

Debate on Absolute Morality with Phillip Johnson

This debate took place over a couple of weeks in April, 2001 with Phillip Johnson, a professor of law at UC Berkeley and an advocate for creationism and the moral authority of God.

The writer of succeeding comments is identified in bold, quotes of the other writer by the writer are offset by the character ">".

John Donovan writes:

Dr. Johnson,

We have a friend in common: Jack Coon, whom I sing with in the Monks. He is, as you probably know, a really nice guy and very funny too. We always have a great time singing together every holiday season (even if he is a tenor and I'm a baritone)- have you ever come to hear us? Some years we sound better, some years worse! Last year was pretty good I think.

I just finished reading Pennock's "Tower of Babel", and as an atheist that believes in moral absolutes, I am curious as to how you respond to his point, that claims of morality coming from God's authority are seriously flawed.

Specifically, the argument goes (I think), if what is moral is merely what God says, then is whatever God says moral? If so, then would God ever say anything immoral? If not, then God only says what is moral, not the other way around.

Therefore morality exists independent of God. This viewpoint I find reasonable, and is one basis for my atheistic embrace of moral absolutes. As Pennock says, we are "moral beings in an amoral" universe and it is up to us (not God) to give value, meaning and purpose to our lives.

Your thoughts please? Thanks.

john

Phil Johnson writes:

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>reasonable, and is one basis for my atheistic embrace of moral absolutes. As
>Pennock says, we are "moral beings in an amoral" universe and it is up to us
>(not God) to give value, meaning and purpose to our lives.

Before answering your question, I need to clarify what you mean by moral absolutes.

If it is up to you (not God) to give value, meaning and purpose to your life, then can't you modify any supposed "moral absolutes" to the extent necessary to give value, meaning and purpose to your life?

I'm afraid your position as stated seems utterly incoherent to me, even granted your assumption of atheism. The question is not merely whether morality exists independent of God, but whether it exists independent of ourselves. If there are moral absolutes, then we do not live in an amoral universe. The universe is moral rather than amoral precisely because it contains moral absolutes, which I understand to mean inviolable moral principles which are not invented by humans.

On the other hand, if the universe is truly amoral, then morality must be something we create ourselves, in that quest to give meaning to our lives. If a divine command cannot create a genuine morality, then a fortiori a human command cannot do so either. In that case each individual is the supreme judge of morality in his own case, and will obey any supposed moral authority only to the extent that he thinks it is

reasonable to do so. Of course he also has to worry about the police, but that is merely a prudential concern.

Which is it that you believe?

Phil Johnson

John Donovan writes:

Hi Phil,

Ready? To start with, I think that we are confusing two separate issues here (my fault I think). The one is: what gives value, meaning and purpose to each of our lives and the other is: where does morality ultimately come from. The first is trivial and the second slightly more interesting because of the inherent connection to law.

On the first issue, I do think that it's up to EACH of us (not God) to give value, meaning and purpose to our lives and you might agree, recalling the adage "God helps those that help themselves". Do you really think that if I decide to sit around on my behind all day and watch TV, god will give my life value, meaning and purpose? I don't think so.

On the other issue, I do NOT think that it's up to EACH of us to decide what morality is, instead I think that it's up to ALL of us as a society, to continuously decide those questions. Of course it is (as you seem to agree), ultimately up to EACH of us to decide whether or not to adhere to society's moral code as it currently stands.

So to clarify your question about the meaning of the word "absolute", I suggest that morality is absolute only in the sense that it's not really up to each of us alone to decide morality, but instead up to society as a whole. This idea could be extended to a global society of course because obviously some societies are judged immoral by other societies. But in any case, to restate: We are moral or immoral beings (we get to decide), part of a moral society (that we together get to decide the morals of), that lives on a tiny speck of dust in an amoral universe.

(I think that it's the "tiny speck of dust in an amoral universe" part that makes most people turn to religion. To really irritate the heck out of you, I suspect that it's an evolutionary side effect of self awareness that undoubtedly has many wonderful survival benefits. So while it's not necessary for me (so far), I realize that it is very important for others, in order to deal with their existential angst, and that's ok with me as far as it goes.)

That reminds me, do you know the joke (supposedly taken from an actual legal transcript but then again maybe not):

Lawyer: Have you lived your whole life in this town?

Witness: Not yet.

Do I think that morals exist independently of humans? No. If a 10 km meteorite slammed into the earth today (hey, it's happened before) and wiped out the human race, then I do not think that morality would exist in the universe. Unless of course there is intelligent life elsewhere, but then it would probably have a somewhat different set of morals, don't you think?

So the question really is: where does our society derive its morality? You say god, but the problem with that is (as you know), God doesn't take out full page ads in the newspaper, so we are left with either to trust people who say they've talked with god (yeah, right) or to try and interpret an old book of stories and fables. What else is there?

