Resolved: Moral systems rooted in theism are preferable to non-theistic moral systems.

About the Topic Analysis

This document aims to provide a brief introduction to the new topic to students and coaches. The provided analysis is not intended to be used to limit topic interpretation. We encourage all students to conduct additional independent research to explore additional viewpoints, arguments and strategies.

All participants are expected to create an environment conducive to open discourse, where all points of view are considered, and interactions are conducted with respect. Students, as always, should uphold the Code of Honor and rules set forth in the Unified Manual when developing and presenting their arguments on this topic.

How We Choose Our Topics

Note: This topic had a slight wording adjustment on September 30, 2025 based on the Competition and Rules Leadership Committee recommendation.

In 2026-2027, a wording committee will be created to develop potential topics. If you are interested, please apply to be part of that committee and suggest potential topics for the next school year at the NSDA topic creation hub!

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

The Resolution

Topic Analysis

In many ancient civilizations, moral systems have been a key part of human civilization. The principles, icons, and guidance that these moral systems created provided a guiding light as civilizations from around the world developed and grew. Commandments, divine laws, and religious narratives provided clear guidelines for moral conduct. These doctrines often promised divine rewards for adherence and punishment for disobedience. The idea that morality must come from a divine source was the dominant view in many cultures for eons. Challenges to this view often arose during periods of significant intellectual or social change, such as the Enlightenment, which saw the rise of secular philosophy and a greater emphasis on human reason. As we entered the modern age, traditionally held religious views were shaped and changed by new thinking and current events. Today, the debate over the roots of morality is a hotly contested issue.

The year's Big Questions resolution, “Resolved: Moral systems rooted in theism are preferable to non-theistic moral systems” puts us into one of humanity’s oldest and most profound philosophical debates. It puts us at the center of an examination of the very foundations of the moral systems that early humans used as a building block for civilization and what role those systems play today. How do theistic societies compare to non-theistic societies? This guide will explore the intellectual background, historical changes, current relevance, and the critical nuances of the resolution's wording. It will also offer strategic considerations for students and coaches as they explore the resolution.

It is important to note that the resolution is not intended as a judgment about the personal morality of individual debaters or members of any belief community. Many societies, both religious and non-religious, lead moral existences and contribute positively to global order. Instead, this resolution should be understood as a philosophical claim about the origins and foundations of morality in general. Framing the topic this way keeps the debate focused on systems and philosophical frameworks rather than personal identities. The central question is not “Is one particular religion better than any other?” Instead, this topic is a question of "Is a moral system rooted in religious tradition better than a non-theistic society?"

At its core, this resolution grapples with fundamental questions about the origin and nature of morality. What compels societies to form just systems of laws, moral standards, social safety nets, and compassion for their citizens? Is it an innate human capacity, a product of societal conditioning, or a directive from a higher power? The affirmative side of this debate typically maintains that theistic societies are preferable.

The affirmative team has the burden of demonstrating why a moral system rooted in theism is the better option. Their case often rests on three pillars: objectivity, motivation, and purpose. A theistic system can provide a basis for objective morality. Without a divine anchor, moral values can be seen as subjective human preferences or cultural constructs. This leads to the problem of moral relativism, where there is no universal standard to condemn actions like genocide. The affirmative can argue that a statement like “harming an innocent person is wrong” is not just an opinion, but a universally true moral fact. They would contend that this fact is best explained by a transcendent, objective moral lawgiver who is the

ultimate source of all good. In this view, morality isn't something we invented; it's something we discover.

The affirmative can focus on moral motivation and accountability. Theistic systems often provide a powerful incentive for moral behavior: divine judgment and the promise of eternal consequences or rewards. The belief in an all-knowing God who sees every action provides a strong motivation for individuals to act morally, even when no one else is watching. The affirmative can argue that non-theistic systems, which lack this ultimate accountability, may struggle to compel individuals to make genuine sacrifices for the greater good, especially when it goes against their self-interest. While empathy and social contracts are important, they might not be enough to prevent a person from committing an immoral act if they believe they can get away with it.

Finally, the affirmative can argue that theism provides a deeper sense of purpose for being moral. Many religious traditions frame morality not just as a set of rules, but as a way of living in harmony with a divine will or purpose. Moral actions are an expression of love for God and for one's fellow human beings. This gives morality a profound, life-affirming meaning that the affirmative would argue is absent from non-theistic systems. For example, a utilitarian may act morally to maximize happiness, but a theist might act morally because it fulfills their purpose in a divinely created world.

Conversely, the negative must demonstrate why non-theistic systems are preferable. Their case will be a philosophical argument that their moral framework is superior. This case often centers on autonomy, consistency, and universality.

A primary negative argument is that non-theistic systems promote moral autonomy and critical thinking. They argue that a truly moral act is one that is chosen freely, based on one’s own reasoned understanding of right and wrong, not out of obedience to an authority figure. They might introduce the Euthyphro Dilemma, a classic philosophical problem that asks: Is something good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is already good? If it's the former, morality is arbitrary. If it's the latter, morality exists independently of God, making a divine being unnecessary for morality. This critique suggests that theistic moral systems can be logically inconsistent.

The negative can also argue that non-theistic systems are more consistent and adaptable. They can point to historical instances where religious texts and authorities were used to justify what are now considered immoral acts, such as slavery, sexism, and religious persecution. They would argue that a system rooted in human reason and empathy is better equipped to adapt to changing social contexts and correct past moral mistakes. A system that relies on human reason and empathy allows for moral progress and the evolution of our ethical understanding.

Finally, the negative will highlight the universality and practicality of non-theistic moral systems. These frameworks, such as deontology and utilitarianism, are not tied to a specific faith, ancient text, or divine revelation. They can be understood and applied by anyone, regardless of their religious beliefs. Principles like “do no harm” or “treat others as you would want to be treated” are common across cultures and can form a basis for a truly global, pluralistic society. The negative would contend that this accessibility makes non-theistic systems a more stable and inclusive foundation for morality in a diverse world.

Philosophically, scholars throughout history have also developed comprehensive secular ethical systems such as utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics, that do not rely on divine revelation. Crucially, the

existence of millions of atheists, agnostics, and humanists who lead moral and ethical lives and contribute positively to society without adhering to religious doctrines serves as empirical evidence against the necessity of faith for morals and ethics. The classic Euthyphro Dilemma, posed by Plato, further challenges the idea of divine command as the sole source of goodness. This dilemma asks whether something is good because God commands it, or whether God commands it because it is good. If the latter, then goodness exists independently of God; if the former, then morality becomes arbitrary. This ongoing philosophical tension underscores that the debate is not merely academic but touches on deeply held convictions about human nature, societal structure, and the very meaning of existence.

The relationship between religion and society has been a central theme in philosophical and societal discourse since ancient times. In ancient civilizations, particularly in the West, morality was often inextricably linked with divine will, with early codes like the Code of Hammurabi or the Ten Commandments presented as divinely ordained and the foundation for nations. Even as early as ancient Greece, Plato's Euthyphro dialog directly confronted the idea of divine command as the sole source of societal goodness. This laid the groundwork for arguments that morality might exist independent of religion.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle focused on virtue and human success as the path to a good life that was largely separate from theological mandates. During the Medieval period, particularly within the Abrahamic based religions, religious institutions became the primary deciders of moral conduct. Thinkers like Thomas Aquinas sought to reconcile faith and reason, arguing for Natural Law, the idea that God's moral order is discernible through human reason and observation. This concept suggested that some moral truths could be known without direct revelation, though still originating from a divine source.

A significant shift occurred during the Enlightenment, as philosophers began to emphasize human reason and individual autonomy as the foundation for morality, rather than solely relying on divine command. Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative proposed a universal moral law derived from reason. He stated that moral duties are binding regardless of personal desires or religious beliefs. David Hume explored the role of moral sentiments (empathy and sympathy) in shaping our ethical judgments.

The Enlightenment saw the rise of secular humanism. Humanism states that humans can be ethical and moral without religion or belief in a god. In the 19th and 20th centuries, figures like Friedrich Nietzsche challenged traditional religious morality, and existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized human freedom and responsibility in creating their own values in a godless universe. More recently, the "New Atheist" movement from the likes of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris have actively argued that religion is not only unnecessary for morality but can even be detrimental. They advocate for a morality based on scientific understanding, empathy, and human flourishing.

Despite these intellectual shifts, a significant portion of the global population continues to believe that religion is the essential bedrock of morality, making this an enduring and perpetually relevant debate.

The question of the resolution is far from an abstract discussion question. It has profound implications for modern society. It influences everything from global politics to personal ethics. In increasingly diverse and secular societies, the debate impacts how we discuss public ethics. If morality requires religious belief, then societies with declining religious adherence might be perceived as facing a moral crisis. This could fuel arguments for maintaining religious influence in public life. Conversely, if morality is

independent of religion, then a secular state can still be a moral state, and public ethics can be built on shared human values.

The universality of human rights is often debated through the following question: Are human rights divinely endowed or are they a product of international consensus and evolving moral understanding? This impacts how different nations approach justice, equality, human rights, and human dignity. This is especially true when religious doctrines clash with secular human rights norms. In many countries, “culture wars” over moral issues like abortion, euthanasia, or marriage equality often become proxy battles between religious and secular worlds. These directly tap into the underlying assumption about the source of moral authority. While religion has been associated with both peace and conflict, its dual role highlights the complexity of directly linking religious belief to moral outcomes. Finally, rapid advancements in fields like artificial intelligence and biotechnology present novel ethical challenges that traditional religious texts may not directly address, necessitating a broader ethical discourse capable of engaging both religious and secular perspectives.

Advice Before Starting This Topic

For Students:

Foster Respectful Dialogue. This topic is broad, but we always want to remain respectful of others. This topic can touch on deeply held beliefs. Emphasize that the debate is an intellectual exercise on a philosophical claim, not a judgment of anyone's personal faith or lack thereof. Create space for open discussion.

Go Beyond the “Why”: Understand the “How.” Don't just research why people are moral; dig into how each system functions. For the affirmative, understand the nuances of different theistic frameworks. Is it divine command theory, natural law, or something else? For the negative, don't just say non-theistic systems exist; research specific ones like utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Knowing the specific mechanisms of each system will allow you to make more precise and compelling arguments.

Anticipate the Euthyphro Dilemma. This is the single most common philosophical critique of theistic morality. The affirmative must have a pre-prepared, well-rehearsed response to it. A good response will show that morality is not arbitrary but is rooted in God’s unchanging, perfectly good nature. The negative must be prepared to articulate the dilemma clearly and explain why it’s a fundamental problem for the affirmative’s case.

Use Historical and Current Examples Responsibly. Both sides can use history, but be careful. The affirmative can point to moral progress inspired by religious movements (i.e., the Civil Rights Movement). The negative can point to historical atrocities committed in the name of religion (i.e., the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition). Frame these examples not as a critique of people or a particular religion, but as evidence of a system’s practical outcomes. This keeps the debate focused on the philosophical resolution and not on personal attacks.

Define and Defend Your Terms. The word “preferable” is the central point of contention. Both teams must define what it means to them. Does it mean more logical? More motivating? More practical? More inclusive? A definition will give your arguments a clear purpose. For instance, if the affirmative says, “preferable means a system that provides a clear, objective standard,” they can use that to structure their entire case.

Focus on the Foundation, Not the Follower. The resolution is about moral systems, not people. Avoid saying “religious people are more moral” or “atheists can't be moral.” This is inaccurate and

unproductive. Instead, argue that one system provides a better philosophical foundation for morality than the other.

For Coaches:

Foster Respectful Dialogue. As the leader of your classroom/team, it is important to lead by example. This debate resolution is a chance for exploration. Create a space that makes students excited to explore new areas of a topic they may never have thought about before.

Establish Ground Rules Early. The first class session on this topic should include a conversation about respect. Make it clear that this is a philosophical exercise and that personal beliefs are not on trial. Encourage students to critique ideas, not people. Remind them to use phrases like “the non-theistic system argues...” instead of ‘atheists believe’...”

Provide a “Philosophical Toolkit.” Before students begin their research, give them a brief, accessible overview of key concepts. Introduce them to Divine Command Theory, the Euthyphro Dilemma, utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. You don't need to make them experts but giving them the basic vocabulary will make their research and argument construction much more effective.

Encourage Cross-Sided Research. Require students to research both sides of the resolution. This is perhaps the most important piece of advice. A student who deeply understands the opposition's best arguments will be far better prepared to counter them. This exercise also helps build empathy and intellectual humility.

Emphasize Rebuttal and Refutation. The heart of any good debate is clash. Teach students to actively listen to their opponent's arguments and to directly refute them. For example, a good rebuttal isn’t just “my side is right,” but “my opponent claims that non-theistic systems are more flexible, but I argue that this very flexibility leads to moral relativism and a lack of clear standards.”

Role-Play with Diverse Perspectives. Have students practice debating in different roles. Have them argue for theism one day and non-theism the next. This helps them internalize both sides of the issue. Consider having a discussion where students explore the topic from the perspective of a historian, a sociologist, or a psychologist, to show that morality can be viewed from multiple academic lenses.

The Resolution's Wording and Definitions

To begin the discussion of these definitions, it is important to address the concept of "terms of art". A term of art is a word or phrase that has a specific, technical meaning within a particular field or discipline, which may differ from its common, everyday usage. This is distinct from defining the words in a phrase individually, where each word's general definition is considered separately. A term of art is preferred in fields like law, philosophy, and science because it ensures precision and avoids ambiguity. For instance, in a legal context, "assault and battery" is a single term of art with a specific legal meaning, even though the words "assault" and "battery" have distinct definitions. By using a term of art, professionals can communicate complex ideas concisely and accurately, knowing that the phrase will be understood with its intended technical meaning, rather than relying on a potential misinterpretation of its component parts. This precision is vital for clarity and consistency.

Moral systems:

Definition: "A framework of rules, values, and beliefs that a person or group uses to determine what is right or wrong, and how to act."

This is the most crucial phrase for establishing the scope of the debate. It forces both sides to discuss frameworks, not individuals. The debate is about the logical structure and internal consistency of a system, not the morality of a specific person or group of people.

Affirmative Strategy: The affirmative can use this to their advantage by arguing that their system (theistic morality) provides a more systematic, coherent, and a-priori foundation for morality. They can claim non-theistic systems are an eclectic set of rules that lack a unified theoretical basis.

Negative Strategy: The negative can counter this by arguing that non-theistic systems are not a monolith but a diverse range of well-defined philosophical frameworks (utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics). They can argue that this variety and flexibility is a strength, as it allows people to choose a system that best fits their understanding of ethics. They can also use this to show that a single "theistic moral system" doesn't exist, as interpretations vary greatly across religions

Source: "Moral Systems." Ethics Unwrapped, The University of Texas at Austin, 2024, https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/moral-systems.

Rooted in theism:

Definition: “The belief in the existence of a god or gods, specifically of a creator who intervenes in the universe.”

This phrase defines the source of the moral system for the affirmative. Morality must be fundamentally derived from a belief in God. A popular theory here is Divine Command Theory, which says an action is moral because God commands it. The affirmative can also use other theories, like Natural Law Theory, which argues that morality is inherent in the universe because it was created by a divine being.

Affirmative Strategy: The affirmative can use this phrase to their advantage by arguing that the term "rooted in" implies a strong, foundational connection that provides moral certainty and objectivity. They can claim that without a divine root, morality is left to arbitrary human opinion.

Negative Strategy: The negative can seize on the vagueness of theism itself. Which god? Which religion? They can argue that because there is no single "theistic moral system," the affirmative is forced to defend an ambiguous or even contradictory set of moralities. This makes the affirmative's burden of proof much higher. The Euthyphro Dilemma is the perfect tool for the negative to attack the foundation of divine command theory.

Source: “Theism, n.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, 2024, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200582.

Preferable:

Definition: “More desirable or suitable.”

This is the heart of the debate and the most important place to make strategic decisions. The resolution doesn’t ask “Is theism true?” or “Is non-theism false?” It asks which one is better. This means both sides must establish a clear criterion for preferability.

Affirmative Strategy: The affirmative can define “preferable” as a system that provides objective, unchanging moral truths. They can argue that only a theistic system can meet this standard. They can claim non-theistic systems are inferior because they can change over time.

Negative Strategy: The negative can define “preferable” as a system that is rational, inclusive, and adaptable. They can argue that non-theistic systems, which are based on human reason and empathy, meet this standard far better. They can also argue that theistic systems are inferior because they rely on faith and are subject to rigid, outdated rules.

Source: “Preferable, adj.” Cambridge Dictionary, Cambridge UP, 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/preferable.

Non-theistic moral systems:

Definition: “A moral system or worldview that does not include a belief in a god or gods.”

This defines the negative's ground. It includes a vast and diverse set of ethical frameworks. The negative's challenge is to avoid a list of systems and instead focus on a few key and well-defended examples.

Affirmative Strategy: The affirmative can try to "group" all non-theistic systems together and label them all as arbitrary or purely subjective. They can argue that because these systems lack a transcendent source, they are all essentially baseless.

Negative Strategy: The negative can use this to their advantage by arguing for the pluralism and resilience of non-theistic thought. They can claim that the existence of multiple, well-reasoned non-theistic systems shows that morality can be derived from sources other than God. They can argue that this diversity is a strength, as it allows for moral growth and a more inclusive society.

Source: Draper, Paul. “Atheism and Agnosticism.” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022 ed., Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/atheism-agnosticism/.

Affirmative Argument Ideas

The affirmative team's goal is to prove that moral systems rooted in theism are preferable. Their arguments should focus on the inherent strengths of their system, often highlighting its ability to provide a stable, meaningful, and objective moral foundation.

1. Theism as the Basis for Objective Morality

This argument is the foundation of many affirmative cases. It posits that morality isn't just a set of human-made rules; it's a set of objective truths, much like the laws of physics. Without a divine, transcendent source, morality becomes subjective and relative; what is "good" or "bad" is merely a matter of personal opinion or cultural agreement. The affirmative would argue that this leads to a dangerous moral relativism where it's impossible to condemn a truly heinous act as fundamentally wrong. Theism solves this problem by rooting morality in the unchanging, perfect nature of God. Moral commands are not arbitrary; they are reflections of a divine essence that is the ultimate standard of goodness.

Define "Objective Morality": Start by defining objective morality as truths that exist independent of human opinion or culture. Use an analogy: the law of gravity exists whether you believe in it or not; similarly, moral laws are universal and binding.

Show the Problem of Relativism: Explain why non-theistic morality, without an objective anchor, devolves into mere opinion, making it impossible to condemn acts like genocide as fundamentally wrong. This undermines the very purpose of a moral system.

Establish God as the Source: Present the argument that God's nature or commands provide the necessary foundation for these objective moral truths. The divine is the ultimate and unchanging standard against which all actions can be judged.

2. Moral Accountability and Motivation

A good moral system must not only tell people what is right, but also give them a compelling reason to do it. The affirmative argues that non-theistic systems, which rely on internal motivations like empathy or external ones like social contract, are often insufficient. When no one is watching, or when an immoral act would benefit the individual, these motivations can fail. Theism, on the other hand, provides a powerful and constant incentive: accountability to a divine being. The belief in an all-knowing God who holds individuals accountable, with consequences in this life and the next, acts as a powerful deterrent to wrongdoing and a motivator for good.

Define Moral Motivation: Explain that a good moral system must not only provide a code of conduct but also a reason for following it.

Show Non-Theistic Systems' Weakness: Argue that non-theistic motivations can be fragile. An individual might feel empathy for others, but that feeling can be suppressed by self-interest. Social consequences can be avoided through deception.

Present Theism as the Solution: Establish that the belief in an all-seeing God provides the ultimate incentive and accountability for moral action, ensuring that morality is not just a choice but a profound duty.

3. Answering the "Why Be Moral?" Question

This argument addresses the ultimate purpose of human life. While non-theistic systems might answer the question "Why be moral?" with "to achieve happiness," "to ensure societal flourishing," or "to fulfill one's duties," the affirmative can argue that these answers lack a deeper, transcendent meaning. Theistic morality, by contrast, is rooted in a purpose that transcends human existence. Being moral is not just about avoiding punishment or creating a better society; it is about fulfilling one's purpose in a divinely created world, living in harmony with one's creator, and seeking a relationship with the ultimate source of goodness.

Frame the Question: Start by posing the philosophical question, "Why should we be moral?" as a quest for ultimate meaning, not just practical outcomes.

Critique Non-Theistic Answers: Analyze and show the limitations of non-theistic answers, arguing they lack a deeper, transcendent meaning. For example, a utilitarian may act morally to maximize happiness, but the affirmative can ask: "Why is happiness the ultimate goal?"

Offer the Theistic Answer: Propose that being moral is about fulfilling one's purpose in a divinely created world, making it a profound and meaningful endeavor that gives life a deeper sense of significance.

4. The Universality of Theistic Moral Intuition

This argument suggests that the human moral compass, which seems to exist across cultures and time periods, is best explained by a divine origin. The affirmative would say that our innate sense of justice and fairness is not an accident of evolution or a social construct. Instead, it is a reflection of a divine moral law, a kind of moral "blueprint" imprinted on our consciousness by a creator.

Establish the Universal Moral Sense: Provide examples of moral norms that are common to most cultures (i.e., prohibitions against murder and the value of truth-telling).

Argue against a Non-Theistic Explanation: Challenge the idea that this moral sense is merely an evolutionary or social construct. A debater might argue that while evolution can explain cooperative behavior, it cannot account for a universal sense of obligation or sacrifice that goes beyond pure self-interest.

Conclude with a Divine Origin: State that a divine creator is the most logical and compelling explanation for this shared moral intuition.

