

RETHINKING GOD AND MORALITY: IS THE MORAL ARGUMENT A SUFFICIENT PROOF FOR THEISM?

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Abstract

The moral argument for theism contends that the reality of objective moral values necessitates the existence of a divine moral lawgiver who is responsible for human morality. Despite the prominence of moral argument in Christian apologetics and analytic philosophy, many critics argue that it lacks epistemic and metaphysical force to convince all reasonable people. Therefore, this study explores the developmental trend of the moral argument with a view to assess the logical structure, assumptions and implications, and evaluate the strength of secular alternatives to divine-command-based moral realism in order to determine whether the moral argument is a logically and metaphysically sufficient proof for God's existence. This study adopts qualitative philosophical methodology based on conceptual analysis, historical interpretation, and comparative evaluation. The findings reveal that while the moral argument is a philosophically compelling component of a cumulative case for theism, it is not robust enough on its own to constitute conclusive proof for God's existence. The paper submits that the argument's primary strength lies in its ability to offer an elegant explanation for moral reality, particularly for those with pre-existing theistic leanings, rather than serving as a definitive and universally persuasive apologetic.

Keywords: Moral Argument, Morality, Divine Command, Theism, God's existence

Introduction

The moral argument for God's existence posits that the reality of objective moral values and duties necessitates the existence of a divine moral lawgiver. As famously postulated by Craig, the moral argument follows this order: *If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist; objective moral values do exist; therefore, God exists* (Craig 42). This concise form—a *modus tollens*—has been celebrated by a Christian philosopher, Christopher Shrock as “the most widely-convincing apologetic argument of the twentieth century,” due to its strong appeal to reason (Shrock 99). It follows a logically given presentation and is easily comprehensible compared to other versions of the argument. The argument draws significantly from C. S. Lewis's concept of a universal *Law of Human Nature*, which he saw

as evidence of a moral reality beyond human convention (Lewis 19–20). For Lewis, human convention cannot adequately account for the source of human moral consciousness which later became the foundation upon which the moral arguments for the existence of God were built.

Immanuel Kant also contributed to this tradition, proposing that belief in God, freedom, and immortality were *postulates of practical reason*. For Kant, without God, there would be no ultimate assurance of moral justice or attainment of the *summum bonum*—the highest good (Kant 102–104). To Kant, God is not just a self-existing being but the necessary drive and goal for human morality. He is not just the source of this moral consciousness but provides the teleological relevance for whatever we come to know as morality. Theistic moral philosophers argue that core values such as *justice, honesty, and altruism* require ontological grounding in God's nature or will (Adams 250; Craig 42). Taking God out of the premise of reason that explains all these virtues will be nothing more than a fruitless speculation. According to Hare, divine command theory not only accounts for obligation but unites morality with human dignity and freedom (113).

Despite the moral argument's prominence in Christian apologetics and analytic philosophy, many scholars remain unconvinced. Critics argue that it lacks epistemic and metaphysical force. Secular philosophers like Wielenberg and Street deny the necessity of a divine moral lawgiver. They propose that *moral consciousness* can be explained through evolutionary, rational, or social frameworks (Wielenberg 55–78; Street 110–15). These three alternative explanations to the source of human morality later became the pillars upon which secular counter arguments on human morality were built.

The central philosophical query remains: Do moral truths require God for their existence, or can they exist independently as brute facts? Do the possession of a universal moral consciousness affirm the existence of a superior moral deity or they are just coincidences that build in to a cosmic consciousness? Theists insist that only a transcendent source can make sense of universal moral duties. They perceived objective moral values as pointers to a necessary being who necessitates their forms and functions. Over the years, these claims have been the weightiest burden of proof of the theistic moral argument, to prove that the existence of objective moral reality is a sure evidence that God exists who must have source and sustain them. On the other hand, secular thinkers maintain that morality may be discovered, not invented, through reason, experience, and evolutionary development. The secular thinkers presume alternative explanations to the existence of objective moral values; insisting that God is not the only possible cause for their existence. Many counter-theistic moral views were advanced in that respect in order to establish a divine-free metaethical framework.

Therefore, this study explores the historical development of the moral argument with a view to critically assess the logical structure, assumptions, implications and evaluate the strength of *secular alternatives* to divine-command-based moral realism in order to determine whether the *moral argument is a logically and metaphysically sufficient* proof for God's existence. In order to achieve the above objectives, this study adopts qualitative philosophical methodology based on conceptual analysis, historical interpretation, and comparative evaluation. Data were essentially collected through secondary sources. These include utilization of classical and contemporary philosophical works in learn journals, textbooks, and other relevant sources, which were systematically and logically analyzed to assess worthy philosophical arguments, and evaluate whether *moral experience* is sufficient to support theism.

