This suggests strongly that moral obligations are not decided by the society. They are objective—what we are obligated to do transcends individual or the collective human will, desires, or beliefs. Thus unless there is a law above human law, it is hard to see how we can justify our claim that some things commanded by certain societies are wrong.

Philosopher Joel Marks has argued that obligation does indeed require the existence of God, though he sadly rejects morality instead of seeing it as further evidence for God. He writes,

I had thought I was a secularist because I conceived of right and wrong as standing on their own two feet, without prop or crutch from God. We should do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, period. But this was a God too. It was the Godless God of secular morality, which commanded without commander—whose ways were thus even more mysterious than the God I did not believe in, who at least had the intelligible motive of rewarding us for doing what He wanted.²⁰
Secondly, the demands of morality frequently conflict with our self-interests in a way that suggests that they transcend mere individual or societal conventions. If we were solely responsible for assigning moral obligations to ourselves, why would we make them so difficult to fulfill, and why do we keep on trying to meet them when we have proven that we are incapable of doing so perfectly? Why not adjust our obligations to match our practical abilities? Our very struggle in this area shows that we recognize the transcendent, otherworldly source of our moral obligations. The hound of heaven is ever on our trail. Consider the words of the following poem written by A.E. Housman:

And how am I to face the odds
Of man’s bedevilment and God’s!
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.

They will be master, right or wrong;
Though both are foolish, both are strong.
And since, my soul, we cannot fly
To Saturn nor to Mercury;
Keep we must, if keep we can,
These foreign laws of God and man.

The speaker acquiesces to the weight of moral obligation that he finds to be undeniable, even though it is foreign to his preferred mode of existence. Morality doesn’t ask for our permission
before placing its burdensome demands on us. How is such compulsion to be justified? Why should one yield to such demands? Christine Korsgaard’s statement in this regard is worth considering:

... the question can become urgent, for the day will come, for most of us, when what morality commands, obliges, or recommends is hard: that we share decisions with people whose intelligence or integrity don’t inspire our confidence; that we assume grave responsibilities to which we feel inadequate; that we sacrifice our lives, or voluntarily relinquish what makes them sweet. And then the question—why?—will press, and rightly so. Why should I be moral?  

In Christian terms, we should be moral because we are moral beings made by a moral God in his image. We find our proper telos or purpose when we become what we were originally intended to be. That process begins in this life and continues on to the next, where it will be fully perfected. Morality doesn’t always keep its promises in this life; not only do nice guys not always finish last—sometimes they don’t finish at all. But if this life is not all there is, then the scales will eventually be evened out, and morality and happiness will one day coincide.

**THE REALITY OF MORALITY**

I find it absolutely mystifying that some would choose to deny the reality of morality rather than acknowledge the fact that it indeed points us to God. That is their prerogative, though in the end they will find themselves “without excuse”: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). Thankfully, there are many others who have found their way to the cross after pondering the implications of an objective morality that is simply a part of the fabric of the universe. After discussing some of the points I have raised here with a seemingly hardened, lifelong atheist university professor, he completely caught me off-guard by confessing to me that the argument makes his atheism untenable. I have seen students give their lives to Christ when they learn how to think clearly about morality and when they consider what the gospel of salvation has to offer them—not just for this life, but also for the life to come, as we will see at the conclusion of this article.

Moreover, CS Lewis’s classic book *Mere Christianity* has played an incalculable role in leading many to faith. One of the most compelling sections of his book is the section where he deals with the moral argument for God’s existence. In his autobiography, Chuck Colson recounts the impact the moral argument had on him in his journey to faith as he read Lewis’s book,

As a lawyer I was impressed by Lewis’s arguments about moral law, the existence of which he demonstrates is real, and which has been perceived with astonishing consistency in all times and places. It has not been man, I saw for the first time, that has perpetuated moral law; it has survived despite man’s best attempts to defeat it. Its long existence therefore presupposes some other will behind it.

Similarly, Francis Collins, former leader of the Human Genome Project and now director of the National Institutes of Health, recalls his reaction to the moral argument as presented by CS Lewis:
The hard part for me [as an atheist] was the idea of a personal God, who has an interest in humankind. And the argument that Lewis made there—the one that I think was most surprising, most earth-shattering, and most life-changing—is the argument about the existence of the moral law. How is it that we, and all other members of our species, unique in the animal kingdom, know what’s right and what’s wrong? In every culture one looks at, that knowledge is there. Where did that come from?25

The Christian has a ready and compelling answer to the question: morality comes from a God who made us in his image and who makes it possible for us to apprehend and apply morality to our lives. Christianity makes an empirically verifiable diagnosis of our spiritual condition; we have broken God’s law. We are at odds with a system of morality that we did not invent, and we stand condemned. But Christianity does much more. It offers a solution to the human condition through the Cross of Christ. At the cross, God marvelously honors his justice while demonstrating his infinite love at the very same moment. And, finally, the Word of God promises that we will one day be made morally perfect. At that point, morality will no longer be a subject of debate—we will just live it out the way we breathe oxygen today, only without the threat of air pollution. Imagine that: we will one day live beyond right and wrong!

