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Right from Wrong:

The Folly of Religious Arguments about Morality

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Chapter 3

Discovering Morality through Inclusive Deliberation

Atheists are strikingly unpopular, especially in America. When asked several years ago whether they “would disapprove if my child wanted to marry” an atheist, 44% of Americans said yes, much greater than the number for African Americans (23%), Jews (18%), and Hispanics (13%).¹ Only 58% of Americans would vote for a well-qualified candidate from their party who happened to be an atheist, whereas many more would vote for someone who was Catholic (93%), female (92%), Black (92%), Mormon (81%), or gay or lesbian (74%).² Many atheists report being ostracized from their families after publicly declaring their non-belief in God,³ and résumés that mention a person’s affiliation as an atheist are less likely to get a response from prospective employers.⁴

These negative attitudes toward atheists reflect a common belief that they readily lie, cheat, and steal when it serves their interests. Research documenting those perceptions has been

conducted by psychologist Will Gervais, who developed a clever test to capture beliefs about who commits the greatest number of moral transgressions. He found that Americans think atheists are much more likely than members of groups defined by race, religion, and sexual orientation to commit murder, engage in incest, kick a dog, cheat at cards, disrespect an employer, eat human flesh, ridicule an obese woman, and renounce national and family ties.⁵ In a country where nearly half the population deems it “necessary to believe in God to be moral,” as one survey indicates, atheists seem to threaten order and decency.⁶

As it turns out, Christian apologists are usually more generous than the general public when talking about atheists. William Lane Craig speaks for many of his colleagues in holding that “a belief in God is not essential to living a moral life.”⁷ Directing his comments to other Christians, Craig acknowledges that atheists can and do “live good moral lives—indeed, embarrassingly, lives that sometimes put our own to shame.”⁸ Matt Slick, president and founder of the Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry, goes even further in stating that “atheists, generally, are honest, hardworking people. . . . Atheists are capable of governing their own moral behavior and getting along in society the same as anyone else.”⁹ On a personal level, apologists such as Larry Taunton have often established enduring friendships with people who deny the existence of God. Taunton, a vocal defender of Christianity through his organization Fixed Point Foundation, movingly describes his relationship with the noted atheist Christopher Hitchens.¹⁰

Despite these charitable attitudes toward atheists as individuals, apologists routinely attack *atheism* as an idea. Virtually all apologists claim that atheism offers no foundation for an objective moral code, and therefore no reason to believe that objective morality even exists. As a result, they argue, atheists can neither justify the moral actions they take nor urge similar behaviors by others. Rice Broocks, a pastor, writer, and cofounder of the Every Nation family of

churches, picks up this line of argument: “If there is no God, there couldn’t possibly be a transcendent morality that everyone should obey.”¹¹ The absence of a transcendent morality, in turn, would lead individuals and societies to create a free-for-all. In the eyes of Dennis Prager, a columnist, radio host, and creator of the PragerU videos on YouTube, such an outcome is inevitable because “Without God there is no good and evil.”¹²

Other apologists challenge atheists to explain where their moral beliefs come from. Christian philosopher Chad Meister wonders, “What grounds the atheists’ moral positions? What makes their moral views more than hunches, inklings, or subjective opinions?”¹³ Craig Hazen, founder of the M.A. program in Christian Apologetics at Biola University, asks of atheists, “What makes your moral standard more than a subjective opinion or personal preference? What makes it truly binding or obligatory?”¹⁴ Writing for Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, J. M. Njoroge summarizes the apologists’ thinking: “Can we really make sense of objective morality without God?”¹⁵

A related issue involves what happens to society if people become atheists. If atheists lack a foundation for objective morality, the spread of non-belief could easily lead to increases in debauchery, disease, and death. In one of their favorite debating lines, apologists often pin the blame for various atrocities of the twentieth century on atheism. Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot were all atheists, and their regimes caused millions of deaths through famines, warfare, genocide, and politically motivated executions. Christian authors such as Dinesh D’Souza and Larry Taunton attribute the deaths to those leaders’ allegiance to atheism.¹⁶

Are they right? Should we fear that the growth of atheism in our own societies will instigate a new wave of killing? The answer is no, because atheism has no positive content of its own and therefore cannot cause anything, at least not by itself. Atheism merely describes one

belief a person denies, not the full set of beliefs they affirmatively hold. To understand why people act as they do, we need to investigate what replaces the belief in God and other supernatural agents. Depending on the commitments a particular atheist holds, we will observe a huge range of behaviors.

In the cases of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, the guiding principles for their lives were provided by Marxism-Leninism. This ideology justified limiting civil liberties, restricting private property, concentrating power in the state, and using violence to achieve political ends. However, there is no necessary reason why an atheist would want to embrace the ideas that motivated these rulers. A simple fact proves the point: Of the millions of atheists living in the West today, very few are Marxist-Leninists. Scholars of sociology and religious studies such as Christel Manning, Elizabeth Drescher, and Phil Zuckerman have analyzed survey data, conducted in-depth interviews, and examined both historical and contemporary documents to learn about the lives and beliefs of Western atheists. In all of this research, Marxism-Leninism is not even a blip on the radar screen.¹⁷

Besides their mistake in attributing the crimes of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot to atheism, Christian apologists also err in calling atheism a “worldview.” Philosopher Peter Kreeft, one of the leading Catholic apologists in America, wrote an entire book distinguishing between the “theist worldview” and the “atheist worldview.”¹⁸ Jason Lisle, a writer for Answers in Genesis, deems atheism an “irrational worldview,”¹⁹ while philosopher Alister McGrath asserts that atheism is not a “credible worldview.”²⁰ Pastor and author Lance Waldie argues that “the atheistic worldview cannot account for logic, morality, or science,”²¹ and the influential apologists Norman Geisler and Frank Turek assert that “the atheist’s worldview. . . actually requires more faith than the creationist’s.”²²

All of these statements suffer from the same false assumption that there is such a thing as an “atheist worldview.” We need to recognize instead that atheism is simply the belief that neither God nor any other divine beings exist. That’s it. The definition of atheism assumes nothing else, and atheists themselves disagree on fundamental matters. Some are libertarians; some are not. Some are environmentalists; some are not. Some are feminists; some are not. Comedian and actor Ricky Gervais puts the matter well: “Saying ‘Atheism is a belief system’, is like saying ‘not going skiing is a hobby.’”²³

Because atheism is not a worldview or belief system, it gives people little guidance on understanding and interacting with the world. Most importantly, atheism offers no insights on how a person should think and act. To learn what motivates a particular atheist, once again we must examine what replaces a belief in divine beings. The usual answer today is humanism. As historian Callum Brown and other scholars have shown, most atheists in the West endorse the core ideas of humanism, even if they don’t regularly use that term.²⁴ Speaking for myself, I openly identify as a humanist and prefer the label as the best summary of my beliefs, though I call myself an atheist, too. Atheism describes what I don’t believe; humanism describes what I do believe. Unlike atheism, humanism is a worldview and can structure a person’s life.

So What Is Humanism?

Humanism has carried many different meanings since the term first entered common usage during the Renaissance. The best way to learn what humanism means today is to ask self-described humanists and the organizations representing them. Humanists UK gives an especially informative answer to this question:

“Roughly speaking, the word humanist has come to mean someone who:

- trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.”²⁵

One can find similar definitions in allied associations throughout the Western world, including Humanist Canada, Humanist Association of Germany, Council of Australian Humanist Societies, American Humanist Association, Union of Freethinkers of Finland, and the Secular Humanist League of Brazil. In the U.S., Brazil, and some other countries in North and South America, the modifier “secular” is frequently attached to yield “secular humanism.” Indeed, the Council for Secular Humanism, publisher of the magazine *Free Inquiry*, is one of the U.S.’s leading organizations working in this area. In most Western countries, however, the adjective “secular” is considered redundant when describing “humanism.”²⁶ For that reason, hereafter I will use the term “humanism” to include what others call both “humanism” and “secular humanism.”