Conceptual Discourse of God and Morality

In theistic worldviews, God refers to a personal being who is omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, and the creator and sustainer of the universe (Craig 35). These descriptions of God as obtainable in the theistic circles are far more than words. They are the very essence of a typical God-thought without which God will not be the transcendent reality of the theistic tradition. To the theists, God is both omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent. He is personal; possessing essential personal qualities. He is also considered to be morally devoid of any blemish and wrinkle-free. Atoi, Sadiku and Babale maintain that morality is a fundamental constituent of religion. Traditionally, the fear of God and adherence to his commands are regarded as the source or foundation of moral values (117). It is imperative to note that morality describes the beliefs of the individual in valuing the notions of good and bad, right and wrong, justice, and virtue, which are vital elements of belief in God (Atoi and Ajiji 128).

According to Divine Command Theory (DCT), morality is grounded in God's commands or essential nature (Adams 250). His testimonial of being a morally perfect entity is not just a divine trademark but the necessary foundation from where objective morality emanates and is established. Objective morality refers to moral truths that exist independently of human opinion or cultural context. For instance, acts such as murder or rape are considered objectively wrong, regardless of social approval. According to Shafer-Landau, moral facts are “*not made true by virtue of anyone's say-so*” and “*hold independently of what we believe about them*” (15). They are thus, objective moral values, like the blazing sun that fill the earth with its marvelous light. Some may consider it hot, some scorching and others warming. Human beings have found various means of interpreting the nature of reality and values in life (Atoi and Ogbole 112). However, differences in human appreciation does not alter the very meaning why it exist or even shine.

Nevertheless, Nielsen argues that if morality is “*built into the fabric of the universe,*” then it can be understood without invoking a deity (65). In fact, this response assumes that morality is a bobble that can be both perceived and explained apart its water waves. It does not negate necessarily that morality can be adequately understood without invoking a deity

simply because it is indelibly etched into the fabric of nature. In another light, secular philosophers such as James Rachels and Michael Smith provide *naturalistic accounts* of moral realism. These theories claim that moral truths can emerge from rational consensus, biological evolution, or intrinsic value found in conscious life (Rachels and Rachels 102; Smith 98).

Another position is historically reflected in Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates poses his famous dilemma: *Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?* (Plato 10). This dilemma challenges divine command theory by implying that if moral values exist independently of God, then God is not the source of morality. But if moral values depend solely on divine will, then morality is arbitrary. In fact, this dilemma place God on a moral swindle, forcing him to fall on either extremes of the pendulum; which in itself is an unfair approach and false dilemma. Adams postulates that moral values are rooted not in arbitrary divine commands, but in God's essentially loving and good nature. In his words, “*God's commands are not independent standards of goodness, but expressions of the moral character of God himself*” (253). Thus, Adams practically moved God out of the *Euthyphro* dilemma by providing a third possible option. The pious is not just loved by the gods because it is pious, or it is pious because it is loved by the gods; it is pious because it is an emanative of divine immutable and eternal character. Thus, it is neither independent of God nor arbitrary as presumed in the *Euthyphro* dilemma.

Theistic Perspective on the Moral Argument

Theists argue that objective moral values and duties are best explained by the nature or commands of a personal, morally perfect God. The theistic perspective on morality can be summarized in two major line of thoughts: first, the affirmation of the existence of objective moral values and second, God is the best possible explanation for their existence. The theists are not contending that other explanation do not exist to explain the existence of objective moral values, but they only see God as the best possible explanation. This conviction lies at the heart of the Divine Command Theory and its variants. In this view, God is not simply a moral teacher or enforcer but the ontological foundation of morality itself.

According to Craig, if God does not exist, then “objective moral values and duties do not exist” (42). Craig forwarded a material implication between objective moral values and the existence of God. To him, one cannot successfully affirm the existence of objective moral values without acknowledging the existence of God who must have founded them. For Craig and other proponents of the moral argument, the best or only explanation for the binding nature of moral duties is the reality of a moral lawgiver (Craig 45). Craig maintains that without God, morality becomes subjective, and duties reduce to personal or cultural preferences; which will imply the absence of objective moral values. Lewis supports this view in *Mere Christianity*, where he observes that human beings exhibit a remarkable consensus on moral principles across cultures—what he calls the Law of Human Nature. Lewis writes: “*Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it*” (19). Like Craig, Lewis focuses first

on establishing the reality of objective moral values. This, for Lewis, is evidence of a supernatural source. He argues that the sense of an *inner moral law*, which includes guilt and conscience, cannot be explained adequately by socialization or instinct (21–24). Atoi, Markus and Dillali assert that religious utterances derive meaning from the role they play within religious practices, such as, worship, prayer, confession, and moral formation (175).