5. Theism and a Stable Moral System

The affirmative can argue that because divine moral principles are unchanging and eternal, they provide a stable and reliable moral system. In a world of shifting values and cultural norms, a theistic system offers a constant anchor. In contrast, non-theistic systems, which are based on changing human ideas, can lead to moral chaos or instability. For example, utilitarianism might justify an immoral act if it leads to the “greater good,” making morality unpredictable and situational.

Define Moral Stability: Explain that a good moral system should provide a constant and reliable guide for behavior, free from the whims of cultural fads or political agendas.

Show the Instability of Non-Theistic Systems: Argue that frameworks like utilitarianism or social contract theory can lead to moral uncertainty. What is considered “good” today may be “bad” tomorrow if the majority's opinion shifts.

Uphold Theism as Unchanging: Assert that a moral system based on the eternal, unchanging nature of God provides a more consistent and trustworthy guide for human behavior.

Negative Arguments

The negative team's goal is to prove that non-theistic moral systems are preferable. Their arguments should expose the logical and practical flaws of theistic morality and highlight the strengths of their own.

1. The Euthyphro Dilemma

This is the cornerstone of the negative's case against theistic morality, a philosophical conundrum that undermines the logical foundation of Divine Command Theory. The dilemma poses a fundamental question: Is an act moral because God commands it, or does God command it because it is already moral? The negative will argue that both answers lead to fatal flaws in theistic morality. If God's commands make an act moral, then morality is arbitrary; God could theoretically command cruelty, and it would become "good." If God commands an act because it is already moral, then morality exists independently of God, making a divine being unnecessary for a moral system.

Frame the Dilemma: Clearly state the two choices: Morality is based on God's will (Divine Command Theory) or morality is independent of God.

Expose the Flaw in Divine Command Theory: Argue that this makes morality arbitrary and meaningless. Use an analogy: If morality is based solely on God's will, it is like a court where the judge's word is law, with no underlying principles of justice.

Expose the Flaw in the Alternative: If morality is independent of God, then God is not necessary for morality, which disproves the resolution. This makes theism a superfluous addition to a moral system's foundation.

2. Moral Autonomy and Human Reason

This argument champions the idea that a truly moral act is one that is chosen freely, based on human reason and empathy, not out of blind obedience to a higher authority. The negative will argue that non-theistic systems empower individuals to be their own moral agents, fostering critical thinking and genuine moral development. A moral decision made out of fear of punishment or hope of reward is less "moral" than one made out of a genuine belief in its rightness.

Define Moral Autonomy: Explain that a moral agent should be able to reason for themselves about what is right and wrong. Use the analogy of a child: we teach them to follow rules, but the ultimate goal is for them to internalize the reasons for those rules.

Contrast with Theistic Obedience: Argue that a system based on divine command can discourage independent moral thought and instead promote unquestioning obedience. This can lead to blind adherence to harmful doctrines and a lack of personal responsibility.

Present Non-Theistic Systems as Superior: Show how frameworks like deontology and virtue ethics empower individuals to use reason and empathy to make moral decisions, leading to more robust moral character.

3. The Problem of Moral Progress

The negative can argue that a moral system based on unchanging, ancient religious texts is inherently unable to adapt to new knowledge and societal progress. As humanity evolves, so too should our understanding of morality to become more just and inclusive. The negative can highlight historical examples where religious doctrines were used to justify what are now considered immoral acts, such as slavery, gender inequality, and religious persecution. A system based on human reason is better equipped to recognize and correct these moral failings.

Establish the Necessity of Moral Progress: Argue that as humanity learns and grows, our understanding of morality should also evolve to become more just and inclusive.

Provide Historical Examples: Give specific, well-researched examples of how religious doctrines have been used to justify what are now considered immoral acts, arguing that the theistic system failed to correct them in a timely manner.

Conclude with Non-Theistic Adaptability: Show how non-theistic systems, which are based on reason and empirical evidence, are better able to adapt and lead to positive moral changes.

4. The Universality of Non-Theistic Systems

This argument focuses on the practicality of a moral system in a diverse, globalized world. The negative will argue that non-theistic systems, because they rely on shared human experiences like empathy and reason, are universally accessible. A moral framework that requires belief in a specific deity is inherently exclusive and can create conflict between people of different faiths. Non-theistic principles like “do no harm” or “the greatest good for the greatest number” are universal and can form the basis of a truly global ethic.

Define Inclusivity: Explain that a preferable moral system should be accessible and applicable to all people, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Show the Exclusivity of Theism: Argue that theistic systems, which require belief in a specific deity, are inherently exclusive and can lead to conflict between different religious groups.

Uphold Non-Theistic Universality: Assert that principles based on shared human reason and empathy are universal and can form the basis of a global ethic that transcends cultural and religious boundaries.

5. The Arbitrariness of Divine Commands

This is a more direct attack on the logic of theistic morality. The negative will argue that even if God is the source of morality, His commands are still arbitrary from a human perspective. Why is this specific action moral and that one immoral? The answer seems to be "because God said so," which is not a compelling reason for non-believers or even believers who seek a deeper understanding of their faith. Without a clear, rational explanation for the commands, the system lacks philosophical grounding and is less compelling than systems that provide a clear rationale for their rules.

Define the Problem of Arbitrariness: Explain that for a moral system to be preferable, it must provide a reason for its rules, not just declare them.

Point to the Lack of Reason: Argue that theistic morality, in its simplest form, lacks a clear, human-accessible reason for its commands, making it less compelling than systems that provide a clear rationale (i.e., utilitarianism).

Conclude with Non-Theistic Rationality: Show how non-theistic systems, which are based on reason and logical consistency, provide a more rational and understandable basis for morality.

Topic Analysis

Theism and the Development of Society

Theistic moral systems have been a central force in shaping human civilization, evolving from early, localized belief systems to the complex frameworks that underpin modern societies. Their development is a story of gradual refinement, driven by shifts in human understanding, social structures, and theological thought.

In early human civilizations, morality was not a standalone concept but was deeply integrated into religious ritual and daily survival. In societies where polytheism and animism were prevalent, morality was often a matter of maintaining balance with the natural and spiritual worlds. An act was considered "good" if it appeased the gods of the sun, harvest, or war, ensuring the community's well-being. For example, a successful harvest might be attributed to the favor of a fertility god, making the rituals and sacrifices performed to that god "moral" acts. Conversely, a drought or a failed hunt was a sign of divine displeasure, making the transgression that caused it "immoral." This early morality was often communal and pragmatic, with an emphasis on collective responsibility and the immediate, observable consequences of actions.

The rise of codified law, as seen in the Code of Hammurabi in ancient Mesopotamia, marked a significant step toward a more structured moral system. While not strictly monotheistic, these codes were presented as being handed down by deities, providing a divine justification for a universal set of rules. This established a critical precedent: that moral laws were not arbitrary human creations but were of divine origin, making them non-negotiable and binding on all members of society. This provided a stable foundation for early state-level societies, which needed a common set of laws to govern a large, diverse population.

The advent of monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) represented a revolutionary leap. With a single, all-powerful God, morality became a unified and universal system. The focus shifted from appeasing multiple deities to adhering to the will of one supreme moral authority. The Divine Command Theory became a central pillar, asserting that God's commands were the source of all moral truth. This gave rise to comprehensive moral codes like the Ten Commandments and Sharia law, which provided detailed guidance on everything from personal conduct to legal justice. This new framework was profoundly impactful, as it fostered a sense of shared moral identity across vast geographic areas and provided a powerful basis for social cohesion and legal systems. The concept of a divine judge also introduced the notion of ultimate accountability, where individuals were responsible for their actions to God, regardless of earthly consequences.

As societies grew more complex and a new emphasis was placed on human reason during the Enlightenment, theistic moral systems began to evolve to address these new intellectual challenges.

Philosophers questioned the reliance on divine revelation alone, arguing that human reason could also discover moral truths. This led to a resurgence of Natural Law Theory, most notably developed by figures like Thomas Aquinas, who argued that morality is inherent in the rational order of the universe and a divine plan that is accessible to human reason. This allowed theistic morality to engage with the rational arguments of the Enlightenment, asserting that morality is both divine and discoverable through reason.

In the modern world, theistic moral systems continue to evolve in a globalized, pluralistic context. While they still provide a moral anchor for billions, they have had to grapple with new scientific knowledge, the rise of secularism, and ethical dilemmas in fields like bioethics and artificial intelligence. Many religious traditions have adapted, with some embracing a more progressive interpretation of their texts to address issues like gender equality and social justice. Others have maintained a traditional stance, asserting that divine truths are eternal and unchanging. The ongoing debate over the role of faith in public life is a testament to the continued relevance of theistic morality. It remains a powerful force that inspires acts of charity, builds communities, and provides a sense of meaning for billions of people worldwide. While the secular world has developed its own moral systems, the influence of theistic frameworks on our laws, values, and cultural norms is undeniable and enduring.

World Religions and Their Moral Codes

World theistic religions have provided a lot to society over the years. Whether people follow these traditions, they still have a profound influence on the lives of billions. Religious traditions across the globe offer diverse and often profound answers. For many faiths, morality is not a human construct but a divine imperative, a reflection of cosmic order or the will of a transcendent being. However, the specific ways in which this divine foundation translates into daily ethical conduct, and the emphasis placed on internal conviction versus external adherence, vary significantly across cultures and spiritual paths.

Major monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam predominantly derive their moral codes from divine revelation, but with distinct emphases.

Judaism grounds its morality in the concept of a covenantal relationship with God. The Torah is not merely a set of rules but a divine blueprint for righteous living, reflecting God's character and expectations for humanity. This morality is fundamentally obligatory; it is a response to God's grace and liberation. Beyond the explicit commandments, Jewish ethics extends into the vast body of Halakha (Jewish law), which interprets and applies these principles to every facet of life from dietary laws (kashrut) that foster discipline and mindfulness, to civil laws governing justice and charity (tzedakah). The emphasis is on mitzvot (commandments) as actions that sanctify life and bring individuals closer to God, viewing ethical behavior not just as avoiding wrongdoing but actively pursuing holiness and contributing to the betterment of the world (tikkun olam). The Mishnah and Talmud provide rich discussions on ethical dilemmas, demonstrating a dynamic and interpretive tradition of moral reasoning. At the same time, those following the Jewish faith believe in constant study and adaptation as society and time changes.

In Christianity, morality is intricately linked to the nature of God, who is understood as the embodiment of love. While the Hebrew Scriptures remain foundational, the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, introduce a profound emphasis on internal disposition and transformative love as the core of morality. It's not just about avoiding sin, but cultivating virtues like compassion, humility, forgiveness, and selfless service (agape love). The concept of grace plays a significant role; morality is not solely a human striving but a response to God's unmerited favor, empowering believers to live ethically. The Holy Spirit is believed to guide and enable moral action. Ethical frameworks in Christianity often involve Natural Law theory (God's moral order discernible through reason), and Situation Ethics (applying love in specific contexts), leading to diverse interpretations on issues like social justice, war, and personal conduct.

Islam similarly positions morality as fundamentally divine, derived from the will of Allah as revealed in the Quran and the Sunnah (the traditions of Prophet Muhammad). The concept of Tawhid (the oneness of God) underpins Islamic ethics, fostering a sense of accountability to the Creator in all actions. Islamic morality is comprehensive, encompassing ibadah (worship) and mu'amalat (social interactions). Sharia law, while often reduced to strict legal codes in public discourse, is fundamentally an ethical framework encompassing personal conduct and spirituality aimed at achieving justice (adl), mercy (rahma), and benevolence (ihsan) in society. Key virtues include honesty, trustworthiness, humility, generosity (zakat), and patience. The goal is to live in submission to God's will, recognizing that every action, no matter how

small, carries weight and contributes to one's ultimate destiny. The concept of Ummah (global Muslim community) also fosters a sense of collective moral responsibility.

Eastern Traditions: Cosmic Harmony and Spiritual Liberation

Moving to the Indian subcontinent and East Asia, ethical frameworks often emphasize cosmic order, karmic law, and the path to spiritual liberation rather than explicit divine commands.

Hinduism understands morality (Dharma) as an inherent cosmic law that governs the universe and human conduct. It is less about a personal God dictating rules and more about living in harmony with the natural order of existence and one's own intrinsic nature (svadharma). Dharma encompasses righteousness, duty, ethics, and virtue, which can vary based on an individual's caste (varna) (though this is contested in modern Hindu practice), stage of life (ashrama), and personal circumstances. The concept of Karma is a powerful ethical driver: every action, thought, and word creates consequences, good or bad, that will inevitably manifest in this life or future rebirths. Ethical living is thus crucial for spiritual progress (moksha), purifying the soul and breaking the cycle of reincarnation (samsara). Virtues like Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), and Dana (charity) are widely emphasized, rooted in the understanding that all beings are interconnected.

Buddhism, while non-theistic in its traditional sense (not centered on a creator God), places profound emphasis on ethical conduct as essential for spiritual awakening and the cessation of suffering. Morality is not a set of external rules but arises from wisdom and compassion. The Noble Eightfold Path, particularly "Right Speech," "Right Action," and "Right Livelihood," outlines a practical moral framework aimed at transforming the mind and cultivating inner peace. The core of Buddhist ethics lies in understanding the interconnectedness of all phenomena and recognizing that harmful actions (rooted in greed, hatred, and ignorance) lead to suffering, while wholesome actions (rooted in generosity, kindness, and wisdom) lead to well-being. Metta (loving-kindness) and Karuna (compassion) are central virtues, extending to all sentient beings. The absence of a divine judge means morality is deeply internalized, driven by the desire to alleviate suffering and achieve enlightenment.

Global Traditions: Communal Well-being and Ecological Harmony

Beyond the major global faiths, a rich tapestry of other traditions demonstrates distinct approaches to grounding morality.

Sikhism, a monotheistic religion originating in Punjab, integrates spiritual devotion with active ethical living. Its morality is rooted in the teachings of the Gurus, enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib, emphasizing Naam Simran (remembrance of God's name) coupled with Kirat Karni (honest labor) and

Vand Chakna (sharing earnings). Morality is seen to achieve spiritual liberation and to establish a just society. Key tenets include universal equality, social justice, selfless service (seva), and truthful living. The concept of Miri-Piri (temporal and spiritual authority combined) highlights the Sikh belief that spiritual life cannot be separated from active engagement in worldly affairs, particularly in fighting injustice and upholding righteousness.

Jainism, an old Indian religion, is perhaps the most extreme example of morality centered on the principle of Ahimsa (non-violence) towards all living beings. This core ethical imperative extends to thoughts, words, and actions, and is practiced with meticulous and extraordinary rigor by Jain monks and nuns, such as sweeping the path before walking to avoid harming insects. For Jains, every living entity possesses a soul (jiva), and harming any being accumulates negative karma, hindering the soul's liberation (moksha). Morality is thus about purifying the soul by minimizing harm and maximizing compassion, leading to strict vegetarianism, mindful living, and rigorous self-control.

Native American religions are highly diverse across tribes, often ground morality in a profound sense of interconnectedness with nature, community, and the spiritual world. There is typically no centralized doctrine, but rather a shared understanding of sacred reciprocity and respect for all life expressed through oral tradition, ceremonies, and community practices. Moral actions are those that maintain balance and harmony within the ecosystem and foster the well-being of the collective. Humility, generosity, honesty, and courage are highly valued. Elders and spiritual leaders often serve as moral guides, passing down traditional stories, ceremonies, and taboos that reinforce ethical behavior and wisdom. The concept of "Mother Earth" as a living entity instills a deep moral obligation to care for the environment. Morality here is inherently relational and contextual, emphasizing duties to one's family, tribe, and the natural world.

Contemporary Movements: Personal Growth and Universal Principles

Even more modern or less widespread spiritual movements engage with the question of morality's basis, often blending traditional insights with modern philosophical thought.

Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest monotheistic faiths, centers its morality on the cosmic struggle between Asha (truth, order, righteousness) and Druj (falsehood, disorder, evil). Followers are believed to have free will to choose between these two opposing forces. Morality is thus an active and conscious choice for "good thoughts, good words, and good deeds," aligning oneself with the divine wisdom of Ahura Mazda. This choice is not just for personal salvation but contributes to the ultimate triumph of good in the world, emphasizing individual responsibility and active participation in improving existence.

The Baha'i Faith, a relatively new global religion, posits that morality is rooted in the divine oneness of God and the fundamental unity of humanity. Its ethical teachings emphasize principles such as the independent investigation of truth, the equality of men and women, the elimination of all forms of prejudice, and the harmony of science and religion. Morality is seen as essential for both individual spiritual progress and the establishment of a peaceful, just, and unified global society. Followers are called to develop virtues like trustworthiness, honesty, and compassion, viewing ethical conduct as an expression of love for God and humanity.

Finally, while some scholars debate whether to classify them as a "religion" in the traditional sense, movements like Scientology offer structured ethical systems. Scientology's "The Way to Happiness" is a non-religious moral code based on common-sense principles aimed at improving individual and societal conditions like "Try to be industrious," "Respect the religious beliefs of others," and "Do not murder". While it doesn't invoke a divine being as the source of morality, it posits that adherence to these ethical guidelines is crucial for personal spiritual progression and for creating a more rational and humane world.

Similarly, Wicca, a modern pagan religion, typically adheres to the Wiccan Rede: "An' ye harm none, do what ye will." This principle emphasizes personal responsibility, autonomy, and non-maleficence, suggesting that individual freedom should not infringe upon the well-being of others. Morality in Wicca often stems from a deep reverence for nature and a belief in the interconnectedness of all life.

The belief that religion serves as a fundamental basis for moral thought and action is a pervasive theme across global spiritual traditions. Whether through divinely revealed commandments, intricate karmic laws, cosmic harmony, or the pursuit of spiritual liberation, religions provide comprehensive frameworks for ethical living. These frameworks not only offer prescriptive rules but also cultivate virtues, provide narratives, establish communal bonds, and articulate ultimate purposes that give meaning and motivation to moral behavior. The diverse approaches highlight humanity's shared quest for ethical guidance, demonstrating that while the sources and expressions of morality may vary, the profound human impulse to distinguish between right and wrong remains a cornerstone of religious experience worldwide.

Divine Command Theory

Divine Command Theory (referred to as DCT from hereon) stands as a foundational meta-ethical theory. It offers a distinct and profound explanation for the origin and nature of morality. At its core, DCT asserts whether something is right or wrong entirely dependent on the will of a divine being. The theory's central claim is that an act is morally obligatory because God commands it, and it is morally forbidden because God forbids it. This is not to say that God commands an action because it is already good. Rather, the command itself is what makes the action good. In this framework, moral truth is not an independent and timeless reality that God recognizes, but it is instead created and defined by divine will. For billions of people across various monotheistic faiths, this theory provides a coherent and complete system for understanding and navigating the moral landscape of the world.

The philosophical weight of DCT lies in its solution to a fundamental problem of ethics: the source of objective morality. In a world without a divine standard, morality risks becoming a matter of opinion, cultural relativism, or a utilitarian calculation of consequences. DCT eliminates this by rooting all moral authority in a transcendent, all-powerful, and all-knowing being. Moral principles are therefore not subject to human whim or social evolution. They are eternal and universal decrees. For example, obligation to be honest is not a social contract that can be renegotiated, but a binding duty established by God. This provides a stable and authoritative moral anchor for believers, giving their ethical principles a permanence and weight that they believe purely secular systems cannot match. In this sense, moral duties are viewed as religious duties, and the pursuit of a virtuous life becomes synonymous with an act of faithful obedience to God.

The application of DCT in daily life is both practical and pervasive. It shapes not only individual decisions but also the ethical fabric of entire communities. For a believer operating under this framework, the process of moral decision-making is often a quest to discern divine will. When faced with an ethical dilemma, the first and most crucial question is not "What feels right?" or "What are the consequences?" but rather, "What does my God command?" The answer is typically sought through a combination of sources, including sacred scriptures, the teachings of spiritual leaders, and personal prayer or contemplation. A person might choose not to lie, not because of a fear of social consequences, but out of a conviction that God has forbidden deceit. This provides a clear, decisive, and authoritative guide for action in moments of uncertainty.

DCT provides a powerful and indispensable motivation for moral behavior. While secular ethics might rely on internal feelings like empathy or external incentives like legal punishment or social reputation, DCT introduces a level of ultimate accountability. The promise of divine reward and the threat of divine punishment are seen as inescapable forces that compel moral conduct even when no one else is watching. The belief that one's actions and intentions are known to an omniscient being is a constant motivator for integrity, even in private matters. This extends beyond simple self-interest, fostering a deep-seated commitment to moral virtues that is rooted in a desire to please and honor the divine. In this way, religious belief serves as the engine that drives moral action. Consequently, for many, the very act of living a moral life is a public and personal testament to their faith and their obedience to a higher power.

The Origins of Morality Through Philosophical Thought

The fundamental question of where morality and moral thought originate has captivated philosophers for millennia. This discussion yields a kaleidoscope of theories that span across the spectrum of through from divine commands to social contracts. From the ancient academies of Greece and the imperial courts of China to the intellectual salons of Enlightenment Europe and the modern scientific laboratories, thinkers have grappled with whether morality is discovered or created, absolute or relative, universal or culturally specific.

Ancient Foundations: The Good, Virtue, and Cosmic Order

In Ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle offered foundational insights into morality's genesis. Plato believed that true morality resided in the transcendent realm of Forms, a perfect and unchanging reality accessible only through intellect. For him, “The Good” was the ultimate, objective source of all reality and value. Moral thought, therefore, involved the arduous intellectual ascent to apprehend this Form of Goodness, and virtuous action was the natural consequence of this profound knowledge. Vice was fundamentally a product of ignorance or an imperfect grasp of this ultimate truth.

