or the nature of ethics. Moral skeptics assume as much when they claim that, objectively speaking, good and evil are human constructs. Skeptics don't claim that their viewis true only for them, or for those in their culture. They claim that there are no objective standards of good and evil, period.

Let's run that Argument from Disagreement again, only in a slightly modified version: If a claim is the subject of intractable dispute among thoughtful people, then it isn't objectively true. Moral ***skepticism*** is the subject of intractable dispute among thoughtful people. Therefore it isn't objectively true.

Hmmm. The present conclusion is logically entailed by the two premises. And the second premise is true—moral skepticism is the subject of intractable disagreement. So moral skeptics had better abandon that first claim. But once they do, the Argument from Disagreement crumbles, its crucial premise abandoned. And even if, perversely, skeptics cling to that first premise (thus undermining their own view), it is anyway false. All sorts of philosophical claims are subject to deep, persistent dispute. Yet some of them are true--objectively true. Intractable disagreement does not, after all, signal the absence of objective truth. If it did, there would be no objective philosophical truths. There are such truths. Therefore a claim, including (for all we know) many an ethical claim, can be objectively true even if it never attracts a consensus among well-informed, open-minded people. The fact that we can't agree about which ethical views are true and which false is sometimes disheartening. But it shouldn't sap our confidence that some such views really are true, regardless of what we (or others) think about them.'

'Skeptics might still insist that intractable disagreement prevents our ever gaining knowledge of these objective truths. And what good is objective truth is there's no way of discovering it? In Chapter 18, I try to show why pervasive disagreement is no obstacle to moral knowledge.

Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?
Russ Shafer-Landau
(Oxford University Press, 2004)

CHAPTER 15

Does Ethical Objectivity Require God?

Most people think that if moral rules are objective, then they must have been authored by God. This includes **theists,** many of whom believe in God precisely because they believe in ethical objectivity, and see no way of defending that idea without God. But it also includes all those **atheists** who embrace moral skepticism, just because they believe that the only escape from it is through God, whom they reject.

The *Argument from Atheism* is the classic expression of this last line of thought. It's an extremely simple, powerful argument. It says that ethics is objective only if God exists. But God does not exist. Therefore ethics isn't objective.

It would be a lot of fun to talk about that second premise—the claim that God doesn't exist. But it would also take another book to do it justice. I can beg off that projectfor another reason as well, an even better one: we don't have to settlewhether God exists in order to decide on the merits of ethical objectivism. Ethical objectivism can be true even if God doesdt exist.

To see how we can pull that rabbit out of a hat, let us reflect a bit about why so many people are convinced that what I have just said is false. In other words, consider why most people find the first premise of the Argument fromAtheism so compelling:ethics is objective only if God exists. Why think that?

In my own experience, people tie objectivity to God because of a very specific line of thought. The basic idea is that all laws (rules,

principles, standards, etc.) require a lawmaker. So if there are any moral laws, then these, too, require a lawmaker. But if these moral laws are objective, then the lawmaker can't be any one of us. That's just true by definition. Objectivity implies an independence from human opinion. Well, if objective moral rules aren't authored by any one of us, then who did make them up? Three guesses.

In a nutshell: all rules require an author. Objective rules can't be human creations. Therefore objective rules require a nonhuman creator. Enter God.

The basic problem with the Argument from Atheism is that both theists and atheists can (and should) reject it. It is obvious why theists will reject it. Its second premise is just an assertion of atheism. If you are convinced that God exists, then this Argument is a nonstarter for you.

You might be wrong, of course. It may be that God really does not exist. But unless the atheist can provide compelling argument to that effect, then you theists out there are within your rights to reject the Argument from Atheism. And agnostics are in pretty much the same boat. Agnostics are those who believe that the evidence for or against God's existence is evenly weighted. They suspend judgment on the question. If they do that, then they, too, will find the Argument from Atheism less than compelling. For they'll neither accept nor reject its second premise (the avowal of atheism), and so will refrain from endorsing its conclusion.

But what if you are an atheist? Why shouldn't you accept the Argument — after all, it's named in your honor! The answer is that you ought to reject the first premise of the Argument (the claim that ethical objectivity requires God). Why? Because the reasoning that supports this premise is one that atheists will not accept. Recall that the reasoning stipulated that laws require lawmakers, and that objective laws therefore required God. But atheists deny that God exists. So atheists must either reject the existence of any objective laws, or reject the claim that laws require lawmakers. Since they can easily accept the existence of at least some objective laws (e.g., of physics or chemistry) they should deny that laws require authors. But once we get rid of that view, then there is no reason at all to suppose that objective moral rules require God's existence.