BEYOND RIGHT AND WRONG
In addition to accounting for the objectivity and agent-centeredness of moral obligation, Christianity fulfills and complements morality itself in ways naturalism can never hope to do. When we are honest with ourselves, we all know that we fail to keep the moral law that we know exists. And our failure to keep it is more than just a matter of ignorance; it bears the marks of what the Bible calls rebellion against God. As a result, we all stand in need of forgiveness. The Bible thus offers both an accurate diagnosis of the human heart as well as the solution for our primary malady.

In a chillingly profound passage, atheist philosopher Joel Marks makes the following observation:

Philosophical ethics [has become] the pursuit of grounds independent of either God’s fiat or God’s instruction for telling the difference between what we should do and what we should not do. Thus, ironically, secular ethics seeks to replicate the religious origin of sin (of wresting the knowledge of good and evil from God’s providence).26

Did you catch that? Marks says that the philosopher’s struggle to account for morality without God is reminiscent of the account of the fall of humanity in the Old Testament book of Genesis, which offers an explanation for the origin of human evil. In Genesis 3:4-5, the serpent assures Adam and Eve that they are mistaken to let God define right and wrong for them. He says to them, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

What the Tempter meant was not that Adam and Eve would know about good or evil or that some things were wrong to do. They must have known that already, or the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would not have made any sense to them. What the Tempter meant was that
The hope offered in the gospel message goes well beyond morality. In Christian terms, merely recognizing and even keeping the moral law is ultimately beside the point; one of the key goals of the biblical call to righteousness is to be transformed to become like God’s Son (see Romans 8:29). When we have achieved the status for which we were made, morality will cease to occupy the central place it does in our day-to-day lives.

Adam and Eve did not need to let God define good and evil for them; they could determine that for themselves. Marks detects the same spirit in the denial of God’s place in morality in contemporary philosophical ethics. When that happens, we become incapable of appreciating and appropriating the power of the gospel in our lives. This gospel is the forgiveness of sin and the necessity of Christ’s death on the cross—revealing also that human beings are morally at odds with God’s righteousness.

But the hope offered in the gospel message goes well beyond morality. In Christian terms, merely recognizing and even keeping the moral law is ultimately beside the point; one of the key goals of the biblical call to righteousness is to be transformed to become like God’s Son (see Romans 8:29). When we have achieved the status for which we were made, morality will cease to occupy the central place it does in our day-to-day lives. In a world where perfection reigns and where all types of sin are completely absent, talk of “right,” “wrong,” “duty,” etc., would at best be forgotten altogether or be mildly entertaining. As George Mavrodes notes, a theistic view of the world “gives morality a deeper place in the world than does a [naturalistic] world and thus permits it to ‘make sense.’”

Similarly, CS Lewis penned these profound words:

I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes.

When we complain about evil, we do indeed presuppose the reality of the good. Good and evil invoke an objective standard of right and wrong. Such a standard in turn points us to the God who made us, not just so we can recognize and apply morality to our lives in this life, but so that we can actually enter into an intimate relationship with God and a process of discipleship in his kingdom that begins to prepare us for the noblest existence possible: being in God’s presence forever.
We know that we flout not only God’s standards but also our own. How wonderful to know that forgiveness and eventually eternal restoration are available for people like us. What an incredible promise: that one day we will be able to live beyond right and wrong!

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1 I am convinced the reverse is also true: most people do not reject the faith due to arguments. They develop arguments to defend a position they’ve already accepted on other grounds.


4 I should note that in this article I use the terms “morality” and “ethics” interchangeably.


9 Ibid.

10 Quoted in Did God Really Command Genocide?: Coming to Terms with the Justice of God by Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 2014), 157.


12 For an extended discussion, see Schroder’s article and Copan and Flannagan’s relevant section in their book.


15 John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism” (originally published in 1861), in Hackett edition, 1979, 47-48. It is important to note that duty or obligation, holds even when no punishment is intended. All that is needed is for there to be a person with the authority to issue a command.


24 Chuck Colson, Born Again (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2008), 134.


Longing To *Comfort*

By Naomi Zacharias

Seeing my daughter in tears, a parallel was not lost on me, with an awareness never considered before. How many times have I refused to allow God to come close in comfort and instead in my anger and lostness, forced Him to a distance?
My little girl was just sixteen months old when her younger brother arrived. I rocked her to sleep every night before he came. She was not one who slept through the night, and I had wakened with every cry, holding her again at various hours and countless times in a night. As each week fell into the next she began to show her growing displeasure—her annoyance, even—at my protruding baby belly as she tried to find a place on my shoulder where it didn’t get in her way. I saw this as a kind of symbolism for the impending change to her small world and tried to use those days where I had enough arms to hold each child as an opportunity to affirm her invaluable place against me.

I researched how to prepare siblings for the arrival of a new little one. I placed her tiny hands on my belly as the baby kicked and explained that he was talking to her. I took her to appointments to see his black and white sketch on the screen of the doctor’s office where she lay nestled in the crook of my arm as I pointed to toes and elbows of “her baby.” After many months, an appointment to my doctor’s office resulted in the instruction to drive straight to the hospital, for labor had begun early. Instead, we first drove back to the house to tell our two little ones where we were going, to have one last moment as the family of four familiar to us all to navigate before receiving the tremendous gift to be five; to give them a hug and kiss before sleeping away from them for a few days; before introducing them to their baby brother whose arrival would change their world as they knew it.

