Morality Needs
No God

Chapter 1 Preview

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Can Atheists be Moral?

Religion and morality are closely linked in the minds of many people. It is widely believed you can't have one without the other. And if morality needs religion, then what does that say about atheists? Can they be moral? Can there be a morality without God?

To answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at the connection between religion and morality. While the two are linked, the way in which they are linked is important.

Religions can provide a foundation for morality. Morality is actually the most significant function of a religion. Without morality, a religion would be nothing but a set of stories and speculations. You might have creation myths that tell you how the world was created. You might speculate about a life that comes after death. You might explain mysteries in this world by claiming a conscious, powerful being is to blame. You might explain thunder and lighting as an act of a god, or you might describe unhappy events as controlled by fate. But these would be just stories, without any greater purpose.

Morality is what allows religion to go beyond these stories and speculations. It suggests that you can use the ideas in these stories to control your own destiny. A wishful fantasy about an afterlife is nothing more than a bedside story, but it becomes the foundation of morality when you are informed that your actions and choices affect the results. If you follow certain rules, or make certain sacrifices, you will be granted access to a better life in the next world. And if you fail to act appropriately, you will be doomed to suffer instead.

Religion tells you how to appease the angry gods. It tells you how to act so that they will reward you and not punish you. It tells you how to achieve supernatural effects, like receiving miracles on earth, getting into an afterlife, or being reincarnated in a more desirable form. The details of the god or gods vary, as do the details of the rewards or punishments. The crucial element is simply that your actions impact these supernatural effects. The religious beliefs provide you guidance in how to control these effects.

Some forms of superstition promise you direct control over these effects. You might be able to cast a spell or perform a dance to gain a miraculous effect. But religions tend to make the control less direct. Instead of invoking a magical power directly, your actions and choices please or anger a supernatural force that may then take action itself.
It's clear that there is a strong connection here between religion and morality. One could correctly say that the purpose and justification of religion is to provide a moral code. And it's not surprising that those who base their morality on religious beliefs will see religion as an integral and necessary part of morality. Their moral beliefs are not just connected to their religious beliefs. They are a product of them.

Religion could have another purpose. The religion could provide a description or explanation of the natural world. It could assert that the earth is at the center of the universe, and that the sun rotates around it. It could assert the age of the earth as a mere few thousand years. But while religions often make these kinds of claims, they don't stand up to scientific investigation.

Without the religious morality, these claims would be like countless other mistaken views of the world that have been discarded when the evidence became clear. It is morality that gives them significance. They stop being mere stories, and become transformed into a necessary foundation of the moral beliefs. You can no longer discard them without the fear of undermining morality. Instead of changing your views of the world based on the best evidence, belief becomes a moral requirement. You have to believe in order to be moral. So while a religion may also try to describe or explain the natural world, it is morality that provides these beliefs with significance and dedication.

Religious beliefs require morality to give them significance and meaning. Religion needs morality. But just because religion needs morality to make it meaningful, it doesn't make the opposite true. The dependence is one-sided. Morality does not need to be based on supernatural beliefs or aimed at otherworldly benefits. You can have a morality based on the consequences in this world. You can have a set of values that is concerned with earthly matters. Morality does not need religion. It does not need a supernatural world. It does not need a god.

And so while religion and morality are often associated with one another, so much so that they are thought of as inseparable, the truth is very different. Morality does not need religion. Yes, atheists can be moral. And this book will provide a detailed argument for why this is true.

The Myth in Practice

Can atheists be moral? A whole book to answer a yes or no question? Why does it matter in the first place? It turns out that the myth that atheists can’t be moral has several consequences in practice.

Probably the most significant effect of this myth is that it creates a deep injustice. It causes hatred and fear towards atheists, which can
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Many atheists have stories of family and loved ones rejecting them and pushing them out of their lives. Friendships are ended. They are treated like criminals, and sometimes with less dignity. They are thought of as evil, and some are bullied or threatened.

The injustice is grave. It doesn't matter how a person acts. He may be honest, caring, and gentle. He may work hard at his job, and go out of his way to make sure nobody ever has a reason to think poorly of his character. And yet as soon as he admits that he doesn't believe in a supernatural entity, he is assumed to be morally bankrupt.