His student, Aristotle, took a more empirical and practical approach. While acknowledging a teleological universe where everything has a purpose, Aristotle argued that morality was not about grasping abstract Forms but about achieving eudaimonia (human flourishing or living well) through the cultivation of virtues. These virtues such as courage, temperance, justice, practical wisdom were not innate but developed through habituation and rational choice. For Aristotle, morality arose from the rational pursuit of human excellence, actualizing our unique capacities as rational beings within a social context.

At the same time in Ancient China, Confucius laid the groundwork for a morality deeply rooted in human relationships and social harmony. For Confucius, morality was not divinely ordained in an Abrahamic sense but inherent in human nature, albeit requiring diligent cultivation. He emphasized Ren (benevolence, humaneness, compassion) as the highest virtue, manifested through Li (propriety, ritual, correct conduct), and refined by Yi (righteousness or moral appropriateness). Moral thought emerged from the careful observation of human interactions, self-reflection, and the cultivation of character through education and adherence to social roles.

His successor, Mencius, further developed this by explicitly arguing for the inherent goodness of human nature, proposing “four beginnings” of morality: the feeling of compassion, the feeling of shame and dislike, the feeling of respect and deference, and the feeling of right and wrong. For Mencius, morality comes from within, a natural endowment that simply needs nurturing and cultivation to blossom into full virtuous conduct.

The Stoics, spanning ancient Greece and Rome, located morality within the universal Reason (Logos) that pervades the cosmos and human beings. Morality, for them, meant living “in accordance with Nature” - which implied living according to reason and virtue. Virtue was the sole good, and external circumstances like wealth, health, and pain were morally indifferent. Moral thought was the rigorous

process of discerning what is rational and within one's control and cultivating equanimity towards what is not.

This natural law perspective saw morality as universally accessible through human reason. This was later integrated into Christian thought by figures like Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas merged Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology and argued that morality derived from “Natural Law”, or God’s eternal law implanted in human reason. Humans, through their rational faculties, could discern basic moral principles like “do good and avoid evil” that are universally binding. Divine scripture complemented natural law, guiding humans to higher moral truths necessary for salvation.

From the rich intellectual tradition of Islamic Philosophy in the medieval era, thinkers like Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) extensively debated the interplay of divine command and human reason in establishing morality. While ultimately acknowledging divine revelation as supreme, many Islamic philosophers argued that human reason could, to a significant extent, discern moral truths independent of specific revelation. Morality was often seen as intrinsically good or bad and not just good because God commanded it, with human intellect capable of grasping these inherent qualities. The emphasis was on human free will and the individual's responsibility to choose the good. Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) exemplifies this, as it involves not just adhering to literal divine commands but also employing reason (ijtihad) and consensus (ijma) to derive moral principles applicable to new situations.

The Enlightenment: Reason, Sentiment, Contract, and Duty

The Enlightenment ushered in new ways of conceiving morality, shifting emphasis from divine decree to human reason, sentiment, or utility. Thomas Hobbes, reacting to the chaos of civil war in England, argued that morality arose not from innate goodness but from the pragmatic necessity of self-preservation. In his “state of nature,” life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” a war of all against all. Therefore, morality is a purely utilitarian invention and a social contract where individuals rationally agree to abide by rules and relinquish some freedoms to avoid universal conflict. For Hobbes, moral thought is rational egoism, collectively leading to laws and conventions that secure peace.

John Locke, while also a social contract theorist, offered a more optimistic view. He contended that morality stemmed from natural rights (life, liberty, property) inherent in humanity, which were either endowed by a benevolent God or discernible by reason. Moral duties, for Locke, are reciprocal to these natural rights, discoverable by human reason operating within the natural order.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a pivotal figure in French Enlightenment thought, offered yet another perspective. He famously asserted that “Man (sic) is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” Rousseau believed that humans in their “state of nature” possessed an innate goodness (amour de soi - self-love without egoism, leading to compassion) which was corrupted by society and civilization. True morality, therefore, was not about adhering to external laws or even individual rational choice but about aligning with the general will of the collective. The general will, distinct from the sum of individual desires, always aims for the common good. Morality for Rousseau emerges from the collective's pursuit of a just and equitable society, where individuals achieve true freedom by obeying laws they themselves have collectively willed.

David Hume, a Scottish empiricist, famously challenged the notion that reason alone could be the source of morality. He argued that “reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions.” For Hume, moral distinctions are ultimately rooted in moral sentiment, feelings of approval or disapproval, sympathy, and empathy. When we call an action good or bad, we are expressing our feelings about it, often driven by its perceived utility to society or its capacity to evoke our sympathy for others. Moral thought, then, is less a process of logical deduction and more an exercise in refining our sentiments and expanding our sympathetic imagination.

Directly opposing Hume, Immanuel Kant, the preeminent enlightenment philosopher, championed a rigorous deontological (duty-based) ethics. For Kant, morality must be grounded in pure practical reason, independent of empirical desires, emotions, or consequences. He argued that a truly moral act is one performed solely out of duty to the moral law, not merely in accordance with duty for some desired outcome. His core concept, the Categorical Imperative, provides the test for moral actions:

> Universalizability: Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.
>
> Humanity as an End in Itself: Treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.
>
> Kingdom of Ends: Act as though you were a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.

For Kant, morality originates not from an external authority or from our inclinations, but from the autonomous rational will itself. It is the self-legislating capacity of reason that gives us the moral law, making morality a product of our own inherent rationality.

A truly moral act is one performed solely out of a sense of duty to the moral law, and not for any other reason, such as personal gain, emotional satisfaction, or a favorable outcome. He rejected the idea that morality could be based on a posteriori (experience-based) factors, as this would make it contingent and not universal. Instead, he proposed the Categorical Imperative as the supreme principle of morality, a moral law that is a priori (known independently of experience) and thus universally binding on all rational beings. The Categorical Imperative has several formulations, but its core idea is that one should only act according to rules that one could rationally will to become a universal law, and that one must always treat humanity, in oneself and others, as an end in itself and never merely as a means. By grounding morality in the self-legislating capacity of reason, Kant concluded that we are not merely subjects of a moral law, but its authors, which is what gives us our dignity and makes morality a matter of pure rationality and human autonomy.

Building on the Enlightenment’s emphasis on human agency, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill developed Utilitarianism. Under this system, morality is fundamentally determined by its consequences, specifically by its ability to maximize overall happiness or pleasure and minimize suffering for the greatest number of people. Moral thought is a calculation of utility, aiming for the “greatest good for the greatest number.” While Bentham focused on the quantitative sum of pleasures and pains, Mill later refined it by distinguishing between higher (intellectual, moral) and lower (sensory) pleasures, arguing

that the pursuit of qualitative well-being was essential. The origin of morality here lies in human capacity for pleasure and pain, and our rational ability to calculate and promote general welfare.

19th and 20th Centuries: Evolution, Psychology, and Radical Freedom

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed further radical departures from earlier conceptions of morality's origin. Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, launched a scathing critique of traditional Western morality, arguing that it was largely a "slave morality", a system created by the weak and resentful to control the strong. For Nietzsche, morality was not objective, divine, or universally rational, but rather a human invention, a symptom of underlying psychological drives, particularly the "will to power." He called for a "revaluation of all values" and the creation of a "master morality" by self-overcoming individuals strong enough to define their own values beyond conventional good and evil. For Nietzsche, morality's origin is historical, psychological, and ultimately a matter of human creation, not discovery.

Karl Marx, the German economist and philosopher, viewed morality as part of the "superstructure" of society, which fundamentally reflects the economic "base" and the interests of the dominant class. Moral ideas, therefore, are largely determined by prevailing modes of production and serve to justify existing power structures and class relations. True, unalienated morality, for Marx, would only emerge with the advent of a classless communist society.

Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, reacting to the perceived absence of inherent meaning in a godless universe, asserted that "existence precedes essence." This means there is no pregiven human nature or inherent moral blueprint. Humans are "condemned to be free," meaning we are radically free to choose our values, create our own meaning, and define who we are through our actions. Therefore, morality originates not from external laws or divine commands, but from this radical freedom and the immense anguish and responsibility that comes with it. We must choose our actions and take full responsibility for them, creating our own moral code in a world without inherent meaning.

The growing field of science also began to weigh in. Evolutionary ethics, stemming from the work of Charles Darwin suggested that morality, or at least pro-social behaviors like altruism and cooperation, could be explained as evolved traits that confer survival advantages for individuals, kin groups, or larger populations. Morality, from this perspective, has a biological and adaptive basis, rooted in our shared evolutionary history.

Ubuntu and Relational Philosophies

Beyond the well-trodden paths of Western and East Asian thought, diverse global philosophies offer unique insights into morality's origins. In African Philosophy, particularly prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, the concept of Ubuntu stands out as a profound wellspring of morality. Often translated as "I am because we are," Ubuntu emphasizes the fundamental interconnectedness and relationality of human existence. Morality in this context is not primarily about adherence to individual rights or abstract duties,

but about fostering harmony, compassion, empathy, and interconnectedness within the community. An action is moral if it builds community, strengthens relationships, and contributes to human flourishing within the collective. Its origin lies in the very fabric of human social existence and interdependence, asserting that personhood and moral being are constituted through relationships with others.

The philosophical quest for the origin of morality reveals a contested tapestry of thought devoid of a single, universally accepted answer. From ancient notions of divine commands and cosmic reason to Enlightenment ideas of innate reason, human sentiments, social contracts, and duties, and finally to modern conceptions of biological evolution, psychological drives, and radical human freedom, each philosophical school has offered compelling arguments.

The diverse answers highlight the multifaceted nature of morality itself, demonstrating that its roots are likely complex, intertwining elements of innate human capacity, rational reflection, emotional response, cultural conditioning, and communal relationality. The enduring inquiry into where morality comes from continues to shape our understanding of human nature, our societies, and our place in the world, reminding us that the “where” often profoundly dictates the “what” and “why” of our ethical lives.

Non-Theistic Beliefs and History

While theistic moral systems have long dominated the historical narrative, non-theistic beliefs have also played a crucial, though often less acknowledged, role in shaping human societies. These systems, which ground morality in human reason, nature, or social utility rather than divine command, have evolved from ancient philosophical inquiries to the diverse ethical frameworks that influence the modern world. Their history is not a continuous, unified movement but a series of distinct intellectual and cultural shifts that have incrementally pushed for a morality rooted in human experience.

The origins of non-theistic thought can be traced to the philosophical inquiries of ancient Greece and Rome. Thinkers such as Epicurus and Democritus proposed materialist worldviews that did not require divine intervention. More significantly, philosophers like Aristotle and the Stoics developed moral systems based on human reason and the pursuit of virtue. Aristotle's virtue ethics argued that the highest good for humanity (eudaimonia) could be achieved through the cultivation of virtues like courage and justice. This was a profoundly non-theistic moral system because it was self-contained; one could be fully moral by developing one's character, without needing to appeal to a god. Similarly, the Stoics argued that morality lay in living in harmony with nature and reason, providing a rational basis for ethics that was independent of religious frameworks. These early philosophical traditions laid the intellectual groundwork for a morality centered on human agency and rational inquiry, separate from the rituals and dictates of religious belief.

For much of the medieval period, non-theistic moral thought existed largely on the fringes, overshadowed by the dominance of theistic frameworks, particularly Christianity in Europe. However, with the onset of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, non-theistic ideas experienced a powerful resurgence. Scientists like Isaac Newton demonstrated that the universe operated according to natural laws that could be understood through observation and reason, rather than divine caprice. This scientific approach to the natural world inspired a new generation of philosophers to apply similar reasoning to morality. Philosophers such as David Hume argued that morality was based on human sentiment and empathy, not divine revelation. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill developed utilitarianism, a revolutionary non-theistic system that judged the morality of an action based on its ability to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism offered a secular, quantifiable method for ethical decision-making that had a profound impact on social policy, law, and economics.

The Enlightenment also saw the development of Immanuel Kant's deontology. While Kant himself was a deist, his moral system is profoundly non-theistic in its structure. He argued that morality is not based on external commands but on the categorical imperative, a universal moral law that is derived from human reason alone. Kant's emphasis on moral duty and the inherent dignity of every rational being provided a powerful framework for human rights and justice that was entirely independent of religious belief.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw non-theistic thought gain significant cultural and political influence. The rise of secular humanism provided a comprehensive, non-religious worldview that affirmed human reason, ethics, and justice. Humanists argued that humanity could solve its own problems and create a meaningful life without recourse to supernatural belief. This philosophy found its way into public policy, leading to the establishment of secular governments, the separation of church and state, and the development of international human rights law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, is a fundamentally non-theistic document, grounding its principles in the inherent dignity and rights of all human beings, rather than in a divine mandate.

In the modern world, non-theistic moral systems continue to be central to public and private life. They are at the heart of many academic disciplines, from bioethics to international relations. Ethical frameworks like utilitarianism and deontology are used to analyze complex issues such as the ethics of gene editing, the morality of drone warfare, and the distribution of global resources. Non-theistic ideas also provide a moral compass for a growing number of people who do not identify with a specific religion. This has led to the rise of communities and organizations that are dedicated to social justice, environmental protection, and scientific advancement based on shared human values. While a significant portion of the world's population remains religious, the influence of non-theistic moral systems is undeniable. They have provided the intellectual tools for secular governance, the moral foundation for human rights, and a compelling alternative for those who seek to live a meaningful, ethical life grounded in reason, compassion, and shared humanity.

As the world has become more interconnected and complex, non-theistic moral systems have continued to evolve and diversify. The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen the rise of new ethical concerns and the refinement of existing frameworks. Environmental ethics, for instance, is a field that is largely non-theistic, arguing for the moral consideration of the natural world based on principles of ecological balance and shared planetary responsibility. Similarly, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering has given rise to a new generation of ethical dilemmas that are being addressed by non-theistic frameworks. These frameworks, grounded in reason and a consequentialist analysis, may be seen as better equipped to handle new and unprecedented challenges than ancient, divinely revealed texts.

The increasing global migration and cultural exchange have also highlighted the practical benefits of non-theistic morality. In a world where people from different faiths and cultures must coexist, a moral system based on universal human principles, rather than specific religious tenets, provides a common ground for understanding and cooperation. The concept of a global human rights standard, for example, is a direct result of non-theistic moral thinking. It allows a diverse group of nations to agree on a set of fundamental principles, even if they disagree on the divine source of those principles.

Furthermore, non-theistic moral systems have provided a compelling alternative for individuals who no longer identify with traditional religious institutions or who simply do not feel a connection to a specific deity. For these individuals, a moral compass is not lost; it is simply reoriented toward compassion, reason, and the pursuit of human flourishing. This has led to the growth of non-religious communities dedicated to philanthropy, social activism, and the advancement of science. These groups demonstrate that a vibrant, ethical, and meaningful life is possible without a belief in the supernatural.

The historical trajectory of non-theistic moral systems is one of intellectual rebellion, rational exploration, and social progress. From the philosophical inquiries of ancient Greece to the foundational principles of modern human rights, these systems have provided the intellectual tools for secular governance, the moral foundation for human rights, and a compelling alternative for those who seek to live a meaningful, ethical life grounded in reason, compassion, and shared humanity. Their influence on the laws, values, and cultural norms of the modern world is undeniable and continues to grow.

Beyond the philosophical evolution, non-theistic moral systems have had a profound and tangible impact on society. The separation of church and state, a cornerstone of many modern democracies, is a direct result of Enlightenment-era non-theistic thought. This has allowed for the creation of legal and political systems that are neutral on religious matters, ensuring freedom of belief for all citizens.

Additionally, non-theistic morality has been a powerful catalyst for social reform. For example, the abolitionist movement, while often supported by religious figures, also drew heavily on non-theistic arguments about the inherent rights and dignity of all human beings. Likewise, the fight for women's suffrage and LGBTQ+ rights has been championed by individuals and groups who base their arguments on principles of equality and justice, independent of religious doctrine.

In the realm of public health and welfare, non-theistic systems have driven policy decisions aimed at maximizing well-being. The development of public sanitation, vaccination programs, and social safety nets often rests on a utilitarian calculus of providing the greatest good for the greatest number. These are not divine commands but are instead rational policies born from a secular concern for human flourishing.

Ultimately, the history of non-theistic morality is the story of humanity’s ongoing quest to understand and define itself. It is a narrative of intellectual courage, critical inquiry, and a belief that people can be good for goodness’ sake. While this is not to say that non-theistic systems are without their own challenges or that they are morally superior in practice, their historical impact on the development of rational governance, individual rights, and global cooperation is irrefutable. They stand as a testament to the power of human reason and compassion as a foundation for a just and ethical society.

Non-Theistic Morality

Beyond the foundational frameworks of humanism, social contract theory, and virtue ethics, a deeper dive into non-theistic morality reveals several key insights that enrich the understanding of how these worldviews shape culture and guide lives.

Atheism and agnosticism offer a narrative of human history and morality that is entirely secular. This narrative sees humanity as a product of natural processes, responsible for its own actions and its own future. This perspective can be incredibly empowering, as it places the burden of moral progress squarely on human shoulders. Instead of waiting for a divine intervention or a set of commandments to be revealed, this worldview inspires proactive engagement with social problems. Movements for civil rights, women's suffrage, and environmental protection have all been significantly influenced by individuals and groups who were motivated by a secular desire to create a better, more just world for current and future generations.

One of the key advantages of non-theistic moral systems is their flexibility and adaptability. They are not bound by ancient texts or interpretations, which can struggle to address modern ethical dilemmas. For example, issues in bioethics require careful reasoning about consequences, individual autonomy, and human dignity. Non-theistic frameworks, such as utilitarianism and deontology, are designed to handle these complex situations by focusing on the well-being of those affected and the moral duties involved, rather than on a set of rules established thousands of years ago. Similarly, debates about the ethical use of artificial intelligence and the distribution of global resources are often framed in non-theistic terms, allowing for a more rational and inclusive discussion.

Atheism and agnosticism foster a culture of free thought and critical inquiry. By encouraging critical inquiry into sources of moral authority, these worldviews encourage individuals to scrutinize all moral claims, regardless of their source. This intellectual rigor is a moral good in itself, as it helps to prevent dogmatism, prejudice, and the unquestioning acceptance of harmful ideologies. A society that encourages its citizens to think for themselves, to question authority, and to seek evidence-based truths is a healthier and more resilient society. This commitment to open inquiry is a core moral value for many non-believers, as it is seen as essential for both personal integrity and societal progress.

The morality of atheism and agnosticism is not a void but a profound commitment to meaning and responsibility. For a non-believer, the universe may be indifferent, but human life is not. This recognition can lead to a powerful sense of purpose: to make the world a better place because this life, and this world, are all that we have. Morality becomes an act of creation, not just a response to an external authority. It is a choice to be compassionate, to act justly, and to strive for human flourishing in a universe that does not guarantee it. This is the enduring legacy of atheism and agnosticism: to provide a

compelling and ethical path forward for those who seek a life guided by reason and a deep-seated love for humanity.

Atheism and Agnosticism as Human Frameworks

Atheism and agnosticism are often misunderstood as nihilistic or morally barren philosophies. These have played a significant role in shaping human culture and providing a moral framework for countless individuals. Far from being a rejection of morality, these worldviews ground ethics in human reason, empathy, and a shared concern for well-being. They have been instrumental in fostering intellectual and social progress, driving movements that prioritize human flourishing alongside or apart from divine command.

Atheism, the lack of belief in a god or gods, and agnosticism, the view that the existence of a deity is unknown or unknowable, are not moral systems in themselves but rather epistemological positions that pave the way for non-theistic ethics. They remove reliance on divine authority, allowing individuals and societies to build moral frameworks from the ground up, based on observable reality and rational thought. This intellectual shift has had profound cultural consequences. For example, during the Enlightenment, thinkers like Voltaire and Diderot championed reason and skepticism against religious authority. Their ideas helped lay the groundwork for modern concepts of individual liberty, secular governance, and the separation of church and state. By arguing that morality could be derived from human reason, they provided a powerful philosophical justification for a public life free from religious control.

The influence of these non-theistic viewpoints is also evident in the development of modern science. The scientific method, which relies on testable hypotheses and empirical evidence, is a fundamentally non-theistic approach to understanding the world. By focusing on natural explanations, science has been able to drive incredible technological and medical advancements that have improved the lives of billions. Ethical frameworks within science, such as those related to genetic engineering or artificial intelligence, are almost entirely non-theistic, relying on principles like utilitarianism (the greatest good for the greatest number) and deontology (moral duty) to guide research and application.

How can atheists and agnostics be moral? The answer lies in the rich tapestry of non-theistic moral philosophies that provide a robust foundation for ethical living.

One of the most powerful and accessible ethical frameworks for non-believers is humanism, which centers on the moral core of empathy. This philosophy affirms that people have the power and responsibility to lead ethical lives that aspire to the greater good of humanity. For an atheist or agnostic, empathy is the starting point for morality. From an evolutionary perspective, empathy is a natural human trait essential for social cooperation and survival. This biological reality is a compelling basis for a moral system where an action is considered good if it promotes well-being and reduces suffering for others.

The golden rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) is a simple yet powerful moral principle that doesn't require a divine origin to be understood or followed.

Another non-theistic approach is rooted in rational self-interest, giving rise to the idea of a social contract. Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke argued that morality isn’t a divine decree but an implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate for mutual benefit. In this view, people are moral because they recognize that a cooperative and just society is preferable to a chaotic and violent one. Morality becomes a pragmatic choice that serves to protect individuals and their communities. This framework explains why rules against murder and theft are universal: a society where these acts are permitted is one in which no one can feel safe.

Beyond these, many non-theistic moral systems focus on the concept of human flourishing, or eudaimonia, as articulated by ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle. This view holds that morality is about cultivating virtues that lead to a fulfilling and meaningful life. An action is moral if it helps a person become a better, more virtuous version of themselves. Courage, honesty, and compassion are valued not only because of divine command, but also because they are essential for living a good life, both individually and collectively. This is a powerful guiding principle for many non-believers who seek to live with integrity and purpose without relying on religious teachings.