I'm sure you don't believe people that claim to hear voices in their heads (how do you know if they're lying for example), so we are left with the bible. The main problem with this method is that the bible has been

interpreted throughout history and even down to the present to justify almost every evil that has been perpetrated by humans. So again it really comes down to: ALL of us as individuals and as a society get to decide what is good and what is not. After, can you trust anyone else to interpret the bible for you? I didn't think so. That's why there are a thousand religions out there (just counting the Christian ones).

Much more importantly, the issue extends to democracy and the rights of individuals, minorities and society as a whole. Even if a Christian society decides (based on the bible) that something is moral, e.g., slavery, as was the case for centuries, one can decide that it's not moral and try to persuade others of that belief, as eventually happened.

But if we believe only in moral absolutes derived from authority (that is, the person or persons authorized to interpret the bible), then we all risk being burned at the stake (or in an oven) for disagreeing with that authority, as often was and is still the case in some non-western countries today.

As Bronowski said, that is how a people behave when they believe that they have (god given or other) absolute (unquestionable) morality on their side. Bronowski also has a great quote (by Cromwell was it?), "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you might be mistaken".

That frame of mind is exactly why science generally has had enormous success in understanding nature, because science (when operating properly) trusts no authority. That is to say: all knowledge CAN in principle be questioned by anyone, because scientific knowledge is knowledge that is susceptible to falsification, unlike knowledge derived from the bible or god speaking inside my head.

I suspect you are a little unclear on this enlightenment concept; from what I have read you seem to advocate a return to the practice of appeal to the supernatural in science, as was often the case in the middle ages.

Please remember that this right to question authority (of any kind) is the foundation for the beautiful resonance between science and democracy that the men who wrote the constitution recognized so clearly. Did you know that the first six presidents were not orthodox christians but rather deists, not unlike unitarians today? I was quite surprised considering how they are usually portrayed in popular histories.

But it amazes me, that as a professor of law, you do not understand the essential conflict between having morality derived from supernatural authority and the imperfect but essential character of democracy in permitting challenges to legal and government authority by individuals or minorities. Do you really want a tyranny of the majority that believes it has absolute knowledge that cannot be questioned because it comes from god? (or at least they believe it comes from god)

The only real difference between the God given morality you advocate and that of the Taliban today, is that you and they choose to interpret different old books.
Gee, that wasn't too strong a statement was it?

I guess I should say: which book (if any) is used as the moral basis isn't important (both the bible and the koran have been endlessly interpreted for both good and for evil). What's really important is how we as society decide to interpret the chosen book (again if any). So ultimately we as society decide our morality. Sometimes in our effort to understand the meaning of those stories and fables and sometimes in just thinking and talking with each other about words and ideas in other great books.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this sort of thing, not that anyone ever changes their mind (unlike in science!).

john

Phil Johnson writes:

At 01:23 PM 4/20/01 -0700, you wrote:

>On the other issue, I do NOT think that it's up to EACH of us to decide what

>morality is, instead I think that it's up to ALL of us as a society, to
>continuously decide those questions. Of course it is (as you seem to agree),
>ultimately up to EACH of us to decide whether or not to adhere to society's
>moral code as it currently stands.

That's moral relativism, or perhaps pragmatism. You do not believe in moral absolutes at all, but think that morality is a human invention subject to continual change, and that society's morality is binding on you only to the extent you find it satisfactory. That's the most logical position for an atheist or agnostic to take. Making moral rules are not the central issue for Christians, by the way. Making and keeping rules was the morality of the scribes and pharisees, and Jesus found it very inadequate. The sin problem in the gospel is that people are not able to live up to the standards they know to be God's standards, because they are not in the right relation with God. God's standards are not arbitrary commands, but are built into the very fabric of creation. For example, adultery is bad because of the nature of men and women and the marriage relationship. Hence the badness of adultery can be ascertained by natural law reasoning independent of the Ten Commandments, but we reason on the basis of the created order, and even our ability to reason is created by God and in his image. So to say that we have reasoning powers superior to God's, by which we can correct his mistaken moral commands, would be an absurdity.

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>in understanding nature, because science (when operating properly) trusts no
>authority. That is to say: all knowledge CAN in principle be questioned by
>anyone, because scientific knowledge is knowledge that is susceptible to
>falsification, unlike knowledge derived from the bible or god speaking
>inside my head.

That is precisely my objection to Darwinism, and the scientific materialism from which it springs. Darwinism is a dogma based on philosophy, and it is effectively protected from falsification by loaded definitions and rules of reasoning. My colleagues and I are currently engaged in a project to change that situation. We are making considerable progress, as evidenced by recent page one stories in the Los Angeles Times and New York Times, as well as the publication of many books. I refer you to the literature at the web sites below in case you wish to become better informed about the state of the debate.