In the classical theistic tradition, thinkers like Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Thomas Aquinas held that morality is grounded in God's eternal nature. God is seen as the foundation upon which the edifice of moral consciousness is developed. Augustine argued that divine commands reflect eternal truths. Aquinas, building on Aristotelian thought, saw natural law as part of God's rational order embedded in human nature (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 91). Kant on the other hand, offered a more detailed view about the theistic perspective of the moral argument. Though he did not ground morality in God's commands, he claimed that moral action presupposes the existence of God, freedom, and immortality—what he called *postulates of practical reason* (104). He sees these postulates as impetus for moral consciousness and the privation of these postulates will result into a world devoid of moral order. Kant argues that the *summum bonum*, the highest good (perfect virtue united with perfect happiness), is only achievable if God exists to bring about justice (105–106).

Moreover, Adams, in *Finite and Infinite Goods*, reformulates divine command theory by asserting that moral obligation arises from the commands of a loving God, whose nature is the standard of goodness (252). In this view, God's commands are neither arbitrary nor external to moral truth—they are grounded in God's unchanging and perfectly good nature. He sees the nature of God as more or less the basis for the existence of moral obligations. Hare also advances this perspective, arguing that moral autonomy and divine authority are not incompatible. In his own perspective, it is possible for completely free humans to be configured in a morally conscious way by the divine; to be morally obligated even in their moral liberty. Hare contends that human dignity is respected precisely when moral laws are issued by a perfectly rational and loving God (Hare 112–115).

Exponents of theistic morality argue that belief in God not only grounds *moral ontology* but also supports *moral motivation* and *cosmic justice*. Thus, the belief in God does not only answer the question: where did man get his moral consciousness? But also address the teleological questions: what motivates man to live a morally sound and ethically inclined life? What glued man's feet to the path of goodness despite the evil around him? These three phenomena could be described as the three pillars of the moral argument because collectively and of course individually set out the course whereon the theistic moral argument navigates. As Craig writes, “if God does not exist, then there is no moral accountability... Good will not triumph over evil” (48).

For many believers, the promise of divine justice gives weight and purpose to moral action beyond the temporal or social consequences. To the typical theist, an individual will most likely get the following responses when one inquires the rationale behind their moral consciousness: God commanded it. God will reward a person for being good. God will judge every unrighteousness. Thus, at the center of the theist thought on moral ontology, moral motivation and cosmic justice lies a divine being that explains all emergencies and inquisitions. Theistic philosophers maintain that the moral argument does not merely suggest that God is the one and only possible explanation—but the most coherent and comprehensive one. Theists see every other explanation to the root and origin of human morality as inferior groundwork compared to the divine command theory.

Atheistic and Naturalistic Challenges

Atheist and secular philosophers challenge both the structure and substance of the moral argument. They reject the notion that objective moral values and duties require a divine source, offering alternative metaethical explanations grounded in human nature, reason, social utility, and evolution. What the secular perspective of the moral argument seems to buttress is not to unify the theistic thoughts of morality as another alternative explanation to the universal human moral consciousness but to dismiss the divine source theory and God as the necessary causation for human morality. One of the earliest and most influential critics of the divine command theory was Hume, who, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, argued that morality originates from human sentiments, not divine commands. He denied that we can derive moral obligations from facts, coining the famous “*is-ought*” problem: “*you cannot derive an ought from an is*” (Hume 469). According to Hume, moral truths are not discovered through reason alone but are shaped by emotions, sympathies, and social experiences. Nonetheless, his postulations did not address the objectivity of human morality. In fact, it appears to not have a standing on the relativity and subjectivity of morality when it depends on human sympathies and social experiences.

Following the steps of Hume, Mackie developed what he called the *error theory*. In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Mackie agreed that people often speak and act as if objective moral values exist, but he concluded that such values are “*queer*” and metaphysically implausible. To Mackie, these moral values popularized to be objective are nothing more than a homogeneous mark of individually perceived goods. He does not spend more time in debunking the existence of God but the existence of objective moral values which form the basis for the theistic moral argument. He famously argued, “*there are no objective values,*” and that belief in them is the result of moral projection, not discovery (Mackie 15). However, Today's moral realists, like Shafer-Landau, reject both theistic and error-theoretical accounts. He affirms the existence of moral objectivity while rejecting its divine foundation. In *Moral Realism: A Defense*, he argues that moral facts exist as brute features of reality—similar to logical truths or mathematical axioms. He writes, “*Moral knowledge is possible even if there is no God,*” and maintains that “*objective morality does not need theological foundations*” (Shafer-Landau 13–15).