In the modern world, atheism and agnosticism continue to play a crucial role in shaping culture and guiding individuals. The rise of secularism in many Western nations, for example, has allowed for a greater emphasis on individual rights, gender equality, and social justice. These movements often draw their moral authority from non-theistic principles of human dignity and autonomy. The ongoing debates about topics like climate change, global poverty, and animal rights are often framed in non-theistic terms, appealing to a shared sense of responsibility for the well-being of our planet and all its inhabitants.

Atheism and agnosticism are not just intellectual positions; they are forces that have helped to create a culture of reason, empathy, and compassion. They provide a robust and compelling answer to the question of how to be moral, grounding ethics in the very fabric of human experience. For an atheist or agnostic, morality is not a matter of divine reward or punishment, but a profound commitment to making the world a better place for all.

Social Contract Theory and Morality

Social Contract Theory is a foundational concept in political philosophy and ethics that explains the origin of both government and morality. Instead of grounding moral principles in divine commands or intrinsic human nature, this theory posits that morality arises from a rational agreement, or "contract," among individuals to form a society. In this view, people are not inherently moral, but they choose to be moral as a matter of practical necessity and self-interest. The theory functions as a powerful tool for understanding why individuals, who might otherwise act selfishly, choose to cooperate and abide by a shared code of conduct for the benefit of all.

The theory begins with a thought experiment in a hypothetical "state of nature." Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau all imagined this pre-societal state, though they differed on its specific details. Hobbes famously described it as a "war of all against all," where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In this state, there are no laws, no government, and no objective morality. Individuals are free to do as they please, but this freedom comes at a steep price: constant fear and insecurity. The motivation for forming a society, therefore, is to escape this perilous condition. Rational individuals recognize that their freedom is of little value if their life, liberty, and property are constantly at risk.

The contract is an implicit or explicit agreement to give up some individual freedoms in exchange for the security and benefits of a functioning society. It is from this agreement that morality and laws emerge. The principles of morality, such as prohibitions against stealing, murder, and deceit, are not arbitrary. Rather they are the very rules that rational people would agree to make society work. For instance, individuals agree not to steal from others, on the condition that others also agree not to steal from them. This mutual commitment creates a stable environment where trust is possible, and cooperation can flourish. Morality, in this sense, is not an external force or a divine decree, but a logical and self-interested solution to the problems posed by the state of nature.

In daily life, social contract theory functions as a continuous and practical explanation for moral behavior. People act morally and follow rules not out of a fear of eternal punishment or an innate sense of goodness, but because they understand that their own well-being is tied to the well-being of the collective. When an individual refrains from cheating on a test, they do so not only to avoid being caught but because they recognize that if everyone cheated, the integrity of the educational system would collapse, devaluing their own achievements. When a person pays taxes, they do so because they accept their part of the bargain that funds public services like roads, police, and schools, all of which they benefit from.

The theory also explains how societies can enforce and evolve their moral codes. The authority of the state and its laws are legitimate because they are seen as an extension of the original social contract. If a law is deemed unfair or no longer serves the common good, it can be changed, reflecting the dynamic nature of the social agreement. Social Contract Theory posits that humans are fundamentally rational agents who recognize that the greatest good for themselves is achieved by cooperating within a structured, rule-bound society. Therefore, morality is the essential framework that makes that cooperation possible.

The Categorical Imperative and Morality

Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, centered on the Categorical Imperative, provides a powerful framework for understanding morality that stands in stark contrast to theories based on consequences, divine commands, or social contracts. Kant believes that morality is not about achieving a desired outcome or obeying an external authority. Instead, it is a matter of pure reason and the fulfillment of one's rational duty.

The Categorical Imperative serves as a universal law of reason, a single, objective principle that determines whether an action is morally right or wrong, regardless of the individual's desires, feelings, or the specific results of the action. It is a moral command that is always binding for all rational beings, functioning as the ultimate test for the moral validity of any action.

Kant articulated the Categorical Imperative in several formulations, with the two most prominent being the Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of Humanity. The Formula of Universal Law states, "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." This formulation asks us to imagine if the principle behind our action could be applied to everyone in all situations without contradiction. If a principle, such as "I will lie to get what I want," were to become a universal law, lying would become so common that no one would trust promises or statements anymore. This would make lying itself ineffective, creating a logical contradiction. Therefore, according to Kant, lying is a moral wrong because it cannot be universalized.

The Formula of Humanity, on the other hand, commands, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." This means we must recognize the intrinsic value and dignity of every rational being. We should never use people as mere tools to achieve our goals but must always respect their autonomy, their capacity to make rational choices for themselves.

Kant's Categorical Imperative functions to explain morality by shifting the focus from the consequences of an action to the intentions and universal principles behind it. A person acts morally not because it brings them happiness or serves their self-interest, but because they are acting out of a sense of duty to the moral law. A person who returns a lost wallet acts morally because they recognize it as a universal duty, not because they hope to be rewarded or to feel good about themselves. If they returned the wallet only for a reward, their action would lack genuine moral worth. This emphasis on duty for duty's sake is central to Kantian ethics. The moral worth of an action is determined by the purity of the will behind it. The extent to which the action is performed from a respect for the moral law itself.

The Categorical Imperative explains the universality of moral obligations. It provides a rational basis for rules that apply to everyone, regardless of culture, religion, or personal background. Our moral instincts and actions are not arbitrary feelings, but rather reflections of our shared rationality. When we condemn a murderer, we do so not because we are afraid of being murdered ourselves, but because we recognize that the maxim of killing for personal gain cannot be universalized without fundamentally destroying the possibility of a rational society. By providing a logical framework for deriving moral truths from reason, Kant's theory offers a compelling explanation for why people act morally and feel a universal obligation to do so.

The Paradox of Altruism: Is Real Selflessness Possible?

The concept of altruism (the selfless concern for the well-being of others) is a cornerstone of many moral systems and is celebrated as one of humanity's noblest virtues. From a firefighter rushing into a burning building to an anonymous donor financially supporting a stranger in need, acts of altruism are often held up as proof of our capacity for genuine goodness. However, the idea of pure, selfless altruism has been a source of intense debate across philosophy, biology, and psychology. Critics argue that all seemingly altruistic acts are, upon closer inspection, motivated by some form of self-interest, whether conscious or unconscious.

Defining and Defending Altruism

To understand the debate, it is crucial to distinguish between different forms of altruism. Biological altruism refers to an action that benefits another organism at a cost to the actor's fitness (its ability to survive and reproduce). This is an objective, observable phenomenon in the natural world. In contrast, psychological altruism refers to the motivation behind an action. The claim that an individual is motivated by the ultimate desire to increase another's welfare, with no ulterior self-interested motive. The debate centers on whether the latter, psychological altruism, is possible.

The most powerful argument for the existence of psychological altruism is the empathy-altruism hypothesis, primarily championed by psychologist C. Daniel Batson. This hypothesis states that experiencing empathy for a person in need evokes a genuinely altruistic motivation to help them, and this motivation is aimed at reducing the other person’s distress, not one’s own. In a series of classic experiments, Batson created scenarios where participants had the option to help someone in distress. Critically, he manipulated the ease with which participants could “escape” from the situation without helping. The results consistently showed that when participants felt a strong empathic connection, they were just as likely to help even when the “costly escape” option was available. This suggests that their motivation was not to relieve their own distress (which they could have done by leaving) but to genuinely help the other person. Proponents of this view argue that the warm, satisfying feeling one gets from helping is not the goal of the action, but a byproduct of having achieved the altruistic goal of improving another’s well-being.

Philosophically, defenders of altruism also mount a logical critique of psychological egoism’s claims. Psychological egoism, in its strongest form, asserts that because all human actions are motivated by some desire, and the fulfillment of any desire brings a sense of pleasure or satisfaction, all actions are therefore ultimately self-interested. Philosophers like Joseph Butler and Elliott Sober have countered that this argument is circular and commits a logical fallacy. They argue that it conflates the satisfaction of achieving a goal with the goal itself. The pleasure one derives from saving a drowning child, for example, is the result of achieving the primary goal, the child's safety, not the reason for undertaking the action in the first place. This distinction between a goal and a subsequent feeling of satisfaction is central to the philosophical defense of psychological altruism.

The Counterargument to Self-Interest

Critics of altruism, particularly proponents of psychological egoism, maintain that all human actions are ultimately motivated by self-interest. They argue that even the most heroic or selfless-seeming acts are driven by a deeper, often subconscious, desire for personal gain. This gain might not be monetary or tangible; it could be the reduction of one's own empathic distress, the anticipation of social praise, the avoidance of guilt or shame, or the satisfaction of upholding a principle that a person has come to value. For example, a person who donates a kidney to a stranger might be motivated by the desire to live up to their own self-image as a good person, thus deriving a powerful, intrinsic reward. In this view, the "warm glow" of giving is not a byproduct but the very goal of the action.

Biological and evolutionary theories also provide powerful counterarguments, framing seemingly altruistic behavior as a mechanism for genetic self-interest. Kin selection is one of the most robust explanations. This theory suggests that an organism's apparent altruism towards a family member is not selfless at all. Rather, it is a way to ensure that the genes they share with that relative are passed on. From the perspective of the "selfish gene," the organism is simply a vehicle for genetic propagation, and an act that benefits a relative's survival is an act that benefits one's own genetic legacy.

Similarly, reciprocal altruism explains cooperation among non-relatives as a form of long-term self-interest. An individual is motivated to help a non-relative because there is an unspoken social contract and a strong expectation that the favor will be returned in the future. This tit-for-tat dynamic creates a system of mutual benefit, and the underlying motivation is a calculated, strategic form of self-interest. The emotions of gratitude and guilt are seen as biological tools to enforce this system: gratitude encourages reciprocity, while guilt punishes a failure to reciprocate, thereby maintaining the cooperative structure. Expanding on this, the theory of indirect reciprocity suggests that individuals can gain benefits by being seen as a helpful person. By building a reputation for altruism, they increase their chances of receiving help from a third party in the future, even if the original recipient never reciprocates. This adds a reputational layer to the self-interested motivation.

Sociological and reputational explanations add another layer to the argument against pure altruism. They contend that people often perform altruistic acts to enhance their reputation and status within a group. A reputation for generosity or heroism can lead to social rewards, increased cooperation from others, and improved reproductive prospects. This is closely related to the idea of costly signaling, where an altruistic act is so costly to the individual that it serves as an honest signal of their high quality In this context, an altruistic act, even if it feels selfless to the actor, is a form of social signaling that ultimately benefits the individual by improving their social standing and desirability as a mate or cooperator.

The debate over altruism is not a simple matter of whether people are "good" or "bad." It is a sophisticated inquiry into the nature of our motivations, shaped by competing theories from different fields. While proponents of altruism point to the role of empathy and a genuine desire to help others, their arguments are met with strong counterclaims rooted in the pervasive influence of self-interest. From the psychological egoist's view that all actions are ultimately for personal gratification, to the evolutionary biologist's assertion that we are vehicles for "selfish genes" and strategic cooperators, the counterarguments suggest that selflessness may be an illusion. Ultimately, the question of whether true

altruism exists may remain unanswerable, as it is nearly impossible to definitively prove an actor's motivation is free from any hidden benefit. The legacy of this debate, however, is a richer understanding of human behavior, revealing a complex interplay of motivations where the line between self-interest and concern for others is often blurred and dynamic.

Objectivism and the Virtue of Selfishness

Ayn Rand is a Russian-American novelist and philosopher who developed a comprehensive philosophical system she called “Objectivism”. Emerging in the mid-20th century, Objectivism offers a starkly individualistic perspective on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. At the heart of her philosophy, and perhaps its most controversial tenet, is the assertion that true morality lies in rational self-interest, a concept she famously defended in her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

The Philosophical Foundation of Reason and Reality

Rand’s ethical framework is not presented in a vacuum. It is a direct consequence of her views on metaphysics and epistemology. Objectivism holds that reality is an absolute, objective fact that exists independently of human consciousness. This means that facts are facts, regardless of anyone’s beliefs, feelings, or wishes. Complementing this, Rand’s epistemology asserts that reason is humanity’s sole means of acquiring knowledge.

She believed that sensory perception, validated by a process of logical deduction and induction, is the only reliable way to understand the universe. She was a fierce opponent of faith, mysticism, and emotionalism, which she saw as antithetical to reason and a denial of objective reality. For Rand, accepting reality as it is and using reason to navigate it is the fundamental precondition for a moral life.

The Virtue of Selfishness and the Rejection of Altruism

With these foundations in place, Rand’s ethics present a radical departure from traditional moral thought. Her central ethical principle is that the highest moral purpose of a person’s life is the achievement of their own happiness. She defined “selfishness” not in the conventional sense of mindless cruelty or exploitation, but as a commitment to one’s own rational self-interest. To be selfish, in her view, is to act to sustain and advance one’s own life, to pursue one’s own values, and to live by the guidance of one’s own reason. This rational pursuit of one’s own happiness is, in her philosophy, the ultimate moral good. She saw this as the only logical conclusion for a being whose primary value is its own life.

A central part of this ethical system is the explicit and forceful rejection of altruism as a moral ideal. Rand defined altruism as the belief that an individual is morally obligated to live for the sake of others, placing the interests of others above one’s own. She viewed this as a profoundly destructive and immoral doctrine. For Rand, altruism demands the sacrifice of one’s own values, happiness, and even one’s life for the benefit of others. She argued that this sacrifice leads to a society of self-immolating victims and unearned beneficiaries, a system that fundamentally contradicts the value of human life itself. Instead, she states that a moral society is one where individuals interact as independent traders, exchanging value for value, neither giving nor receiving unearned sacrifices. Productive work, therefore, is not merely an economic activity but a moral virtue. This is why she celebrated characters like Howard Roark

in The Fountainhead and John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*, who refuse to compromise their creative visions for the sake of others.

The Moral Case for Laissez-Faire Capitalism

Rand's ethics of rational self-interest serves as the direct moral justification for her political philosophy: laissez-faire capitalism. She argued that capitalism is not merely a practical or efficient economic system, but the only moral system because it is the only one that fully protects individual rights. In her view, the fundamental right of every person is the right to their own life, which entails the right to think, to act, and to own the product of their own effort. The protection of these rights requires a government with a very specific, limited function: to protect individuals from physical force and fraud. This includes maintaining a police force, an army, and a legal system.

Rand was adamantly opposed to any form of government intervention that she considered an infringement on individual rights including taxation for social welfare, economic regulation, and public education. She viewed these as forms of legalized sacrifice, forcing productive individuals to give up their earnings for the "common good." In an Objectivist society, individuals are free to pursue their own happiness without being coerced to serve the interests of others. This freedom of action, guided by reason and a commitment to honest exchange, creates a society where everyone benefits not through collective sacrifice, but through individual achievement and voluntary interaction. The role of government is not to redistribute wealth or manage the economy, but to act as a night-watchman state, ensuring that the rights of every individual, the right to life, liberty, and property, are held indivisible.

Ayn Rand's Objectivism presents a cohesive philosophical system where ethics is the foundational element. Rejecting all forms of collectivism, mysticism, and faith, she championed a morality of rational egoism, asserting that the pursuit of one's own happiness is the highest moral purpose. This ethical framework provides the moral basis for a political system of pure, laissez-faire capitalism, which she saw as the only system capable of protecting individual rights and allowing human flourishing. Rand's work remains a powerful and provocative defense of individualism, challenging conventional notions of selflessness and sacrifice, and demanding a re-examination of the very nature of morality. Her philosophy, while often criticized for its unyielding stance on self-interest, continues to influence libertarian thought and offers a compelling vision of a society built on reason, individualism, and voluntary cooperation.

The Tragedy of the Commons: What Can Cows Teach Us About Morality?

The tragedy of the commons, a concept popularized by Garrett Hardin in 1968, serves as a powerful illustration of the interplay between individual self-interest and collective well-being. It highlights how a shared resource, when accessible to all without regulation, is inevitably overexploited by individuals acting rationally in their own best interest. This dynamic, while seemingly a purely economic or ecological problem, has profound implications for understanding morality and duty, or the absence of them.

The core of the tragedy lies in the logic of individual actors. Imagine a shared pasture open to all ranchers. Each rancher, seeking to maximize their own gain, considers adding an extra animal to their herd. The benefit of this extra animal is enjoyed solely by the individual rancher. However, the cost of the extra grazing, the slight degradation of the pasture, is shared among all herdsmen. From the individual's perspective, the personal benefit of adding another animal always outweighs the minuscule, shared cost. Now, let's go one step further. Pretend that in this shared common pasture, a rancher decides to take advantage of the free grazing. They move their entire herd into this pasture. Their field is kept green and tall, while the shared pasture is quickly eaten. Other ranchers, upon seeing this, also move their herds into the field to take advantage of the dwindling opportunity. In both situations, as each rancher follows this same rational, self-interested logic, the pasture is eventually overgrazed and destroyed, to the detriment of all.

This scenario reveals a fundamental disconnect in logic and practice. What is rational for the individual is collectively disastrous. It shows that in the absence of a governing force or social contract, individual morality, based on personal gain, can lead to a tragic outcome for the community. The tragedy isn't caused by malicious intent, but by a lack of a framework that aligns individual actions with the collective good.

Morality and Duty in the Pasture

The tragedy of the commons is not a story of evil people. It's a story of a system that fails to incentivize moral behavior. Morality can be defined as an individual's sense of right and wrong, and duty as their obligation to act for the good of others. The tragedy suggests that in a pure "commons" scenario, these concepts are often overridden by self-interest. The herdsman's primary duty is to their own family and economic survival, not to the long-term health of the communal pasture. Their morality is bound by what is personally beneficial.

The lack of duty is particularly evident. There is no social or legal mechanism compelling any herdsman to reduce their herd for the good of the group. Without a shared sense of duty to protect the common resource, everyone is incentivized to "defect" from any informal cooperative arrangement. Hardin argues that an "invisible hand" does not guide individuals to an optimal outcome in this case; instead, it guides them to ruin. This highlights a key failure of a purely laissez-faire approach to shared resources.

The tragedy demonstrates that relying on a sense of collective duty is not an innate human trait that automatically emerges to protect a shared resource. Instead, it must be cultivated, enforced, or structured into a system. Without it, the default human response is to prioritize personal gain, leading to a breakdown of the social fabric that underpins sustainable resource management.

Hardin also suggests solutions that, by their nature, involve creating mechanisms to compel duty and moral behavior. The two primary solutions he presents are privatization and regulation.

> Privatization: By dividing the commons into private plots, everyone becomes the sole beneficiary and the sole bearer of the costs of their actions. The ranchers who overgraze their private plot only harms themselves. This system aligns individual self-interest with collective well-being by removing the “commons” aspect entirely. In this model, the moral decision to conserve the land is no longer a choice between personal gain and collective good, but a choice between immediate profit and long-term personal gain. The system itself enforces a moral alignment.
>
> Regulation: Hardin’s second solution is “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon.” This refers to government regulation and enforcement. Through laws, taxes, or quotas, a governing body can limit access to the commons and prevent its overuse. For example, a government might impose a limit on the number of animals each herdsman can graze or charge a fee for each animal. This creates a new set of rules that transform the individual’s calculation of self-interest. The herdsman is now faced with a choice: follow the regulations (duty) or face penalties (moral enforcement). This is a top-down approach that directly imposes a collective duty on individuals for the good of the commons.

In both solutions, the key is the removal of the incentive structure that allows for the tragedy. Therefore, the tragedy of the commons is not a sign to the inherent immorality of humanity, but rather a cautionary tale about the conditions under which human morality and duty fail to prevent a collective disaster. It demonstrates that without a system that either privatizes the resource or enforces a collective duty, the default human tendency to prioritize individual gain will lead to the destruction of the very resources upon which the community depends. The tragedy is a powerful reminder that our social structures and institutions play a crucial role in shaping and sometimes even compelling our moral and dutiful behaviors.

The Tragedy’s Premise and the Failure of Inherent Morality

This tragedy highlights the limitations of an intuitive, uncodified morality. In the absence of a governing body or a strong social contract, a rancher’s primary duty is not to the collective, but to their economic survival. Their morality is thus narrowly defined by what is personally beneficial. The tragedy isn't caused by inherently evil people, but by a system that fails to align individual self-interest with the collective good. It suggests that a robust sense of collective duty isn't an innate human trait that automatically emerges. It must be cultivated and enforced.

Philosophical Perspectives on Morality and Duty

The tragedy of the commons can be analyzed through several philosophical frameworks that offer different explanations for the origin and nature of morality and duty.

Social Contract Theory: Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that morality and duty arise from a "social contract." As we discussed earlier, individuals willingly surrender some of their freedoms to a governing authority in exchange for protection and social order. The tragedy of the commons is a perfect illustration of a state of nature without such a contract. In this "pre-social" state, individuals' unchecked self-interest leads to a "war of all against all" (Hobbes), or in this case, the destruction of the commons. The solutions to the tragedy, privatization and regulation, are essentially forms of a social contract. By creating laws, a society establishes a collective duty to preserve the commons, making it a moral obligation to not over-exploit the resource. This perspective argues that morality and duty are not natural but are constructs of a functioning society.

Utilitarianism: Utilitarianism, as proposed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, holds that the most moral action is the one that maximizes overall happiness or "utility" for the greatest number of people. From a utilitarian standpoint, the rancher's individual act of adding an extra animal is immoral because it leads to a net decrease in utility for the entire community when the pasture is destroyed. The collective suffering of all herdsmen outweighs the short-term gain of one. Utilitarianism would demand a system of rules or laws that prevent individuals from making choices that harm the collective good. In this view, the duty is to the greater good, and the tragedy of the commons demonstrates the failure of a system to promote this duty.