The myth that atheists can't be moral wrecks lives. It creates fear and mistrust, and treats a class of people as if they were evil, regardless of their actual values or actions.

The myth can also hurt the religious person who believes it. It destroys relationships. It creates conflicts between people where none was necessary, and it robs each of the benefits of the other. If a family ostracizes an atheist member, they all lose someone close. If a friendship is ended when someone finds out the other is an atheist, both parties lose.

And with the potential consequences so significant, it has another effect. It makes people lie to one another about their religious beliefs. Atheists feel that they need to pretend to be religious in order to avoid the unjust consequences. Or they may feel that they need to downplay their beliefs, calling themselves agnostics to suggest that they haven't made up their mind. Even religious individuals often feel that they must not talk about their religious doubts. If religion is thought of as necessary for morality, then even admitting doubts to yourself might damn you as immoral. Who wants to have their moral character questioned?

The threat of being called an atheist, and therefore immoral, is used frequently. Religions use it to discourage any critical analysis of their beliefs. Creationists use it to malign anyone promoting the Theory of Evolution. Politicians must go out of their way to convince voters that they are religious to win elections. These are all consequences of a firm belief by many people that atheists are morally corrupt.

This assumption about religion being necessary for morality is recognized and used as a justification for religion. When atheists provide arguments showing that religious beliefs are incorrect and illogical, a frequent response is that religion is still good because it's needed for morality. The question of truth is dismissed as less important than the question of usefulness. If morality is a good thing, then atheist arguments fall on deaf ears. And more, the act of willfully substantial harm their lives. If you believe an atheist can't be moral, you'll assume that he is immoral, and you will likely treat him accordingly. Some people treat atheists as unworthy of trust. Others ostracize them as if they were evil. Atheists may even have to fear bodily harm or death.

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ignoring evidence or argument is performed with a sense of moral pride. This position rests on the myth that morality requires religion, and that you have to accept religion despite any flaws or abandon morality. This justification of religion is just one more consequence of the myth.

A last, significant consequence of this belief occurs when atheists accept the argument themselves. In that case, the myth becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The religious argue that morality can only be justified by faith in the supernatural, and that it cannot make any sense for someone to be moral without those beliefs. When an atheist accepts that belief, they accept that morality is just a religious concept, to be dismissed with every other religious belief. In that view, morality is for fools who believe fanciful stories without evidence or reason, which means the rational thing would be to just do whatever you want. When you promote this myth, you promote the idea that morality is irrational. Is it surprising then that some people believe it?

The idea that atheists can’t be moral is destructive and harmful. It wrecks lives and destroys trust. That's why this topic is so important. That's why atheists shouldn't be dismissed as immoral so casually. The consequences are real and significant.

**Taking on a Myth**

The goal of this book is to show that atheists can indeed be moral. The belief that morality is necessarily tied to religion is a myth promoted by religion to justify its own existence. We'll see that the belief is based on many misunderstandings about the nature of morality, as well as many assumptions that can't survive thorough examination.

How does one go about proving atheists can be moral? There isn't a straightforward answer. Part of the problem is that there are so many different reasons people have for believing it. Countering each argument would be exhausting, and likely wouldn't be convincing anyway. Showing how arguments for the myth are flawed is not the same thing as providing evidence that atheists really can be moral.

Instead of trying to refute each possible argument, the approach I will take is to provide a description of what a secular morality would look like, and why atheists could be counted on to practice it. Instead of negating arguments, I'll be presenting an argument of my own. By understanding how an atheist could be moral, and seeing details about how it would actually work in practice, you'll be able to see for yourself that it is possible.

To make a convincing argument, however, I need to meet certain standards. For instance, one could easily argue that atheists can act in a way that is consistent with a religious morality. Morality provides you guidance in what actions to take, but those options are available to everyone, whether atheist or religious. It doesn't take any effort to
show that atheists can avoid murdering people, as an example. If nothing else, they could simply imitate someone else.

