

THE MORAL ARGUMENT

One of the great questions debated in modern times is this: are moral convictions objective and absolute truths or are they simply relative to particular times, places and cultures? To put it another way, is *'stealing is wrong'* as sure and as rock-solid as *'the earth is round'*? 'The earth is round' is an objective truth, a truth that is true no matter what the opinions of the Flat Earth Society. Can we put moral convictions in the category of objective truths?

- If you hold that certain moral values are objective and absolute then you will be faced with the question: 'In what are these values grounded?'
- If you hold that all moral values are subjective and relative, then you are faced with answering the awkward question: 'Why be moral?'

Moral arguments for the non-existence of God

The ancient Euthyphro dilemma was a kind of argument to question the link between morality and religion. The 20C philosopher, Bertrand Russell, revived this to disprove God's existence:

First, summarise the Euthyphro Argument.

Russell's argument (summarised by Vardy):

- 1 If there is a moral law, it stems from God or it does not.
- 2 If the moral law comes from God it is arbitrary (because whatever God commands is our definition of goodness).
- 3 If it does not come from God then God is subject to it.
- 4 So either God is not essentially good (because he is arbitrary about what is right or wrong) OR God is subject to an independent moral standard.
- 5 Neither an arbitrary God nor a less than ultimate God is worthy of worship.
- 6 Therefore there is no God.

Moral arguments for the existence of God

Moral arguments for the existence of God basically seek to establish:

- a common awareness of moral demands in the rational mind;
- the source of these moral demands as *transcendent* - God.

Many recognise Aquinas' Fourth Argument in the *Quinque Viae* as a moral argument:

- 1 People commonly judge some things to be more perfect than other things.
- 2 But judgment concerning the degree of perfection in things only makes sense if there exists a most perfect Being. To say that something is more perfect than something else is to say that it closer approximates the perfect.
- 3 One cannot determine that something falls short of a perfect standard unless that perfect standard is known.
- 4 Therefore, the perfect must exist.
- 5 Whatever contains the most perfection must be the source of all the perfection that exists in other beings.
- 6 Therefore there must exist a most perfect Being who is the cause of all the perfections that exist in beings containing lesser degrees of perfection.

Newman¹ versus Freud² and Hick³

The next paragraphs lay out a moral argument developed by John Henry Newman. His thinking is then contrasted with that of Sigmund Freud and of John Hick.

Newman concentrates on the fact of conscience. His line of argument goes like this:

If ... we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear ... If the cause of these emotions does not belong to the visible world, the Object to which (our) perceptions are directed must be Supernatural and Divine ...

¹ John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was a brilliant theologian. He started life as an Anglican, but gradually felt drawn to Catholicism. He became a Catholic and eventually a Cardinal of the Catholic Church.

² Sigmund Freud was the famous Austrian founder of psychoanalysis.

³ John Hick was a leading Philosopher of Religion in Cambridge university in the 1960s.

A brief analysis of this passage:

- Conscience stirs feelings of responsibility, shame, fear.
- These feelings must relate to some being, must be directed to some object.
- This being/object is not in the visible world, but is the Supernatural and Divine Being.

The perfect crime ...

Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel: 'Crime and Punishment' deals with a impoverished young student's murder of a rapacious moneylender.

"Why, Alyona Ivanovna, you know me . . . Raskolnikov . . . here, I brought you the pledge I promised the other day . . ." and he held out the pledge.

The old woman glanced for a moment at the pledge, but at once stared in the eyes of her uninvited visitor. She looked intently, maliciously and mistrustfully. A minute passed; he even fancied something like a sneer in her eyes, as though she had already guessed everything. He felt that he was losing his head, that he was almost frightened, so frightened that if she were to look like that and not say a word for another half minute, he thought he would have run away from her.

"Why do you look at me as though you did not know me?" he said suddenly, also with malice. "Take it if you like, if not I'll go elsewhere, I am in a hurry."

He had not even thought of saying this, but it was suddenly said of itself. The old woman recovered herself, and her visitor's resolute tone evidently restored her confidence.

"But why, my good sir, all of a minute. . . . What is it?" she asked, looking at the pledge.

"The silver cigarette case; I spoke of it last time, you know."

