

from Stand to Reason SOLID GROUND

September/October 2007

As a Christian ambassador, your biggest challenge may be making sense of the problem of evil. Surprisingly, though, evil is actually evidence for God, not against Him.

Dear Friend,

The wave of best-selling atheist books has forced followers of Christ to confront an age-old objection: the problem of evil, considered by some to be the strongest evidence against the existence of God.

I actually think it proves just the opposite. The entire objection hinges on the observation that true evil exists “out there” as an objective feature of the world. Therein lies the problem for the atheist.

BOWLING AND BADNESS

Think of it this way. How do you know the difference between a good bowler and a bad one? By the bowlers’ scores, of course. There must be a way to keep score to make a judgment between mediocre and masterful. C.S. Lewis pointed out that a portrait is a good or bad likeness depending on how it compares with the “perfect” original.

In the same way, evil is a value judgment based on a scoring system of some sort, a standard of moral perfection that evil falls short of.

To say something is evil, then, is to make a moral judgment, and moral judgments make no sense outside of a moral standard. Evil as a value judgment marks a departure from that standard of morality. If there is no standard, there is no departure. Lewis notes:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I gotten this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call something crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.¹

Here’s the key question: Where does the moral standard come from? Is it a product of chance? Does morality simply fall from the sky? What world view makes the best sense out of objective morality?

Answering these questions will help clear up another bit of confusion on both sides of the aisle. Some Christians have claimed that no atheist can be a truly moral person. To which Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic* magazine, fires back, “I’m an atheist, and I’m moral.”

It’s a shallow response, but it works because the challenge itself misses the point. The question isn’t whether an atheist can *be* moral, but whether he can *make sense* of morality in a universe bereft of God. This is what philosophers call “the grounding problem.” What grounds morality? What does it “stand” on, so to speak? Why is the universe the way it is?



I think we can get much closer to an answer to these questions by simply reflecting on the nature of a moral rule. By making observations about the effect – morality – we can determine its characteristics and then ask what cause is adequate to produce it.



EXPANDING HORIZONS

QUICK SUMMARY:

- The problem of evil is perhaps the greatest challenge a Christian has to answer.
- Atheists often use the presence of evil in the world to argue against God’s existence, however, it proves just the opposite.
- To say something is evil is a value judgment based on a standard of moral perfection that it falls short of.
- We observe that moral rules exist but have no physical properties. They are a kind of communication, they have an “oughtness” to them, and we feel real guilt when we violate them.
- Only three options for the existence of morality are possible: 1) morality is simply an illusion; 2) moral rules are the product of chance; or 3) they are the product of intelligence.
- Moral laws have force when they’re given by an appropriate authority.
- Moral laws suggest a moral law giver. The best explanation for the existence of morality is a personal God.

FOUR OBSERVATIONS ABOUT MORALITY²

The first thing we observe about moral rules is that, though they exist, they are not physical because they don't seem to have physical properties. We don't bump into them in the dark. They don't extend into space. They have no weight. They have no chemical characteristics. Instead, they are immaterial things we discover through the process of thought, introspection, and reflection without the aid of our five senses.

This is a profound realization. We have, with a high degree of certainty, stumbled upon something real. Yet it's something that can't be proven empirically or described in terms of natural laws. This teaches us there's more to the world than just the physical universe. If non-physical things – like moral rules – truly exist, then materialism as a world view is false

There seem to be many other things that populate the world, things like propositions, numbers, and the laws of logic. Values like happiness, friendship, and faithfulness are there, too, along with meanings and language. There may even be persons – souls, angels, and other divine beings.

Our discovery also tells us some things really exist that science has no access to, even in principle. Some things are not governed by natural laws. Science, therefore, is not the only discipline giving us true information about the world.

It follows, then, that naturalism as a world view is also false. Our discovery of moral rules forces us to expand our understanding of the nature of reality and open our minds to the possibility of a host of new things that populate the world in the invisible realm.