Here's another way to look at the matter. If objective ethical rules require God, that's because (i) rules require authors; (ii) therefore objective rules require nonhuman authors; (iii) therefore objective moral rules require a nonhuman author; and (iv) that must be God. Each of these steps follows naturally from the preceding one. Atheists reject the conclusion (iv). Therefore they should reject the initial claim that got them there: (i).

If you are an atheist, you do, in fact, believe that all objective laws lack a divine author. As far as you can tell, such a being doesn't exist. And objective laws—of the sort we find in mathematics, or astronomy, or hydrology—are not of our own creation. We have identified them and given them names, but we have not invented the truths that they represent. So in these cases we have instances of laws without lawmakers. Who created the law of gravity? No one. Who made the second law of thermodynamics true? No one. If these laws are objective, then *we* certainly didn't create them. And if God doesn't exist, then, obviously, God didn't make them up, either. No one did.

Here's a replv you might be thinkng of: while scientific laws may be authorless, **normative** laws — those that tell us what we ought to do, how we should behave—do require an author. So all of these scientific examples are besides the point. Even if we concede the existence of scientific laws without lawmakers, we still need some reason to think that moral laws, which are obviously normative, are also authorless.

I disagree. The best reason for thinking that moral laws require an author is that all laws require an author. But that reason, as we've seen, is mistaken. What other reason could there be?

I don't think there is one, or at least one that works. Not all normative laws require lawmakers. For instance, the laws of logic and rationality are normative. They tell us what we ought to do. But no one invented them. If you have excellent evidence for one claim, and this entails a second claim, then you should believe that second claim. If you are faced with contradictory propositions, and know that one of them is false, then you must accept the other. If you want just one thing out of life, then you ought to do what's necessary to achieve it.

None of these are moral principles. But they *are* normative ones. If you are an atheist, you'll deny that God made up such principles. If any principles are objective, these are. So we have here objective, authorless, normative laws. Objective principles, scientific or normative, need no authors.

What all of this means is that if you are an atheist, then you should reject the first premise of the Argument from Atheism. That premise—bjective ethics requires God—appears plausible only because of a further view (laws require lawmakers) that you should not accept. If you believe in objective laws at all, then you will deny that they have authors—they just *are* true, period. You can take the laws of math, logic, and the natural sciences as models of those that are neither human nor divine artifacts. That doesn't prove that ethical laws are also objective. But it does show that God isn't necessary to establish the existence of objective laws in general. Scientific and normative laws might be objective even if God does not exist. If God is claimed to be specially necessary for moral laws in particular, that will require some further argument, something that has yet to make its appearance.

So whether you are a theist or an atheist, you should reject thk Argument from Atheism. Atheists will reject its first premise, because they will be able to cite objective laws that do not require a divine author. And theists will reject its second premise, because it just begs the question against their view. The Argument has lost its constituency. Regardless of your take on religious matters, you should reject the Argument from Atheism.

Perhaps you never liked the Argument in the first place. Maybe you're a theist. And suppose you're right: God exists. Then it's easy, isn't it? If God exists, then God is the author of morality, and morality is objective. That is the most natural, straightforward way of getting God into the picture. But it is also deeply problematic. In fact, it turns out that even if you believe in God, you should have serious reservations about tying the objectivity of morality to God's existence.

One of the classic attributes of God is that of Author of morality. If, as most Western theists believe, God is the source of everything, then God must also be the source of morality. So when we ask the familiar question—where did the standards of right and wrong come from?—the answer, from a theistic perspective, is: God. God decides what is right and wrong. God communicated that information to us, in a working out of the divine plan. It is our job to do our part, and aspire to live in accordance with the divine decrees.

You've all heard that story before, regarding it, perhaps, as a pernicious fiction, or as a comfort in distress. Despite its familiar feel, the thinking it represents has been rejected by most philosophers who have thought about it, including most theistic philosophers. To see why is to see why ethical objectivists—ven the theists among them—should insist on the existence of a realm of moral truths that have not been created by God.

The philosophical story begins almost 2,500 years ago. In one of Plato's early dialogues, a man named Euthyphro confidently tells Socrates of his impending lawsuit. When Socrates asks him who he is prosecuting, Euthyphro tells him that he is bringing his own father up on murder charges; he allowed a slave to die of exposure; this is murder, and piety requires a conviction. Before you know it, Socrates and Euthyphro are off, enmeshed in a discussion of the nature of piety that would have lasting repercussions in the history of Western thought.

Euthyphro is now remembered for the dilemma that Socrates sets the title character: is an action pious because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it is pious? We can focus on rightness, rather than piety, and replace the polytheism with monotheism, to get the question that contemporary theists must face: is an act right because God loves it, or does God love it because it is right?