She held out her hand.

"But how pale you are, to be sure . . . and your hands are trembling too? Have you been bathing, or what?"

"Fever," he answered abruptly. "You can't help getting pale . . . if you've nothing to eat," he added, with difficulty articulating the words.

His strength was failing him again. But his answer sounded like the truth; the old woman took the pledge.

"What is it?" she asked once more, scanning Raskolnikov intently, and weighing the pledge in her hand.

"A thing . . . cigarette case. . . . Silver. . . . Look at it."

"It does not seem somehow like silver. . . . How he has wrapped it up!"

Trying to untie the string and turning to the window, to the light (all her windows were shut, in spite of the stifling heat), she left him altogether for some seconds and stood with her back to him. He unbuttoned his coat and freed the axe from the noose, but did not yet take it out altogether, simply holding it in his right hand under the coat. His hands were fearfully weak, he felt them every moment growing more numb and more

wooden. He was afraid he would let the axe slip and fall. . . . A sudden giddiness came over him.

"But what has he tied it up like this for?" the old woman cried with vexation and moved towards him.

He had not a minute more to lose. He pulled the axe quite out, swung it with both arms, scarcely conscious of himself, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the blunt side down on her head. He seemed not to use his own strength in this. But as soon as he had once brought the axe down, his strength returned to him.

The old woman was as always bareheaded. Her thin, light hair, streaked with grey, thickly smeared with grease, was plaited in a rat's tail and fastened by a broken horn comb which stood out on the nape of her neck. As she was so short, the blow fell on the very top of her skull. She cried out, but very faintly, and suddenly sank all of a heap on the floor, raising her hands to her head. In one hand she still held "the pledge." Then he dealt her another and another blow with the blunt side and on the same spot. The blood gushed as from an overturned glass, the body fell back. He stepped back, let it fall, and at once bent over her face; she was dead. Her eyes seemed to be starting out of their sockets, the brow and the whole face were drawn and contorted convulsively.

Even though there was no material evidence, the police became suspicious of him for his self-incriminating behaviour. For example, he became obsessed with the crime, and read all the newspaper articles on it; he returned to the pawnbrokers flat, and challenged the residents to arrest him, and when the crime was discussed in the police station, he fainted ...

Imagine this scenario:

You are involved in a plane crash in a remote area. The crash kills all but two: yourself and a wealthy businessman. During the flight he became drunk and let slip that he was on his way to pick up a very precious item stored in a secret safe deposit box. No one else, he claimed, knew anything of this. Now he lies helpless and bleeding profusely from a deep cut in his leg. He pleads with you to help him. You only have a few cuts and bruises. He begs you to make him a tourniquet; he promises you anything. You ask for the key and details of the safe deposit box. He gives them readily. You then leave him to bleed to death, resolving to pick up the precious item when rescued.

- Would you be able to go through with this? Why/why not?

John Hick, the Cambridge Philosopher of Religion disputes the logic of this argument. His line of thinking goes like this:

- *The basic assumption of arguments (like Newman's) is that moral values are not capable of naturalistic explanation in terms of human needs and desires, self-interest, the structure of human nature or human society or in any other way which does not appeal to the Supernatural.*
- *To make such an assumption is to beg the question.*

In other words, Hick is saying that Newman's starting assumption is already set up to accept the conclusion he arrives at. What do you prove if you assume that moral values are not grounded in the natural and then conclude they're grounded in the supernatural?

Sigmund Freud's views on conscience and guilt could be used to undermine Newman's argument by offering an entirely naturalistic explanation for the experience of guilt feelings, shame, fear, and so on. Freud's explanation is:

The long period of childhood during which the growing human being lives in dependence on his parents leaves behind it a precipitate, which forms within his ego a special agency in which this parental influence is prolonged. It has received the name of 'super-ego'. The parents' influence naturally includes not only the personalities of the parents themselves but also the racial, national and family traditions handed on through them, as well as the demands of the immediate social milieu they represent.

Moral Argument of C. S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis developed a famous and persuasive moral argument in his classic work 'Mere Christianity'. (You need to read this!)

Whence does the 'Law of (Human) Nature' come?