I had been concerned she would resent him. But she didn’t. She welcomed him, she kissed him, she longed to care for him from the moment she saw him. She didn’t hold it against him seemingly at all. It was me. I had not read that, I had not prepared for the fact that it was me she could feel abandoned or betrayed her. While always close to her daddy, she suddenly attached to him with an adhesive that forbid another to come close. As hours and days melted into weeks and then months of eternity for me, she resisted all of my attempts to hold her, to be close to her, or to care for her even when she was sick. Each morning as my husband left for work, he had to peel her off of the safe zone of his shoulder and she would crumple to the floor in a pool of sobs that would break your heart and crushed mine. Her beautiful round, light brown eyes were flooded with an ocean of hurt, full lips trembling through the sobs. I tried so hard and so gently to get close, bending down and holding my arms out to comfort her. But she refused and angrily pushed me away, choosing to ache entirely alone. I felt deeply rejected, but even more, it literally pained me to see her hurting so much and opting to endure it alone rather than allow me to provide comfort. So I stood at the distance she demanded, tears streaming down my face as I watched her struggle day after day. “All I want to do is to love you, to help you, and you won’t let me even comfort you,” I felt and audibly whispered.

And a parallel was not lost on me, with an awareness never considered before. For how many times have I refused to allow God to come close in comfort and instead in my anger and lostness, forced Him to a distance in favor of my lonely puddle of fear, confusion, and grief?

As I’ve thought about it, I realized that I don’t think I have ever gone to Him
purely for comfort—not really, not sincerely. I cry before Him when I am asking for an answer to a prayer for Him to prevent, save, or restore. But when what was lost was not resurrected in the way I hoped, I have opted to withdraw alone into my grief, with feelings of abandonment or even anger rather than know what it means to let Him sit with me in the sadness of the “it will not be so.”

Several years ago a good friend drew my attention to her grandmother’s favorite verse, words written by David in Psalm 56:8 (ESV): “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?” I loved this affirmation that he saw, that he recorded the wounded parts of my story. It revealed that someone—not just someone, but God Himself—bore witness that provided a kind of validation of those tears and their birthplace. Some months later, I was in the country of Turkey and on a mission to find an old glass tear bottle. I had learned that family used to use these to bottle their tears and bury them with dear ones lost as a testament to the fact that they were loved. So at my request to find this hidden treasure, a friend took me to an old market in Istanbul. She was not certain we would find them, but there in the midst of the maze of stalls filled with jewelry and scarves was a shelf with a handful of vintage tear bottles of various shapes and colors. They were one of my greatest finds and served as a reminder that my Creator, my Comforter, keeps count of even my tears and the experience behind them.

But I still missed it, for his comfort carries potential far greater that just keeping a journal of account; I missed that He longs to step inside.

I didn’t recognize what I now see as his longing to comfort, or my role in relegating Him to the sideline. Perhaps I have tended to see Him as this distant presence, reminding me from lofty places of the verses that tell me to trust Him, to pray that his will be done, to desire the greater good. And while all of those desires may be right, the picture carries the image of someone you choose to avoid in your angst because while they may have the answers, they don’t engage in the raw grief part of the process where words don’t really find a place to sink in. Because if we are honest, true and even kind reminders of perspective can often serve to make us feel only more alone and communicate a greater sense of a failure when we are engaged—and losing—a momentary struggle to peel ourselves off of the floor of defeat, devastation, and sheer grief.

But I missed it. I did not see Him as one who wants to enter into my very grief itself, the messy part before any acceptance and answer can be embraced.

It was when I stood helpless beside my little girl, feeling her sadness and desperately longing to simply be in it beside her that I caught a glimpse of how God, too, has perhaps stood on the sidelines of my grief when He longed to participate. In the thick of her sadness and limited understanding she saw me at best as one who exacerbated her pain, perhaps at worst the one who caused it. And oh, how my memory instantly put me on that familiar floor and pool of tears where, like a frightened animal, I would not let Him enter in.

This image of Jesus is one that causes me to feel like a little girl again, to easily fold into tears and want to allow Him near my broken spirit and dreams. What if I could allow Him to come into that unkempt and broken space with me, not for answers or reversals, but to experience God as Comforter?

With fondness I remember a Western woman I met in a Middle Eastern country several years ago. There was an immediate ease to our conversation, even a mutual affection. She shared a
story from years past when she was preparing for the mission field and learned she was pregnant with her first child. And then she told how she lost her infant son when he was only weeks old. I well remember her describing the moment of her indescribable loss; how as her husband, with tears streaming down his face, said a prayer of acknowledgement that their son returned to his maker. Instead, she cried out in protest, for she was not ready for him to go. Broken-hearted, she could not bear to think of the mission field, a journey she had imagined with the son part of that vision. And it was twenty years before she ultimately found the healing needed to go. Where do you think God was with her in those twenty years? I do not think He was angry or impatient. I think He was sitting on the floor of her sadness and grieving with her.

The Gospel of John tells the story of the death of Lazarus. When Lazarus got sick, his sisters, Mary and Martha, immediately sent word to Jesus. But He did not come for three days, and in the meantime, Lazarus passed away. When finally the women heard that Jesus was coming, Martha ran out to meet Him, but Mary stayed inside. I wonder if she felt betrayed or forgotten when He did not come in time for the miracle she hoped for. John tells us that when Martha returned inside, she told Mary that Jesus was calling for her, and instant-ly she stood and ran outside to Him. I picture this wounded woman who had felt abandoned by the one person she put her faith in. And so even when she hears He is near, she doesn’t go to Him. But then, she hears He called her by name, and she runs. Maybe it was that demonstration that He had not forgotten her. Maybe it was because He was the only one who could really comfort her. And so she allows Him to enter in to her disappointment and questions and grief.