Deontology: Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics focuses on moral duties and rules, independent of the consequences. For Kant, an action is moral if it can be universalized into a rule that everyone must follow. This is famously expressed in his "Categorical Imperative." Applying this to the tragedy of the commons, the herdsman's action of adding an extra animal could not be universalized without leading to a contradiction. If everyone adds an extra animal, the pasture is destroyed, making the act of adding an animal impossible in the future. The very act itself is self-defeating and thus, according to Kant, morally impermissible. This theory suggests a strong, inherent duty to not over-exploit a shared resource, a duty that exists regardless of personal gain. The tragedy shows what happens when individuals ignore this universal moral law.

Religious and Theological Perspectives

Religious theories often ground morality and duty in a divine source, contrasting with secular philosophical views.

Divine Command Theory: This theory posits that an action is moral because God commands it. In this framework, moral duties, such as stewardship of the Earth and care for one's community, are derived directly from divine commands found in scripture or religious tradition. The tragedy of the commons would be seen as a sin, a violation of a divine command to be a good steward of creation. The duty to the commons is not just a social obligation but a religious one. Religious law or teachings would provide the necessary rules to prevent the tragedy, creating a moral framework that is enforced by both communal pressure and the fear of divine punishment.

Natural Law Theory: Associated with figures like Thomas Aquinas, natural law theory holds that morality is inherent in the natural order of the world, created by God. Human reason can discern these moral principles. A “natural duty” to preserve the resources necessary for human flourishing would be considered a key principle of this law. The destruction of the commons is not just a bad outcome, but a violation of this natural order. A herdsman who over-exploits the pasture is acting against their own nature as a social being dependent on the community's well-being. This theory suggests that morality and duty are not arbitrary but are an intrinsic part of a rational and divinely ordered universe.

The tragedy of the commons serves as a powerful illustration of how the conditions for human behavior can override innate morality or duty. The failure to preserve a shared resource is not necessarily a failure of human character, but a failure of the system to align individual incentives with the collective good. The proposed solutions, privatization and regulation, are essentially mechanisms to create a new moral landscape where duty is no longer an optional virtue but a necessary condition for survival.

Affirmative Evidence

Theism forms the basis for sound ethical values

Dr. William Lane Craig, Notre Dame, “Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate”, https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris-deba/)

First, theism provides a sound foundation for objective moral values. Moral values have to do with what is good or evil. On the theistic view objective moral values are grounded in God. As St. Anselm saw, God is by definition the greatest conceivable being and therefore the highest Good. Indeed, He is not merely perfectly good, He is the locus and paradigm of moral value. God’s own holy and loving nature provides the absolute standard against which all actions are measured. He is by nature loving, generous, faithful, kind, and so forth. Thus if God exists, objective moral values exist, wholly independent of human beings.

Theism provides for the roots of morality

Michael W. Austin, former president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, "Divine Command Theory", https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/

In his Critique of Practical Reason, Immanuel Kant, who has traditionally not been seen as an advocate of Divine Command Theory (for an opposing view see Nuyen, 1998), claims that morality requires faith in God and an afterlife. According to Kant, we must believe that God exists because the requirements of morality are too much for us to bear. We must believe that there is a God who will help us satisfy the demands of the moral law. With such a belief, we have the hope that we will be able to live moral lives. Moreover, Kant argues that "there is not the slightest ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and proportionate happiness of a being who belongs to the world as one of its parts and is thus dependent on it" (p. 131). However, if there is a God and an afterlife where the righteous are rewarded with happiness and justice obtains, this problem goes away. That is, being moral does not guarantee happiness, so we must believe in a God who will reward the morally righteous with happiness. Kant does not employ the concept of moral faith as an argument for Divine Command Theory, but a contemporary advocate could argue along Kantian lines that these advantages do accrue to this view of morality.

Moral societies are rooted in theistic codes

Michael W. Austin, former president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, "Divine Command Theory", https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/

Another possible advantage of Divine Command Theory is that it provides an objective metaphysical foundation for morality. For those committed to the existence of objective moral truths, such truths seem to fit well within a theistic framework. That is, if the origin of the universe is a personal moral being, then the existence of objective moral truths are at home, so to speak, in the universe. By contrast, if the origin of the universe is non-moral, then the existence of such truths becomes philosophically perplexing, because it is unclear how moral properties can come into existence via non-moral origins. Given the metaphysical insight that ex nihilo, nihilo fit, the resulting claim is that out of the non-moral, nothing moral comes. Objective moral properties stick out due to a lack of naturalness of fit in an entirely naturalistic universe. This perspective assumes that objective moral properties exist, which is of course highly controversial.

Not only does Divine Command Theory provide a metaphysical basis for morality, but according to many it also gives us a good answer to the question, why be moral? William Lane Craig argues that this is an advantage of a view of ethics that is grounded in God. On theism, we are held accountable for our actions by God. Those who do evil will be punished, and those who live morally upstanding lives will be vindicated and even rewarded. Good, in the end, triumphs over evil. Justice will win out. Moreover, on a theistic view of ethics, we have a reason to act in ways that run counter to our self-interest, because such actions of self-sacrifice have deep significance and merit within a theistic framework. On Divine Command Theory it is therefore rational to sacrifice my own well-being for the well-being of my children, my friends, and even complete strangers, because God approves of and even commands such acts of self-sacrifice.

Theistic systems provide an objective basis for evaluating ethics

Dr. William Lane Craig, Notre Dame, "Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate", https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris-deba/)

Second, theism provides a sound foundation for objective moral duties. On a theistic view objective moral duties are constituted by God's commands. God's moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commandments which constitute our moral duties or obligations. Far from being arbitrary, God's commandments must be consistent with His holy and loving nature. Our duties, then, are constituted by God's commandments and these in turn reflect his essential character. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the whole moral duty of man can be summed up in the two great commandments: First, you shall love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your soul and with all your heart and with all your mind, and, second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On this foundation we can affirm the objective rightness of love, generosity, self-sacrifice, and equality, and condemn as objectively wrong selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination, and oppression.

Theism can define all aspects of human civilization as it exists today

MarketFaith Ministries, "What is Theism?",
https://www.marketfaith.org/understanding-worldview/what-is-theism/

Theism, in a general sense, gives us all of the categories necessary to get a handle on truth by providing a framework for understanding both the material and the spiritual aspects of existence. It points to God as creator, gives a basis for natural and moral law, and holds out the hope that there is a reason and purpose for our existence.

The big problem with Theism, as a category, is that it is so broad. It encompasses several of the major world religions as well as dozens of smaller groups. Many, if not most, of these groups have their own authoritative book which they consider to be an actual revelation from God. Most do not, however, contemplate a God who is interested in an intimate interaction with the material world, and man in particular.

The various Theistic approaches do go in quite different directions; some which strongly contradict one other. This means that not every specific Theistic view can be viable. But it does generally point us in the right direction. After settling on Theism as the correct basic approach we should use in order to find the ultimate truth about reality, we are still left with the task of finding which specific understanding of Theism represents the ultimate truth.

Basic Premise and Implications of Theism

Let's begin by getting a general understanding of the underlying principles of Theistic thought. Essentially, Theism asserts that there is an actual, infinite and transcendent God who created and sustains the material order. Generally speaking, Theistic groups depend on some kind of revelation to support their positions.

There are a number of implications that emerge from this understanding of reality. In its essence, Theism basically lends itself to an impact on culture that is both moral and positive, even though most forms result in a legalistic approach to living life and the development of culture. This is a result of a belief that the moral order ought to be a certain way because it is written in "the law" or put forth by "the prophet." The way things ought to be are specifically prescribed. Some of the other implications include:

· Theism acknowledges both a spiritual and a physical part of reality which exists to fulfill a purpose, views life in a way that promotes meaning, and establishes a specific "right" way to view morality and technology that promotes goodness.

· Theism asserts that it is right to struggle against the moral wrongs in the world and change them to conform to the instructions given from God.

· Theism claims to receive direction from a good God who directs his followers to be likewise.

· Theism asserts that instructions from God come in the form of some kind of revelation.

· In most, but not all, forms of Theism, God tends to operate impersonally in relationship to mankind.

· Typically, Theistic belief systems acknowledge that God exists as creator, as all powerful, and as having given authoritative direction about how human beings should live their lives

Theism provides 4 distinct global advantages

J. Warner Wallace, “Four Distinct Advantages of a Theistic Worldview”, https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/four-distinct-advantages-of-a-theistic-worldview/

A Transcendent Source of Hope

We are inclined, as fallen humans, to place our hope and trust in people, possessions, or power. These transient, frail substitutes cannot compare to the transcendent Creator of the Universe, however. Although we hope for things in this life, the ultimate hope at the core of every human heart is the hope of eternity; the hope we will live beyond this life. Most people possess this kind of hope; the hope of life after the grave. This hope is rooted in a theistic worldview; an immaterial God created “soulish” beings in His image, and our dual nature allows us to live beyond the death of our material bodies. Our hope, as Christians, is rooted in the all-powerful nature of God:

John 17:3-4
Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

Psalm 71:5
For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth.

Hope rooted in theism is multi-facetted. Theism offers a hope of heaven, but it also provides hope for today. Those who believe in an immutable, personal God have an unflinching hope for both the future and the present:

Psalm 95:3-7

For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.
Although we hope for things in this life, the ultimate hope at the core of every human heart is the hope of eternity; the hope we will live beyond this life.Share on X

A Transcendent Source of Purpose

There are two questions we struggle with as humans. They are the same two questions people have asked for thousands of years: “How did we get here?” and “Why are we here?” While cultures and people groups have assigned their own meaning and purpose over the centuries, theists across the globe live each day with transcendent conviction and determination. We believe we are here for a reason surpassing our temporal impact on history. We were designed by God for a purpose, and this purpose helps us persevere in difficult times. If we are convinced we are here for a transcendent reason, difficult times are easier to endure. We have a sense of mission, destiny and plan. We can enjoy more than the moment; we are part of a larger story. We care about the future and we care about our impact as a nation and as a people. Why? Because we believe God has a transcendent purpose for our lives:

Romans 8:28
And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to [his] purpose.

While cultures and people groups have assigned their own meaning and purpose over the centuries, theists across the globe live each day with transcendent conviction and determination.Share on X
A Transcendent Object of Gratitude

Theism is a unifying source of gratitude. Gratitude is a close sibling of joy, peace and contentedness, and those who are able to develop and harness a grateful heart find happiness in ways the rest of us only envy. Think about the "Thank You" notes and cards you've sent over the years. In every expression of thanks, the verb "thank" is used in conjunction with an object, "you". Do you realize without an object of thanks, there can be no thankfulness? Every time we say, "thank you" we are directing it toward someone, and there is a direct relationship between the degree of joy we experience and the object of our thanks. Do you remember when you were small and received a gift at Christmas time? Your happiness spilled over to the giver of the gift in the form of thankfulness. Theists ought to understand gratitude in a much more profound way. Every day is filled with the transcendent gift of life (and many other blessings). These blessings come from someone. They come from an eternal God who is the source of all good things and the object of every "thank you". As theists, we ought to move from occasional gratefulness toward someone who has given us a temporal gift, toward a heart of extended gratitude for the Giver of all good things. Gratitude in this sense is not a moment in time, but rather a life long journey:

Colossians 3:16-17
"…sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."
Every time we say, thank you, we are directing it toward someone, and there is a direct relationship between the degree of joy we experience and the object of our thanks.Share on X

As an atheist, I had order, hope, purpose and gratitude in my life, but if I am honest, they were often fleeting and fragile. More importantly, my ideas about these concepts were highly personal and subjective. My friends and I did not always share these beliefs; we did not form community around the transcendent nature of such truths. As a theist, I have an unflinching (and unifying) confidence in the order, hope, and purpose resulting from God's existence, and as a result, my gratitude is more consistent and unwavering. I'm not a Christian because I long for these realities, but they are the logical consequence of a theistic worldview.

Hindu belief prescribes both a context driven and a universal set of ethics

Chara Scroope, 2022 "Hinduism",
https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/religions/hinduism/resources/hinduism-law-and-ethics

Ethical Approach

In Hinduism, there are different understandings and approaches to ethics. On the one hand, there is a context-sensitive approach related to the principle of duty (dharma). This approach is one's personal duty (svadharma) and refers to the idea that an individual's moral behaviour depends on one's age, life station, gender and caste. The smṛti (remembered) texts are often seen as examples of how to follow one's personal duty and the possible karmic consequences in the cases where one does not. On the other hand, there is a universal or 'common to all' ethical approach known as sādhāraṇa dharma. This universal system presents ethical principles that one should follow regardless of their context. Such principles include non-violence (ahiṃsā) and truthfulness (satya).

Theistic beliefs command us to love one another, making society better

Michael W. Austin, former president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, "Divine Command Theory", https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/

Alston's argument is that if we interpret these statements correctly, a theist can in fact grasp both horns of this putative dilemma. One problem with opting for number 1 in the above dilemma is that it becomes difficult if not impossible to conceive of God as morally good, because if the standards of moral goodness are set by God's commands, then the claim "God is morally good" is equivalent to "God obeys His own commands". But this trivialization is not what we mean when we assert that God is morally good. Alston argues that a divine command theorist can avoid this problem by conceiving of God's moral goodness as something distinct from conformity to moral obligations, and so as something distinct from conformity to divine commands. Alston summarizes his argument for this claim as follows:

…a necessary condition of the truth that 'S ought to do A' is at least the metaphysical possibility that S does not do A. On this view, moral obligations attach to all human beings, even those so saintly as to totally lack any tendency, in the ordinary sense of that term, to do other than what it is morally good to do. And no moral obligations attach to God, assuming, as we are here, that God is essentially perfectly good. Thus divine commands can be constitutive of moral obligations for those beings who have them without it being the case that God's goodness consists in His obeying His own commands, or, indeed, consists in any relation whatsoever of God to His commands (p. 315).

Alston concludes that Divine Command Theory survives the first horn of the dilemma. However, in so doing, perhaps the theory is delivered a fatal blow by the dilemma's second horn. If the divine command theorist holds that "God commands us to love our neighbor because it is morally good that we should do so," then moral goodness is independent of God's will and moral facts stand over God, so to speak, insofar as God is now subject to such facts. Hence, God is no longer absolutely sovereign. One response is to say that God is subject to moral principles in the same way that he is subject to logical principles, which nearly all agree does not compromise his sovereignty (See The Omnipotence Objection below). Alston prefers a different option, however, and argues that we can think of God himself as the supreme standard of goodness. God does not consult some independent Platonic realm where the objective principles of goodness exist, but rather God just acts according to his necessarily good character. But is not arbitrariness still present, insofar as it seems that it is arbitrary to take a particular individual as the standard of goodness, without reference to the individual's conformity to general principles of goodness? In response, Alston points out that there must be a stopping point for any explanation. That is, sooner or later, when we are seeking an answer to the question "By virtue of what does good supervene on these characteristics?" we ultimately reach either a general principle or an individual paradigm. And Alston's view is that it is no more arbitrary to invoke God as the supreme moral standard than it is to invoke some supreme moral principle. That is, the claim that good supervenes on God is no more arbitrary than the claim that it supervenes on some Platonic principle.

Hinduism’s core is that of non-violence

Chara Scroope, 2022"Hinduism",
https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/religions/hinduism/resources/hinduism-law-and-ethics

Non-violence (Ahiṃsā)

In Hinduism, ahiṃsā (‘non-injury’, ‘non-killing’ or ‘non-violence’) refers to the concept of not causing or wishing to cause physical, mental or emotional harm to other living things. Adherence to the principle of non-violence is thought to generate positive karma while defying the principle is believed to bring about negative karma. The concept of non-violence forms the basis of vegetarianism for many Hindus, as well as the tolerance towards all forms of life.

The ideas of Karma and Dharma drives a human centered focus on ethics

Pathos Ethics in Community,"Principles Of Moral Thought And Action", https://www.patheos.com/library/hinduism/ethics-morality-community/principles-of-moral-thought-and-action

Dharma is one of the most complex and all-encompassing terms in all of Hinduism: it can mean religion, law, duty, order, proper conduct, morality, righteousness, justice, norm. As such, dharma fundamentally underlies conceptions of morality and ethics in Hinduism. Dharma puts things in their proper place, creates and maintains order and balance. In the vast compendium of literature known as the Dharmashastras, dharma is examined from virtually every imaginable angle, from the proper performance of sacrifice, kingly duties, cultural norms, sexual relations, and everyday social rules such as manners.

To act dharmically is, in essence, to act appropriately; what is appropriate is determined by the context in which the action is to be performed and who is performing it. Different people have different dharmas; one's caste, one's position in life (ashrama), one's gender, all determine what is dharmic in a particular instance. The ethical and moral guidelines for a Kshatriya are different than those for a Brahmin, which are in turn different from those for a Shudra. This is sometimes called "svadharma," or one's own, personal dharma. The specifics of these guidelines are discussed in great detail in the Dharmashastras and their commentaries.

Thus in Hinduism specific ethical and moral guidelines vary; the general ethical and moral principle does not, however. That amounts to a simple moral and ethical imperative: act properly (dharmically).

Karma is intimately associated with dharma in this regard. Karma is understood in Hinduism as a universal law of cause and effect. Positive actions produce positive effects; negative actions produce negative effects. To act dharmically is to act in a karmically positive manner, therefore. When one acts dharmically, one necessarily produces positive karma. This karma is cumulative: one accrues karma, positive and negative, not only throughout the course of one's life, but throughout the course of one's multiple rebirths. It is karma that determines one's rebirths.

A core belief in Islam states a higher power commands love for all

Benjamin Wormald, 4-30-2013, "Chapter 3: Morality", Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-morality/

Muslims widely hold the view that it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values. In nearly every country surveyed, at least half of Muslims say an individual's morality is linked to belief in God. This is true especially in the countries surveyed in Southeast Asia, where more than nine-in-ten Muslims say it is necessary to believe in God to be a moral person. At least eight-in-ten say the same in most countries surveyed in South Asia and the Middle East-North Africa region; only in Lebanon does a smaller majority (64%) share this view.

At least half of Muslims in all the countries surveyed in sub-Saharan Africa accept that personal morality is based on belief in God. This view is most widely held in Niger (88%) and Tanzania (87%), followed by Djibouti and Kenya (75% each).

Most Muslims in Central Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe also agree that belief in God is necessary to be moral, including 88% in Azerbaijan and 76% in Kosovo. Only in Albania (45%) and Kazakhstan (41%) do fewer than half share this opinion.

In many countries, Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely than those who pray less often to say it is necessary to believe in God to be moral. The differences are particularly large in Russia (+40 percentage points), Lebanon (+39), Kosovo (+23) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (+22). On this question, there are no consistent differences by age or gender across the countries surveyed.

Islamic belief states that divine powers have given the humans the ability to channel good

Abul 'Ala Al-Mawdudi, Islamic scholar "The Moral System Of Islam", No Publication, https://www.iium.edu.my/deed/articles/themoralsystem.html

MAN (sic) has been blessed with an innate sense of morality, which has served to guide him through the age, enabling him to distinguish between right and wrong and good and evil. Although the degree to which a certain quality is interpreted as being either good or evil may vary from person to person, there is more or less a universal consensus regarding the classification of what constitutes a moral deed or attribute and what does not. Thus, virtues such as bravery and truthfulness have always elicited praise. In contrast to this, we find that at no time in the history of man have qualities such as dishonesty and breach of trust ever been upheld or regarded as worthy of praise. Fidelity, magnanimity and integrity have always been valued, whilst selfishness, cruelty, miserliness and bigot, have never received the approbation of society at large. Perseverance, determination and courage are qualities that are much admired and appreciated by man, whereas impatience, fickleness and cowardice are given little consideration. Dignity, restraint, politeness and amiability have always been regarded as virtues as opposed to snobbery, arrogance and discourteousness, which have never been recognized as good moral qualities. A person who possesses a sense of responsibility and devotion to duty has always been high regarded and respected whilst he who is lazy, negligent of his duties and undisciplined is largely ignored and looked down upon.

Similarly, a society that is founded upon and actively promotes equality, justice and freedom is looked upon a positive light. A society in which injustice, disorganization, disunity and social imbalance manifest themselves is considered to be on the verge of collapse, having allowed itself to decay over time through the implementation of policies destructive to the very core upon which it is based. Robbery, larceny, murder, adultery and fraud have always been condemned. Slander, blackmail and bribery have never been regarded as wholesome social activities. Contrary to this, we of the aged, loyalty to friends, helping one's kith and kin in times of need, concern for neighbours, assisting the week and oppressed and nursing the sick are all activities that have been highly valued since the dawn of civilization.

People who are polite, sincere, upright, dependable, who are prompt in discharging their obligations to others, who live in peace and allow others to do likewise have always formed the core of any healthy society. Good and evil are not myths awaiting resurrection, they are a real part of our everyday lives and hence, Allah has blessed mankind with an inherent sense of right and wrong. Allah says in the Qur'an: "(Allah) has revealed to human nature the consciousness and the cognition of good and evil. " (Surah as-Shams: 8) The questions that now arise are: If the basic values of good and evil are universally recognized, why then, do varying patterns of moral behavior exist in the world? Why are there so many conflicting moral philosophies? Where does the root of these differences lie? What is the position of Islam with respect to other ethical systems? How can we justify the claim that Islam provides us with a perfectly balanced moral system? What is the distinctive contribution that Islam has made in the realm of ethics?

Christian morality guides us to discover who we are

Michael Pennock, The Seeker's Catechism: The Basics of Catholicism, Notre Dame Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1994, p 43-44,
https://www.sandhurst.catholic.org.au/faith-in-action-living-the-christian-life/the-human-person-christian-morality

Every human person is a being of immeasurable dignity because each is created in the image and likeness of God, with a spiritual and immortal soul (or spirit), intelligence and free will. God wants everyone to find eternal beatitude (happiness) and has placed this desire deep within every heart. Speaking of all dimensions of life in this world and beyond, Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Only God alone can satisfy the human desire for fullness of life and enduring happiness. When St Augustine discovered this, he wrote: "You have made us for yourself O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." (St Augustine, Confessions, Chapter 1).