A successful moral argument for God's existence has to show:

1. the interior sense of an objective moral consciousness as common to all humans and human cultures.
2. the ground or source of this moral consciousness as being other than natural – in other words *metaphysical*.

C. S. Lewis has tried to show 1. largely by analysing human moral disagreements. Considering 2., he tries to establish a metaphysical grounding for the Moral Law by rejecting non-metaphysical explanations (e.g. that the Law is really a developed herd instinct, social convention, and so on).

He goes on to establish the metaphysical explanation more firmly by asking: if there is a power behind the universe, how would we expect to know it? What tools or clues could we use?

Science cannot help ...

He reasons that science cannot help this enquiry: the role of the scientist is to make inferences based on observations.

Every scientific statement in the long run, however complicated it looks, really means something like, 'I pointed the telescope to such-and-such a part of the sky at 2.20 a.m. and saw so-and-so,' or 'I put some of this stuff in a pot and heated it to such-and-such a temperature and it did so-and-so.'

... because there are certain kinds of questions outside the scope of science ...

Supposing science ever became complete so that it knew every single thing in the whole universe. Is it not plain that the questions, 'Why is there a universe?' 'Why does it go on as it does?' 'Has it any meaning?' would remain just as they were?

Lewis goes on to argue that if there was a controlling power behind the universe ... ***'it could not show itself to us as one of the facts inside the universe – no more than an architect of a house could actually be a wall or staircase or fireplace in that house.'***

Wanted – a different kind of knowledge

‘There is one thing, and only one, in the whole universe which we know more about than we could learn from external observation. That one thing is Man. We do not merely observe men, we are men.’

We have ‘inside information’ on ourselves. A controlling power of the universe could make its presence known in the only type of knowledge that doesn’t come from observation – self-knowledge.

‘... when I open that particular man called Myself, I find that I do not exist on my own, that I am under a law; that somebody or something wants me to behave in a certain way.’

Later, Lewis sums up by saying:

‘We have two bits of evidence about the Somebody. One is the universe He has made. If we used that as our only clue, then I think we should have to conclude that He was a great artist (for the universe is a very beautiful place), but also that He is quite merciless and no friend to man (for the universe is a very dangerous and terrifying place).’

The second bit of evidence is more revealing, because, Lewis argues, you can find more about God from the Moral Law than from the universe in general just as you find out more about a man by listening to his conversation than by looking at the house he has built.

‘Now, from this second bit of evidence we conclude that the Being behind the universe is intensely interested in right conduct – in fair play, unselfishness, courage, good faith, honesty and truthfulness.’

The Moral Law is not Instinct

What we call the moral law cannot be the result of herd instinct or else the stronger impulse would always win, but it does not. We would always act from instinct, rather than selflessly to help someone, as we sometimes do. If the moral law were just instinct, then instincts would always be right, but they are not. Even love or patriotism are sometimes wrong.

The Moral Law is not Social Convention

Neither can moral law be mere social convention, because not everything learned through society is based on social convention. For example, math and logic are not mere social convention, yet they are taught in society. The same moral law can be found in virtually every society, past and present. Further, judgements about social progress would not be possible if society were the basis of judgements.

Moral Law differs from the Laws of Nature

The moral law is not to be identified with the laws of nature. Nature's laws are descriptive (is), not prescriptive (ought). Factually convenient situations (the way it is) can be morally wrong. Someone who tries to trip me and fails is wrong, but someone who accidentally trips me is not.

The Moral law is not Human Fancy

Neither can the moral law be mere human fancy, because we cannot get rid of it even if we would like to do so. We did not create it, it is impressed upon us from without. If it were fancy, than all value judgements would be meaningless, including such statements as, "Hate is wrong," and "Racism is wrong." But if the moral law is not a description, or merely a human prescription, then it must be a moral prescription from a Moral Prescriber beyond us. As Lewis notes, the Moral Law Giver is more like Mind than Nature. He can no more be a part of nature than an architect identical to his designs.

Injustice does not disprove a Moral Law Giver

"How had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe to when I called it unjust....Of course I could have given up this idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, my argument against God collapsed as well--for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist--in other words, that the whole of reality is senseless--I found that I was forced to assume that one part of reality--namely my idea of justice--was full of sense."