Second, moral rules are a kind of communication. They are propositions: intelligent statements of meaning conveyed from one mind to another. The propositions are in the form of imperatives, commands. A command only makes sense when there are two minds involved, one giving the command and one receiving it.

There's a third thing we notice when we reflect on moral rules. They have a force we often feel *prior* to any behavior. This is called the incumbency of moral rules, the "oughtness" of morality. It appeals to a person's will, pushing him to act in a certain way, though he often disregards its force and chooses to disobey.³

Finally, there is a deep discomfort that emotionally healthy people feel when they violate clear and weighty moral dictates – a kind of ethical pain – making them aware they have done something wrong and deserve punishment. This sense of guilt carries with it not just the uncomfortable awareness of wrongdoing, but also the dread of having to answer for the deed. Distraction and denial may temporarily numb ethical pain, but it never entirely disappears. Only sociopaths succeed in silencing the conscience completely.

NARROWING OUR OPTIONS

These four observations provide us with a foundation from which to answer the question, "Why morality?" We need only determine the possible options, then ask which option best accounts for our observations.

A word of caution here. At this point our discussion gets personal, because the ultimate answer to our question has serious ramifications for the way we live our lives. It's tempting to abandon careful thinking when conclusions that make us uncomfortable come into focus. Faced with a limited number of options, no one sits on the fence. When the full range of choices is clear, rejection of one means acceptance of another.

Our options are limited to three. One: Morality is simply an illusion. Two: Objective moral rules exist, but are mere accidents, the product of chance. Three: Moral rules are not accidents, but instead are the product of intelligence. Which option makes most sense given our four observations about morality?

Some want to argue that morals just don't exist. They're nothing but illusions, useful fictions that help us to live in harmony. This is the relativist's answer. This view is not an option for those who raise the problem of evil. Their complaint about the injustice of the universe is a tacit admission of morality. C.S. Lewis observed:

Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist – in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless – I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality – namely my idea of justice – was full of sense. Consequently, atheism turns out to be too simple....If there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. *Dark* would be without meaning.⁴ [emphasis in the original]

Some take a second route. They believe in objective morality, but contend that God is not necessary to ground ethics. We discover them as part of the furniture of the universe, so to speak, but they have no explanation, nor do they need one. This seems to be the course taken by Christopher Hitchens, best-selling author of *god Is not Great – How Religion Poisons Everything*.

This won't do for a good reason: Moral rules that have no ground or justification need not be obeyed.

An illustration is helpful here. One evening in the middle of a Scrabble game, you notice the phrase "do not go" formed in the random spray of letter tiles on the table. Is this a command that ought to be obeyed? Of course not. It's not a command at all, just a random collection of letters.

Commands are communications between two minds. Chance might conceivably create the appearance of a moral rule, but there can be no bona fide command if no one

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is speaking. Since this phrase is accidental, it can safely be ignored.

Even if a person is behind the communication, one could ignore the command if it isn't backed by appropriate authority. If I stood at an intersection and put my hand up, cars might stop voluntarily, but they'd have no duty to respond. They could ignore me with no fear of punishment because I have no authority to direct traffic. If, on the other hand, a policeman replaced me, traffic would come to a halt.

What is the difference between the policeman and me? My authority is not grounded. It doesn't rest on anything solid. The policeman, however, represents the government, so his authority is justified. The state can appoint legitimate representatives to carry out its will because it is operating within its proper domain.

We learn from this that a law has moral force when it is given by an appropriate authority, one operating within its legitimate jurisdiction. If one violates such a law, he could be punished. The same is true of moral laws. They have incumbency – force to them – if there is a proper authority behind them. Moral rules that appear by chance have no such grounding.

Our second option fails because it doesn't explain three important features we observed about morality. Chance morality fails to be a communication between two minds, and therefore, cannot be imperative. It doesn't account for the incumbency of moral rules, nor does it make sense of the guilt and expectation of punishment one feels when those rules are violated.