Humanity is faced with 'big questions'; How should we live? What is goodness? Why should we act morally? How do we know what is right or wrong? What kind of life leads to real, and eternal, happiness? For Catholic Christians, faith in Jesus Christ is expressed in lives of loving service as his disciples.

"Christian morality helps us discover how we should live our lives as a result of our faith in God's word which has been revealed to us. Christian Morality can be summarized in the word responsibility. There are two components to this term: response and ability. To what do we respond? Christian life is a response to God's freely given love and gift of salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ. 'Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality' (Pope John Paul II, The Splendour of Truth, #19). Christian morality comes to the forefront when people say yes to God, when they freely respond to God's love. The essence of Christian morality is, simply, love. Reflect on the words of Jesus: 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your sould, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: you must love your neighbour as yourself' (Mt 22:37-39).

The second aspect of Christian morality is the ability to respond to God, the ability to love, the ability to say to say yes to God. This is also a gift, also freely bestowed on us. It is part of what it means to be a human being. Human persons have basic dignity which flows from our being created in God's image (with a soul); this implies that we can think and love and be in relationship to others in community. Our conscience aids us in a life directed to God and other people."

Human nature is naturally harmful, yet we act good, thus a higher power drives our moral compass

Karen Armstrong, The Case for God, Chapter 14, "The Eclipse of God."
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7839352-the-case-for-god

Even if we have rejected the notion of God and a supernatural dimension, our humanism will still be in thrall to these ancient religious values. The very term 'humanism' is inadequate; it suggests that our values are simply 'human.' Yet there is nothing intrinsically human about compassion, for example. We have to learn it. We have acquired it from those traditions which for millennia have been showing us that unless we are prepared to feel with others, to weep with those who weep, and to mourn with those who mourn, we will be unable to live a fully human life.

The human connection to God is what sets up apart from nature. This concept is our morality

Alvin Plantinga, Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism, Chapter 11, "Evolution and Christian Belief." https://www.calvin.edu/library/archive/plantinga/

Suppose for a moment, that naturalism is true, and there is no God, no being whose creative activity is responsible for the existence of human beings. Then human beings have not been created in the image of God. There is no such image. Then, perhaps, the most important property of human beings is that they are organisms, that they are parts of the animal kingdom. Their most important properties are biological. But then what is the basis for the thought that human beings have rights, or are intrinsically valuable, or ought not to be tortured, or are such that it is wrong to kill them? If we are, as naturalism implies, just very complicated organisms, then it is hard to see a basis for the claim that it is wrong to kill a human being but perfectly all right to kill an animal, or that it is wrong to torture a human being but all right to torture an animal. The natural world contains an enormous amount of pain and suffering; if we are just part of that world, why should we expect anything else for ourselves?

To be moral and to do good is intrinsic to all world religions

Huston Smith, The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions, various chapters discussing individual religions. https://www.harpercollins.com/blogs/authors/huston-smith-books-biography

The Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' is perhaps the most widely recognized ethical principle across cultures and religions. It is found, often in nearly identical formulations, in Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and many indigenous spiritual traditions. This remarkable convergence suggests a deeply embedded moral intuition, often articulated and reinforced through religious teachings, that recognizes the interconnectedness of humanity and the necessity of empathy for harmonious social existence."

Negative Evidence

Morality is done through duty to others and the desired end goal of our own actions

Oklahoma State Department of Philosophy "An Introduction to Kant's Moral Theory – Philosophical Thought", Philosophical Thought, https://open.library.okstate.edu/introphilosophy/chapter/a-brief-overview-of-kants-moral-theory/

According to Kant the only thing that is good in itself is the "good will." The will is what drives our actions and grounds the intention of our act. It is good when it acts from duty. To clarify, Kant thinks the good will is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable. If we think about the other goods and things that we value, such are not good without qualification. For example, we value knowledge, but such can be used to commit atrocities in the world, so knowledge is good sometimes. The same can be said of courage. We value courage, but a suicide bomber also exhibits courage. So, courage can only be good sometimes. We can think of other examples as well. This leads Kant to claim that the good will is the only thing good without qualification–or the only thing that is intrinsically good. Accordingly, the will is a good will provided it acts from duty.

Kant recognizes that it is difficult to determine one's intentions, so he makes a distinction between acting in conformity with duty and acting from duty. To illustrate this distinction, let's take the example of three young men who see an elderly woman needing help across the street. Man A decides he will help the woman across the street because if he didn't he would feel guilty all day. Man B decides he will help the woman across the street because he recognizes her as his neighbor, Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Wilson makes the best cookies in the neighborhood. So, Man B helps her because he reasons that he will be rewarded. Man C decides he will help the woman across the street because it is the right thing to do; he understands that he has a moral obligation to help others in need when he can.

The results of all three individuals are the same–the woman is helped across the street. If we were looking at this from a utilitarian perspective, all three of the young men would be morally praiseworthy because in all three cases, happiness or well-being is increased (or pain is relieved). However, for Kant, only one of the young men's actions have moral worth and it is Man C; he understands what his moral duty is and he acts from it. The other two act only in conformity with duty–they are driven by some other goal or desire aside from duty itself.

The duties we experience every day are not all driven by morals

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Duties are principles that guide our actions. Duties are imperatives in the sense that they tell us what to do. Kant recognizes that there are different types of imperatives in his distinction between a hypothetical and a categorical imperative. An imperative is essentially a ought; something I ought to do. Hypothetical imperatives are the oughts that direct my actions provided I have certain goals or interests. In fact, these oughts are entirely dependent upon my goals or interests. For example, if I want to be a good basketball player I ought to practice free throws or if I want to go to law school I ought to take a logic class. If I change my goal and decide to be a baseball player or a welder instead then my oughts may also change. Hypothetical imperatives have nothing to do with morality. However a categorical imperative does not depend upon my desires or wants. These are necessary and always binding and are the oughts that determine what our moral duties are. Even if I don't want to help the elderly person across the street, if I have a duty to do so, my ought is binding. We should all be familiar enough with feeling we must do something even if we'd rather do something else.

Kant’s categorical imperative is driven by three 3 questions not a belief system

Oklahoma State Department of Philosophy "An Introduction to Kant’s Moral Theory – Philosophical Thought", Philosophical Thought, https://open.library.okstate.edu/introphilosophy/chapter/a-brief-overview-of-kants-moral-theory/

Kant’s moral theory has three formulas for the categorical imperative. So, if you’re facing a moral dilemma you must determine whether or not your action is permissible according to the formulas. Simply put, think of the formulas as tests that have to be passed in order for a principle or act to be moral.

Formula one states that we ought to act in a way such that the maxim, or principle, of our act can be willed a universal law. If your maxim cannot be universalized then that act is morally off limits. For example, if I am considering stealing a loaf of bread, I have to ask myself if my maxim can be made a universal law. This would look something like this: Is it okay for all people to steal all the time? The answer is no; the maxim itself would be self-defeating because if everyone stole all the time there would be no private property and stealing would no longer be possible.

The second formula states that we ought to treat humanity (self and others) as an end and never as a mere means. Essentially, this entails that I treat all persons with respect and dignity; I help others achieve their goals when possible, and I avoid using them as tools or objects to further my own goals. For Kant, since humans have the capacity for autonomy and rationality, it is crucial that we treat humans with respect and dignity.

The third formula states that we act on principles that could be accepted within a community of other rational agents. The third formula, “the kingdom of ends,” moves us from the individual level to the social level.

In brief, Kant’s moral philosophy focuses on fairness and the value of the individual. His method rests on our ability to reason, our autonomy (i.e. our ability to give ourselves moral law and govern our own lives), and logical consistency. He also offers an objective sense of morality in the form of absolute duties–duties that are binding regardless of our desires, goals, or outcomes.

Morality is social contract based

Alexander Wendt 2000 (Professor of International Security, Dept. of Political Science at Ohio State University) International Relations: Critical Concepts in Political Science, edited by Andrew Linklater, p. 629.)

Let us assume that processes of identity- and interest-formation have created a world in which states do not recognize rights to territory or existence-a war of all against all. In this world, anarchy has a "realist" meaning for state action: be insecure and concerned with relative power. Anarchy has this meaning only in virtue of collective, insecurity-producing practices, but if those practices are relatively stable; they do constitute a system that may resist change. The fact that worlds of power politics are socially constructed, in other words, does not guarantee they are malleable, for at least two reasons. The first reason is that once constituted, any social system confronts each of its members as an objective social fact that reinforces certain behaviors and discourages others. Self-help systems, for example, tend to reward competition and punish altruism. The possibility of change depends on whether the exigencies of such competition leave room for actions that deviate from the prescribed script. If they do not, the system will be reproduced and deviant actors will not. **The second reason is that systemic change may also be inhibited by actors' interests in maintaining relatively stable role identities. Such interests are rooted not only in the desire to minimize uncertainty and anxiety, manifested in efforts to confirm existing beliefs about the social world, but also in the desire to avoid the expected costs of breaking commitments made to others-notably domestic constituencies and foreign allies in the case of states-as part of past practices.** The level of resistance that these commitments induce will depend on the "salience" of particular role identities to the actor. The United States, for example, is more likely to resist threats to its identity as "leader of anticommunist crusades" than to its identity as "promoter of human rights." **But for almost any role identity, practices and information that challenges it are likely to create cognitive dissonance and even perceptions of threat, and these may cause resistance to transformations of the self and thus to social change. For both systemic and "psychological" reasons, then, intersubjective understandings and expectations may have a self-perpetuating quality, constituting path-dependencies that new ideas about self and other must transcend.** This does not change the fact that through practice agents are continuously producing and reproducing identities and interests, continuously "choosing now the preferences [they] will have later." But it does mean that choices may not be experienced with meaningful degrees of freedom. **This could be a constructivist justification for the realist position that only simple learning is possible in self-help systems. The realist might concede that such systems are socially constructed and still argue that after the corresponding identities and interests have become institutionalized; they are almost impossible to transform.**

Human good nature is rooted in the human condition not religion

Kohn 1988 (Alfie, writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting, “Human Nature Isn’t Inherently Violent,” http://salsa.net/peace/conv/8weekconv1-4.html)

Peace activists can tell when it's coming. **Tipped off by a helpless shrug or a patronizing smile, they brace themselves to hear the phrase once again. "Sure, I'm in favor of stopping the arms race. But aren't you being idealistic? After all, aggression is just" - here it comes - "part of human nature**." Like the animals, -- "red in tooth and claw," as Tennyson put it - human beings are thought to be unavoidably violent creatures. Surveys of adults, undergraduates, and high school students have found that about 60 percent agree with this statement. "Human nature being what it is, there will always be war." It may be part of our society's folk wisdom, but it sets most of the expert's heads to shaking. Take the belief, popularized by Sigmund Freud and animal researcher Konrad Lorenz, **that we have within us, naturally and spontaneously, a reservoir of aggressive energy. This force, which builds by itself, must be periodically drained off - by participating in competitive sports, for instance - lest we explode into violence. It is an appealing model because it is easy to visualize. It is also false.** John Paul Scott, professor emeritus at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, has written: "**All of our present data indicate that fighting behavior among higher mammals, including man, originates in external stimulation and that there is no evidence of spontaneous internal stimulation." Clearly, many individuals - and whole cultures - manage quite well without behaving aggressively, and there is no evidence of the inexorable buildup of pressure this "hydraulic" model would predict. The theory also predicts that venting aggressive energy should make us less aggressive - an effect known as "catharsis," which follows Aristotle's idea that we can be purged of unpleasant emotions by watching tragic dramas. But one study after another has shown that we are likely to become more violent after watching or participating in such pastimes.** Although the hydraulic model has been discredited, the more general belief in an innate human propensity for violence has not been so easily shaken. Among the arguments one hears is these: Animals are aggressive, and we cannot escape the legacy of our evolutionary ancestors; human history is dominated by takes of war and cruelty, and certain areas of the brain and particular hormones are linked to aggression, proving a biological basis for such behavior. First, we should be cautious in drawing lessons from other species to explain our own behavior, given the mediating force of culture and our capacity for reflection. But even animals are not as aggressive as some people think - unless the term "aggression" includes killing to eat. Organized group aggression is rare in other species, and the aggression that does exist is typically a function of the environment in which animals find themselves. Scientists have discovered that altering animals' environment, or the way they are reared, can have a profound impact on the level of aggression found in virtually all species. Furthermore, animals cooperate both within and among species far more than many of us may assume on the basis of watching nature documentaries. When we turn to human history, we find an alarming number of aggressive behaviors, but we do not find reason to believe the problem is innate. Here are some of the points made by critics of biological determinism: Even if a given behavior is universal, we cannot automatically conclude that it is part of our biological nature. All known cultures may produce pottery, but that does not mean that there is a gene for pottery-making. Aggression is nowhere near universal. Many hunter-gatherer societies in particular are entirely peaceful. And the cultures that are "closer to nature" would be expected to be the most warlike if the proclivity for war were really part of

that nature. Just the reverse seems to be true. While it is indisputable that wars have been fought, the fact that they seem to dominate our history may say more about how history is presented than about what actually happened. Many people have claimed that human nature is aggressive after having lumped together a wide range of emotions and behavior under the label of aggression. While cannibalism, for example, is sometimes perceived as aggression, it might represent a religious ritual rather than an expression of hostility. It is true that the presence of some hormones or the stimulation of certain sections of the brain has been experimentally linked with aggression. But after describing these mechanisms in some detail, K.E. Moyer, a physiologist at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, emphasizes that "aggressive behavior is stimulus-bound. That is, even though the neural system specific to a particular kind of aggression is well activated, the behavior does not occur unless an appropriate target is available (and even then) it can be inhibited." Regardless of the evolutionary or neurological factors said to underlie aggression, "biological" simply does not mean "unavoidable." The fact that people voluntarily fast or remain celibate shows that even hunger and sex drives can be overridden. All this concerns the matter of aggressiveness in general. The idea that war in particular is biologically determined is even more far-fetched. To begin with, we tend to make generalizations about the whole species on the basis of our own experience. "People in a highly warlike society are likely to overestimate the propensity toward war in human nature," says Donald Greenberg, a sociologist at the University of Missouri. The historical record, according to the Congressional Research Service, shows the United States is one of the most warlike societies on the planet, having intervened militarily around the world more than 150 times since 1850. Within such a society, not surprisingly, the intellectual traditions supporting the view that aggression is more a function of nature than nurture have found a ready audience. The mass media also play a significant role in perpetuating outdated views on violence, according to Jeffrey Goldstein, a psychologist at Temple University. Because it is relatively easy to describe and makes for a snappier news story, reporters seem to prefer explanations of aggression that invoke biological necessity, he says. An international conference of experts concluded in 1986 that war is not an inevitable part of human nature. When one member tried to convince reporters that this finding was newsworthy, few news organizations in the United States were interested. One reporter told him, "Call us back when you find a gene for war." Leonard Eron, a psychologist at the University of Illinois in Chicago, observes, "TV teaches people that aggressive behavior is normative, that the world around you are a jungle when it is actually not so." In fact, research at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications has shown that the more television an individual watches, the more likely he or she is to believe that "most people would take advantage of you if they got the chance." The belief that violence in unavoidable, while disturbing at first glance, actually holds a curious attraction for some people. It also allows individuals to excuse their own acts of aggression by suggesting that they have little choice. "In order to justify, accept, and live with war, we have created a psychology that makes it inevitable," says Dr. Bernard Lown, co-chairman of International Physicians for th4e Prevention of Nuclear War, which received the Nobel peace Prize in 1985. "It is a rationalization for accepting war as a system of resolving human conflict." To understand these explanations for the war-is-inevitable belief is to realize its consequences. Treating any behavior as inevitable sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy: By assuming we are bound to be aggressive; we are more likely to act that way and provide evidence for the assumption. People who believe that humans are naturally aggressive may also be unlikely to oppose particular wars. The evidence suggests, then, that humans do have a choice with respect to aggression and war. To an extent, such destructiveness is due to the mistaken assumption that we are helpless to

control an essentially violent nature. "We live in a time," says Lown, "when accepting this as inevitable is no longer possible without courting extinction."

As more studies have taken place, human nature is more kind than we realized. People need less incentives than previously thought

Stephanie Pappas, 2-23-2017, "Conflicts of Interest: Are Humans Inherently Selfish?," livescience, https://www.livescience.com/57991-conflicts-of-interest-science-humans-selfish-cooperation.html

President Donald Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership on Jan. 23, 2017.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership on Jan. 23, 2017. (Image credit: Ron Sachs - Pool/Getty Images)

President Donald Trump has been dogged by questions about conflicts of interest. He has declined to divest himself of his assets or put them in a blind trust, as is customary for presidents, news reports say. He has tweeted in defense of his daughter's clothing line. And taxpayer money may go toward the Department of Defense leasing space in Trump Tower — the president's property — to remain close to the president when he is in Manhattan, CNN recently reported.

At the heart of any conflict-of-interest situation is the question of whether to act in your own best interest or do what is best for the greater good. Trump's issues might make a cynic shrug. After all, don't we all look out only for ourselves?

Psychological research suggests the opposite: that self-interest is far from people's primary motivation. In fact, humans are prone to act for the good of the group, many studies have found.

"In the past 20 years, we have discovered that people — all around the world — are a lot more moral and a lot less selfish than economists and evolutionary biologists had previously assumed, and that our moral commitments are surprisingly similar: to reciprocity, fairness and helping people in need, even if acting on these motives can be personally costly for a person," Samuel Bowles, an economist at the Santa Fe Institute and author of "The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives Are No Substitute for Good Citizens" (Yale University Press, 2016), wrote in an email to Live Science. [No 'I' in Team: 5 Key Cooperation Findings]

Philosophers have been arguing about whether people are inherently selfish since there has been such a thing as philosophers. In Plato's "Republic," Socrates has a discussion with his older brother Glaucon in which Glaucon insists that people's good behavior actually only exists for self-interest: People only do the right thing because they fear being punished if they get caught. If human actions were invisible to others, Glaucon says, even the most "just" man would act purely for himself and not care if he harmed anyone in the process.

It's the sort of argument that might have appealed to Thomas Hobbes, the 17th-century English philosopher famous for saying that the natural state of man's life would be "nasty, brutish and short." According to Hobbes, humans must form social contracts and governments to prevent their selfish, violent tendencies from taking over.

Not all philosophers have agreed with this dour point of view, however. Philosopher John Locke, for example, thought that humans were inherently tolerant and reasonable, though he acknowledged humanity's capacity for selfishness.

So, what does the science say? In fact, people are quite willing to act for the good of the group, even if it's against their own interests, studies show. But paradoxically, social structures that attempt to give people incentives for good behavior can actually make people more selfish.

Perverse incentives

Take a classic example: In 2000, a study in the Journal of Legal Studies found that trying to punish bad behavior with a fine backfired spectacularly. The study took place at 10-day care centers in Haifa, Israel. First, researchers observed the centers for four weeks, tracking how many parents arrived late to pick up their children, inconveniencing the day care staff. Next, six of the centers introduced a fine for parents who arrived more than 10 minutes late. The four other centers served as a control, for comparison. (The fine was small but not insignificant, similar to what a parent might have to pay a babysitter for an hour.)

After the introduction of the fine, the rate of late pickups didn't drop. Instead, it nearly doubled. By introducing an incentive structure, the day cares apparently turned the after-school hours into a commodity, the researchers wrote. Parents who might have felt vaguely guilty for imposing on teachers' patience before the fine now felt that a late pickup was just something they could buy. [Understanding the 10 Most Destructive Human Behaviors]

The Haifa day care study isn't the only one to find that trying to induce moral behavior with material incentives can make people less considerate of others. In a 2008 review in the journal Science, Bowles examined 41 studies of incentives and moral behavior. He found that, in most cases, incentives and punishments undermined moral behavior.

For example, in one study, published in 2000 in the journal World Development, researchers asked people in rural Colombia to play a game in which they had to decide how much firewood to take from a forest, with the consideration that deforestation would result in poor water quality. This game was analogous to real life for the people of the village. In some cases, people played the games in small groups but couldn't communicate about their decisions with players outside their group. In other cases, they could communicate. In a third condition, the players couldn't communicate but were given rules specifying how much firewood they could gather.

When allowed to communicate, the people in the small groups set aside self-interest and gathered less firewood for themselves, preserving water quality in the forest for the larger group as a whole. Regulations, on the other hand, had a perverse result over time: People gradually began to gather more and more firewood for themselves, risking a fine but ultimately putting their self-interest first.

"People look for situational cues of 'acceptable behavior,'" Bowles said. "Literally dozens of experiments show that if you offer someone a money incentive to perform a task (even one that she would have happily done without pay), this will 'turn on' the 'What's in it for me?' way of thinking, often to such an extent that the person will perform less with the incentive than without."

Though cooperation is ingrained in the human psyche to some extent, it's also obvious to anyone who has worked on a team that not everyone approaches group activities with the same attitude. An

increasing focus on individual differences in humans reveals that some people tend to cooperate more than others.

"It has been known for quite a while that people differ quite a lot, and they differ in all kinds of behavioral tendencies," said F.J. Weissing, a theoretical biologist at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. "But when people conducted experiments, they typically looked at the average behavior and not so much at the variation between subjects." [Top 10 Things that Make Humans Special]

That variation among subjects turns out to be quite important. In 2015, Weissing and his colleagues published a paper in the journal PNAS in which they allowed people to play a game where they could choose to seek out either information about the choices of other players, or information about how successful those other players were. People were remarkably consistent about the kind of information they sought, the researchers found: Two-thirds always asked for the same kind of information, whether they preferred information about choices or success.

