

# **Why, Despite All The Protests, We Really Can't Be Good Without God**

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## **1. Introduction**

A few years ago, I was having lunch with an old friend in a vegetarian pizza restaurant in London. Now I'm no fan of vegetarian food—I think I'm persuaded by the argument that the word “vegetarian” is derived from an old German word that means “bad hunter”. However, my friend, Garth, had just started dating a devout Buddhist, so he was not merely eating vegetarian, but vegan.

Halfway through the meal, I looked up from my lentil and sawdust pizza to see Garth surreptitiously produce a small plastic container from his pocket: he opened it and shook out the contents over his pizza.

“What's that?” I asked.

“Tuna,” he hissed in a whisper.

“Tuna?” I said.

“Shhhh!” Garth hissed. “Not every vegan takes the liberal approach that I do. Besides,” he added, “I don't know what all the fuss is. So I eat fish. Big deal. Fish doesn't count as meat, does it? It can't be meat if it lives in water.”

“You claim to be a vegan and you eat fish?” I asked.

“Yes. And prawns, crab, shellfish, lobster, that kind of thing.”

“Strangest vegan I've ever met,” I said.

“Duck, too,” he added.

“Duck?!?”

“Well, they live in water don't they.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said, “ you're claiming to be a vegan—telling your girlfriend, your colleagues, and your family that you're a vegan, subjecting your friends to vegan restaurants—all the while chowing down on anything that moves. Why not just come clean and admit you're an omnivore like the rest of us: it's the hypocrisy that galls me.”

“*Hypocrisy?*” Garth said, looking genuinely offended. “I thought you'd be more, well, progressive. And besides, who says that *you* get to define what the word 'vegan' means? Who died and pronounced you King of the Dictionary? I *say* 'vegan' to me means 'occasionally eats meat when there is a vowel in the month'. How dare you tell me *your* meaning of the word trumps mine.”

## 2. The Claim: “Atheists Can Be Good Without God”

The idea that words can mean whatever somebody wants them too is widespread in our culture, especially among many of my atheist friends. The tendency is particularly noticeable when it comes to any words that have anything to do with morality, or ethics, or goodness. Many atheist friends and many atheist writers live in a very black and white, very moral universe: violence, aggression, intolerance, ignorance and, of course, religion and superstition are *bad*. Conversely, humanism, kindness, generosity, science, technology and progress are *good*. And lying behind all of this moralising is a key idea: that atheists do not need God to be good. Listen to Alom Shaha, former Muslim, now an atheist, and author of *The Young Atheist’s Handbook*:

Despite not believing in God, and not believing in an afterlife where I might be rewarded or punished for my behaviour, I try to be a good person. That’s the most any of us can do.<sup>1</sup>

You get the idea: atheists can be good without God: but is it true?

## 3. “What Does The Word ‘Good’ Mean?”

I often think this whole subject of goodness, God and atheism is a little like two kittens and a ball of string, in that it can pretty tangled pretty quickly, largely because asking “Can we be good without God?” is completely the *wrong* question. The question is not “Can an atheist do something good?”—of course they can. An atheist can *know* the right thing and *do* the right thing. Rather the question is a much more profound one: does “good” actually exist? What does the word “good” actually mean?

Like my lunchtime discussion with my friend about the word “vegan”, we need to ask the question: who gets to define what the word “good” means? Can anybody define it? Traditionally, “goodness” was grounded in the character of God. So what happens if you throw God out—what happens to goodness?

The atheist Arthur Leff, who taught for many years at the prestigious Yale University in the USA, once made an observation. He said that moral claims (e.g. “You *ought* to help old ladies across the road”; “You *ought not* poke badgers with a stick”; “Generosity *is* good”; “Stealing donuts *is* bad”)—are *authority* claims and to any authority claim, we can respond like the school bully or the town drunk and cry “Yeah? Sez *who*?”

In the absence of God, says Leff, there are but two choices: you either turn every individual person into a little godlet, able to decide good and evil for themselves: but then who evaluates

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<sup>1</sup> Alom Shaha, *The Young Atheist’s Handbook* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2012) 45.

between them when there are clashes between godlet claims? Alternatively, you can turn the state into God and let it determine good and evil, but then might becomes right and you have sheer, naked brutality. But in either case, whenever another godlet, or the state, tells you that anything is good, right, or the Proper Thing To Do, you can look them squarely in the eye and sneer: “Really, sez *who*?” Leff ends his essay by pointing out that there is only one solution to this—and that would be if goodness were something *bigger* than us, something outside of us. Only then could ethics, morality and law actually work. Leff writes:

Only if ethics were something unspeakable by us, could law be unnatural, and therefore unchallengeable. As things now stand, everything is up for grabs.