With these terminological matters resolved, we can see that humanism touches upon many important subjects and helps its adherents navigate all aspects of life, of which moral beliefs and actions are the most important for this book. A humanist claims we can establish a moral code through reason, argument, and evidence. An action does not become moral because of what somebody feels, what’s written in a holy book, what authority figures say, or what people have traditionally believed. Morality instead has to be rationally defended using the best

tools available to humanity, which include using empathy to put yourself in the shoes of other people. Philosophy, history, literature, the natural sciences, and the social sciences are all essential in allowing us to discover and defend a comprehensive morality. To learn the principles of right and wrong, along with how to handle concrete situations, people must think, reflect, and deliberate with others. In short, they must deploy reason in all its forms.

This humanistic project quickly butts up against what theists claim as their exclusive province. In the last two chapters, I explained why the truth of right and wrong cannot be established through a God or gods, and here I will explain why morality exists in the absence of supernatural agents. Christian apologists assert that any morality without God must be arbitrary and subjective, reflecting the mere opinions or preferences of a person, group, or society. To see why the apologists are wrong, we first have to distinguish the senses in which something can be objective. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two definitions of “objective” relevant to the topic of morality. As we read the definitions, we quickly see their differences:

1. “of a person and his or her judgement: not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts; impartial; detached”²⁷
2. “external to or independent of the mind”²⁸

Philosophers disagree about whether morality could ever be “external to or independent of the mind,” as required for the second definition, if there is no God. Philosophers such as Erik Wielenberg and Michael Martin have argued for yes, while Julian Baggini and Paul Kurtz have argued for no.²⁹ Regardless of who is right in that debate, human beings in their moral judgments can be objective in the first sense. We can attain moral rules stripped of what the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls the “personal feelings or opinions” that people often use “in considering and representing facts.” Many conflicts and controversies revolve around limitations of precisely this

kind. When you make a statement or argument and someone replies that you are “not being objective,” they are accusing you of bias. If they are right, you have a prejudice or preconception that is clouding your judgment and preventing you from assessing the issue correctly. You aren’t seeing the whole picture but only what is visible from your narrow and parochial perspective. With more care in collecting and analyzing the relevant facts, combined with reflection on the principles at stake, you could be objective and thereby arrive at the truth.

Notice the subtle distinction between the two definitions. The first one applies to the way a person reaches a judgment or decision, whereas the second is normally used to describe abstract concepts. Parents mediating disputes between their children try to be objective in the first sense. We use the second sense, by contrast, to refer to “objective reality,” something whose ontological status does not depend on any human processes. When applied to morality, the second definition refers to a morality independent of the human mind. Again, philosophers do not agree on whether such a morality could exist in the absence of God. I focus here instead on the first meaning of objectivity, and I will explain how human beings can reach it by following the right processes.

Apologists care greatly about that first definition, for they commonly invoke it when they contemplate a world without God. If there is no God, they fear, then morality becomes “simply one group’s opinion”³⁰ (Rice Broocks), “mere hunches, inklings, or subjective opinions”³¹ (Chad Meister), or “a subjective opinion or personal preference”³² (Craig Hazen). In the rest of this chapter, I will show that apologists are mistaken in their fears. We can construct a morality that rises above the perspectives of particular individuals and societies, making our judgments objective in the first sense.

To make my case, I will begin by examining what individuals can do to limit their subjectivity. Although no one can overcome all of their biases, they can uphold objectivity as an ideal and take steps to move closer to it. I then argue that a morality purged of bias can only emerge from deliberation that welcomes and incorporates the views of people from diverse backgrounds. Morality, then, derives not from any single person but rather from human beings as a collective. I conclude by debunking common Christian objections to a morality without God.

Objectivity as an Aspiration

Let's get something out of the way right now: I'm biased, and so are you. This is inevitable given the distinctive biological and environmental forces that shape how each of us thinks and acts. Each person has a unique set of genes (shared for some people with an identical twin) that influences their personality, tastes, and behaviors. Other influences emerge at the societal level. Which society a person grows up in, whether it's ancient India, medieval England, or modern-day Haiti, affects them and their morality in profound ways. Even within a given society, the experiences a person undergoes during childhood, along with the values taught by parents, neighbors, schools, friends, and the media, can leave a lasting imprint on their conception of right and wrong. We also need to account for structural factors related to a person's identity and how others perceive and act toward them. A person's race, class, gender, and sexual orientation affect their life course and their moral beliefs.

The upshot is that we're all biased when we evaluate moral questions. The question is how to respond to this incontrovertible fact. We could choose to wallow in our biases and turn morality into something entirely personal and subjective. Perhaps we should throw up our hands, take a relativistic stance, and assert that everyone lives in their own reality. If someone gives a

passionate defense of something we find offensive, such as racism, genocide, or child abuse, we could say “that’s true for you but not for me.” If we think certain moral views are actually *wrong*, however, we have to figure out how to move beyond the beliefs of one person or society to an overarching morality.

A humanist tackles this challenge by using reason. Fortunately, there are thousands of years of thinking from around the world that a humanist can draw from. The Golden Rule offers a useful place to begin. Virtually every religion, society, and ethical system has articulated some version of the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule can be stated either negatively (what you should not do) or positively (what you should do). Buddhism and Confucianism capture the negative version, Judaism and Christianity the positive, and Islam combines both. The founders and prophets of these philosophical and religious movements all express similar ideas: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful” (the Buddha); “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you” (Confucius); “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Moses); “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Jesus); and “As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don’t do to them” (Muhammad).³³

The fact that so many different people and traditions have discovered the Golden Rule suggests that it is tapping something universal to humanity. Human beings are social animals; except for the occasional hermit, we live in communities. Society after society has learned that the Golden Rule is a useful principle allowing us to not only coexist but also cooperate for common ends. The Golden Rule helps depersonalize morality by forcing each of us to recognize the needs and desires of others. When you consider the perspective of another person, you take a step toward objectivity. Everyone wants to be treated kindly and fairly, and no one wants to be

enslaved, raped, assaulted, slandered, or disrespected. The Golden Rule leads us away from our parochial values and interests and toward a principle for behavior that all human beings can embrace.

These considerable strengths notwithstanding, the Golden Rule cannot eliminate subjectivity precisely because it starts with the self. Morality under the Golden Rule extends outward from how a person would and would not want to be treated. So far, so good. But what if other people have their own preferences on these matters? You might think they want what you want, which might be true sometimes but probably not always. Is it really moral to always act toward them in the ways you would prefer, as opposed to the ways they actually desire? A more general problem with the Golden Rule is its simplicity. The Golden Rule is just an aphorism, not a set of detailed guidelines on how to handle specific decisions. A moral principle that could fit onto a refrigerator magnet can only take us so far in our complex, messy world.

A humanist therefore must dig deeper into the history of ethical thought to develop a comprehensive system of morality. We need to flesh out the crucial details telling us how to act, which are left unspecified by the Golden Rule, while preserving its aim of removing the biases of each individual and society. The contractarian (or social contract) school of ethics, as elaborated by John Rawls, offers powerful resources for this effort because it puts the question of bias front and center. Rawls and other contractarians such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are best known for their insights into how politics and society should be structured, but they have also thought deeply about what qualifies as moral—the subject of this chapter.