She goes to Jesus and falls at his feet and weeps. She weeps that Jesus did not come and that her brother is gone. And what did He do? He wept. He cried with her even though He knew that the life mourned was about to be resurrected and her pain relieved. First, He stopped to grieve with her for the loss she endured—the experience of losing her brother and perhaps the many other disappointments in that story He knew she felt.

It requires a dying to the self and an awakening of heart and mind to see God as Creator and Savior, but we are invited to a particular vulnerability to also know Him as “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3, emphasis added).

He keeps count of all our tossings, bears witness to all that happened, and remembers. He will sit in the lonely room where we grieve. He will come and weep even when there is a miracle to come, and how much more when there is a loss to endure. He asked Mary, “Where have you put him?” And she led Him to a tomb. Does He ask us, too, where we have laid our loss, and when the answer is the tomb of our heart, does He also ask to enter in and weep alongside us? I believe He does—sometimes for the moment, sometimes when it takes twenty years, and for a lifetime when that is how long it is endured. Yes, we all want the miracle. But while on this temporal earth that holds both beauty to know and mortality to hold, loss is a part of our experience in living. How comforting to know that He who dwells in the heavenly heights is able—and chooses—to descend to the floor of our sorrow. Can we let Him come close?

For the God of Righteousness, the Lord our Sanctifier, the Everlasting God, is also the God of all comfort today.

Naomi Zacharias heads RZIM’s Wellspring International, working on behalf of at-risk women and children around the world.
No Matter the Cost

By Andy Bannister

How different might our culture look if Christians were prepared to live out our lives as followers of Jesus Christ as if we really meant it?

In a fascinating essay in *Education Forum*, the magazine of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, Stephen Anderson tells a chilling story of a philosophy class he was teaching on ethics. Wanting an “attention getter” to shock his students into thinking morally, he displayed a photo of Bibi Aisha. She was a young Afghani girl who, at just fourteen, was forced into marriage with a Taliban fighter who proceeded to horribly abuse her. After suffering four years of violence, Aisha fled but was soon captured. Her husband and other family members then hacked off her nose and ears and left her to die in the mountains where she was later rescued by aid workers.

As Anderson told Aisha’s story and displayed the picture of her hauntingly beautiful but marred face, he was hoping his students would display strong moral outrage. But he was shocked to discover that nothing of the kind happened, rather there was a fear of saying anything that might appear critical or judgemental. “It’s just wrong to judge other cultures,” one student stated. Another timorously said: “Well, we might not like it, but maybe over there it’s okay.” Anderson went on to suggest that we have succeeded in raising a generation of students who have imbibed one key idea: “never judge, never criticize, never take a position.”
His findings are not unusual. A similar phenomenon was recounted by Kay Haugaard, who described how her class of literature students were discussing Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery,” in which each year the residents of a small, rural town choose one member of their community to stone to death to ensure the wellbeing of the community and the crops. In 1948 when the story was published, it provoked outrage. But Haugaard found her class responded with sentiments like “If it’s part of a person’s culture, it’s okay.” It was not that her students were unwilling to take a stand on their convictions; rather, they had no convictions at all.

The trend seems to be growing. A study by the Barna Group revealed that 64% of American adults and a startling 83% of teens believe that morality is relative, with only 6% of teens willing to say that it is absolute. When asked about how they make moral decisions, 31% of adults and 38% of teens said they do so based on “what feels right for them.” Given that, as Stephen Anderson discovered, criticizing another person’s culture or belief makes most teens and young adults feel deeply uncomfortable, we appear to have a problem. As Robert Simon put it, what we have is “absolutophobia”: an unwillingness, if not an outright fear, of committing to any moral position.

More concerning, the Barna study revealed that 16% of teens said they make their moral choices on the basis of “whatever outcome would produce the most personally beneficial results.” At an event in Toronto, I recently met a high school student who waited behind after I had spoken to ask me a question. “I am struggling with a friend of mine,” she explained, “who is a complete moral relativist. No matter how hard I try to encourage her to take a position, nothing works. She insists that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are just personal preferences. Do you have any suggestions?” I thought for a moment before replying: “Next time your friend says something like that, reach across and steal her iPhone. When she protests, reply: ‘You’ve persuaded me that morality is relative. I like your phone, so I thought I’d take it. After all, there’s nothing wrong with stealing phones, is there?’ I wonder if your friend might discover at least one moral absolute quite quickly.” I never heard how the story played out—I hope it may have worked—but even if it did, it is hardly encouraging if moral bedrock is only embraced once it personally benefits us.

There was one more disturbing discovery from the Barna study. Many of those surveyed claimed to be Christians, yet of these, only 32% said they believed in moral absolutes. Among the teens who self-identified as Christians, 11% said that they made moral decisions based on what would produce the best outcome for them. One can hear the echoes of Judges 17:6: “Everyone did as he saw fit.”