Best wishes,

Phillip Johnson

For information on important new books, see www.wedgeoftruth.com and www.iconsofevolution.com; for schedule, general information, and articles see www.arn.org, www.discovery.org, and <http://members.iinet.net.au/~sejones/index.html>

John Donovan writes:

Phil,
This is fun.

I see that you took great pains to not respond to my main point that no one can know what God (if you even assume that he is not simply solace for those suffering from existential angst) really intends. How can you claim that it is not really up to those who believe in him (or her) to decide how to interpret 'his words'. What else is there?

For example the ten commandments say "thou shalt not kill", but that has been interpreted by the religious from pacifism to genocide. So this moral absolutism you proclaim is simply yours and others agreed upon timely moral agenda. You certainly don't share the same morality of everyone that also believes or has

believed in God, so where is the absolutism? Where is your direct telephone line to God? Please respond directly to this point. (See below our discussion of physical and social constraints on morality for more on this)

Science on the other hand, CAN test it's theories against physical reality. What exactly can you test your absolutes against? Nothing, because they are simply assertions of belief. I think that the religious Right and the spiritual Left simply suffer from science envy, which is I think the main motive underneath both intelligent design creationism and pseudo-science. Isn't your faith strong enough by itself?

You wrote previously:

>If a divine command cannot create a genuine morality, then a fortiori a human command cannot do so either.

Well professor, I'm not up too much on my Latin, but that is an interesting use of the word "genuine" I must say, a little gratuitous perhaps? Who decides "genuine", you?

I didn't say that a divine command cannot create, only that what you call divine command is simply your own moral beliefs that are sometimes shared by other religious persons, sometimes not. You only claim they are God-given because you want to protect them from critique, but fortunately we have the Constitution for free speech, which sadly both the religious Right and the politically correct Left want to emasculate.

Interesting word: "emasculate", huh? I thought it very telling that in the Firing Line debate that Buckley used that word to sum up the anti-evolution side's success in attacking the pro-evolution arguments.

>Hence the badness of adultery can be ascertained by natural
>law reasoning independent of the Ten Commandments, but we reason on the
>basis of the created order, and even our ability to reason is created by
>God and in his image. So to say that we have reasoning powers superior to
>God's, by which we can correct his mistaken moral commands, would be an
>absurdity.

Nothing absurd about it, but again you misstate me. In fact your argument above presupposes the point you are trying to prove and I bet you don't even see it. (Here's a hint: if I had granted to you that we and our ability to reason were created by God, then it would be absurd...)

In fact you are on to something here: the physical and social world DOES constrain morality and without God stepping in to decide for us. That is in fact exactly where conventions of morality meet the test, in the REAL world. God sure doesn't come down and let us know which is what. It's up to us.

Humans have been around far longer than the ten commandments and have obviously wrestled with these issues since they could talk about it (and probably even before that non-verbally). The ten commandments (like the code of Hammurabi and others) were one of many attempts to balance the rights and responsibilities of individuals and society and there is nothing wrong with that.

It's only when people attempt to insulate their ideas or morals from critique by cloaking them in "God-given" that we get some pretty awful human behavior, like the Taliban. Can't you see that? It would be nice to get a direct response to this point.

I've read before your claim that darwinism is dogma, but you miss the mark consistently. Like all scientific theories, the current theory of evolution can be improved upon, probably significantly. Can your bible be improved upon? I thought not. That, sir, is the difference between dogma and science. Try to remember it please.

Your turn.

john

Phil Johnson writes:

>Phil,
>This is fun.

I only meant to answer your question, but it seems you have planned on a full-scale aggressive debate over the existence of God and so on. No thanks.

>It's only when people attempt to insulate their ideas or morals from
>critique by cloaking them in "God-given" that we get some pretty awful human
>behavior, like the Taliban. Can't you see that? It would be nice to get a
>direct response to this point.

Dogmatism is indeed one of the roots of violence. Scientific materialists can do every bit as good a job of insulating themselves from critique by cloaking their dogmas in the mantle of science. Go to the Marxists for a more murderous variety of dogmatist than even the Taliban.

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>consistently. Like all scientific theories, the current theory of evolution
>can be improved upon, probably significantly. Can your bible be improved
>upon? I thought not. That, sir, is the difference between dogma and science.
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Your arguments please yourself very much, and that is fine with me.

Phil Johnson

John Donovan writes:

Hi Phil,
I have no desire to debate the existence of God with you (it is empty meta-physics for one thing), rather I wish only to debate where it is you claim to obtain your morality from. Since you are obviously intelligent, there is some chance I could perhaps introduce a seed of doubt into your "God given" world view.