Similarly, Rachels and Rachels defend secular moral realism by proffering alternative sources of human moral consciousness apart from a divine source. In *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, they argue that moral facts can be derived from principles of human flourishing, rational analysis, and empathetic reasoning (102–104). Another significant critique of the moral argument comes from Street, who articulates the “*Darwinian Dilemma*” for moral realism. In her essay “*A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value*,” Street argues that if our moral faculties evolved through natural selection, then they were shaped by survival and reproduction, not by the truth of moral beliefs. She writes, “*The forces of evolution would have selected moral judgments conducive to reproductive fitness, regardless of their truth*” (Street 110). The dilemma, then, is whether to accept that moral judgments are unreliable or to assert divine guidance in evolution—something many secularists reject. In response to evolutionary critiques, Wielenberg defends what he calls robust ethical realism. In *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, he maintains that objective moral values can exist in a naturalistic world, without divine foundations. Wielenberg argues that moral facts are non-natural but not supernatural; they simply exist as part of the fabric of the universe, like numbers or logic (Wielenberg 77–82).

Furthermore, Smythe and Rectenwald in their article *Craig on God and Morality*, critique the first premise of Craig's argument: If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist. They argue that this premise is not only unsupported but clearly false. Smythe and Rectenwald present hypothetical cases—such as, a solitary rapist on Earth—to show that most people would still believe rape is wrong, even without believing in God (334–35). They submit that the moral argument commits a genetic fallacy, confusing the origin of beliefs with their validity. Also, the Euthyphro dilemma resurfaces as a major challenge. If God commands actions because they are good, then goodness exists independently of God. But if actions are good only because God commands them, then morality becomes arbitrary. Even modified divine command theorists struggle with this, as critics like Nielsen asserts that such positions still imply God is subject to an external moral standard (67).

It is imperative to affirm at this juncture that secular philosophers offer several alternative foundations for morality, these include Evolutionary Ethics, which states that morality evolved to promote cooperation and survival. It is not some bobble out of a deity driven beliefs but an evolutionary scare born out of human will to survive. Rational Constructivism, which says that morality arises from rational agreement among autonomous agents (cf. Rawls, Korsgaard). Brute Moral Realism, which suggests that moral truths are part of reality and need no deeper foundation (Shafer-Landau, Wielenberg). It is pertinent to note that each of the aforementioned positions challenges the assumption that God is necessary for moral objectivity; though some question the reality of objective morality themselves. To many critics, the moral argument begs the question, assuming that God is the only possible explanation when plausible non-theistic alternatives exist.

The Moral Argument Reconsidered

The moral argument endures because it touches a profound human intuition: that moral truths are not merely preferences or conventions, but are objective, universal, and binding. For many, this intuition points naturally toward a transcendent source, often identified as God. Theists find in this argument a compelling reason to affirm a moral lawgiver whose nature grounds the authority and universality of moral obligations (Craig 42; Adams 250). The existential weight of the moral argument should not be underestimated. It addresses deep human questions, such as, where did I get my goodness? Why should I be good? Why does justice matter? Why do we feel guilt, obligation, and compassion? For many, theism provides the most satisfying and coherent answers (Lewis 21; Craig 48). However, the Euthyphro dilemma remains a powerful objection to divine command theory, which is one of the most fundamental theistic perspective of the moral argument. Even modified versions that appeal to God's nature face the problem of whether goodness is created by God or recognized by God—a dilemma that has continued to divide scholars ever since the debate started (Plato 10; Adams 253; Nielsen 67).

It is imperative to note that when both theistic and secular perspectives are carefully analyzed, the moral argument emerges not as a definitive proof but as a probabilistic or suggestive argument. It resonates deeply with those who already believe in a transcendent moral order, but for skeptics, it lacks the logical crown required to command belief. As noted by Shafer-Landau, the moral argument “*fails to demonstrate that theistic ethics is the only viable foundation for objective moral values*” (17). Recall the common structure: If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist. Objective moral values and duties do exist. Therefore, God exists. (Craig 42). Critics such as Smythe and Rectenwald have strongly rejected Premise one, noting that it assumes what it sets out to prove—that God is the only explanation for objective morality. They assert, “Even if objective moral truths exist, the claim that God is required to ground them is unsubstantiated” (Smythe and Rectenwald 334).