ONE REMAINING ANSWER

Only one answer remains as a possible source of morality. If morality is not an illusion and not the product of chance, then morals must be the result of an intelligent Mind. Universal moral laws that have genuine incumbency require an author whose proper domain is the universe, who has the moral authority to enforce his laws, and the power to ultimately mete out perfect justice.

What is the best explanation for the existence of morality? A personal God whose character provides an absolute standard of goodness is the best answer. An impersonal force won't do because a moral rule is both a proposition and a command, and these are features of minds. Ethicist Richard Taylor explains:

A duty is something that is owed....but something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as a duty in isolation....The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone.⁵

Only one option makes sense of each observation about morality: a personal God, who is the creator of both the material and the immaterial domain. Moral laws suggest a moral law giver. His laws are a communication of his desires, imperatives expected to be obeyed.

The existence of God also explains the incumbency of morality. Ethics are adequately grounded because God is a proper authority for moral rules. The universe is his possession because he created it, and he has the right to rule over it.

Ethical pain – true moral guilt – also makes sense. Since morals are not disembodied principles, but personal commands, a violation is not just a broken rule, but an offense against the person who made the rule. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard has pointed out that a man could not have anything upon his conscience if God did not exist.

Some – like Michael Shermer – attempt to argue they don't need God for them to be moral. They can be virtuous people even though they're atheists. No one thinking carefully about it, though, would deny that an atheist can behave in a way one might call moral. The real question is, "Why ought he?" Trappist monk Thomas Merton put it this way:

In the name of whom or what do you ask me to behave? Why should I go to the inconvenience of denying myself the satisfactions I desire in the name

of some standard that exists only in your imagination? Why should I worship the fictions that you have imposed on me in the name of nothing?⁶

A moral atheist is like a man sitting down to dinner who doesn't believe in farmers, ranchers, fishermen, or cooks. He believes the food just appears, with no explanation and no sufficient cause. This is silly. Either his meal is an illusion, or someone provided it. In the same way, if morals exist – as the reality of evil proves – then some cause adequate to explain the effect must account for them. God is the most reasonable solution.

THE FINAL VERDICT

The argument against God based on the problem of evil can only be raised if some form of moral objectivism is true. Morals, therefore, exist. I don't need to give a complete taxonomy of ethical guidelines to make my case. If there is even one moral absolute, it invites the question, "What kind of world view best explains its existence?"

Atheism can't make any sense of it. Neither can most Eastern religions, by the way. If reality is an illusion, as they hold, then the distinction between good and evil is ultimately rendered meaningless. Something like the Judeo-Christian or Muslim idea of God must be true to adequately account for moral laws.

Morality grounded in God explains our hunger for justice

– our desire for a day of final reckoning when all wrongs are made right, when innocent suffering is finally redeemed, when all the guilty are punished and the righteous are rewarded.

This also explains our own personal sense of dread. We feel guilty because we are guilty. We know deep down inside that we have offended a morally perfect Being who has the legitimate authority to punish us. We know we will have to answer for our own crimes against God.

In the end, we're forced to accept one of two alternatives. Either relativism is true or morality is true. Either we live in a universe in which morality is a meaningless concept and are forever condemned to silence regarding the problem of evil, or moral rules exist and we're beholden to a moral God who holds us accountable to His law.

