

Did God create morality?

by David Heslop

Introduction

To address this question, I will initially consider aspects of the nature of morality, together with an essential property of the God of Western theism: His perfect goodness. This property assures us that God is supremely loving, and implies that God always has our best interests at heart. However, this solicitousness will be shown to be tempered by the respectful consideration God necessarily gives to our *inherent freedom*. I will go on to argue that, although we cannot *know* whether God created morality, we are nonetheless presented with a possible choice as to whether to *accept* God's morality. This choice is possible because we were created *moral beings* with the freedom to choose.

The nature of our inherent morality

Morality comprises moral rules of various kinds, and a sense of the need to obey those rules. Although these rules may be framed in terms of restrictions ('Thou shalt not...'), they can also involve open-ended directives ('Love thy neighbour as thyself'), and the rules may be appreciated and applied more as 'inner compunctions' than as edicts reduced to propositions about what one can or cannot do. That is, we may find that in a situation we feel that we *intuitively know* what we ought to do; on other occasions, by contrast, we may ponder long and hard simply working out what to do. Such deliberations are often accompanied by the feeling that there *is* a right way, even when we don't know what it is: our moral sense can be very intense as well as being exasperatingly vague.

A consequence of this highly developed moral sense, however, is that we have a **conscience** regarding our adherence to the rules, perhaps most significantly *not* because following the rules is beyond our capabilities, but because we *fall short* of their attainable demands: we take 'short-cuts', are thoughtless or self-serving. A troubled conscience can be a consequence of recollecting moral *failings*.

At the heart of having a conscience, then, is the awareness that we could have acted differently in a particular situation. This is founded on our understanding that we have *free will*: we have, and know that we have, the capacity to choose, as well as the capacity to make our own mistakes.

Our inherent creativity, coupled with this freedom to choose, occasions tremendous risks for humankind: we are seemingly free to *try* to do whatever we want, or to *attempt* whatever we aspire to achieve. This can be wonderfully constructive, but also dangerously destructive. Our 'wishes' and our 'wants' and aspirations often prove deficient in advancing either personal or group 'flourishing'.

These abounding creative capacities, however, are subject to the potentially advantageous restrictions imposed by morality, through our profound sense of what we 'ought' to do. Such a 'check' *may* be an eminently practical strategy that has evolved to serve the species well, but, regardless of its origins, a crucial aspect of 'morality' is this belief that there is an 'ought' that we could discern and to which we would submit, which may be distinct from any explication as to *exactly* what it is we ought to do. This sometimes overwhelming sense can exist quite independently of someone giving consideration as to whether the moral urgings and promptings emanate from God's own will, or whether they exist in their own right, unconnected to belief in God's existence or His will. I think this is strong evidence that we are inherently **moral beings**, *independently of any belief that God is the source of our morality*.

Types of moralities

If we give attention to the **source** of both the rules and of our sense of morality, we are faced with several possibilities: many 'rules' are doubtless of deeply historical origins, and although the rules have changed and developed, their inherited nature is usually quite evident. Significantly, many essential 'commands' remain, and constitute part of our 'collective consciousness'. From a Western, Judaeo-Christian perspective, I believe this generalisation can be reasonably asserted.

But if morality is considered to be a *purely socio-biological phenomenon*, for instance, and is thought explicable in terms of such evolutionary and cultural considerations *alone*, then we would still feel that we had moral demands made upon us. And any individual person could legitimately think this an *external* imposition. Although the source of morality here is different from where God is considered to be the creator of morality, the 'rules' could be just the same. We cannot, therefore, recognise the source of morality by *consideration of the nature of the rules themselves*.

That leaves the question, 'Did God create morality?' not only unanswered, but possibly unanswerable, and perhaps beyond knowing. I will nevertheless now consider one way of addressing the question.

The special case of God's morality

If God *did* create morality, then humankind exists in a state where moral demands are explicitly imposed upon us, which confronts our clear sense of having individual autonomy with a major difficulty. Here, I think there is a *unique choice*: to accept or not to accept God as the creator of values, and hence to accept or not to accept God as the ultimate arbiter in our lives.

A choice that we can make

We all know that we face moral demands in our lives; we are moral beings. While some people may be amoral, the vast majority seem to be highly moral, by whatever lights. And a fundamental aspect of *any* morality is the sense of the obligations that are imposed on us (or that we impose on ourselves): our capacity as a moral being requires that we *obey* those moral demands, obey our inner promptings (or 'duty', elaborated by the use of reason,) and *do the right thing*, or show whatever strength of character is required to desist from doing what we know we shouldn't do. That we need to resist various urgings, for our own good, is something we have to learn rather early in life; we would hopefully continue to enhance our 'moral stature' as we grow older: ordinary daily life requires that we have a deep understanding of what is 'good for us', using this term in its broadest sense. Anyone bringing up children, for instance, is constantly aware of the need to make moral judgements as to what is 'good for them'. In the theist perspective, God, likewise, is believed to constantly have our best interests at heart. And whilst, as I have argued, we can't *know* that God created morality, **we can choose to accept that He did**. Only by being free, *and knowing that we are free*, to accept or reject that God created morality, however, is it possible to accept that our freedom is being wholly respected by God.

The 'demand' for objectivity

The need for an objective basis of morality is often posited as a reason to acknowledge that God is the creator of morality. One ostensible consequence of God being the creator of morality is that it accords moral values a **uniquely objective basis**, valid irrespective of whether anyone believes in them. But this demand for objectivity is misplaced, however, and for this reason: whatever the source of morality, we act upon the moral demands (through our sense of what we ought to do) **as though those requirements are objective**. They are not experienced as subjective whims, or they wouldn't have the significance for us that they have. We do not need the assurance, or belief in the certainty, of this sort of 'objective' status for morality to 'function' and be effective. I think a weakness of the demand for objectivity is that it does not take sufficiently into account that we are all intrinsically moral beings and can lead moral lives without needing to *know* whether our morality has this objective foundation. Moreover, as I have shown, we **cannot know** whether there is such

a basis: any claim that there is such a basis can therefore only presume 'objectivity' *in terms of faith alone*.

Conclusion

I do not think that anyone's acceptance of God as the creator of morality could ever come about completely 'in isolation'; it would be part of their full acceptance of the place of God in their life, including God's foundational role in 'who they are', from their very creation to their fundamental identity and their essential purpose. So the question, 'Did God create morality?' becomes one which can only be answered affirmatively from *within* a faith position. It is then no longer a theoretical question for someone, but an authentically concrete issue, which will impact on how they view the world and fulfil their lives within it. Perhaps the question would no longer be asked directly, because it would be understood afresh, as are all such fundamental questions when once they have received an answer that can be accepted and believed.

God, I conclude, doesn't 'impose' His morality. But if He created us as moral beings, we can use our freedom to *choose*. We can't *know* if God created morality, but, through faith, can *accept* that He did.