Earlier writers including Plato, Epicurus, and the authors of the Buddhist texts *Mahāvastu* and *Sutta Pitaka* dropped hints of contractarian thinking, and Manegold of Lautenbach (1030-

1103) subsequently offered a longer treatment.³⁴ Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is widely credited with expanding the approach. A humanist forerunner, Hobbes provided an account of morality that does not depend on any divine beings. Theorizing instead that humans create morality through common agreement, he asked us to imagine living in a “state of nature” without any rules or government. Within the state of nature, everyone has the freedom to act however they choose, regardless of the effects on other people. Nobody has any protection from others in their property or physical security beyond their ability to retaliate. Any observer can see that such a situation creates “continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”³⁵ To avoid these negative consequences, Hobbes argues, rational individuals would voluntarily agree to a moral code to regulate their interactions with each other, and they would empower a sovereign to enforce it.

Reacting to and often challenging Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau offered their own versions of contractarian ethics, and John Rawls reinvigorated the approach at the end of the twentieth century. Instead of the “state of nature” envisioned by his predecessors, Rawls offered the “original position” through which individuals determine the fundamental social and political arrangements of their society. Rawls does not think the “original position” ever did or could exist; it instead serves as a theoretical device for him to determine the rules for a political community that can be rationally defended. Decisions within the original position take place behind a “veil of ignorance,” Rawls writes, such that “no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like.”³⁶ By requiring that people know nothing specific about their lot in life, Rawls ensures that they construct the rules in an objective manner, without influence from personal factors that would otherwise distort their judgment.

This restriction does not mean that individuals enter the original position with no knowledge whatsoever. To give them the means for having an intelligent conversation, Rawls ensures that they understand all relevant facts about “human society,” “political affairs,” “principles of economic theory,” “the basis of social organization,” and the “laws of human psychology. Indeed, the parties are presumed to know whatever general facts affect the choice of the principles of justice.”³⁷ Knowing these general facts allows the parties to make thoughtful and reasoned decisions, just not ones that systematically advantage or disadvantage a certain kind of person.

Rawls designed his framework primarily for its political applications, and he called his influential book *A Theory of Justice*. Its core concepts, however, can be easily extended to the overlapping and somewhat broader realm of morality. The original position puts us on a path toward discovering an impartial morality. Behind the veil of ignorance, nobody is special, everyone counts equally, and no one can foresee the place they will hold in society. You can't be biased if you have to choose the moral rules without knowing your talents, your tastes and dispositions, and characteristics such as your gender, class, race, nationality, and sexual orientation. Everyone else is making choices under the same constraints. Thus, even people who wanted to build a system favoring themselves would lack the knowledge necessary to do so. Self-interest does not exist behind the veil of ignorance; or rather, one person's self-interest is identical to everyone else's.

Rawls uses the original position to derive principles of justice regarding the basic liberties available to all and the permissible social and economic inequalities. I will expand his concepts for use in thinking about morality more generally. My goal here is to describe the process to follow, not to specify the content of the moral code that will emerge. To carry my

analysis forward, I borrow from Rawls's "veil of ignorance" and pair it with what I call the "fountain of knowledge." The "fountain of knowledge" is similar to but broader than the "general facts" that Rawls allows people to access within the original position. By the "fountain of knowledge," I mean to invoke all forms of practical wisdom and experience, along with the ideas that human beings have developed through the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and other branches of knowledge.

Like Rawls, I am proposing a thought experiment, one I hope readers will actively engage. Each person, though biased, can aspire to objectivity. To move closer to that ideal, a person seeks to determine right and wrong from behind the veil of ignorance and in front of the fountain of knowledge. The veil of ignorance allows us to eliminate or at least mitigate the influences stemming from our backgrounds, abilities, and positions in society. The fountain of knowledge, meanwhile, gives us the information necessary to address the wide range of situations a system of morality must handle. These twin concepts reinforce each other. From behind the veil of ignorance, you form your moral beliefs based solely on the facts and wisdom flowing from the fountain of knowledge. On the flip side, the more you drink from the fountain of knowledge, the easier it becomes to overcome your biases as the veil of ignorance requires.

Striving for Objectivity

A concrete example will help bring these concepts to life. Let's suppose you're a heterosexual who has never felt any sexual attraction to a person of the same sex. You're trying to figure out whether homosexuality, as embraced by consenting adults, should be considered moral or immoral. You step behind the veil of ignorance to remove yourself from the equation. All of the biological and environmental forces that have shaped your views are irrelevant to the

question of whether homosexuality is right or wrong. It makes no difference what you've been taught by your family, community, and society, for any particular tradition or culture has no inherent connection to a defensible morality. Your own position as a heterosexual is also irrelevant, for you have to imagine forming your beliefs without knowing whether you will or will not be one of the people attracted to members of the same sex.

While standing behind the veil of ignorance, you imbibe from the fountain of knowledge. You talk to gays and lesbians and ask about their upbringing, interests, hopes, fears, motivations, and daily lives. You read literature by and for gays and lesbians, including articles, essays, memoirs, and novels, and you examine how different societies, both historically and today, have handled issues relating to sexual orientation and behavior. You search for insights in the texts of the world's philosophical and religious traditions. What have writers through the ages said about homosexuality? Do those writers offer persuasive arguments and evidence for their positions? You then examine scientific research on the origins of a person's sexual orientation, and you examine research on homosexual relationships. By comparison to heterosexual relationships, do those between same-sex partners lead to outcomes that are better, worse, or about the same for them and their children? What are the consequences—good, bad, or neutral—for both the individual and society when someone engages in homosexual behaviors? Only after synthesizing all these disparate pieces of knowledge will you be ready to assess whether homosexuality is moral or immoral.

Admittedly, no one has the time to follow the process I have described, at least for the complete set of matters on which we form moral beliefs. Nevertheless, my thought experiment helps clarify what we can do to move closer to the ideal of objectivity on not just homosexuality but the whole panoply of moral questions. First, we can recognize and confront our biases,

subsequently changing our moral beliefs when they fail the test of rationality. Thoughtful people should regularly ask themselves, “Do I hold my beliefs because they are actually true, or am I simply parroting what I have learned through socialization? Do my beliefs suspiciously match what you would predict for someone with my heritage, upbringing, talents, and socioeconomic status? Can my beliefs be rationally defended, and if not, what beliefs should I hold?” Morality should be a matter of considered judgment, not the expression of raw feelings or prejudices.

A person can develop a more refined morality, one less tied to their predispositions, by reading, thinking, studying, and talking with others. By exposing yourself to at least a sampling of the diverse ideas that humanity has produced, you will be better positioned to form your moral beliefs through the method of humanism: reason. It’s especially valuable when someone stretches beyond their comfort zone to interact—whether in person or vicariously through books, documentaries, or other means—with people and ideas from another time or place. Writers such as Herodotus, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Kwame Anthony Appiah have gained moral insights after moving either temporarily or permanently from one society to another, allowing them to address questions of cultural similarities and differences.³⁸ Study abroad programs serve the same purpose on a smaller scale. One systematic survey found that 95% of participants affirmed that their program “has had a lasting impact on my worldview,” and 98% said it “helped me better understand my own cultural values and biases.”³⁹

Yet we need not spend time physically in another society to reap these kinds of benefits. Art, literature, and films produced around the world or closer to home can help a person become more reflective in deciding questions of right and wrong. Practical consequences of this sort are just one of many reasons why the arts and humanities are essential to any enlightened society. Through a jarring image, an appeal to beauty, or a call to recognize complexity, works of art

such as paintings, sculptures, and photographs open windows into the human condition and encourage people to grapple with familiar matters in a new way. Similarly, the best novels and movies allow a person to understand the experiences, emotions, and choices of someone else. Seeing the world through the eyes of another, especially someone whose cultural background, social status, interests, values, or opportunities differ from our own, often gives us a new perspective on moral questions. We know that the characters are fictional, and yet they can prod our thinking.