Now, is it unfair to pick on the Christians in the survey sample like this? No, and for this reason: you cannot accuse an atheist of hypocrisy, because they are beholden to nobody and thus their moral relativism is at least consistent. But a Christian? A Christian is one who claims to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, one who follows their master even if it hurts. As Jesus Himself said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

In front of the main building of the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich stands a small, semi-circular courtyard, the Geschwister-Scholl-Platz, which is dedicated to the memory of brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl. They were founders of the White Rose resistance group during the Second World War, which brought together students and others who were opposed to the evils of Nazi regime. But what was it that
There was one more disturbing discovery from the Barna study. Many of those surveyed claimed to be Christians, yet of these, only 32% said they believed in moral absolutes. Among the teens who self-identified as Christians, 11% said that they made moral decisions based on what would produce the best outcome for them. One can hear the echoes of Judges 17:6: “Everyone did as he saw fit.”

animated their activism and caused them to take a stand? It was their faith in Christ. Neither of the Scholls had been particularly religious during childhood, but at high school that all changed. There they encountered men like Carl Ruth, a Catholic professor who was bold in his denouncement of the Nazi regime, who encouraged them to take a fresh look at Christianity. They began to read the Bible and Christian books and Hans in particular was deeply influenced by the preaching of Bishop Clemens von Galen. On 7 December 1941, Hans wrote to a friend: “I’m thinking of you this second Sunday of Advent, which I’m experiencing as a wholehearted Christian for the first time in my life.”

Around the same time, Sophie was recording her journey to faith in her diary. Her older sister, Inge, said of them both: “The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thoughts and actions.” As they began to work out the implications of their faith, they became increasingly convinced that they needed to take a stand against the Third Reich. With the help of one of their university professors, Kurt Huber, the White Rose group was formed and they began distributing leaflets explaining the evils of Nazism. Their materials caused a storm and the Gestapo began actively hunting for the publishers. On 18 February 1943, Hans and Sophie brought a suitcase full of pamphlets to the university, leaving piles of them in corridors for students to find when lectures finished. They had a few pamphlets left and deciding it would be a shame to waste them, they climbed the stairs to the top of the atrium and flung them into the courtyard. Unfortunately they were spotted, the authorities called, and the group were rounded up and arrested by the Gestapo. Four days later they were tried before the Volksgericht (“The People’s Court”), found guilty of treason, and sentenced to death by guillotine.

Asked at their trial why they had carried out their actions, Sophie replied simply: “Somebody, after all, had to make a start,” while Kurt Huber gave a lengthier statement:

You have stripped from me the rank and privileges of the professorship and the doctoral degree summa cum laude which I earned, and you have set me at the level of the lowest criminal. The inner dignity of the university teacher, of the frank, courageous protestor of his philosophical and political views — no trial for treason can rob me of that. My actions and my intentions will be justified in the inevitable course of history; such is my firm faith. I hope to God that the inner strength that will vindicate my deeds will in good time spring forth from my own people. I have done as I had to on the prompting of an inner voice. I take consequences upon myself in the way expressed in the beautiful words of Johann Gottlieb Fichte:
“And thou shall act as if
On thee and on thy deed
Depended the fate of all Germany
And thou alone must answer
for it.”

A few years ago, a colleague of mine was traveling in Pakistan. During the trip he met a Pakistani Christian pastor who had been arrested many times and horribly tortured for his faith. He rolled up his sleeves and showed my colleague the scars that he carried. As they talked, the pastor asked, through an interpreter: “What it is like for Christians in the West?” My colleague, slightly embarrassed, replied: “The greatest fear most Christians in the West have is embarrassment. They are afraid of looking foolish, so most do not talk about Jesus.” The pastor replied with tears in his eyes, through the interpreter: “Such a church is dying.” Then the interpreter paused and apologized: “I am sorry,” he said, “I interpreted that badly. What the pastor actually said was: ‘Such a church is already dead.’”

How different might our culture look if Christians were prepared to live out our lives as followers of Jesus Christ as if we really meant it? If we daily demonstrated our willingness to take a stand for Christ no matter what consequences might follow? Unlike Hans and Sophie Scholl, Kurt Huber, or that Pakistani pastor, we are not yet, at least in the West, likely to face imprisonment, torture or death. But what about being willing to sacrifice our reputation, our popularity, our chance of promotion, our easy, comfortable middle class existence? Or are we, if we are entirely honest with ourselves, more tempted to choose the path of personal benefit?

The only answer to moral relativism will only come not from better education strategies—which, at the end of his essay “Moments of Startling Clarity,” is all that Stephen Anderson had to offer. Rather, cultural transformation must begin with personal transformation, and that will only happen when people really see what the gospel looks like when it is lived out. What our country, our culture, our world needs are Christians who are willing to display the character of their convictions, no matter the cost.

Andy Bannister is Director and Lead Apologist for RZIM Canada.

3 The account is reported in James Emery White, A Mind for God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 76–77.
4 “Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings,” The Barna Group, online at https://barna.org/component/content/article/5-barna-update/43-barna-update-sp-657/67-americans-are-most-likely-to-base-truth-on-feelings#.VvL6AOIrK4Q.
6 Mark 8:34. See also Luke 9:23.
By *His* Hand

By Danielle DuRant

Although some today no longer believe we need God in order to understand ourselves and our world, we often struggle to make sense of our impoverished hearts, even toward those we claim to love.
“Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God,” penned John Calvin almost 500 years ago in the opening lines of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.”