But after all, the existence of God is a valid line of questioning even for this more limited subject since I would have thought that a god-given morality assumes the existence of God. Examining your opponent's implicit assumptions is one way to conduct rational discussion isn't it? But if it bothers you, I will leave it alone.

Here's a quote that you might find amusing:

"It is hard to say whether the doctors of law or divinity have made the greater advances in the lucrative business of mystery"

-Burke

I'm glad you agree that dogmatism breeds intolerance and violence, and yes I agree also, Marxism was horrible, I think more were people killed than by the Nazis. But if I may try to anticipate your direction, I hope you realize that Scientific Marxism is about as scientific as Scientology, so that's not a very pertinent point to make in our discussion.

What both Marxism and the Taliban do have in common, though, are political systems based on the belief that the leaders alone have absolute truth without doubt on their side. I am relieved to hear you say that you abhor both systems. Yet, you claim moral absolutism and so does the Taliban to justify their repression. How does your moral absolutism differ from theirs? I would appreciate a clear answer on this question.

Here is my main point: your moral absolutism is neither. First, it is not moral, because certainty is dogma. When one is convinced that one cannot be wrong because his knowledge or morality is god given, then there begins the bloody trail of divine kings and infallible priests. If you lived three hundred years ago, whose side would you be on, the people or the kings and priests? I would sincerely like to hear your answer on this also.

As an academic it would be sad if you have deserted the honorable tradition of university freethinking that has ultimately freed much of humanity from despots and religious wars today.

Second, your moral absolutism is not absolute either. You get your ethics like you put your pants on one leg at a time: just like everyone else. You do not have a direct line to God, rather you think about morality and you interpret books and other writings according to your fashion just like the atheist.

You want to claim that there is something unique and special about your morality to protect it from criticism, but it's really no more special than anyone else who thinks long and hard about these things. I suggest that is YOU that wants to insulate your views from critique by "invoking" the mantle of God. After all, if I did grant that your views are God given, then indeed it would be absurd for me to critique them, isn't that so?

In fact I would suggest that your morality is actually less morally absolute than the atheist in the plain sense that because you believe in the supernatural, your morality is LESS constrained by physical and social reality. For the believer, anything goes (those voices in your head again). What, exactly, is so absolute about obtaining morality from voices in your head?

Phil, with all due respect, if you mean my arguments do not please you, then I am not unhappy, but whether I enjoy my arguments or not is not very much to the point, which is: Can the bible be improved upon or is it unquestionable dogma? If you answered that question, perhaps it might at least solve the dogma argument for us.

In any case you really ought to try and understand the difference between dogma and science, it really is important. That is, unless you actually want a return to the dark ages. In that case you should probably resist understanding as much as possible.

Dogma, as I understand it, is that which is impervious to change or question, science is that which must be susceptible to revision or even reversal. I know many, many scientists and none of them "invoke the mantle of science" to avoid critique. That would be regarded as total intellectual cowardice. You really should join some scientific seminars here some time to see how little (if anything) is sacred in scientific debate. It is honorable in science to question and it's a lot of fun too. I think that you would really be surprised how well it works. Not perfectly, but for a human enterprise, not too badly either.

Actually I suspect that you already know all this, since this is exactly how science has progressed and I think that you will not deny the obvious fact: science does work.

Ever had your blood pressure measured? Three hundred years ago it was accepted that blood did not circulate, but that view was challenged and overturned as many others have been. Now centuries later, if you need a heart bypass, you will probably not only survive, but recover completely. These advances were not accomplished by "dogma" so far as I can tell.

But since what you seem to want is god-given certainty without doubt, you must therefore fear rational discourse, democracy and science. I suspect you might have been happier had you been born before the Enlightenment.

Speaking of which, here's an appropriate quotation:

"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is ridiculous"
-Voltaire

Here's one I just made up:

The most profound answer in religion: I know. The most profound answer in science: I don't know.

To paint with a very broad brush, I would say that there are basically two types of people in the world: those that live in fear of doubt and not knowing and those that find uncertainty and the unknown wonderfully exciting. I think that you can identify these groups easily enough.

I will summarize my questions for your convenience:

1. Since like the atheist you do not have a telephone line direct to God, how exactly does the process by which you obtain your morality differ from that of the atheist?
2. How exactly does your absolute morality differ from other absolute moralities used to enslave and oppress humanity throughout history and today (e.g. the Taliban)?
3. Webster defines "dogma" as "doctrines put forth by some authority". Since God is the ultimate authority (at least in your book), how can you call your morality obtained from God anything other than dogma?

john

Phil Johnson writes:

Sorry, but you are wasting my time. All this rant about "moral absolutism" comes straight out of your own confused imagination, and has nothing to do with my writing. If you think you have something important to say, then by all means publish it to the world.

Phil Johnson