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Good Minus God

By

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The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

I was heartened to learn recently that atheists are no longer the most reviled group in the United States: according to the political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell, we've been overtaken by the Tea Party. But even as I was high-fiving my fellow apostates ("We're number two! We're number two!"), I was wondering anew: why do so many people dislike atheists?

I gather that many people believe that atheism implies nihilism — that rejecting God means rejecting morality. A person who denies God, they reason, must be, if not actively evil, at least indifferent to considerations of right and wrong. After all, doesn't the dictionary list "wicked" as a synonym for "godless?" And isn't it true, as Dostoevsky said, that "if God is dead, everything is permitted"?

Well, actually — no, it's not. (And for the record, Dostoevsky never said it was.) Atheism does not entail that anything goes.

Admittedly, some atheists *are* nihilists. (Unfortunately, they're the ones who get the most press.) But such atheists' repudiation of morality stems more from an antecedent cynicism about ethics than from any philosophical view about the divine. According to these nihilistic atheists, "morality" is just part of a fairy tale we tell each other in order to keep our innate, bestial selfishness (mostly) under control. Belief in objective "oughts" and "ought nots," they say, must fall away once we realize that there is no universal enforcer to dish out rewards and punishments in the afterlife. We're left with pure self-interest, more or less enlightened.

This is a Hobbesian view: in the state of nature “[t]he notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice.” But no atheist has to agree with this account of morality, and lots of us do not. We “moralistic atheists” do not see right and wrong as artifacts of a divine protection racket. Rather, we find moral value to be immanent in the natural world, arising from the vulnerabilities of sentient beings and from the capacities of rational beings to recognize and to respond to those vulnerabilities and capacities in others.

This view of the basis of morality is hardly incompatible with religious belief. Indeed, anyone who believes that God made human beings in His image believes something like this — that there is a moral dimension of things, and that it is in our ability to apprehend it that we resemble the divine. Accordingly, many theists, like many atheists, believe that moral value is inherent in morally valuable things. Things don’t become morally valuable because God prefers them; God prefers them because they are morally valuable. At least this is what I was taught as a girl, growing up Catholic: that we could see that God was good because of the things He commands us to do. If helping the poor were not a good thing on its own, it wouldn’t be much to God’s credit that He makes charity a duty.

It may surprise some people to learn that theists ever take this position, but it shouldn’t. This position is not only consistent with belief in God, it is, I contend, a *more* pious position than its opposite. It is only if morality is independent of God that we can make moral sense out of religious worship. It is only if morality is independent of God that any person can have a *moral* basis for adhering to God’s commands.

Let me explain why. First let’s take a cold hard look at the consequences of pinning morality to the existence of God. Consider the following moral judgments — judgments that seem to me to be obviously true:

- It is wrong to drive people from their homes or to kill them because you want their land.
- It is wrong to enslave people.

- It is wrong to torture prisoners of war.
- Anyone who witnesses genocide, or enslavement, or torture, is morally required to try to stop it.

To say that morality depends on the existence of God is to say that none of these specific moral judgments is true unless God exists. That seems to me to be a remarkable claim. If God turned out not to exist — then slavery would be O.K.? There'd be nothing wrong with torture? The pain of another human being would mean nothing?

Think now about our personal relations — how we love our parents, our children, our life partners, our friends. To say that the moral worth of these individuals depends on the existence of God is to say that these people are, in themselves, worth nothing — that the concern we feel for their well being has no more ethical significance than the concern some people feel for their boats or their cars. It is to say that the historical connections we value, the traits of character and personality that we love — all count for nothing in themselves. Other people warrant our concern only because they are valued by someone else — in this case, God. (Imagine telling a child: “You are not inherently lovable. I love you only because I love your father, and it is my duty to love anything he loves.”)

What could make anyone think such things? Ironically, I think the answer is: the same picture of morality that lies behind atheistic nihilism. It's the view that the only kind of “obligation” there could possibly be is the kind that is disciplined by promise of reward or threat of punishment. Such a view cannot find or comprehend any value inherent in the nature of things, value that could warrant particular attitudes and behavior on the part of anyone who can apprehend it. For someone who thinks that another being's pain is not in itself a reason to give aid, or that the welfare of a loved one is not on its own enough to justify sacrifice, it is only the Divine Sovereign that stands between us and — as Hobbes put it — the war of “all against all.”

This will seem a harsh judgment on the many theists who subscribe to what is called Divine Command Theory — the view that what is morally good is constituted

by what God commands. Defenders of D.C.T. will say that their theory explains a variety of things about morality that non-theistic accounts of moral value cannot, and that it should be preferred for that reason. For example, they will say that atheists cannot explain the objectivity of morality — how there could be moral truths that are independent of any human being's attitudes, will or knowledge, and how moral truths could hold universally. It is true that D.C.T. would explain these things. If God exists, then He exists independently of human beings and their attitudes, and so His commands do, too. If we didn't invent God, then we didn't invent His commands, and hence didn't invent morality. We can be ignorant of God's will, and hence mistaken about what is morally good. Because God is omnipresent, His commands apply to all people at all times and in all places.