Calvin proposed that one’s identity cannot be separated from one’s relationship with God: we understand ourselves only by knowing God and we come to know God as we in turn gain knowledge of ourselves. Who are we and who is God? Calvin continues:

“[N]o man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone. ... Here, again, the infinitude of good which resides in God becomes more apparent from our poverty. In particular, the miserable ruin into which the revolt of the first man has plunged us, compels us to turn our eyes upwards.... Thus, our feeling of ignorance, vanity, want, weakness, in short, depravity and corruption, reminds us, that in the Lord, and none but He, dwell the true light of wisdom, solid virtue, exuberant goodness. We are accordingly urged by our own evil things to consider the good things of God; and, indeed, we cannot aspire to Him in earnest until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves. For what man is not disposed to rest in himself? Who, in fact, does not thus rest, so long as he is unknown to himself; that is, so long as he is contented with his own endowments, and unconscious or unmindful of his misery? Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him.”
Knowledge is relational, suggests Calvin—we discover who we are in relation to others—an idea that scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) would formally develop in his seminal work *Personal Knowledge*. That is, we don’t just know someone, namely God, “out there.” We are also known by Him, our Creator and Redeemer who leads us “by the hand to find him,” and that knowledge shapes our understanding of who we are. Left to ourselves and our own thoughts, we tend to justify our actions or measure ourselves by our own standards or against other people. Left to ourselves, we are “unknown” to ourselves and “disposed to rest” there. Yet throughout his *Institutes*, Calvin shows that the Scriptures reveal that we are both frail and corrupt creatures in need of God’s grace, kindness, and sustenance, and in knowing Him, we find his “wisdom, solid virtue [and] exuberant goodness.”

Calvin’s magnum opus was revolutionary, helping to stir the Reformation that transformed every sphere of life from education, the arts, and literacy to work, the family, and the church. The effects were far-reaching and lasting in both the academy and culture. Nevertheless, some today would regard Calvin’s view of humanity and God to be merely a product of his times or worse, woefully ignorant and simply inaccurate. We don’t need God to understand ourselves; indeed, God (if He actually exists) is an impediment to self-expression. Rather, we create our own identities and determine who we want to be, even our gender.

In fact, Richard Dawkins dismisses God as a “psychotic delinquent” and “a virus of the mind.” Similarly, in his article “God’s Dupes,” atheist Sam Harris scoffs, “Everything of value that people get from religion can be had more honestly, without presuming anything on insufficient evidence. The rest is self-deception, set to music.” Harris then argues in his book *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* that we don’t need God to define what is good or assist us with being good. Rather, reason is enough to show us that the values of kindness and compassion maximize our well-being and are “good.” Really? “What is good?” and “Why should we be good?” are inescapably metaphysical questions that science cannot answer—any more than reason can inspire us be kind to our enemies when we have everything to lose, including our lives.

Perhaps, though, many would acknowledge that “Something Is Wrong and Somebody Is To Blame,” as Colin McGinn titles his article:

> [T]he modern world has produced an abiding sense that there is something deeply wrong with our lives. We want to be better and freer from guilt, but the old ways of escaping guilt are gone. Officially we no longer believe in original sin, but we are haunted by its secular progeny. Much of this is irrational or arbitrary, but some of it goes to the core.

Maybe religion didn’t so much cause guilt as give it an acceptable form; now we are struggling with a beast we don’t really know how to classify, let alone tame. I would characterize it as a kind of precarious shadowy unease, and a felt poverty of spirit. The more comfortable we become on the outside the more this elusive guilt gnaws on the inside.

Why do we do what we ought not to do and why don’t we do what we ought? Why, with all the scientific advances and advantages of living in the 21st century, are we still confounded by
Why do we do what we ought not to do and why don’t we do what we ought? Why, with all the scientific advances and advantages of living in the 21st century, are we still confounded by not only widespread hate and evil but also the malevolent inclinations in our own hearts—even towards those we claim to love? Not only widespread hate and evil but also the malevolent inclinations in our own hearts—even towards those we claim to love? In our restless and troubled moments, I think we sense, “There is something of a cognitive mess at the core of our lives. We are inconsistent in our choices, incoherent in our convictions, persuaded where we ought not to be, and deluded that we know ourselves transparently.”

In her lyrical yet sobering book Living by Fiction, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Annie Dillard attributes our malady to the loss of shared values once firmly held:

“If meaning is contextual, and it is, then the collapse of ordered Western society and its inherited values following World War I cannot be overstressed; when we lost our context; we lost our meaning. We became, all of us in the West, more impoverished and in one sense more ignorant than pygmies, who, like the hedgehog, know one great thing: in this case, why they are here. We no longer know why we are here.”

It is in this place that the Christian gospel speaks so uniquely into our fragmented, media-saturated lives, for the gospel alone offers the most plausible and hopeful understanding of who we are and why we are here. We are made in the image of God—who is the “infinitude of good” (Calvin)—to honor Him and reflect his splendor, but we have sought to find our purpose and home elsewhere. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

The gospel offers us a window into our hearts and God’s grace to see our desires and our desolation. I am reminded of a letter I received some years ago from a woman who wrote to RZIM to tell me that days before her release from prison, her unexplainable self-defeating behavior landed her back in maximum security. “We need reminders that God is near,” she wrote, “God is here—revealing Himself and His plan.”