Then, the researchers split people into groups based on which information they preferred, with some groups comprising only people who liked choice information, some groups made up of only people who liked success information, and some mixed. These groups then played games in which cooperation benefited everyone, but a selfish strategy could elevate an individual's fortunes while hurting the group.

People who fixated on the success of their teammates were more likely to behave selfishly in these games, the researchers found. This finding shows that this strategy — comparing others' successes and failures — prompts people to engage in behaviors focused on their own gain, the researchers said.

In contrast, people who focus on how the rest of the group is acting, regardless of individual successes, might be more prone to working together, the researchers said.

Both cooperation and selfishness may be important behaviors, meaning that species may be most successful if they have some individuals that exhibit each behavior, Weissing told Live Science. In follow-up experiments that have not yet been published, he and his colleagues have found that in some economic games, mixed groups perform far better than groups made up only of conformists or only of those who look out for themselves. [7 Thoughts That Are Bad for You]

Very fundamental physiological differences between people may be at the root of these different social strategies, Weissing said, including differences in hormone levels and organization of the central nervous system. However, he agreed that situational factors can subtly push people toward cooperation or self-interest. More realistic studies of cooperative and selfish behavior are needed, he said.

"In real life, cooperation looks very, very different from these very, very simplified lab contexts," Weissing said. "And the dominant factor is not really money, but something else. I think that makes quite a difference."

Our sense of duty drives morality

Peter Singer 1972 [Prof. Bioethics at Princeton] “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol. 1, no. 1 Spring 1972

My next point is this: if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By "Without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. This principle seems almost as uncontroversial as the last one. It requires us only to prevent what is bad, and to promote what is good, and it requires this of us only when we can do it without sacrificing anything that is, from the moral point of view, comparably important. I could even, as far as the application of my argument to the Bengal emergency is concerned, qualify the point so as to make it: if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it. **An application of this principle would be as follows: if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing. The uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive.** If it were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed. For the principle takes, firstly, no account of proximity or distance. It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. Secondly, the principle makes no distinction between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position.

A duty to assist the other drives utility

Peter Singer 1972[Prof. Bioethics at Princeton] “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol. 1, no. 1 Spring 1972

A third point raised by the conclusion reached earlier relates to the question of just how much we all ought to be giving away. One possibility, which has already been mentioned, is that we ought to give until we reach the level of marginal utility - that is, the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift. This would mean, of course, that one would reduce oneself to very near the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee. It will be recalled that earlier I put forward both a strong and a moderate version of the principle of preventing bad occurrences. The strong version, which required us to prevent bad things from happening unless in doing so we would be sacrificing something of comparable moral significance, does seem to require reducing ourselves to the level of marginal utility. I should also say that the strong version seems to me to be the correct one. I proposed the more moderate version - that we should prevent bad occurrences unless, to do so, we had to sacrifice something morally significant -only in order to show that, even on this surely undeniable principle, a great change in our way of life is required. On the more moderate principle, it may not follow that we ought to reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility, for one might hold that to reduce oneself and one's family to this level is to cause something significantly bad to happen. Whether this is so I shall not discuss, since, as I have said, I can see no good reason for holding the moderate version of the principle rather than the strong version. Even if we accepted the principle only in its moderate form, however, it should be clear that we would have to give away enough to ensure that the consumer society, dependent as it is on people spending on trivia rather than giving to famine relief, would slow down and perhaps disappear entirely. There are several reasons why this would be desirable in itself. The value and necessity of economic growth is now being questioned not only by conservationists, but by economists as well. [5] There is no doubt, too, that the consumer society has had a distorting effect on the goals and purposes of its members. Yet looking at the matter purely from the point of view of overseas aid, there must be a limit to the extent to which we should deliberately slow down our economy; for it might be the case that if we gave away, say, 40 percent of our Gross National Product, we would slow down the economy so much that in absolute terms we would be giving less than if we gave 25 percent of the much larger GNP that we would have if we limited our contribution to this smaller percentage.

The obligation to assist the other is a prerequisite to other concerns of value

Peter Singer 1972 [Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University], "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 229-243 [revised edition]

There may be a greater need to defend the second implication of my principle - that the fact that there are millions of other people in the same position, in respect to the Bengali refugees, as I am, does not make the situation significantly different from a situation in which I am the only person who can prevent something very bad from occurring. Again, of course, I admit that there is a psychological difference between the cases; one feels less guilty about doing nothing if one can point to others, similarly placed, who have also done nothing. Yet this can make no real difference to our moral obligations. [2] Should I consider that I am less obliged to pull the drowning child out of the pond if on looking around I see other people, no further away than I am, who have also noticed the child but are doing nothing? One has only to ask this question to see the absurdity of the view that numbers lessen obligation. It is a view that is an ideal excuse for inactivity: unfortunately, most of the major evils - poverty, overpopulation, pollution - are problems in which everyone is almost equally involved.

The view that numbers do make a difference can be made plausible if stated in this way: if everyone in circumstances like mine gave £5 to the Bengal Relief Fund, there would be enough to provide food, shelter, and medical care for the refugees; there is no reason why I should give more than anyone else in the same circumstances as I am; therefore, I have no obligation to give more than £5. Each premise in this argument is true, and the argument looks sound. It may convince us, unless we notice that it is based on a hypothetical premise, although the conclusion is not stated hypothetically. The argument would be sound if the conclusion were: if everyone in circumstances like mine were to give £5, I would have no obligation to give more than £5. If the conclusion was so stated; however, it would be obvious that the argument has no bearing on a situation in which it is not the case that everyone else gives £5. This, of course, is the actual situation. It is more or less certain that not everyone in circumstances like mine will give £5. So there will not be enough to provide the needed food, shelter, and medical care. Therefore by giving more than £5 I will prevent more suffering than I would if I gave just £5.

It might be thought that this argument has an absurd consequence. Since the situation appears to be that very few people are likely to give substantial amounts, it follows that I and everyone else in similar circumstances ought to give as much as possible, that is, at least up to the point at which by giving more one would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents - perhaps even beyond this point to the point of marginal utility, at which by giving more one would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as one would prevent in Bengal. If everyone does this, however, there will be more than can be used for the benefit of the refugees, and some of the sacrifice will have been unnecessary. **Thus, if everyone does what he ought to do, the result will not be as good as it would be if everyone did a little less than he ought to do, or if only some do all that they ought to do."**

The obligation to assist is the driver in society

Peter Singer 1972 [Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University], "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 229-243 [revised edition]

One objection to the position I have taken might be simply that it is too drastic a revision of us moral scheme. People do not ordinarily judge in the way I have suggested they should. Most people reserve their moral condemnation for those who violate some moral norm, such as the norm against taking another person's property. They do not condemn those who indulge in luxury instead of giving to famine relief. But given that I did not set out to present a morally neutral description of the way people makes moral judgments; the way people do in fact judge has nothing to do with the validity of my conclusion. My conclusion follows from the principle which I advanced earlier, and unless that principle is rejected, or the arguments are shown to be unsound, I think the conclusion must stand, however strange it appears. It might, nevertheless, be interesting to consider why our society, and most other societies, do judge differently from the way I have suggested they should. In a wellknown article, J. O. Urmson suggests that the imperatives of duty, which tell us what we must do, as distinct from what it would be good to do but not wrong not to do, function so as to prohibit behavior that is intolerable if men are to live together in society. [3] This may explain the origin and continued existence of the present division between acts of duty and acts of charity. Moral attitudes are shaped by the needs of society, and no doubt society needs people who will observe the rules that make social existence tolerable. From the point of view of a particular society, it is essential to prevent violations of norms against killing, stealing, and so on. It is quite inessential, however, to help people outside one's own society.

The assumption that humans are self-interested guarantees extinction and is disproven by recent scientific evidence - the communications revolution enables the creation of a cosmopolitan identity

Rifkin 2010 (a senior lecturer at the Wharton School's Executive Education Program at the University of Pennsylvania—the world's #1 ranked business school, author, an advisor to the European Union since 2002, the founder and chairperson of the Third Industrial Revolution Global CEO Business Roundtable [January 11, 2010, Jeremy Rifkin, "'The Empathic Civilization': Rethinking Human Nature in the Biosphere Era," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeremy-rifkin/the-empathic-civilization_b_416589.html)

The problem runs deeper than the issue of finding new ways to regulate the market or imposing legally binding global greenhouse gas emission reduction targets. The real crisis lies in the set of assumptions about human nature that governs the behavior of world leaders--assumptions that were spawned during the Enlightenment more than 200 years ago at the dawn of the modern market economy and the emergence of the nation state era. The Enlightenment thinkers--John Locke, Adam Smith, Marquis de Condorcet et. al.--took umbrage with the Medieval Christian world view that saw human nature as fallen and depraved and that looked to salvation in the next world through God's grace. They preferred to cast their lot with the idea that human beings' essential nature is rational, detached, autonomous, acquisitive and utilitarian and argued that individual salvation lies in unlimited material progress here on Earth. The Enlightenment notions about human nature were reflected in the newly minted nation-state whose raison d'être was to protect private property relations and stimulate market forces as well as act as a surrogate of the collective self-interest of the citizenry in the international arena. Like individuals, nation-states were considered to be autonomous agents embroiled in a relentless battle with other sovereign nations in the pursuit of material gains. It was these very assumptions that provided the philosophical underpinnings for a geopolitical frame of reference that accompanied the first and second industrial revolutions in the 19th and 20th centuries. These beliefs about human nature came to the fore in the aftermath of the global economic meltdown and in the boisterous and acrimonious confrontations in the meeting rooms in Copenhagen, with potentially disastrous consequences for the future of humanity and the planet.

If human nature is as the Enlightenment philosophers claimed, then we are likely doomed. It is impossible to imagine how we might create a sustainable global economy and restore the biosphere to health if each and every one of us is, at the core of our biology, an autonomous agent and a self-centered and materialistic being. Recent discoveries in brain science and child development, however, are forcing us to rethink these long-held shibboleths about human nature. Biologists and cognitive neuroscientists are discovering mirror-neurons--the so-called empathy neurons--that allow human beings and other species to feel and experience another's situation as if it were one's own. We are, it appears, the most social of animals and seek intimate participation and companionship with our fellows.

Social scientists, in turn, are beginning to reexamine human history from an empathic lens and, in the process, discovering previously hidden strands of the human narrative which suggests that human

evolution is measured not only by the expansion of power over nature, but also by the intensification and extension of empathy to more diverse others across broader temporal and spatial domains. The growing scientific evidence that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society and may well determine our fate as a species. What is required now is nothing less than a leap to global empathic consciousness and in less than a generation if we are to resurrect the global economy and revitalize the biosphere. The question becomes this: what is the mechanism that allows empathic sensitivity to mature and consciousness to expand through history? The pivotal turning points in human consciousness occur when new energy regimes converge with new communications revolutions, creating new economic eras. The new communications revolutions become the command and control mechanisms for structuring, organizing and managing more complex civilizations that the new energy regimes make possible. For example, in the early modern age, print communication became the means to organize and manage the technologies, organizations, and infrastructure of the coal, steam, and rail revolution. It would have been impossible to administer the first industrial revolution using script and codex. Communication revolutions not only manage new, more complex energy regimes, but also change human consciousness in the process. Forager/hunter societies relied on oral communications and their consciousness was mythologically constructed. The great hydraulic agricultural civilizations were, for the most part, organized around script communication and steeped in theological consciousness. The first industrial revolution of the 19th century was managed by print communication and ushered in ideological consciousness. Electronic communication became the command and control mechanism for arranging the second industrial revolution in the 20th century and spawned psychological consciousness. Each more sophisticated communication revolution brings together more diverse people in increasingly more expansive and varied social networks. Oral communication has only limited temporal and spatial reach while script, print and electronic communications each extend the range and depth of human social interaction. By extending the central nervous system of each individual and the society as a whole, communication revolutions provide an ever more inclusive playing field for empathy to mature and consciousness to expand. For example, during the period of the great hydraulic agricultural civilizations characterized by script and theological consciousness, empathic sensitivity broadened from tribal blood ties to associational ties based on common religious affiliation. Jews came to empathize with Jews, Christians with Christians, Muslims with Muslims, etc. In the first industrial revolution characterized by print and ideological consciousness, empathic sensibility extended to national borders, with Americans empathizing with Americans, Germans with Germans, Japanese with Japanese and so on. In the second industrial revolution, characterized by electronic communication and psychological consciousness, individuals began to identify with like-minded others. Today, we are on the cusp of another historic convergence of energy and communication--a third industrial revolution--that could extend empathic sensibility to the biosphere itself and all of life on Earth. The distributed Internet revolution is coming together with distributed renewable energies, making possible a sustainable, post-carbon economy that is both globally connected and locally managed. In the 21st century, hundreds of millions--and eventually billions--of human beings will transform their buildings into power plants to harvest renewable energies on site, store those energies in the form of hydrogen and share electricity, peer-to-peer, across local, regional, national and continental inter-grids that act much like the Internet. The open source sharing of energy, like open source sharing of information, will give rise to collaborative energy spaces--not unlike the collaborative social spaces that currently exist on the Internet. When every family and business comes to take responsibility for its own small swath of the biosphere by harnessing renewable energy

and sharing it with millions of others on smart power grids that stretch across continents, we become intimately interconnected at the most basic level of earthly existence by jointly stewarding the energy that bathes the planet and sustains all of life. The new distributed communication revolution not only organizes distributed renewable energies, but also changes human consciousness. The information communication technologies (ICT) revolution is quickly extending the central nervous system of billions of human beings and connecting the human race across time and space, allowing empathy to flourish on a global scale, for the first time in history. Whether in fact we will begin to empathize as a species will depend on how we use the new distributed communication medium. While distributed communications technologies-and soon, distributed renewable energies - are connecting the human race, what is so shocking is that no one has offered much of a reason as to why we ought to be connected. We talk breathlessly about access and inclusion in a global communications network but speak little of exactly why we want to communicate with one another on such a planetary scale. What's sorely missing is an overarching reason that billions of human beings should be increasingly connected. Toward what end? The only feeble explanations thus far offered are to share information, be entertained, advance commercial exchange and speed the globalization of the economy. All the above, while relevant, nonetheless seem insufficient to justify why nearly seven billion human beings should be connected and mutually embedded in a globalized society. The idea of even billion individual connections, absent any overall unifying purpose, seems a colossal waste of human energy. More important, making global connections without any real transcendent purpose risks a narrowing rather than an expanding of human consciousness. But what if our distributed global communication networks were put to the task of helping us re-participate in deep communion with the common biosphere that sustains all of our lives? The biosphere is the narrow band that extends some forty miles from the ocean floor to outer space where living creatures and the Earth's geochemical processes interact to sustain each other. We are learning that the biosphere functions like an indivisible organism. It is the continuous symbiotic relationships between every living creature and between living creatures and the geochemical processes that ensure the survival of the planetary organism and the individual species that live within its biospheric envelope. If every human life, the species as a whole, and all other life-forms are entwined with one another and with the geochemistry of the planet in a rich and complex choreography that sustains life itself, then we are all dependent on and responsible for the health of the whole organism. Carrying out that responsibility means living out our individual lives in our neighborhoods and communities in ways that promote the general well-being of the larger biosphere within which we dwell. The Third Industrial Revolution offers just such an opportunity. If we can harness our empathic sensibility to establish a new global ethic that recognizes and acts to harmonize the many relationships that make up the life-sustaining forces of the planet, we will have moved beyond the detached, self-interested and utilitarian philosophical assumptions that accompanied national markets and nation state governance and into a new era of biosphere consciousness. We leave the old world of geopolitics behind and enter into a new world of biosphere politics, with new forms of governance emerging to accompany our new biosphere awareness. The Third Industrial Revolution and the new era of distributed capitalism allow us to sculpt a new approach to globalization, this time emphasizing continentalization from the bottom up. Because renewable energies are more or less equally distributed around the world, every region is potentially amply endowed with the power it needs to be relatively self-sufficient and sustainable in its lifestyle, while at the same time interconnected via smart grids to other regions across countries and continents. When every community is locally empowered, both figuratively and literally, it can engage

directly in regional, transnational, continental, and limited global trade without the severe restrictions that are imposed by the geopolitics that oversee elite fossil fuels and uranium energy distribution.

Continentalization is already bringing with it a new form of governance. The nation-state, which grew up alongside the First and Second Industrial Revolutions and provided the regulatory mechanism for managing an energy regime whose reach was the geosphere, is ill suited for a Third Industrial Revolution whose domain is the biosphere. Distributed renewable energies generated locally and regionally and shared openly--peer to peer--across vast contiguous land masses connected by intelligent utility networks and smart logistics and supply chains favor a seamless network of governing institutions that span entire continents. The European Union is the first continental governing institution of the Third Industrial Revolution era. The EU is already beginning to put in place the infrastructure for a European-wide energy regime, along with the codes, regulations, and standards to effectively operate a seamless transport, communications, and energy grid that will stretch from the Irish Sea to the doorsteps of Russia by midcentury. Asian, African, and Latin American continental political unions are also in the making and will likely be the premier governing institutions on their respective continents by 2050. In this new era of distributed energy, governing institutions will more resemble the workings of the ecosystems they manage. Just as habitats function within ecosystems, and ecosystems within the biosphere in a web of interrelationships, governing institutions will similarly function in a collaborative network of relationships with localities, regions, and nations all embedded within the continent as a whole. This new complex political organism operates like the biosphere it attends, synergistically and reciprocally. This is biosphere politics. The new biosphere politics transcends traditional right/left distinctions so characteristic of the geopolitics of the modern market economy and nation-state era. The new divide is generational and contrasts the traditional top-down model of structuring family life, education, commerce, and governance with a younger generation whose thinking is more relational and distributed, whose nature is more collaborative and cosmopolitan, and whose work and social spaces favor open-source commons. For the Internet generation, "quality of life" becomes as important as individual opportunity in fashioning a new dream for the 21st century. The transition to biosphere consciousness has already begun. All over the world, a younger generation is beginning to realize that one's daily consumption of energy and other resources ultimately affects the lives of every other human being and every other creature that inhabits the Earth. The Empathic Civilization is emerging. A younger generation is fast extending its empathic embrace beyond religious affiliations and national identification to include the whole of humanity and the vast project of life that envelops the Earth. But our rush to universal empathic connectivity is running up against a rapidly accelerating entropic juggernaut in the form of climate change. Can we reach biosphere consciousness and global empathy in time to avert planetary collapse?

More individuals worldwide say that morality does not need religion

Janell Fetterolf and Sarah Austin, 4-20-2023, "Many people in U.S., other advanced economies say it's not necessary to believe in God to be moral", Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/20/many-people-in-u-s-other-advanced-economies-say-its-not-necessary-to-believe-in-god-to-be-moral/

Most Americans say it's not necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values, according to a spring 2022 Pew Research Center survey. About two-thirds of Americans say this, while about a third say belief in God is an essential component of morality (65% vs. 34%).

A chart showing that most Americans say it's not necessary to believe in God to be moral, but views differ by religion.

However, responses to this question differ dramatically depending on whether Americans see religion as important in their lives. Roughly nine-in-ten who say religion is not too or not at all important to them believe it is possible to be moral without believing in God, compared with only about half of Americans to whom religion is very or somewhat important (92% vs. 51%). Catholics are also more likely than Protestants to hold this view (63% vs. 49%), though views vary across Protestant groups.

There are also divisions along political lines: Democrats and those who lean Democratic are more likely than Republicans and Republican leaners to say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral (71% vs. 59%). Liberal Democrats are particularly likely to say this (84%), whereas only about half of conservative Republicans (53%) say the same.

In addition, Americans under 50 are somewhat more likely than older adults to say that believing in God is not necessary to have good values (71% vs. 59%). Those with a college degree or higher are also more likely to believe this than those with a high school education or less (76% vs. 58%).

A chart showing that Majorities in most countries say belief in God is not necessary to be moral.

Views of the link between religion and morality differ along similar lines in 16 other countries surveyed. Across those countries, a median of about two-in-three adults say that people can be moral without believing in God, just slightly higher than the share in the United States.

Views of religion and morality in other countries

In European and North American countries, at least six-in-ten respondents believe that it is not necessary to believe in God in order to be moral. That includes nine-in-ten Swedes, the highest share of any country surveyed.

In contrast, Israelis are nearly evenly split over whether belief in God is necessary to be moral: 47% say such a belief is necessary, while 50% say it is not.

On the other end of the scale, roughly one-in-five Malaysians believe that people can be moral without believing in God. In every other country surveyed, at least half of people hold this view.

As in the U.S., differences exist in other countries by religion and demographic factors. For example, people who identify as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" are much more likely than the religiously affiliated to separate belief in God from morality.

A chart that shows even among those affiliated with a religion, most say it's not necessary to believe in God to be moral.

Still, even among people who are religiously affiliated, most do not think it is necessary to believe in God to have good values. In most countries surveyed, half or more of people who say they belong to a religion also say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral, including 86% of religiously affiliated Swedes and 75% of religiously affiliated Australians.

Large differences also sometimes appear within countries and religions, as is the case in Israel. Nearly eight-in-ten Israeli Muslims say morality is tied to a belief in God, while a majority of Israeli Jews say it is not. However, views vary widely among Israeli Jews: Nearly nine-in-ten who are Haredi ("ultra-Orthodox") and Dati ("religious") – both generally considered Orthodox – say you need to believe in God to have good values (86%). But half of Jews who are Masorti ("traditional") and only 7% of Hiloni ("secular," the largest group) agree.