There are no other choices. As Dr. Francis Schaeffer put it, "These are not probability answers; [these] are the only answers. It is this or nothing."⁷

Your partner for the truth,



Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason



PUTTING YOUR KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

- ✓ Realize that the problem of evil is actually one of the strongest proofs for the existence of God.
- ✓ When you encounter someone who says there is no truth, ask them what they mean by "truth."
- ✓ Remember the four observations about morality: moral rules are not physical, governed by natural laws, they are a kind of communication, there is an "oughtness" about them, and we have a conscience that reflects true moral guilt.
- ✓ Keep in mind that we only have three options when trying to explain morality: it's an illusion, it's a product of mere chance, or it's the product of intelligence.
- ✓ Remember that when relativists complain about the injustice of the universe it's a tacit admission of morality.
- ✓ Don't forget that if moral rules have no ground or justification they need not be obeyed. And, like the policeman directing traffic, they must have an appropriate authority that gives them incumbency.

¹ Clive Staples Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1960, paperback), 31.

² See a more thorough treatment of these four points in Beckwith and Koukl, *Relativism – Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*, Baker Books, 1998, chapter 16, "Why Morality?"

³ Some object to the term "moral law" because moral laws can be broken, while scientific laws are inviolable. I have two responses. First, it's not obvious that scientific laws can never be violated. Miracles entail the suspension of natural law, and miracles seem to at least be possible, if not actual, unless one arbitrarily asserts naturalism. Second, moral laws are different from natural laws pre-

cisely at this point. The nature of a moral law is that it can be disobeyed by creatures with moral free will. If it couldn't be disobeyed, it would not qualify as a moral law.

⁴ Lewis, *ibid.*

⁵ Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83-4.

⁶ Quoted in Phillip Yancy, "The Other Great Commission," *Christianity Today*, October 7, 1996, 136.

⁷ Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, from *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), vol. 1, 303.



Bulletin Board

STR SPEAKERS' SCHEDULE

Greg Koukl

SEPTEMBER

- 1-2 Pacific Coast Church, San Clemente, CA Sat. 5 p.m. Sun. 9 & 10:45 a.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (949) 940-2600 or pccsc.org
- 7-8 Stand For Truth Conference Topics: TBD Contact: standfortruthministries.org
- 20 Christian Fellowship Club, Olympia, WA 12 p.m. Topic: [The Intolerance of Tolerance](#) Contact: (360) 701-3591 or johnisaacson@reachone.com
- 28-30 Lutherans for Life, Lesterville, SD

OCTOBER

- 5 Wheatstone Academy, La Mirada, CA Topic: TBD Contact: (562) 690-1027
- 7 Emmanuel Faith, Escondido, CA Topic: [Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air](#)
- 9 Salem Pregnancy Care Center, Winston-Salem, NC Topic: [Only One Question](#) Contact: (336) 760-3680
- 22-23 Trinity Church, Chickasha, OK at the University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma Topics: [Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air](#) & [Bad Argument against Religion](#) Contact: www.trinitychickasha.org

Steve Wagner

SEPTEMBER

- 24-27 Focus on the Family Institute, Colorado Springs, CO Topic: [Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue](#) Contact: (800) 281-6426
- 28 High School Training (hosted by Justice For All), Denver, CO Topic: [Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue](#) Contact: *
- 30 Community Training (hosted by Justice For All), Denver, CO Topic: [Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue](#) Contact: *

OCTOBER

- 1-2 Auraria Higher Education Center (hosted by Justice For All), Denver, CO Topic: [Justice For All Exhibit](#) Contact: *
- 11 Langston University (hosted by Justice For All), Guthrie, OK Topics: [Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue](#) and [Justice For All Exhibit](#) Contact: *
- 12-14 High School & Community Training (hosted by Justice For All), Edmond, OK Topics: [Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue](#) and [Justice For All Exhibit](#) Contact: *
- 22-25 YWAM Discipleship Training School, Lake View Terrace, CA Topic: [Pro-Life 101 and Tactics](#) Contact: (818) 896-2755
- * Contact (800) 281-6426 for all of Steve's events with "**"

Brett Kunkle

SEPTEMBER

- 8 California Christian Apologetics Conference, Fremont, CA Times: TBD Topics: [Who's Waiting for You?](#) and TBD Contact: www.standfortruthministries.org.