And this gospel offers us so much more. It offers us a relationship with the One who made us and who knows and loves us as no other can and with this relationship, the freedom and power to receive all that God longs to give us: love, joy, peace, patience, self-control. “The entrance of your words give light,” wrote the psalmist of God. Rare is the person who can speak into our lives with both truth and love. I think particularly of Jesus’s conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. He discloses that He knows about her five marriages and current man she is living with and that He is the living water for which she thirsts. We might not be surprised if she had turned away in anger and shame, but instead, she leaves her water jar and goes back to her village to exclaim, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.”
Could this be the Messiah? (John 4:29). Jesus doesn’t seek to demoralize her but to tenderly unveil her life so that she might discover her “broken cisterns that cannot hold water” and find the One who will never leave her thirsty.

Rarer still are the ones who can love us even when we push them away or refuse to trust them. Consider Jesus’s relationship with his disciple Peter. Hours before Jesus was arrested and sentenced to be crucified, He tells Peter, “[B]efore the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me” (Luke 22:34). Peter protests but soon does exactly what Jesus predicts, whereupon, “The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord … and he went out and wept bitterly” (verses 61-62). One poignant glance from Jesus undoes him, exposing Peter’s pride and betrayal of the one he claimed to love and follow, even to his own death. But thankfully, the story doesn’t end there, for the resurrected Jesus will meet Peter on the shore of Galilee and invite him not once, but three times, to recognize he is forgiven and restored (see John 21:15-19).

Throughout the Scriptures we see evidence of hearts awakened when God comes near. There is God wrestling with Jacob and Job crying out for mercy. There is the risen Lord walking with the dismayed travelers to Emmaus who didn’t recognize the long-awaited Anointed One they were hoping for was at their side. There is this same Jesus appearing to Saul, a violent persecutor of Christians, on the road to Damascus. In each instance and countless others, each are offered more than they could have hoped for and imagined: an intimate encounter with their very Maker and Lord and the grace and forgiveness that would forever change their lives.

“Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself,” suggests Calvin, “is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him.” Indeed, it is because “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us … full of grace and truth” that we can trust his description of who we are and who He claims to be. He understands our frailties, our fears, our disordered affections. He knows our longing for love and our unwillingness to surrender. He knows the knots of cynicism, heartache, and distrust that can tangle our desire to believe, whether we’re a skeptic or a Christian. To each He offers his hand and says, “Come.” “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11: 28-30).

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1 John Calvin, Institutes of Christian Religion, online at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.ii.html.
2 Ibid.
8 See Galatians 5:22-23 among other verses.
9 Psalm 119:130.
10 John 1:14.
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In addition to the printed magazine, eighteen editions of the award-winning Just Thinking are now available for download to your iPad from Apple iTunes® Newsstand.
Think Again
One Question

As one who has stood before various audiences around the world facing hard questions for over four decades now, I can almost predict one question I will get in nearly every setting, whether in a public forum or private conversation. It is, “How can I believe God exists with so much evil in the world?”

Sometimes the question is asked by an ardent atheist who, in effect, considers the question as the Achilles heel of theism. Other times it is asked by a searching skeptic or a Christian struggling to hold on to his or her faith in the face of enormous heartache or just a sheer disappointment with life itself. Unfortunately, often I do not know a person’s background or struggle and what specifically prompts such a question, and yet every face is a reminder that behind every question is a questioner—and one must always seek to respond to the individual and not merely the question.

There are many approaches one may take. When I am asked this question, invariably one aspect of my answer often involves this line of reasoning. Many are familiar with my approach. But it is worth repeating briefly. I take this approach as a starting point only to point out that denying God’s existence while positing evil as a real category is a self-defeating approach. What do I mean?

When one asserts that there is such a thing as evil, one must assume there is such a thing as good. When one assumes there is such a thing as good, he or she must also assume there is an objective moral law by which to distinguish between good and evil. When you assume an objective moral law, you must posit a moral lawgiver—the source of the moral law.

But, of course, this moral lawgiver is precisely who atheists wish to disprove and so they may retort, “Why is a moral lawgiver necessary in order to recognize good and evil?” Some may even go so far as to add that they believe in objective moral values but don’t need God (the inescapable “moral lawgiver”) to posit that objective values exist.

But here’s where the questioner has to feel the illogical nature of the question without God. You see, the question of evil and morality is always asked by a person and often about a person. The beast doesn’t wrestle with these assuming moral connotations. Only mankind does. Hence, the personal aspect of human worth and moral reasoning is assumed in the question. The objective value of persons is implicit within the question and the object of the question. In a nutshell, positing a moral law without a moral lawgiver would be equivalent to raising the question of values while denying any value to the questioner or the object of the questioner. A moral lawgiver is necessary in order to recognize good and evil for the simple reason that a moral affirmation cannot remain apart from personal worth. Herein is the rub. If we human beings are the random product of time plus matter plus chance, how do we arrive at intrinsic worth? We can only have extrinsic worth—that which is given by some human government or statute.