Nevertheless:

Napalming babies is bad.

Starving the poor is wicked.

Buying and selling each other is depraved.

Those who stood up to and died resisting Hitler, Stalin, Amin, and Pol Pot—and General Custer too—have earned salvation.

Those who acquiesced deserve to be damned.

There is in the world such a thing as evil.

[All together now:] Sez who?

God help us.<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Three Failed Attempts to Ground Goodness Without God**

Now when I make this point to atheist friends, I often get the response “Hang on just a minute! Surely there are *plenty* of ways we can determine good and evil, morality and ethics without God.” There are two common ways that have been tried: by appealing to society, or by appealing to science.

##### **4.1 Society**

One suggestion that atheists have made is that morality is a products of human society. Over time, a kind of shared morality emerges—we generally agree that people should not be allowed to rape and murder at will, for example—and thus our moral code gradually emerges.

In his book *The God Delusion*, Dawkins goes this route, describing what he calls the “Moral Zeitgeist”. Not merely is this a God-free ethic, but for Dawkins, it’s an *improving* ethic, getting better and better year after year, as societies enact more and more progressive legislation. Here he is in full swing:

Some of us lag behind the advancing wave of the changing moral *Zeitgeist* and some of us are slightly ahead. But most of us in the twenty-first century are bunched together and way ahead of our counterparts in the Middle Ages, or in the time of Abraham, or even as

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1249.

recently as the 1920s. The whole wave keeps moving ... Of course, the advance is not a smooth incline, but a meandering sawtooth ... But over the longer timescale, the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue.<sup>3</sup>

It's a popular idea and there are clearly some elements of truth to it. But there are a huge number of problems, too. First, there is the problem that just because a value is shared, does not automatically make it good. Just consider the example of the Third Reich. Surely it doesn't matter that the majority of the German people at the time agreed with Hitler, he was still wrong.

Nor does the problem necessarily go away if one could theoretically find laws that *every* society agreed upon. After all, for most of human history, most societies shared the belief that people could own other people. Slavery was common to most cultures. Did that shared approval make it moral?<sup>4</sup>

But then there's a third and even bigger problem with the Moral Zeitgeist idea. It's all very well to speak of moral "progress" but progress *to where*? Progress implies a direction, doesn't it? If my wife phones me whilst I'm hiking in the mountains and asks, "How's the hike going?" and I reply, "I'm progressing", she'll assume I am *nearer* my destination, rather than lost in the wilderness with one boot missing and my sandwiches stolen by a gang of marauding squirrels. So then, to *where* is society morally progressing: what's the destination? How will we know when we've arrived, will there be a sign and a teashop? If not, then what's the Magical Moral Standard enabling us to look at our culture today and say this is *better* than it was back *then*, if society *itself* determines what 'good' means?

## 4.2 Science

Spotting the problem with trying to use society to determine morality and goodness, other atheists have leapt upon science as a way to solve their problem. Well-known atheist Sam Harris goes this way. He argues like this:<sup>5</sup>

- Questions about morality are nothing more than questions about happiness;
- Science can tell us how to make the greatest number of people happy;
- Therefore science can answer moral questions.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld, 2006) 303.

<sup>4</sup> This point is well made by Abdu H. Murray, *Grand Central Question: Answering the Critical Concerns of the Major Worldviews* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014) 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> See Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2011) 1-2, 8.

Now Harris' argument is not particularly new. What he's essentially advancing is a moral theory known as utilitarianism, that goes back to two English philosophers, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.<sup>6</sup> They basically argued that when you're faced with a moral choice, you must pick that action which will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

But does it work? Not really. First, it quickly leads to some curious problems. Suppose we have four people sitting in the front row: a professor of medicine who is working on a cure for cancer, a leading philanthropist who gives millions to charity, a world famous politician about to solve the Middle East crisis and finally, an unemployed layabout. The professor has a failing heart, the philanthropist two dodgy kidneys, and the politician's liver is waving a white flag. The layabout is perfectly healthy. Could we therefore euthanize him (we would anaesthetize him first, so it's painless) and use his parts to repair the other three? Wouldn't that result in much greater happiness? Most people would balk at the suggestion.