Complementing the insights gained from art, literature, and films, the fields of journalism, history, and anthropology also contribute to the fountain of knowledge. Each person can only see and experience a limited part of what is happening in their local community, the nation, and the world at large, which is why we need journalists. After combing through available records and talking to experts, government officials, and ordinary citizens, journalists bring information and events to our attention. Historians do the same for the past by illuminating the lives and times of our predecessors. The experiences of those who are now dead can be accessed only through the tools of history and allied disciplines: gathering sources, critically evaluating them, and constructing the best possible account. Anthropologists bring us a similar depth of understanding for contemporary societies. Through long-term immersion in the language, customs, families, economies, and religions of diverse societies, anthropologists expand our knowledge of how people can and do live. Anthropological findings and perspectives can inform our moral beliefs and choices.

Having stressed how the veil of ignorance and the fountain of knowledge can allow us to overcome our subjectivity, it's only appropriate that I also acknowledge their limitations. First, no one will ever eliminate their biases even if they make a strong effort to do so. These biases

shape what information a person seeks, how they interpret it, and what they recall, thereby restricting their ability to draw from the fountain of knowledge. A person who recognizes their biases will surely learn more than a person who does not, but objectivity will necessarily remain an aspiration rather than something any individual can achieve on their own. Second, there are some people who deny their limitations, and they can't be helped by the veil of ignorance or the fountain of knowledge. These kinds of people often gleefully point out the biases they perceive in others while insisting their own views are objective. At the extreme, they might change their minds rarely if ever, refuse to examine evidence or arguments that challenge their beliefs, and treat the notion that they have something to learn as an insult rather than a statement of fact that applies to everyone.

Third and most importantly, I have relied so far on theoretical concepts. We can try to overcome our subjectivity, I have argued, by standing behind the veil of ignorance so that we can construct our morality solely from the fountain of knowledge. If all subjectivity arising from a person's genes, upbringing, position in society, and other influences were removed, and if we had access to the same knowledge, we would converge on the same moral code. The hypothetical nature of my method—the preceding sentence contained two important “ifs”—limits its potential to serve as the foundation for morality. In effect, I have inherited not only the strengths but also the main weakness of the contractarian approach to morality. Way back in 1758, David Hume criticized the social contract of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau by arguing that people have no obligation to a hypothetical contract they never promised to obey. According to Hume, we should hold people accountable for their actual promises, not those ascribed to them without their consent.⁴⁰ Some contractarians have responded that the contract is implicit; just by

living in society, you have tacitly agreed to follow its rules. Philosopher Robert Nozick rejects that claim, quipping that an implicit contract “isn’t worth the paper it’s not written on.”⁴¹

A Reboot of Social Contract Morality

To my mind, these are powerful critiques that any contractarian must address. I will therefore attempt to preserve what is valuable in contractarian morality while making the approach more practical and concrete. To survive close scrutiny, contractarian morality must apply to not just hypothetical worlds but also real societies past and present, which leads me to modify the approach contractarians normally take. Instead of trying to determine the morality someone would endorse under idealized conditions—whether in the state of nature, the original position, or the alternative I proposed in the preceding pages—let’s examine the beliefs people actually hold. Such a move does not force us to abandon the contractarian view that human beings affirm the content of a moral code through shared agreement. Similarly, we can still highlight the problem of subjectivity that Rawls addresses so effectively, so long as we find an alternative means to handle it.

Consider the subjectivity that results because a person has formed their beliefs within a specific society. Societies vary along many dimensions, including their economic organization: Some are based on hunting and gathering, others are agricultural, and others are primarily a mix of industry and services. Some societies are polytheistic while others are monotheistic, and within those two broad categories, the ways people interact with their God or gods vary enormously. Some societies are individualistic, others collectivist. Amid all these differences in how people live their lives, we should not be surprised to find that societies also vary in their moral systems. Behaviors that are condemned in one society might be deemed acceptable in

another. In India, for example, Hindus believe that eating cows is immoral, whereas Americans of many religious stripes treat hamburgers as a staple of their diet.

Underlying all the moral differences between societies, however, are many similarities. Anthropologist Donald Brown explored this question in his book *Human Universals*, and other scholars have carried forward his line of research.⁴² I mentioned earlier that virtually every society embraces some version of the Golden Rule, at least for relationships within the group.⁴³ Owing to its simplicity, the Golden Rule is difficult to apply to complex situations, but it nevertheless provides a useful starting point for morality. Similarly, every society limits who, when, and under what conditions you can kill someone; the belief that you can kill whoever you want, for whatever reason you want, has never existed in any known society.⁴⁴ Norms against incest are also universal, even as societies vary on matters of definition, exceptions, and enforcement.⁴⁵ Every society values keeping your promises, reciprocating helpful acts, and punishing wrongdoers.⁴⁶ Wherever you go, the dead are treated with respect and there are rituals surrounding mourning and burial.⁴⁷ Around the world, people give special care to infants and children and devote considerable resources to raising the next generation.⁴⁸

What can we conclude from these areas of agreement? The shared beliefs can't be subjective, a matter of mere opinion, precisely because different societies, each with its own way of viewing the world, arrive at the same positions. As a result, what I will call the "basic morality" is universal to humanity. It includes, at a minimum, the Golden Rule, restrictions on killing, theft, and incest, and requirements of reciprocity, punishment, promise keeping, respect for the dead, and care for infants and children.

We don't know when the basic morality first appeared in our human ancestors. Given that other animals show what primatologist Frans de Waal calls the "ingredients of morality"

such as fairness and compassion for other members of their species, the basic morality probably has an evolutionary origin.⁴⁹ What we can say is that diverse societies have all had the chance to overturn it, and none have done so. Certain individuals have surely offered a contrary view at moments along the way—asserting, for example, that people should be able to kill whoever they want, or that our default mode should be lying rather than telling the truth—but those individuals have never won much support from other members of their communities.

Are there aspects of morality beyond the basic morality that extend to all of humanity? Quick thinking suggests not. Moral questions on which societies diverge are, by definition, not included in the basic morality, and people learn the subjective perspectives of their own culture or subculture. Take slavery as an example. From the beginning of agricultural societies until a few hundred years ago, slavery was widely accepted around the world. Among the Incas, Egyptians, Babylonians, Israelites, Aztecs, Arabs, Chinese, Songhai, Turks, Persians, Kongolese, Romans, and Mongols, and later in the Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English colonies, societies practiced slavery with virtually no internal opposition.⁵⁰ Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, abolitionist movements mounted forceful opposition and eventually succeeded in outlawing the institution worldwide, though it continues illegally through means such as the sex trade, child labor, debt slavery, forced marriage, and forced migrant labor.⁵¹

So who is right—the societies that embraced slavery or the ones that have condemned it? Or is slavery a matter of personal or cultural opinion without a definitive right or wrong answer? To stimulate our thinking about these questions, we can turn to the theory and practice of deliberative democracy. Modern democracies suffer from many problems, two of which relate to the quality of the public voice on which governmental authority supposedly rests. People have many ways to register their preferences: They can vote, join interest groups, contact government

officials, attend protests and demonstrations, give time or money to campaigns, and talk with others about politics in person or online. Most of these modes of participation are skewed, to varying degrees, toward people who are older, whiter, wealthier, and hold more extreme views than the general population.⁵² Meanwhile, most of the expressed opinions are raw and unrefined because people typically avoid discussing politics with those who disagree with them. This problem intensified as it became easier for people to surround themselves with like-minded others through their personal networks and media sources.⁵³ Thus, the public voice we hear today neither represents the larger population nor reflects careful thinking.