Many theists suppose that it would be somehow irreligious to embrace the dilemma's second horn. If God loves actions because they are right, then this seems to undermine God's omnipotence. For in that case, God is not the author of the moral law, but rather one who invariably knows how to appreciate it (namely, with love at the sight of virtue). If God loves actions because they are right, then it isn't God's love that ***makes*** them right. Actions would be right prior to, or at least independently of, God's love, which would be a response to a moral feature of the world that is already there. Divine love would not endow an action with its moral character; rather, such love would be an unerring response to the moral qualities that await divine appreciation.

This has the sound of heresy to some, precisely because it posits a moral law that exists independently of God's having created it. But even if you are a theist, you should take such an option seriously. For consider the alternative: acts are right because God loves or commands them. Now it is God's say-so that makes it so, transforming something that was previously morally neutral into something that is good or evil, right or wrong. This may sound very congenial. But it is actually a quite problematic picture of how God relates to morality.

If the objectivity of ethics hinges on God's existence, that must he because objective moral laws require a nonhuman author. The **Divine Command Theory** tells us that there is one, and so our qualms about moral skepticism can be laid to rest. This theory tells us that, actionsare right because (and only because) God commands them. But if a divine command lies at the heart of ethics, then ethics is arbitrary, an implausible collection of ungrounded moral rules.

How can that be? Surely God's commands are anything but arbitrary. Since these commands are said to be at the foundations of morality, the charge of arbitrariness must be mistaken. But it isn't.' The picture offered by the Divine Command Theory is, to caricature it only a bit, one in which God awakes of a morning, yawns and stretches, decides to create a morality, and then picks a few dos and don'ts from column A and column B. Is there anything wrong with this picture? You bet. But this is the picture we are left with on the assumptions that drive the Divine Command Theory.

If God's say-so is what makes actions right or wrong, then we have to ask: does God command and love things for reasons, or just arbitrarily? If arbitrarily, then this is hardlya God wolthy of worship. The caricature would be right in all essentials. God would be the inventor of the moral law, and so God's omnipotence wouldn't be threatened. But if there were nothing that *justified* God's commands, no reasons that compellingly supported a choice to prohibit, rather than license, killing, theft, perjury, etc., then these choices really would he baseless.

We might put it this way. Either there are or are not reasons that support God's commands. If there are not, then these commands are arbitrary, and so the foundations of morality, if created by God, are infected with this arbitrariness. Alternatively, God may have reasons for the divine commands. *But then these reasons, and not the commands themselves, are what justify the schedule of duties.* God's commands would not create the standards of good and evil; instead, they would codify the standards that are sustained by whatever reasons God has relied upon to suppoa the divine choices.

Take a humdrum example to illustrate this point. Suppose I am appointed the referee at a sporting match. Imagine that one team has just scored, and the rules of the game dictate that the opposing team should now take possession of the ball. Suppose also that I follow the rule and give the ball to the opposing team. If I continually act like that, then I am a good referee. What does my goodness consist in? My unerringly following the rules. I don't make up new rules willy-nilly. I know all the rules and enforce them consistently. When I make a call, I can cite relevant reasons to justify it—pre-existing reasons, rather than ones I make up on the spot, with no rationale.

It may sound odd, or mildly blasphemous, to liken God to a sports referee. But I don't think there's much harm in it. The Divine Command Theory has us picture a God who controls our game in its entirety, making up all the rules, perhaps continually, and having no need to cite any reasons on their behalf. For what reasons could there be? If there are no moral rules or reasons prior to God's commands, then there is nothing God could rely on to justify the divine commands. So any choice is arbitrary. Had God woken up on the other side of the bed on that fateful morning, we'd be saddled with a morality that encourages torture, pederasty, perjury, and all sorts of other things we now recognize to be evil.

How could God possibly license such wicked deeds? Easily enough. If there wasn't anything wicked about them prior to God's decree—nothing intrinsically evil about such conduct—then God could just as easily, at the moment of decision, have gone one way rather than another. Does anybody really believe that? That a true, divine morality could just as well have allowed torture, rape, and assault as forbid such things?

No, you say, such a thing is impossible. A *good* God would never allow such a thing. Right enough. But what does it mean to be good? If the Divine Command Theory is correct, then something is good just in case it is favored by God. But then look what happens: to say that God is good is just to say that God is favored by God. Is that

really what we mean when we say that God is good? Moreover, there is nothing about this characterization that ensures that such a self-loving Being wouldn't have chosen torture over compassion. To love or favor oneself is one thing. But there is no necessary connection between being a self-loving heing, on the one hand, and prohibiting such things as torture and rape, on the other.

A good God, like a good referee, is one who plays by the rules. When we speak of God as morally good — indeed, as morally perfect — what we really mean is that God cannot fail to uphold and respect all moral rules. A perfect referee or judge is one who knows all of the relevant rules, doesn't make them up arbitrarily, and applies them in an exemplaruway with an eye always toward making the game (or the trial) the best it can be. Perfect referees or judges are not authors of the laws they apply. They are not free to change them at will. Their worth, their goodness, is measured by the respect they display for the rules they are asked to enforce.