That's all fine. It would follow from D.C.T. that moral facts are objective. The problem is that it wouldn't follow that they are *moral*. Commands issued by a tyrant would have all the same features. For D.C.T. to explain morality, it must also explain what makes God good.

The problem I'm pointing to is an ancient one, discussed by Plato. In his dialogue "Euthyphro," the eponymous character tries to explain his conception of piety to Socrates: "the pious acts," Euthyphro says, are those which are loved by the gods." But Socrates finds this definition ambiguous, and asks Euthyphro: "are the pious acts pious because they are loved by the gods, or are the pious acts loved by the gods because they are pious?"

What's the difference? Well, if the first reading is correct, then it's the gods' loving those particular acts that *makes* them count as pious acts, that *grounds* their piousness. "Pious," on this alternative, is just shorthand for "something the gods love." *Whatever* the gods happen to love — bingo! — that's pious. If the gods change their preferences on a whim — and they did, if Homer knew his stuff — then the things that are pious change right along with them. In contrast, on the second reading, pious acts are presumed to have a distinctive, substantive property in common, a property in virtue of which the gods love them, a property that *explains why* the gods love them.

Translated into contemporary terms, the question Socrates is asking is this: are

morally good actions morally good simply *in virtue* of God's favoring them? Or does God favor them because they are — independently of His favoring them — morally good? D.C.T. picks the first option; it says that it's the mere fact that God favors them that makes morally good things morally good.

Theories that endorse the second option — let's call any such theory a "Divine Independence Theory" (D.I.T.) — contend, on the contrary, that the goodness of an action is a feature that is independent of, and antecedent to God's willing it. God could have commanded either this action or its opposite, but in fact, He commands only the good one.

Both D.C.T. and D.I.T. entail a perfect correspondence between the class of actions God commands and the class of actions that are good (or rather, they do so on the assumption that God is perfectly benevolent). The two theories differ, however, on what accounts for this congruence. D.C.T. says that it is God's command that explains why the good acts are "good" — it becomes true *merely by definition* that God commands "good" actions. "Goodness," on this view, becomes an empty honorific, with no independent content. To say that God chooses the good is like saying that the Prime Meridian is at zero degrees longitude, or that in baseball, three strikes makes an out. D.I.T., on the other hand, says that it is a substantive property of the acts — their goodness — that explains why God commanded them. Indeed, it says that God's goodness consists in His choosing all and only the good. D.I.T. presumes that we have an independent grasp of moral goodness, and that it is because of that that we can properly appreciate the goodness of God.

D.C.T. is arguably even more radical and bizarre than the Hobbesian nihilism I discussed earlier. On the nihilistic view, there is no pretense that a sovereign's power would generate moral obligation — the view is rather that "morality" is an illusion. But D.C.T. insists both that there is such a thing as moral goodness, and that it is defined by what God commands. This makes for really appalling consequences, from an intuitive, moral point of view. D.C.T. entails that anything at all could be "good" or "right" or "wrong." If God were to command you to eat your children, then it would be "right" to eat your children. The consequences are also appalling from a religious point of view. If all "moral" means is "commanded by

God,” then we cannot have what we would otherwise have thought of as moral reasons for obeying Him. We might have prudential reasons for doing so, self-interested reasons for doing so. God is extremely powerful, and so can make us suffer if we disobey Him, but the same can be said of tyrants, and we have no moral obligation (speaking now in ordinary terms) to obey tyrants. (We might even have a moral obligation to disobey tyrants.) The same goes for worshipping God. We might find it in our interest to flatter or placate such a powerful person, but there could be no way in which God was deserving of praise or tribute.

This is the sense in which I think that it is a more pious position to hold that morality is independent of the existence of God. If the term “good” is not just an empty epithet that we attach to the Creator, who or whatever that turns out to be, then it must be that the facts about what is good are independent of the other facts about God. If “good” is to have normative force, it must be something that we can understand independently of what is commanded by a powerful omnipresent being.

So what about atheism? What I think all this means is that the capacity to be moved by the moral dimension of things has nothing to do with one’s theological beliefs. The most reliable allies in any moral struggle will be those who respond to the ethically significant aspects of life, whether or not they conceive these things in religious terms. You do not lose morality by giving up God; neither do you necessarily find it by finding Him.

I want to close by conceding that there are things one loses in giving up God, and they are not insignificant. Most importantly, you lose the guarantee of redemption. Suppose that you do something morally terrible, something for which you cannot make amends, something, perhaps, for which no human being could ever be expected to forgive you. I imagine that the promise made by many religions, that God will forgive you if you are truly sorry, is a thought would that bring enormous comfort and relief. You cannot have that if you are an atheist. In consequence, you must live your life, and make your choices with the knowledge that every choice you make contributes, in one way or another, to the only value your life can have.

Some people think that if atheism were true, human choices would be insignificant. I think just the opposite — they would become surpassingly important.

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