Deliberative democracy, an important area of study in political science and related disciplines, aims to solve these problems. One of the earliest applications came through deliberative opinion polls. In a traditional poll, researchers attempt to draw a random sample of the relevant population, then ask those selected for their opinions about a political issue. Polls of this kind treat people as isolated individuals, and the respondents lack the chance to learn about the issue or discuss it with others. A deliberative poll retains the goal of obtaining a demographically representative sample of the population, but it departs from a traditional poll in important respects. The selected people meet face-to-face to discuss the issue with each other, listen to the testimony of experts, and study the matter over one or more days. Trained moderators are typically on hand to ensure that everyone participates in the discussions, not just the most passionate or articulate. At the end of a deliberative poll, we obtain opinions that are both representative (because the participants have been selected as a cross-section of the population) and reflective (because the participants have expressed their views after careful deliberation).⁵⁴

Similar procedures have been undertaken in many countries to allow representative and reflective bodies of citizens to make recommendations on government budgets, infrastructure projects, social policies, and initiatives and referenda that voters will decide in an upcoming election.⁵⁵ Academic research on these forums demonstrates that the participants take their responsibilities seriously, learn from the experts and each other, and strive to make informed choices.⁵⁶ Communication scholar Laura Black reports that participants offer personal stories and experiences, draw from events and news stories, make arguments to defend their positions, and ask factual questions to gather important information.⁵⁷ Political scientists James Fishkin and Cynthia Farrar show that contributors to deliberative polls become more familiar with relevant facts, gain confidence in their political knowledge and abilities, and often change their opinions through the process of talking and learning.⁵⁸

One of the most valuable aspects of these experiments in deliberative democracy is that they bring together people from all walks of life and help the participants break out of their bubbles. Because they use the methods of random and stratified sampling, the forums necessarily include young adults, the middle aged, and the old. In ordinary life, a Caucasian might never have a meaningful conversation with a Black person, but the selection procedures for deliberative democracy ensure that all races are represented in rough proportion to their population averages. The assembled group might include veterans, accountants, factory workers, college students, small business owners, and former or current welfare recipients. Given the many forms of diversity built into the group, someone within it probably has personal knowledge or experience with any issue up for discussion. Before making any decisions or recommendations, the group will hear a wide range of perspectives from each other and the relevant experts. In the eyes of Helene Landemore and other political theorists, diversity in

background and experiences increases the ability for a group to synthesize pertinent information and make good decisions.⁵⁹

You might be wondering: How can the workings of deliberative democracy inform my reboot of contractarian morality? The linkage becomes clear once we recognize that some of the problems plaguing democracies—unequal participation and relatively little deliberation—also affect how a society articulates its moral code. Some people lack the economic, social, or political power to make their voices heard, so their interests and concerns can get ignored within declarations of what qualifies as right and wrong. Meanwhile, the morality of each individual is often the product of instinct, tradition, or deference to authority rather than reasoned judgment. Deliberative democracy starts from the premise that the public voice on political issues should be formed through representative and reflective means. The same principle, I claim, applies to the moral realm.

Defining Contractarian Morality

With this background in place, I now offer my definition of morality from a contractarian standpoint: *the consensus among individuals and societies regarding right and wrong conduct that would emerge or has emerged after a process of inclusive deliberation*. This definition contains a lot of information, so it's worth pausing to explain its various parts. Any definition of morality would presumably cover the rules and principles for "right and wrong conduct," so mine includes this obvious feature. My definition's contractarian underpinnings are evident in its reliance on a consensus. The consensus has to reach across "individuals and societies" such that it is general to humanity. A consensus does not require unanimity, just a strong majority. In other words, no person, group, or society gets an automatic veto.

The last part of my definition, which stipulates that the consensus only counts if it resulted from “a process of inclusive deliberation,” shows my debt to the concepts of deliberative democracy. A morality worth the name rests on deliberation within and between societies—possibly lasting years, decades, or centuries—through which people make arguments, examine evidence, gather additional information, listen to other perspectives, and change their minds when appropriate. The deliberation could be face-to-face but also occurs through the written word as people engage the positions and arguments of both their predecessors and contemporaries. What matters for deliberation is not that people share the same physical space but that they carefully consider the reasons supporting each stance on the question at hand. The written word has the advantage of giving people as much time and space as they need to explain their views and respond to objections. Thus, the deliberative process includes writing and reading relevant books, articles, essays, letters, blog entries, social media posts, and other materials.

Regardless of where it occurs, the deliberation must be inclusive. The crucial point is not that all people participate in the extended conversation—that would be impossible—but that all *kinds* of people participate. It’s especially important that the people most directly affected by any moral stance have the opportunity to express their views. Without this wide-ranging participation, any apparent consensus might reflect the subjective preferences of a dominant group rather than the considered judgment of human beings in all their diversity. When the deliberation is inclusive, the result transcends the biased and limited perspectives of any single person or society. The moral positions meeting all the criteria within my definition join with the basic morality and apply to all of humanity. My conception of contractarian morality, then, includes the basic morality plus every moral position that fulfills each part of my definition.

Expressed in this way, contractarian morality is consistent with a core principle of humanism. A humanist, you'll recall, determines what is moral by using reason, and humanists have proposed several ways to derive a reason-based morality.⁶⁰ I have offered my own distinctive approach from within the social contract tradition. The veil of ignorance and the fountain of knowledge are powerful tools of reason because they encourage people to strive for impartiality, empathize with others, and draw from available knowledge before venturing any conclusions. In the sense used here, "reason" is thus something an individual can do on their own. Contractarian morality, by contrast, is communal by its very nature and incorporates the differing ideas, experiences, and sources of knowledge that people carry with them.

Some readers will notice the similarity between my account and the "discourse ethics" of philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas, who sought to establish moral truth through idealized deliberation that meets criteria including open dialogue, the absence of coercion, the freedom to express or challenge any view, and agreement to universalize any claim.⁶¹ The deliberation required for my conception of contractarian morality rests on not only each individual's wisdom and experience but also history, philosophy, literature, and other branches of knowledge. To reach a consensus, people have to study, talk, and learn such that they achieve together what none of them could achieve individually. Deliberation can thus be considered a form of *public* reason, or humanism applied at the community level.

But what if people around the world have grappled with a certain question and yet have not reached a consensus? My definition of contractarian morality addresses that very possibility by referring to the consensus that either "has already emerged" or "would emerge" through inclusive deliberation. In constructing the definition that way, I am trying to maintain a healthy tension between the actual and the ideal. The lack of consensus on an issue could indicate that

biases are tainting the judgments people have offered. If some people are unwilling or unable to engage in a deliberative process based on reason, it will be difficult to achieve a consensus. The solution in that case is to keep the conversation going as long as it takes. A future generation might come to see the issue differently, allowing people to reach a consensus that eluded their predecessors.

While waiting for a potential consensus to emerge, people need not refrain from making moral claims. To the contrary, this is the moment when we need a range of people to consider the various stances and the justifications for them. It's possible that one position is right and another is wrong, which we can learn through further investigation. The "right" position in this context is the one that would find a consensus if diverse people took the deliberation seriously and applied reason to the relevant considerations. My definition thus allows morality to exist in a type of Platonic realm that we can access to varying degrees, depending on the quality of our deliberation. Although human beings can never actually achieve the ideal of inclusive deliberation, we can come sufficiently close to give us confidence in certain moral judgments.

As an illustration, consider the societies marked by a consensus that chattel slavery was normal and acceptable. Did the overwhelmingly pro-slavery beliefs in those societies emerge through inclusive deliberation? Hardly. To state the obvious, no one bothered to ask the slaves whether their bondage was justified. The people who defined what qualified as acceptable behaviors did not consider, discuss, and debate the reasons for and against creating a system where some human beings owned others. Slavery instead reflected the raw exercise of power, most commonly (in the ancient world) when victorious soldiers enslaved those they defeated. Other people became slaves because they were born into it or were sentenced to slavery as

punishment for a crime.⁶² Slavery persisted in some parts of the world but was replaced with serfdom in Europe during the Middle Ages.