Change the relevant rules from those of games arid trials, to those of morality; the analogy is otherwise very close. The rules that God enforces are moral rules. God knows them all. God enforces them all. with perfect justice. And God doesn't make them up arbitrarily. God's goodness consists not in divine authorship of the moral rules, but actually in a kind of divine limitation: God *cannot* do anything other than act in perfect conformity to morality, and cannot help hut perfectly apply the moral rules to those creatures who are subject to them.

What theists mean when they say that a good God wouldn't command such a thing as torture is that *since torture is evil,* no one who is good could direct us to commit it. This makes perfect sense. But it also assumes that the moral character of torture (killing, rape, etc.) is fixed prior to God's reaction to it. And that means that God is not the author of the moral law.

In other words, we manage to preserve God's goodness only by instituting a picture of the origins of morality such that God, being omniscient, knows all facts — including all moral facts. And God, being all-loving, cares enough about us to impart some of that wisdom to us (in the form of your favorite scripture). This outlook preserves God's omniscience and perfect goodness. The cost: God's authorship of the moral law. God sees what is there to he seen — namely,

that torture and rape are evil, and that compassion, kindliness, and bravery are virtues that we should all aspire to.

What this all means is that even theists should resist taking up the view that God is the author of the moral law. God is constrained by the moral laws, in the same way that God is constrained by the laws of logic. Most theologians do not take this logical constraint as any strike against divine omnipotence. On the contrary — such omnipotence is usually understood to mean that God can do anything at all *within the limits of logical possibility.* (God cannot, for instance, make contradictory claims simultaneously true.)

I am suggesting that theists amend this traditional view to say that God's omnipotence enables God to do anything, so long as it is compatible with the laws of logic *and* the laws of morality, neither of which are divinely created. Embracing that view allows theists to make excellent sense of the idea that God is perfectly good — God is the one who cannot fail to abide by all the laws of morality.

The bottom line here is that the best option for theists is to reject the Divine Command Theory, and so reject the idea that things are right just because God commands them. Instead, a perfectly good God would command actions because they are right. And that means that there can be an objective moral code that is not authored by God, but instead is recognized by God (being perfectly knowledgeable), imparted to us by God (being perfectly loving), and enforced by God (being perfectly just).

Of course, it might be true that God does not exist. But that would he no threat to ethical objectivism. According to atheists, there is no author of the universe, and so no author of the countless objective laws that govern it. Since authorless objective laws, on this account, pose no special problems, there is no bar to prospects of ethical laws that are also objective.

On the other hand, it might be true that God does exist. If so, then we have an obvious source of moral objectivity. Yet if I am right, we do well to resist this picture, and to accept the Socratic invitation to see actions as right prior to God's endorsement of them.

In short, there are three major options here, and *all* of them are compatible with the existence of objective ethical laws. First option: God doesn't exist. If that is so, there are still plenty of objective laws (of physics, mathematics, logic, genetics, etc.). Moral laws might

make that list, too. Second option: God exists, and is the author of the moral law. Obviously, objective moral rules follow directly. Third option: God exists, and is not the author of the moral law, but rather perfectly knows, complies with, and enforces it. If my criticisms of the Divine Command Theory are on target, then this option is the preferable one for theists, and also carries with it the promise of objective ethical laws.

So whether you are a theist or an atheist, or still up in the air, ethics can be objective. Whether you like my criticisms of the Divine Command Theory or not, ethics can be objective. No matter God's role in morality—as Author, as perfect Enforcer, or as nonexistent fiction—ethics can be objective.

CHAPTER 16

Where Do Moral Standards Come From?

Much resistance to ethical objectivism stems from puzzlement about how there could be moral standards that are not human creations. If we don't fix the content of morality, then who does? The natural reply: God. But we have just seen reason to doubt that. Hence the $64,000 question: if God didn't make up the moral rules, and humans didn't make up the moral rules, then who did? Where do moral standards come from?

We have two options. If neither humans nor divine beings invent the moral rules, then perhaps someone else made them up. (Space aliens?) The other choice, one that I hope we are now accustomed to taking seriously, is that no one at all made up the moral rules. The question—who invented the moral law?—is operating under a false assumption. Not every law requires an author.

Admittedly, the claim that the moral rules were never invented by anyone is going to leave a lot of people with a bad taste in their mouth. And that's because that new seems to imply a further view that seems ridiculous. The further new is that the moral rules are eternally true. If no one made them up, then there was never a time when they just popped into existence. And if that is so, then they are eternal. Yet that is implausible. So the original claim, one that posits an authorless morality, is implausible as well.