OCTOBER

- 5 Wheatstone Academy, La Mirada, CA Topic: TBD Contact: (562) 690-1027
- 8 Homes Organized for Meaningful Education (H.O.M.E.), Northridge, CA Topic: [Who's Waiting for Your Kids?](#) Contact: (818) 988-9200
- 14 Lighthouse Christian Church, Oceanside, CA Topic: TBD Contact: (760) 726-0590

Alan Shlemon

SEPTEMBER

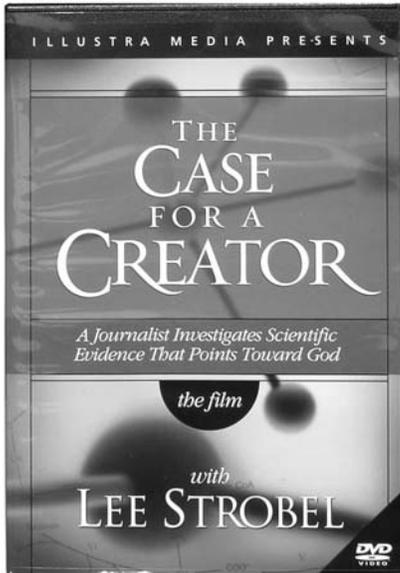
- 2-9 Bel Air Presbyterian Church, Bel Air, CA 10:30 a.m. (end of four-week course) Topic: Evolution & Intelligent Design Contact: (818) 788-4200 or www.belairpres.org

OCTOBER

- 22-29 North Coast Church, Vista, CA 7:00 p.m. (four-week course) Topic: A Closer Look at Islam Contact: (760) 724-6700 or www.northcoastchurch.com/ncu/

As additional dates are scheduled, they will be posted on our web page at www.str.org

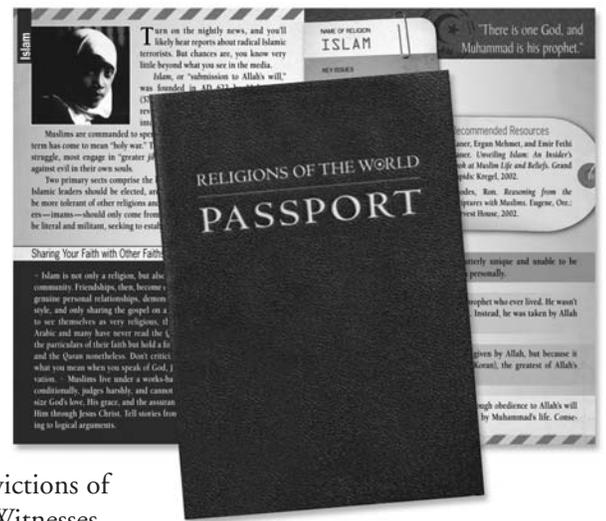
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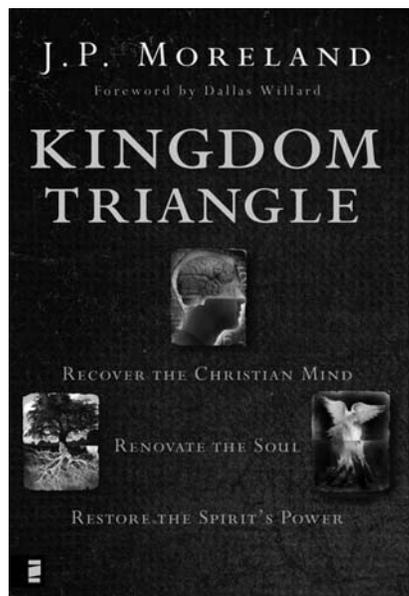


knowledgeable, wise...

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He believes that evangelical Christianity can mature and lead the surrounding society out of the meaningless morass it finds itself in with humility and vision. Discussion and study questions are included. Listen to Greg's radio interview with J.P. Moreland on this important life's work at www.str.org.