When chattel slavery returned in European colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and became controversial in the eighteenth and nineteenth, many people participated in the deliberations. Clergy members delivered sermons and homilies on both sides of the question. Philosophers, politicians, and activists wrote essays, pamphlets, and books extolling slavery's vices or its virtues. Abolitionist societies held public meetings and rallied supporters. Most important of all, former slaves joined the discussions. Sometimes their participation happened directly, as when Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Ignatius Sancho, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and others contributed speeches, letters, pamphlets, and memoirs.⁶³ Slaves also entered the debate as fictional characters in novels, novellas, and plays by authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dion Boucicault, Herman Melville, and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.⁶⁴ As the push for abolition gained strength in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most countries managed to end slavery peacefully. The United States required bloodshed and civil war, and slavery was still legal in a handful of other countries until the second half of the twentieth century.⁶⁵

We now have a global consensus against owning human beings as property, and it is illegal in every country. That consensus was forged through inclusive deliberation over several centuries. Because it exists across myriad lines of difference, the agreement reaches beyond particular individuals and societies. By neutralizing the potential biases through which people might view the question, humanity has moved the debate to a higher plane. Regardless of a person's race, religion, nationality, political ideology, social status, or family background, they almost surely deem slavery a reprehensible institution. Although support for slavery still exists

among a few people, most notably the supporters of the Islamic State (ISIS), the consensus is nevertheless robust.

The example of slavery points to a more general phenomenon: Our understandings of right and wrong can change over time, which we should welcome so long as the change occurs after inclusive deliberation. My approach here resembles that of philosopher William Talbott, who views morality as a fallible work in progress emerging over time through diverse sources including experience, intellectual activity, social movements, and the perspectives of ordinary people.⁶⁶ The earlier consensus in favor of slavery did not qualify as contractarian because it resulted from certain people exercising power over others rather than a good-faith search for morality among diverse participants. In fact, the principles of contractarian morality undercut many practices that have been widespread throughout human history. Any system whereby one group dominates another through sexism, racism, colonialism, or genocide would be unlikely to emerge from a process that brings all affected people into the conversation on equal footing. Changes in morality that develop when previously excluded voices join the conversation are almost always for the better. Conversely, morality can get worse if it follows from a process becoming less inclusive.

How Morality Resembles Science

This tentative and changeable nature of morality—where a consensus does not guarantee truth, especially if it was reached through flawed means—has clear parallels in the area of science. The connection between these two domains might seem suspect on first glance. Morality is often considered a subject for philosophy, religion, and the humanities, whereas scientific disciplines handle matters amenable to empirical investigation. In recent decades, however,

authors such as Edward O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, and Edward Slingerland have called for unifying the different branches of knowledge, and I endorse their project.⁶⁷ In fact, my definition of contractarian morality helps crystallize the ways in which scientific and moral knowledge are connected.

One area of overlap lies in the prospects for objectivity. Depending on where scientists received their graduate training and from what advisors, they may be predisposed to certain positions on topics of scientific debate. Other biases reflect the incentives embedded in the system of scientific publication and communication. Given that reviewers and editors resist devoting scarce journal space to papers lacking statistically significant findings, studies confirming the null hypothesis tend to be underreported.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, once scientists are on the record advancing a certain claim, the desire to protect their reputation can keep them from accepting new research challenging their conclusions. Scientists can also show biases related to their race, gender, or nationality.⁶⁹

Accordingly, objectivity should be considered a property not of any single scientist but rather of science as a collective enterprise. The norms and protocols of scientific communities are designed to overcome the biases that might affect particular scientists. For example, the scientific method requires scientists to be open and forthright about their procedures, analyses, and data. To publish their research in a respectable journal, scientists must submit to peer review, and scrutiny continues after a paper gets published. Different scientists, each with their own biases and desires for professional advancement, thus serve to check each other. A claim doesn't get accepted as scientific knowledge until it has been hypothesized, tested, evaluated, and then replicated by other scientists. Recent attention has appropriately focused on the last stage of that process. Many findings in psychology, medicine, and other disciplines have failed to replicate

and, accordingly, do not count as knowledge.⁷⁰ When the right procedures are followed, including a commitment to replication, science as an enterprise can attain an objectivity unavailable to individual scientists.⁷¹

The same principles hold for morality, where all humans form the relevant community. All people start with preconceptions related to their biology, the society they happened to grow up in, and myriad factors that have influenced them over their lifetimes. We thus need inclusive deliberation so that all moral ideas can be put to the test. Objectivity emerges when different people, each with their own starting points, use logic, evidence, and argument in an open and deliberative process to discover right and wrong. For a moral stance to attain a status beyond subjective beliefs, it must make sense, after rigorous investigation, to human beings in all their diversity. A community of diverse human beings can thus be objective in ways no individuals could accomplish on their own.

Another parallel between science and morality lies in the role of dissenters. Scientists with the relevant expertise define what qualifies as scientific knowledge, but the presence of a consensus does not mean no one disagrees. For example, we can find a handful of card-carrying scientists—people with Ph.D.s in scientific disciplines from reputable universities—who deny evolution, climate change, or the origins of AIDS through HIV, or who believe in ESP, bigfoot, homeopathy, alien abduction, or the claim that vaccines cause autism.⁷² A given scientific dissenter might be mistaken but could also serve as the catalyst for driving knowledge forward. In the former category, we could point to Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons, whose experiments allegedly demonstrating cold fusion could not be replicated in other labs.⁷³ In the latter category of dissenters who successfully challenged the status quo, Alfred Wegener—

originator of the theory of continental drift who was ridiculed in his own day—is a prime example.⁷⁴

Dissenters are equally important in the realm of morality. In societies where nearly everyone within the dominant group deemed slavery acceptable, there eventually emerged some lonely voices standing on the other side. Beyond the issue of slavery, somebody had to be the first to say it is wrong to engage in torture, burn people accused of witchcraft, or punish the family members of wrongdoers. By forming movements, publicizing their ideas, and pressing their case, dissenters can eventually overturn a prevailing consensus. To determine whether an existing consensus needs to shift, we must subject the ideas of moral dissenters to inclusive deliberation. The community might justifiably reject those ideas—after all, some moral dissenters are cranks—but we won't know for sure until their ideas receive a fair hearing.

Morality is also similar to science in that each involves a process of discovery rather than invention or creation. Scientific advances are driven by evidence that evaded previous scientists who were limited by their methods, instruments, and concepts. For example, the theory of plate tectonics (the successor to continental drift) rests in large part on data that had not been collected or even imagined before the twentieth century. The discovery of mid-ocean ridges and the magnetic alignment of the rocks at various distances could not be explained through the assumption of a static earth. Satellite technology in the twenty-first century has allowed scientists to chart with great precision the small year-to-year movements in the plates.⁷⁵ Scientists discovered rather than created these and other pieces of evidence for plate tectonics.

In a like manner, human beings discover the rules of morality through a deliberative process. Deliberation requires establishing and highlighting basic facts relevant to the subject at hand. If the quality of the underlying information improves, so do the judgments that result from

the deliberation. The discovery of a better morality can also happen because additional voices joined the discussion. The reasons why it's wrong to hold another person as property were waiting to be discovered, and former slaves and their allies eventually brought those reasons into the open. Similarly, as religious minorities in the last few centuries increasingly pressed the case for why their rights should be respected, members of the dominant religions learned about a perspective that had been hiding in plain sight. Inclusive deliberation thus facilitates a process of moral discovery by improving the flow of information and injecting new ideas into the dialogue.