A second question is why make happiness your target? Why not aim to maximise knowledge, or compassion, or bravery, or stamp-collecting? Science cannot tell us *why* we should value happiness over and above all other virtues or pursuits. Indeed, to paraphrase John Stuart Mill: "Better to be an unhappy Socrates than a very happy pig."

There is one other problem with trying to use science to determine morality and it is best illustrated by the life of one of the most famous chemists of the twentieth century—his name was Louis Frederick Fieser.<sup>7</sup> He was instrumental in developing the first artificial synthesis of vitamin K, necessary for blood coagulation, a discovery that has saved thousands of lives. But Fieser invented something else. In 1942, the US army asked him to develop a chemical weapon that could burn tracts of jungle and eliminate troops. Fieser and his team at Harvard invented Napalm, a gel that sticks to human bodies when it burns. On 9 March 1945, 1,700 tons were dropped on Tokyo, burning 100,000 civilians to death. Fieser later wrote: "I have no right to judge the morality of Napalm just because I invented it."

Perhaps you can justify Fieser's discovery in the wider context of the Second World War—although when you see how Napalm was used in Vietnam, it gets harder.<sup>8</sup> Fieser's story is a salutary reminder that science can harm as well as hurt. Science can help us develop technology,

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<sup>6</sup> See the excellent overview in Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2010) 31-57.

<sup>7</sup> The following account is taken from Alister McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and How We Make Sense of Things* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 88-89.

<sup>8</sup> Fieser himself is reported to have said: "I have no right to judge the morality of Napalm just because I invented it." (Source: *Time* magazine, January 5, 1968).

but it cannot tell us whether it is right or wrong that a discovery is used in a particular way. Indeed, the more science we do, the more questions of ethics are raised—science actually generates moral questions; what it doesn't do is help to solve them.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. No Escape From Morality

Despite all the myriad difficulties that beset attempts to talk about goodness without God, morality is *everywhere*, we simply cannot escape it. We open our mouths and we make moral judgements *all the time*. Mandela and Martin Luther King are *moral*; those who cheat at sports are *immoral*. My atheist friends, for all of the protests, simply cannot be consistent moral nihilists. It's all very well for Richard Dawkins to write things like this:

The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.<sup>10</sup>

... but one simply cannot live that out in the real world. Nobody—not even Richard Dawkins—*actually* believes that human beings are just little marionettes whose strings are jerked by their DNA, because we want to be able to talk about good and evil, justice and injustice.

So how do we talk meaningfully about goodness? Well, in closing I want to suggest that you cannot talk meaningfully about “goodness” without talking about “purpose”. Goodness and purpose are connected. Suppose I try and hammer in a nail with my watch and it breaks: does that make it a *bad* watch? No, because I have misunderstood its purpose. A watch is a “good watch” if it fulfils its purpose—telling the time. The word “good” is meaningless unless we know something's purpose. Thus if you claim “I am a good person” you are basically saying “I am doing what a human being was *designed* to do.”

So what is the *purpose* of a human life? Well, if atheism is true: nothing. You're just a random collection of atoms, thrown up by the tides of time and chaos. But what if atheism isn't true? Perhaps there is then a different answer: what might a Christian say to this question?

Well that brings us to Jesus.

Jesus was often asked about morality and goodness. For instance, Jesus was once asked: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Old Testament?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first

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<sup>9</sup> See Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), chapter 6, esp. 161-163.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 133.

and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”<sup>11</sup>

Love God, love neighbour, and the two, Jesus says, are connected. Why? Because it is from God that we derive our purpose. What is the purpose of humankind? To worship God and enjoy him forever. Without God, we are purposeless and rudderless. Without God, too, you and your neighbour have no value—Dawkins would be entirely correct: you’d be just a genetic puppet. Asking you to love your neighbour would be meaningless: you might as well love an empty coffee cup.

Love God, love neighbour. Only those two together and intricately connected can form a foundation—or a peg on which to hang, in Jesus’ imagery—morality and goodness.

But one final thought. Every other attempt at morality and ethics is performance-based: do *this*, because of what you might *achieve* (your genes passed on; society’s approval; happiness). Christianity, by contrast, is a *response*. Look what God has done for us in Jesus Christ: now, on that basis, go and live differently.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ. Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 22:34-40.

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:5-11.