Clearly imitation isn’t a very good proof that atheists can be moral. If all we can say is that it’s physically possible for an atheist to act in a way that happens to be consistent with a moral system, it would leave open too many questions. Why would the atheist imitate a religion? Can they be counted on to act that way consistently, even when others aren’t watching? Isn’t this still accepting the premise that morality is ultimately derived from religion, and atheists can at best copy the results?

To show that atheists can actually be moral, we can’t just say that it’s physically possible for them to act consistent with a moral code. We have to show how a moral code can be built entirely on a secular foundation. It has to be based on a secular understanding of the world, and not just plagiarized from a religious morality. We have to show why the moral values are good in terms of their effects in this world, unconnected from supernatural beliefs. We need to show that a secular morality has benefits here on earth.

Even after we see that morality can be based on a secular worldview, we also need to have an argument for why an atheist would follow these moral beliefs. Why not cheat morality? Why not give into temptations? Religious morality recognizes temptation as an obstacle to practicing moral beliefs with integrity. It attempts to overcome temptation with the promise of an afterlife, or the threat of punishment.

What works for an atheist? We have to have a convincing argument, not just that atheists should be moral, but that atheists have strong incentives to be moral. We have to see why they wouldn’t just submit to any temptation that comes along. We have to see why they will take their moral beliefs seriously, and can be counted on to act with integrity.

Along the way, we will have to check many of the assumptions people have regarding morality. The belief that atheists can’t be moral is based on many different assumptions which are taken for granted. Only by questioning these assumptions, and looking at alternatives, can we hope to shed some real light on the topic.

Now even if we can prove that atheists can be moral, the initial belief that religion and morality are tied together will likely lead to a related belief. There will be an assumption that a secular morality would be some kind of flawed version of the religious morality. Any differences would be seen as mistakes or imperfections. The assumption would be that even if atheists can be moral, it’s some kind of inferior and faulty version.

That assumption also needs to be challenged. We’ll see that there are many differences between a religious morality and one that is entirely secular. But there should be no automatic assumption that the religious morality is perfect or superior. Assuming that what you are
used to must be superior is just a case of bias, and not a rational conclusion. To make an informed judgment, an actual comparison needs to be made.

Once we have a clear picture of what a secular morality looks like and what kinds of choices it leads to, we can compare it to religious moralities. Many of these comparisons will be made throughout the book, in order to highlight differences, misunderstanding, or assumptions. The final chapter will make a more thorough and systematic comparison. We'll see that atheists can be moral, and we'll see some strong advantages that a secular morality has over a religious morality.

**What This Book Is and Is Not**

This book attempts to answer the question of whether atheists can be moral, and it does so mostly by providing a detailed description of what an atheistic morality would look like. Along the way, it'll highlight some common assumptions about morality, as well as contrast the morality described here with religious moralities.

This book is not a book about atheism and religion. It does not attempt to argue that atheism is right or that religion is wrong. There are plenty of other books on that topic. Instead, this book just focuses on how the atheistic worldview is compatible with a moral system, and consequently why atheists can be moral. There will be contrasts between this secular view of morality and religious views of morality, but those are not an attempt to prove the existence or nonexistence of God. The question is irrelevant to this book, which only deals with how a belief one way or another affects morality.

Similarly, this book is not about any particular religious morality or religion. The role religion has in this book is as an enlightening contrast with a morality for atheists. Therefore the specific religious beliefs are largely irrelevant. Trying to be overly specific leads to irrelevant controversies. Arguments will end up being focused on whether I have correctly described your particular belief system.

Since people have wildly different religious beliefs, even within the same denominations, there will always be someone who thinks their views are being misrepresented. But this is all beside the point. The goal here is to describe atheists and a secular morality. Any discussion of religious beliefs is only useful in pointing out widespread assumptions, and making comparisons to see how a secular morality is different than you might think at first. If one of these common assumptions does not fit your belief system, you can ignore it and recognize that the contrast is still useful.

This is a book about morality. It is an argument for why atheists can be moral. It is a presentation of a morality grounded in secular beliefs, for the purpose of living here on earth, appropriate for anyone
interested in this life and this world. Atheists can be moral because morality needs no god.