Science and morality are also connected in that the claims within each of them are provisional and subject to being revised or even overturned. Scientific knowledge rests upon the interplay of theory and data. Through the development of conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks, plus new forms of measurement, analysis, and research design, scientists update their models of the world and demonstrate that all scientific knowledge—including the knowledge accepted today—is fallible. A moral consensus is also fallible, especially when we recognize that deliberation is always imperfect and inclusivity can only be approximated. By engaging a longstanding issue, people sometimes discover that a previous consensus needs to be modified or rejected.

The possibility that some moral understandings will change does not mean that we should embrace a position of moral relativism, which would imply that there are no universal standards and no possibility of moral progress. A relativist would say that the guidelines for proper behavior are subjective in being specific to each individual, community, or era. My position differs in that I have defended a process allowing us to obtain an objective and universal morality. When we discover through inclusive deliberation that moral beliefs must change, we can apply that knowledge retroactively. Through my approach, we can see that people from

earlier times and places were wrong in approving of practices such as torture, witch burning, and collective punishment.

Of course, any evaluations of historical individuals and societies must be tempered by acknowledging the fallibility of current beliefs about morality (and science). The germ theory of disease, for example, is supported by a mountain of research. If this theory is right, then people in the past erred when they attributed outbreaks of disease to the humors, stale air, or the evil eye. Similarly, we have reached a moral consensus that no one should be denied social or political rights based on their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or other aspects of their identity, which means that people from earlier eras who thought otherwise were mistaken. Although it seems unlikely, both the germ theory of disease and the moral principle of equal rights could be fundamentally flawed. Even if we are right about both claims in a general sense, there remain large gaps in our knowledge. We do not fully understand infectious organisms, nor do we know how to apply the principle of equal rights to all aspects of modern polities. Just as scientific research must continue, so too must deliberation over moral questions.

Responding to Christian Objections

I doubt that Christian apologists reading this chapter will accept the conclusions I have reached, so I will try to anticipate some of their concerns. An apologist might accuse me of saying that morality ultimately reduces to public opinion, making it synonymous with the will of the majority. Anyone who has read this chapter knows I have argued no such thing. I have stressed instead that morality has to be discovered through reason, with inclusive deliberation serving as a means of reason ideally suited to overcoming the initial biases of each person and society. An apologist alternatively could try to undermine my approach by offering a

hypothetical scenario. To borrow from an example that William Lane Craig regularly uses, what if the Nazis had brainwashed everyone into approving the Holocaust?⁷⁶ Wouldn't my approach force me to acknowledge that consensus as the appropriate grounding for a moral judgment?

To the contrary, my version of contractarian morality accepts a consensus only if it resulted from inclusive deliberation. Neither a hypothetical brainwashing nor the Nazis' actual promotion of their agenda meets the necessary criteria. If the Nazis had tried to defend their policies through open debate rather than totalitarian control of state institutions, massive numbers of people—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—would have vehemently objected both during and after the Holocaust. Hypotheticals about the Nazis brainwashing the whole world give us no more insight into moral questions than hypotheticals about money trees give us into retirement planning.

Even if apologists accepted my point about the need for a consensus to rest on inclusive deliberation, they would still feel uncomfortable with my approach. In particular, they would object that I'm cutting God out of the picture. Ravi Zacharias, one of the most prominent apologists of the last half-century, writes: "When you assume a moral law, you must posit a moral lawgiver—the source of the moral law."⁷⁷ Similar statements appear in the works of many other apologists, including Phil Fernandes, David Limbaugh, and Doug Powell.⁷⁸ The apologists think their line of reasoning takes us straight to God, for who else could give us morality? In fact, apologists often work backwards from the presence of moral laws to infer that God must exist.

As a defender of contractarian morality, I reject their claims wholesale. I have argued that morality originates not with God but with human beings, and an analogy might bolster my case. No one doubts that we enact laws through our governments in order to define impermissible behaviors, specify the means of enforcement and judgment, and describe the punishments for

those found guilty. If human beings can establish laws of the political variety, why can't we also discover the basis for moral laws? In fact, morality and politics are tightly connected, for moral questions frequently become political questions. Any list of behaviors that a society deems immoral will overlap heavily with the list of behaviors the society declares illegal.

An apologist might respond by questioning the objectivity of the humans who serve as moral lawgivers. In the words of Catholic apologist Christopher Akers, "For a moral system to be truly objective, moral law must stem from a source external to humanity. Otherwise, all we have is subjective human moral opinion, no matter how it is dressed up."⁷⁹ Akers assumes that if morality originates with human beings, it must be a matter of opinion. Protestant apologist William Frye makes the point even more strongly in asking, "Is morality real or just opinion or preference?"⁸⁰ William Lane Craig similarly worries that, "In a world without God, there can be no objective right and wrong, only our culturally and personally relative subjective judgments."⁸¹ My burden in the current chapter has been to show why Akers, Frye, Craig, and other apologists are mistaken.

Some aspects of morality, which I have called the "basic morality," are more than mere opinion because they are shared across all societies. When so many human beings from different cultural backgrounds all agree on something, it cannot be dismissed as just the subjective preference of one person or society. We can augment the basic morality by forging a consensus through inclusive deliberation. In one notable example, representatives from dozens of countries as diverse as Lebanon, Canada, France, India, and the United States participated in drafting and ratifying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The UDHR condemns slavery, torture, and arbitrary arrest and demands that all persons be granted equal protection of the law, freedom of speech and religion, and the rights to an education, remunerative work, and

an adequate standard of living.⁸² Several countries abstained from the United Nations vote on the UDHR, which does not change the fact that it had consensual support around the world. It was approved through an open and deliberative process based on information, discussion, and debate.⁸³ The UDHR, which includes many aspects of public and political morality, fits cleanly within my definition of contractarian morality.

To fully address the issue of objectivity for the UDHR or anything else, though, we need to distinguish between the different definitions of objectivity. Something could be objective in the sense of being external to the mind, meaning its existence does not depend on any human processes. Apologists claim that morality without God lacks that kind of objectivity. Such a limitation, they argue, means that morality therefore cannot be objective in the sense of reaching beyond parochial opinions. Apologists thereby link the two definitions, saying that the latter kind of objectivity cannot exist without the former kind. I have argued the contrary in separating the two definitions. Regardless of whether an externally existing morality is a meaningful concept in a purely materialist universe, a point on which philosophers disagree, morality can certainly be objective in the way people ordinarily use the term. If individuals with different beliefs and backgrounds reach a consensus after a process of inclusive deliberation, they have transcended the subjective perspectives with which they began, thereby achieving objectivity in the sense that matters to our everyday lives.

Christian apologists such as Frank Turek fail to make these necessary distinctions. “In order to judge between competing societies,” Turek writes, “there must be this objective standard beyond those societies and beyond humanity.” Note that Turek here is using “objective” to indicate something external to the human mind, and he then jumps immediately to the other definition: “Without that unchanging objective standard, all moral questions are reduced to

human opinion—nearly seven billion human opinions.”⁸⁴ Turek is now worried about whether morality can be objective in the sense of transcending individual opinions such that it is shared and impartial. As I have shown in this chapter, he is wrong in asserting that morality in the absence of God cannot be objective in this wider meaning.