Naturalism cannot have it both ways. It cannot assume intrinsic worth while assuming accidental causes. Transcending value and justice must come from a person of transcending worth and an ultimate law or value-giver—and the only
reason people have intrinsic worth is that they are the creation of One who is of ultimate worth and the perfect lawgiver. That person is God. But in a world in which no person or moral cause brought us into being, as naturalists claim, there can be no intrinsic personal worth and no ultimate moral foundation. The raising of the question as a moral argument against God self-destructs. Morality is value-laden, starting with the value of a person.

In response to this question I would also add that all moral struggles that are existentially inescapable have a personal component to them, whether we think of truth-telling, guilt, or forgiveness. I do not go to my dog and hope to be forgiven for something. I may make an attempt at it but I do not see it as something that the dog can morally do for me. We do it more to appease our own conscience. All the laws that we make in the land, they are not made for how animals should treat each other but how persons should treat each other or how persons should treat animals or the environment. Laws are meant for people. We do not make laws against nature or the environment (“Poison ivy, do not trespass into my yard!”) because, here again, there cannot be a cognitive, personal dimension to such things as trespassing or truth-telling with an abstract or inanimate object; such things necessarily involve a person. When we speak of moral values or the moral law or existential struggles, there is unavoidably a personal component in the equation.

So, whether you approach the question of the existence of evil and God from the essential nature of humanity to the existential experience with which we live, we discover there must be personal intrinsic value and that can only come from another entity. If it is to be objective, that is, true for all people regardless of their belief, that being has to be God. Every life has essential worth and must be considered inviolable.

There is another underlying posture of mind that has to be raised. When I am asked this question in certain settings, in truth I am sometimes tempted to ask the questioner, “Do you really want a solution or is the constant refrain ‘why’ a way of escaping the responsibility of the answer?” In reason, conscience, and revelation, God speaks to the core of human worth and the inescapable mutual moral trust by which we must live. For in fact, the Bible tells us, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Jesus, too, wept over his own beloved city and declared, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42). In instance after instance, the Scriptures reveal that the problem was not the absence of answers, but rather, the suppression of them. This is not to dismiss the very real heartache of pain and suffering, which is another part of this question that I’m not addressing here, but rather to underscore what author George MacDonald once said: “To give truth to him who loves it not is only to give him more plentiful reasons for misinterpretation.” The love of truth and the willingness to submit to its demands is the first step.

And our predicament, I believe, is the same. There are some clues we already have—enough to bring correctives within our reach. But do we really want the truth?

Beyond the question is another implication. Indeed, naturalists claim that “man is the measure of all things” and life is nothing more than DNA. The issue of evil needing a transcendent point of reference applies as well to the question of finding meaning in life. I have heard academics mock the Christian for invoking any transcendent point of reference for life’s meaning. But here
again, the contradiction of naturalism plunders a life. I might well counter that if meaning has no transcendent referent and each one may choose his or her own standard, why do we still marvel when evil takes place? Is it because we cannot shake off the soul that speaks from within to say that there must be a sense and purpose to life, otherwise, everything falls apart at the center? That’s why we even try to make sense out of suffering.

J.L. Mackie, a vociferous atheist who challenged the existence of God on the basis of the reality of evil, granted at least this logical connection when he said, “We might well argue ... that objective, intrinsically prescriptive features, supervenient upon natural ones, constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful God to create them.”

You see, however one approaches the question, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that nothing can be intrinsically prescriptively good unless there also exists a God who has fashioned the universe thus.

Meaning and suffering are meaningful challenges for every life and we pursue them with moral connotations. The truth is we cannot escape the existential rub by running from a moral law. Objective moral values exist only if God exists. Meaning and purpose are real only if there is an ultimate purpose to life itself.

I can understand why naturalists hesitate to grant the reality of absolutes, because they don’t like where it leads. But sadly, Christians often struggle with its reality as well. The answer to that has to be over and beyond the cause of our existence to the purpose of our existence. That becomes another whole subject.

Once we find the purpose, we learn how God conquers not in spite of the dark mystery of pain but rather, how He conquers through it. It is amazing that the most well-known verse, John 3:16, reminds us how “God so loved the world that He gave his one and only son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” The object of God’s love is “whosoever.” The expression of belief is for “whosoever.” It is for mankind that God sent his Son. Our Savior is personal; our need is personal. Our belief must be personal; salvation is personal. The totality of persons is what makes the world valuable. That’s why persons ask the question and nothing else does. The value of the question is directly related to the value of personhood. The gospel alone gives us supreme value. In a strange way, the question of evil is a compliment to human worth. That compliment is only justified if we have a supreme creator of infinite worth. Our worth comes from Him.

The next time you ask the question, remember why it is a worthy one. In finding salvation through our suffering Savior, we see our worth expressed in the purest of terms for the greatest of destinies and the ultimate purpose: to know Him, love Him, and dwell eternally with Him in communion with Him. We conquer through suffering to be conformed to his image. Sin broke us. He puts us back together.

The story of the gospel is the law-giver, the reason for the law, the violation of the law, and how God was both just and the ultimate justifier. Love and grace healed what the law alone could not do and was never intended to do. As a person, God loved and God gave. The law is an ideal requirement. God is the perfect being. We come to Him, and as we see the moral framework of life, we find ourselves as the object of his love in the grace He provides. The question will often haunt. But his presence overcomes that pain.

Warm Regards,

Ravi
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"You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?"
—Psalm 56:8