However, they could not provide a more coherent explanation to the existence of objective moral values that is more plausible than Divine Command Theory. Furthermore, Premise two—the assertion that objective morals do exist, is itself debatable. Nietzsche, for example, saw morality as a human construction tied to the will to power, rather than as a set of objective truths (29–30). Mackie labeled moral claims as “false,” since no moral facts exist to make them true (15). Even though the existence of objective moral values is widely contested, the universality of some moral principles is a great premise for a coherent and homogeneous source.

For those who do affirm the reality of objective morality, the question remains whether God is the best or only explanation. Wielenberg proposes that moral facts are metaphysically primitive; they exist without needing further justification. He writes, “*If we are willing to accept the existence of basic physical and logical truths, why not basic moral ones?*” (Wielenberg 80). In this way, he reframes moral realism as not more mysterious than our belief in numbers or the laws of logic. Phenomenologists and moral intuitivists go further, arguing that our sense of moral obligation is a brute feature of human experience. Just as we perceive colors or pain, we experience moral wrongness. This experience does not demand a metaphysical foundation, though it may suggest one. Pragmatically, the moral argument also struggles to yield specific theological conclusions. Even if we grant that a transcendent moral source exists, we cannot conclude that it is the personal, triune, omniscient God of Christianity. The dynamics of trust and mistrust in the interactions between world religious traditions means that the moral epistemic and communicative endeavors will at times be difficult (Carroll 61). The source could be a Platonic realm, a non-theistic cosmic force, or even a malevolent deity. As Lewis himself acknowledged, the moral argument is not proof but an invitation to explore the implications of our shared moral experience (21–23).

Thus, in philosophical terms, the moral argument is best understood as part of a cumulative case for theism. It does not and cannot stand alone. It works in tandem with other arguments—cosmological, teleological, experiential—and with personal convictions, religious experiences, and existential needs. Craig, Adams, Hare, and others use it to reinforce the coherence of a theistic worldview, not to conclusively demonstrate it. In contrast, naturalistic theories—despite their complexity, offer plausible alternatives that explain moral belief without invoking God. Whether they are convincing often depends on one's prior metaphysical commitments. The secular theories as well did not fully refute the premises upon which the moral argument is build. Some struggle to disprove the existence of objective moral values because it remains the stronghold upon which the theistic moral argument is build and others advance a thought that suggest alternative sources.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the moral argument is not sufficient on its own (independent of other theistic arguments) to establish the existence of God in a deductive or metaphysically conclusive sense; though it made a piece in the chain of arguments that present a case for the existence of God. While it may be philosophically suggestive, it is not logically necessary since other alternative sources of human morality are identified plausibly. Its force lies not in airtight proof but in its explanatory power for those who already hold or are open to theistic convictions.

Critics from the secular tradition—Hume, Mackie, Street, Shafer-Landau, and Wielenberg, among others—have offered rich and complex naturalistic accounts of moral truth. These theories ground morality in evolution, rational autonomy, human flourishing, or non-

natural objective facts. For many philosophers and scientists, such accounts are sufficient to explain why we feel moral obligation, how we reason morally, and why moral agreement is possible, all without invoking a divine lawgiver (Street 110; Wielenberg 80; Rachels and Rachels 102). Moreover, the moral argument cannot, by itself, specify the nature or identity of God. It tells us nothing about God's personality, intentions, or relation to humanity. At best, it suggests the existence of a moral source, which might be impersonal, polytheistic, or otherwise non-traditional. To arrive at a specific theistic worldview, additional philosophical and theological arguments must be added.

While the moral argument is not conclusive proof, it is a meaningful part of the dialogue between faith and reason. Perhaps provides one of the most plausible and credible argument for the existence of God that is not easily refuted beyond reasonable doubt. It invites us to think seriously about the origin of our moral instincts, the structure of moral reasoning, and the foundation of ethical responsibility. Whether one accepts its premises or not, it remains a philosophically rich and existentially significant contribution to the discourse on the existence of God. It is pertinent to point out here that the existence of objective moral values, either theistically inclined or not, is both the substance and strength of the moral argument. Assuming these objective moral values does not exist, the first premise upon which the argument is established would have been trashed and thus the argument would have lost all grounds. However, because this moral values exist and exist objectively, the moral argument is both substantiated and strengthened over the years.

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