Recognizing that it offers the main alternative to a morality based on God’s commands, other apologists have questioned what reason can accomplish. As stated by Catholic apologist Michael Novak, “If morality were left to reason alone, common agreement would never be reached, since philosophers vehemently—and endlessly—disagree.”⁸⁵ Novak here makes the common mistake of taking an all-or-nothing position. He’s certainly right that philosophers writing about morality use several competing approaches, including consequentialism, deontology, natural law, virtue ethics, and care ethics.⁸⁶ Despite those differences in their guiding frameworks, philosophers (and non-philosophers) have forged a consensus on many moral questions, including the rightness of being kind, showing love, demonstrating bravery, seeking justice, acting generously, and caring for one’s family. We also have a consensus on the wrongness of murder, rape, incest, assault, theft, fraud, pedophilia, kidnapping, robbery, arson, slavery, torture, genocide, ethnic cleansing, human sacrifice, arbitrary arrest, collective punishment, and killing civilians during wartime. Of course, those behaviors still happen today; if they didn’t, we wouldn’t need treaties, laws, police officers, courts, and other enforcement mechanisms. Perpetrators of the forbidden behaviors either belong to the small minority who rejects the consensus, find themselves unable to act in ways that match their beliefs, or else think their situations deserve a special exception.

On other issues, we have not reached a global consensus on what the norms should be. The divisive issues include such matters as abortion, contraception, homosexuality, polygamy,

blasphemy, gambling, pornography, prostitution, capital punishment, child labor, eating meat, premarital sex, honor killings, assisted suicide, animal welfare, forced marriages, male circumcision, female genital mutilation, corporal punishment of children, and alcohol and drug use. Differing views persist across individuals within each society on some of these questions. Other subjects on that list are controversial within certain societies but not others. These various kinds of contentious issues notwithstanding, the global community has formed a consensus on many moral questions through the use of reason. It's a mistake to assume, as Novak does, that humans cannot resolve any moral issues and must remain forever deadlocked on the ones that divide us.

Morality and the Afterlife

In the unlikely event that they accepted all of my points above, apologists would still have one card left to play. They could appeal to an important religious concept—the afterlife—to declare the superiority of a God-given morality. After all, what obligation does a person have to obey a moral code discovered and elaborated by human beings? Why should people refrain from behaving immorally if doing so would serve their interests? What constrains someone from acting in ways that harm other people?

One answer is a person's self-regulation. Most people *want* to get along with others and lead a respectable life. Research in psychology and other disciplines finds that the predictors of happiness include building strong relationships, engaging in meaningful work, and participating in one's community.⁸⁷ Will a decent person who loses faith in God subsequently become a moral deviant and a social outcast? According to the best research, no. Systematic data indicates that atheists are worse than the rest of the population on some indicators (giving to charity) but better

on others (likelihood of going to prison).⁸⁸ There is no evidence indicating that the lack of belief in God leads to massive increases in socially destructive behaviors.

A second answer to what keeps people from harming others is that the state stands ready to intervene. Since the days of Thomas Hobbes, the contractarian approach to ethics has sought to discourage malicious behavior by enacting laws and empowering the state to enforce them. Should someone step out of line, they will hear from the state's law enforcement apparatus, which can be strengthened or weakened as necessary to achieve desired ends. If convicted of murder, rape, assault, theft, fraud, or another offense, a person might go to prison, which provides a strong incentive for staying on the right side of the law.

Yet these two answers are incomplete. An apologist could note, correctly, that self-regulation and the criminal justice system work sometimes but not always. Some people have no desire to obey society's rules, and we cannot put a cop on every street corner. Many crimes go unsolved or even unreported, and other moral offenses—such as lying to your friends or family to benefit yourself—are not illegal. Given the limitations of any human means to enforce morality, an apologist could offer the alternative of cosmic justice. God can serve as the watchful eye in the sky, and by controlling a person's destination in the afterlife, he can punish someone who evaded the political authorities on earth. Any moral system without God affords no such solution.

Many apologists, including Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow, press this argument to the hilt. They write: "According to the New Atheists, in the end there will be no ultimate justice, no making things right, and no punishment for the wicked. Clever criminals will 'get away with it.'"⁸⁹ McDowell and Morrow offer the alternative of justice in the afterlife. Frank Turek echoes their claims: "If there is no God and no afterlife, then *no justice will ever be done*. Thousands of

pedophiles who have committed murder over the years will never get justice. They will go to their graves unpunished.”⁹⁰ William Lane Craig similarly argues that, “If life ends at the grave, it ultimately makes no difference whether you live as a Stalin or as a Mother Theresa.”⁹¹ Through the afterlife, by contrast, “the scales of God’s justice will be balanced. Thus the moral choices that we make in this life are infused with an eternal significance.”⁹²

McDowell, Morrow, Turek, and Craig are tapping into the common assumption in the West that people who behave morally go to heaven while evildoers go to hell. There is only one problem: That’s not what their own religion actually teaches. According to Christian theology, all people are sinners who deserve eternal punishment, and they can be brought into a right relationship with God only through the death and resurrection of Christ. As Paul states in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” For Protestants, those who accept Christ’s sacrifice for their sins make it to heaven, while those lacking faith go to hell. For Catholics, the faithful must also maintain their saving grace by participating in the sacraments. In both the Protestant and Catholic traditions, a pedophile, rapist, or murderer who receives God’s grace spends eternity with him. Upstanding individuals who refuse God’s gift of salvation, a group that presumably includes many readers of this book, get a one-way ticket to hell.⁹³

As the holders of advanced degrees in theology who have spent many years or decades studying the subject, McDowell, Morrow, Turek, and Craig know full well what their religion teaches about the afterlife, and yet they can’t help themselves. Their rhetorical moves show that apologetics is not a dispassionate search for truth but rather the public relations of people who think they already have it. Since the goals are reinforcement and ideally persuasion, not truth seeking, apologists can rely on the false beliefs the masses hold about how the afterlife works in

Christianity. On this and other topics, apologists routinely offer whatever argument seems to work, regardless of whether it makes any sense or accurately reflects the doctrines of their own religion. With the ends justifying the means—they believe they are saving souls—many apologists yield to the temptation to use deceptive tactics. They don't necessarily do so consciously, but their writings nevertheless show that they haven't reconciled what they believe with what they say.

If Christian apologists want to uphold an afterlife with “punishment for the wicked,” as McDowell and Morrow put it, they need to find a new religion. Let me recommend Islam, which teaches something close to the works-based righteousness often falsely ascribed to Christianity. The Quran refers in many places to the Islamic equivalent of heaven—*جَنّٰح* in Arabic, usually written in the Roman alphabet as *Jannah* and translated into English as *paradise*. To enter paradise, a person must proclaim there is no god but God, believe in the angels, and accept God's prophets and revelations.⁹⁴ Beyond matters of belief, a person must perform good works such as praying with humility, caring for orphans, and engaging in acts of charity.⁹⁵ The Quran even describes a kind of scale, where those whose good deeds outweigh the bad enter paradise. Everyone falling short goes to the Islamic version of hell, either temporarily or permanently.⁹⁶

By envisioning an afterlife that sorts people according to how they lived their lives, Islam gives a more rational solution than Christianity for someone who commits serious offenses yet avoids punishment by the state. Of course, the Islamic solution only works if Islam is, you know, true. If it's not, and if no other religion is either, then it's an unfortunate fact of life—along with death and taxes—that some people will get away with acting immorally. An additional problem for Islam is that Muslims in the West often find the moral rules of their religion hard to swallow. If reaching paradise requires accepting such practices as jihad, slavery, wife beating, denying

religious freedom, and banning friendships with non-Muslims, one wonders whether the price is worth it. In chapter 7 I'll return to the subject of how modern Muslims handle the Quran's teachings.

For now, I'll focus solely on Christianity. In the next chapter, I examine changes in morality over the grand scale of two millennia. I aim to explain how both Christians and non-Christians managed to improve on the morality presented in the Bible. Although the Bible's morality is flawed in many ways, we have discovered a new and better morality through the method of humanism: reason.

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