Our good actions drive us to be moral for the feeling of accomplishment

Ryan Pollock, Prof of Philosophy, Penn State, "David Hume: Moral Philosophy", https://iep.utm.edu/humemora/

Hume's claim is not that virtue is an inherent quality of certain characters or actions, and that when we encounter a virtuous character we feel a pleasurable sensation that constitutes evidence of that inherent quality. If that were true, then the moral status of some character trait would be inferred from the fact that we are experiencing a pleasurable sensation. This would conflict with Hume's anti-rationalism. Hume reiterates this point, stating that spectators "do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases [they] in effect feel that it is virtuous" (T 3.1.2.3). Because moral distinctions are not made through a comparison of ideas, Hume believes it is more accurate to say that morality is a matter of feeling rather than judgment (T 3.1.2.1). Since virtue and vice are not inherent properties of actions or persons, what constitutes the virtuousness (or viciousness) of some action or character must be found within the observer or spectator. When, for example, someone determines that some action or character trait is vicious, this just means that your (human) nature is constituted such that you respond to that action or character trait with a feeling of disapproval (T 3.1.1.26). One's ability to see the act of murder, not merely as a cause of suffering and misery, but as morally wrong, depends upon the emotional capacity to feel a painful sentiment in response to this phenomenon. Thus, Hume claims that the quality of "vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object" (T 3.1.1.26). Virtue and vice exist, in some sense, through the sentimental reactions that human observers toward various "objects."

There are three issues with morality being based in religion

Marc Hauser and Peter Singer 2005, "Morality without Religion", No Publication, https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%208%20Ethics/Reading-Morality-without-Religion.htm

Is religion necessary for morality? Many people think it is outrageous, or even blasphemous, to deny that morality is of divine origin. Either some divine being crafted our moral sense during the period of creation or we picked it up from the teachings of organized religion. Both views see the same endpoint: we need religion to curb nature's vices. Paraphrasing Katherine Hepburn in The African Queen, religion allows us to rise above that wicked old mother nature, handing us a moral compass.

In the United States, where the conservative right argues that we should turn to religion for moral insights and inspiration, the gap between government and religion is rapidly diminishing,. Abortion and the withdrawal of life-support . as in the case of Terri Schiavo .are increasingly being challenged by the view that these acts are strictly against God's word . thou shalt not kill [note: originally translated as "murder"]. And religion has once again begun to make its way back into public-schools, seeking equal status alongside a scientific theory of human nature.

Yet problems abound for the view that morality comes from God. One problem is that we cannot, without lapsing into tautology, simultaneously say that God is good, and that he gave us our sense of good and bad. For then we are simply saying that God is in accordance with God's standards. That lacks the resonance of "Praise the Lord!" or "Allah is great!"

A second problem is that there are no moral principles shared by all religious people (disregarding their specific religious membership) but no agnostics and atheists. This observation leads to a second: atheists and agnostics do not behave less morally than religious believers, even if their virtuous acts are mediated by different principles. They often have as strong and sound a sense of right and wrong as anyone, including involvement in movements to abolish slavery and contribute to relief efforts associated with human suffering. The converse is also true: religion has led people to commit a long litany of horrendous crimes, from God's command to Moses to slaughter the Midianites, men, women, boys and non-virginal girls, through the Crusades, the Inquisition, theThirty Years War, innumerable conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Moslems, and terrorists who blow themselves up in the confident belief that they are going straight to paradise.

The third difficulty for the view that morality has its origin in religion is that despite the sharp doctrinal differences between the world's major religions, and for that matter cultures like ancient China in which religion has been less significant than philosophical outlooks like Confucianism, some elements of morality seem to be universal. One view is that a divine creator handed us the universal bits at the moment of creation. The alternative, consistent with the facts of biology and geology, is that we have evolved, over millions of years, a moral faculty that generates intuitions about right and wrong. For the first time, research in the cognitive sciences, building on theoretical arguments emerging from moral philosophy, has made it possible to resolve the ancient dispute about the origin and nature of morality.

Consider the following three scenarios. For each, fill in the blank with morally "obligatory", "permissible" or "forbidden."

1. A runaway trolley is about to run over five people walking on the tracks. A railroad worker is standing next to a switch that can turn the trolley onto a side track, killing one person, but allowing the five to survive. Flipping the switch is _____.

2. You pass by a small child drowning in a shallow pond, and you are the only one around. If you pick up the child, she will survive, and your pants will be ruined. Picking up the child is _____.

3. Five people have just been rushed into a hospital in critical care, each requiring an organ to survive. There is not enough time to request organs from outside the hospital. There is, however, a healthy person in the hospital's waiting room. If the surgeon takes this person's organs, he will die but the five in critical care will survive. Taking the healthy person's organs is _____.

If you judged case 1 as permissible, case 2 as obligatory, and case 3 as forbidden, then you are like the 1500 subjects around the world who responded to these dilemmas on our web-based moral sense test [http://moral.wjh.edu]. On the view that morality is God's word, atheists should judge these cases differently from people with religious background and beliefs, and when asked to justify their responses, should bring forward different explanations. For example, since atheists lack a moral compass, they should go with pure self-interest and walk by the drowning baby. Results show something completely different. There were no statistically significant differences between subjects with or without religious backgrounds, with approximately 90% of subjects saying that it is permissible to flip the switch on the boxcar, 97% saying that it is obligatory to rescue the baby, and 97% saying that is forbidden to remove the healthy man's organs. When asked to justify why some cases are permissible and others forbidden, subjects are either clueless or offer explanations that cannot account for the differences in play. Importantly, those with a religious background are as clueless or incoherent as atheists.

These studies begin to provide empirical support for the idea that like other psychological faculties of the mind, including language and mathematics, we are endowed with a moral faculty that guides our intuitive judgments of right and wrong, interacting in interesting ways with the local culture. These intuitions reflect the outcome of millions of years in which our ancestors have lived as social mammals, and are part of our common inheritance, as much as our opposable thumbs are.

These facts are incompatible with the story of divine creation. Our evolved intuitions do not necessarily give us the right or consistent answers to moral dilemmas. What was good for our ancestors may not be good for human beings as a whole today, let alone for our planet and all the other beings living on it. But insights into the changing moral landscape [i.e., animal rights, abortion, euthanasia, international aid] have not come from religion, but from careful reflection on humanity and what we consider a life well lived. In this respect, it is important for us to be aware of the universal set of moral intuitions so that we can reflect on them and, if we choose, act contrary to them. We can do this without blasphemy, because it is our own nature, not God, that is the source of our species morality. Hopefully, governments that equate morality with religion are listening.

The constant conflict between differing religious beliefs, the change in beliefs over time, and statistical data on charity and human rights shows that religion has no ties to morality

Dimitris Xygalatas, Anthropologist at U Conn, "Are Religious People More Moral?", SAPIENS, https://www.sapiens.org/culture/religious-people-moral/

For one thing, the ethical ideals of one religion might seem immoral to members of another. For instance, in the 19th century, Mormons considered polygamy a moral imperative, while Catholics saw it as a mortal sin.

Moreover, religious ideals of moral behavior are often limited to group members and might even be accompanied by outright hatred against other groups. In 1543, for example, Martin Luther, one of the fathers of Protestantism, published a treatise titled “On the Jews and Their Lies,” echoing anti-Semitic sentiments that have been common among various religious groups for centuries.

These examples also reveal that religious morality can and does change with the ebb and flow of the surrounding culture. In recent years, several Anglican churches have revised their moral views to allow contraception, the ordination of women, and the blessing of same-sex unions.

Discrepancy between beliefs and behavior

In any case, religiosity is only loosely related to theology. That is, the beliefs and behaviors of religious people are not always in accordance with official religious doctrines. Instead, popular religiosity tends to be much more practical and intuitive. This is what religious studies scholars call “theological incorrectness.”

Religious people's beliefs and actions often differ from the doctrines and teachings of their religion.

Religious people’s beliefs and actions often differ from the doctrines and teachings of their religion.

Buddhism, for example, may officially be a religion without gods, but most Buddhists still treat Buddha as a deity. Similarly, the Catholic Church vehemently opposes birth control, but the vast majority of Catholics practice it anyway. In fact, theological incorrectness is the norm rather than the exception among believers.

For this reason, sociologist Mark Chaves called the idea that people behave in accordance with religious beliefs and commandments the “religious congruence fallacy.”

This discrepancy among beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors is a much broader phenomenon. After all, communism is an egalitarian ideology, but communists do not behave any less selfishly.

So what is the actual evidence on the relationship between religion and morality?

Do people practice what they preach?

Social scientific research on the topic offers some intriguing results.

When researchers ask people to report on their own behaviors and attitudes, religious individuals claim to be more altruistic, compassionate, honest, civic, and charitable than nonreligious ones. Even among twins, more religious siblings describe themselves are being more generous.

But when we look at actual behavior, these differences are nowhere to be found.

Researchers have now looked at multiple aspects of moral conduct, from charitable giving and cheating on exams to helping strangers in need and cooperating with anonymous others.

In a classical experiment known as the "good Samaritan study," researchers monitored who would stop to help an injured person lying in an alley. They found that religiosity played no role in helping behavior, even when participants were on their way to deliver a talk on the parable of the good Samaritan.

This finding has now been confirmed in numerous laboratory and field studies. Overall, the results are clear: No matter how we define morality, religious people do not behave more morally than atheists, although they often say (and likely believe) that they do.

When and where religion has an impact

On the other hand, religious reminders do have a documented effect on moral behavior.

Studies conducted among American Christians, for example, have found that participants donated more money to charity and even watched less porn on Sundays. However, they compensated on both accounts during the rest of the week. As a result, there were no differences between religious and nonreligious participants on average.

Likewise, a study conducted in Morocco found that whenever the Islamic call to prayer was publicly audible, locals contributed more money to charity. However, these effects were short-lived: Donations increased only within a few minutes of each call and then dropped again.

Sample Affirmative Case

“When a man (sic) says he (sic) is an atheist and is moral, he (sic) means that he has a religious morality, but he has not the religious belief on which it is based.” This insight from G.K. Chesterton captures the essence of my argument today. I stand in firm affirmation of the resolution, Resolved: “Moral systems rooted in theism are preferable to non-theistic moral systems.” I believe that while secular systems may describe what is moral, they ultimately fail to provide a robust, objective, and meaningful foundation for why we should be moral. My case will prove the superiority of theistic morality on three central points: first, it provides a stronger, more stable foundation for objective moral truth; second, it offers a more powerful and ultimate incentive for moral behavior; and third, it imbues moral action with a transcendent meaning and purpose that non-theistic systems cannot.

Contention 1: Theistic systems provide a stronger foundation for objective moral truth.

My first point is that for a moral system to be truly compelling, it must be grounded in a stable, external reality. Theistic moral systems achieve this by anchoring morality in the nature and will of a perfect, unchanging divine being. This is often referred to as Divine Command Theory, which posits that a moral action is one that God commands. This provides an answer to the fundamental question of “why.”

Without a divine reference point, non-theistic systems struggle with the “is-ought problem,” as famously articulated by philosopher David Hume. They can describe what people do (their actions and behaviors), but they cannot logically derive what they ought to do. Non-theistic frameworks often rely on human consensus, social contracts, or feelings of empathy, all of which are subject to change and cultural relativity. What one society deems moral, another may not. In his work Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis

argues that a moral law that applies universally must come from a source outside of the physical world. He presents a strong case that the moral law is a rational, universal truth, akin to the laws of mathematics, which points to a divine "Lawgiver." Therefore, while non-theistic systems can offer guidelines, they ultimately lack the necessary foundation to declare a moral truth as universally and eternally binding. A system based on the will of a divine being provides a far more stable and objective basis for morality than one based on the ever-changing tides of human opinion.

Contention 2: Theistic systems offer a stronger incentive for moral behavior.

My second contention is that theism provides a more powerful and ultimate incentive for moral behavior. While non-theistic systems offer motivations such as social approval or personal happiness, theistic systems add a layer of cosmic accountability. The belief in divine judgment, karma, or an afterlife provides a powerful reason to do the right thing, even when no one is watching.

Sociological research supports this idea. Studies consistently show a positive correlation between religious belief and prosocial behavior, such as charitable giving and volunteerism. For example, a 2008 study in Science by Norenzayan and Shariff suggests that concepts of a "moralizing God" who monitors and punishes or rewards behavior can promote cooperation and altruism in human societies. This is because the fear of divine judgment and the hope of divine reward serve as a powerful psychological deterrent against immoral acts. While secular systems can use laws and social consequences to enforce behavior, they are limited. They cannot enforce morality in private, and they have no final authority for those who successfully evade the law. Theism's ultimate accountability provides an incentive that reaches beyond the confines of human law, making it a preferable moral system.

Contention 3: Theistic systems imbue moral action with transcendent meaning and purpose.

My third and final contention is that theism offers a deeper sense of meaning and purpose for moral action. While non-theistic systems can define “good” in terms of well-being or duty, they struggle to answer the question, “Why bother?” Why should I sacrifice my own happiness for the greater good if, in the end, my existence is a cosmic accident with no ultimate purpose?

Theistic worldviews address this fundamental question by connecting moral action to a grander narrative. In Christianity, for example, moral living is a response to divine grace and love. In many Eastern religions, it is part of a journey toward enlightenment or spiritual liberation. Theistic moral systems provide an answer to what philosophers call the “meaning of life” problem. According to a 2017 study on the psychology of religion, religious frameworks “provide meaning, purpose, and a sense of belonging,” which are vital for human flourishing and for making the effort to be moral worthwhile. Theistic moral systems don't just offer rules; they provide a reason for the struggle, a divine purpose for a moral life. This makes them profoundly more satisfying and, thus, preferable.

In conclusion, while I acknowledge that non-theistic systems can describe and even promote moral behavior, they fall short of providing a truly complete moral framework. I have shown that theistic systems are preferable because they offer a superior foundation for objective moral truth, provide a more ultimate incentive for virtuous behavior, and imbue moral action with a transcendent meaning that makes it profoundly worthwhile. For these reasons, I stand in firm affirmation of the resolution. Thank you.

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Sample Negative Case

“My long experience in life has taught me that the person who is truly ethical is the one who does what is good for goodness’ sake, not because they are constrained to do it by belief in a god or fear of punishment.” This profound statement from renowned atheist and neuroscientist Sam Harris frames the negative position today. I stand in firm opposition to the resolution, Resolved: “Moral systems rooted in theism are preferable to non-theistic moral systems.” The claim that theistic moral systems are preferable overlooks their significant limitations and disregards the robust, compassionate, and authentic nature of non-theistic morality. My case will prove that secular ethics are not merely a poor substitute for religious frameworks but are, in fact, superior. My case rests on three central points: first, non-theistic moral systems provide a more universal and inclusive foundation for ethics; second, they are more adaptable to a modern, changing world; and third, they foster a more genuine and selfless form of altruism.

Contention 1: Non-theistic systems provide a more universal and inclusive foundation.

My first point is that theistic moral systems, by their very nature, are limited to those who share a specific set of beliefs. The divine commands, scriptures, and theological interpretations of one religion often conflict with those of another, creating division and exclusion rather than a common ethical ground. This can be seen in historical conflicts rooted in religious differences, as well as in ongoing disputes over moral issues that vary from faith to faith. Non-theistic moral systems, on the other hand, are based on shared human experience, reason, and empathy. They provide a framework that is accessible to all people, regardless of their religious or cultural background.

The concept of universal human rights, for instance, is a powerful example of a non-theistic moral system. It is a shared framework agreed upon by nations and people of all faiths or no faith at all based on the inherent dignity and value of every individual. This universality is a powerful advantage. As philosophers from the humanistic tradition argue, morality is fundamentally about improving the well-being of all sentient beings. This focus on shared well-being is a far more inclusive and practical foundation for a global moral system than any specific religious doctrine.

Contention 2: Non-theistic systems are more adaptable to a modern, changing world.

My second contention is that non-theistic moral systems are better equipped to adapt to the complexities and challenges of the modern world. Theistic systems often derive their moral laws from ancient texts written for ancient societies. This can create a profound conflict when these rigid, unchanging laws are applied to issues that were unimaginable centuries ago, such as genetic engineering, climate change, or artificial intelligence. A strict adherence to millennia-old doctrines can make it difficult for these moral systems to address new ethical dilemmas in a rational and compassionate way.

Secular systems, however, are dynamic. They can evolve with new knowledge from science, psychology, and sociology. For example, our understanding of psychology and the human brain has given us new insights into empathy and moral decision-making. Non-theistic moral frameworks like utilitarianism or deontology can integrate this new information to improve our ethical decision-making. This flexibility allows for moral progress, as we have seen with the widespread rejection of slavery and the expansion of women's rights, many of which were opposed by some traditional religious doctrines.

Contention 3: Non-theistic systems foster a more genuine and selfless form of altruism.

My final contention is that non-theistic morality is ultimately more virtuous because it encourages genuine, selfless altruism. When an individual's moral actions are driven by the fear of divine punishment or the desire for eternal reward, the motivation is, at its core, self-interested. The moral act becomes a transaction: I do good so that I will be rewarded in this life or the next.

In contrast, non-theistic morality is motivated by an authentic empathy for others and a desire to reduce suffering for its own sake. When a secular person helps a stranger, they are not doing it to please a deity or secure a place in the afterlife. They are doing it because they believe it is the right thing to do and because they feel a genuine connection to their fellow human beings. This kind of unconditioned kindness is a purer form of morality. Studies on secular populations support this idea. Research from scholars like Paul Bloom has shown that our capacity for empathy and compassion is innate and not dependent on religious instruction. Acting morally for its own sake is not only possible; it is, in the end, the most preferable form of ethical behavior.

In conclusion, Non-theistic morality, grounded in reason, empathy, and social cooperation, offers a more inclusive, flexible, and genuine foundation for ethical behavior. For these reasons, I urge you to reject the resolution. Thank you.

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Classroom Resources

Common Core Standards for the Big Questions Unit

Topic Research

W.9-10.8 and W.11-12.8: Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question.

SL. 9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5: Make strategic use of digital media (i.e., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

RI.9-10.2 and RI.11-12.2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details. Provide an objective summary of the text. This standard applies to the analysis of both primary and secondary sources.

RH.9-10.8 and RH.11-12.8: Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claim.

Case Writing

W.9-10.1 and W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

RI.9-10.1 and RI.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.9-10.8 and RI.11-12.8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid, and the evidence is relevant and sufficient.

RH.9-10.8 and RH.11-12.8: Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claim.

Researching

RI.9-10.2 and RI.11-12.2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details.

RH.9-10.1 and RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

W.9-10.8 and W.11-12.8: Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question.

Flowing/Student Judging

SL.9-10.3 and SL.11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 and 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.4 and SL.11-12.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning.

General Public Speaking

SL.9-10.6 and SL.11-12.6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Practice Rounds

SL.9-10.4 and SL.11-12.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning.

RI.9-10.8 and RI.11-12.8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid, and the evidence is relevant and sufficient.

W.9-10.7 and W.11-12.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem.

SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 and 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Worksheet: Ethics in Action

Instructions:

1. Go to the website https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/tests/personality/values-profile and complete the test. There is no right or wrong answer. They are designed to get you thinking about where your moral compass is set.

2. After completing the test, go to https://www.idrlabs.com/moral-alignment/test.php and complete the test. Again, there are no right or wrong answers.

3. Please write down the result from both tests.

4. Complete the following reflection questionnaire. Again, there are no wrong answers.

5. As a group, your instructor will debrief the class on the questions in the test and in the end results.

6. Next, following the instructions of your instructor, please complete the following scenarios. Your instructor will guide you through this process.

7. Be ready to discuss your answers in class.

Post Test Reflection

1. During the online test, what questions did you have the hardest time answering? Why?

2. During the online test, what questions did you find the easiest to answer? Why?

3. What guided your decisions?

4. Where did this decision-making ability come from?

5. How do you use this decision-making ability in your daily life?

Scenario 1: *Stranded Astronauts*
A small group of astronauts are stranded on a newly discovered, uninhabited planet. They find resources are incredibly scarce. One of their members is severely injured and will require a disproportionate share of the remaining supplies, jeopardizing the survival of the others. What should they do?

Initial Decision and Justification

What did you decide the astronauts should do regarding the injured member? Why?

What was the most important factor you considered when making your decision?

Source of Moral Authority

If there are no established laws or religious texts, where did you draw your moral guidance from in this situation?

Ethical Frameworks

Did your decision lean more towards an outcome-based ethic (i.e., what produces the most survivors) or a duty-based ethic (i.e., a universal obligation to protect life, regardless of outcome)?

How does this scenario challenge the idea that morality requires an external, divine authority?

Scenario 2: *The Found Wallet*
You are walking down the street, and you find a wallet full of cash. There's no one around and no way to identify the owner. What should they do and why?

Initial Decision and Justification

What did you decide the person should do with the wallet? Why?

What was your primary motivation for that choice?

Moral Intuition vs. External Rules

In a society without religious rules about stealing or honesty, how do you think people would develop a sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ regarding property? What would be the basis for it?

Would the absence of religious punishment (like divine retribution) make it ‘easier’ or ‘harder’ for people to choose the ‘moral’ action in this situation? Why?

Societal Impact

Is there a societal norm that we are supposed to use in this situation? Why is this a societal norm?

Scenario 3: *The Cure Requiring Sacrifice*
A highly infectious, incurable disease breaks out. A scientist discovers a cure, but it requires sacrificing the life of one healthy individual to create enough antidote for 100 others. There's no religious dogma on this specific situation. What moral choice should the scientist make?

The Hard Choice and Reasoning

What moral choice did you decide the scientist should make? Was this an easy or difficult decision for you personally? Why?

What fundamental moral principle did you prioritize when making your decision?

The Role of Conscience

With so many religious beliefs, how do we determine which one the scientist should use?

What if the scientist is not religious? Will this change their decision?

Moral Absolutes vs. Relativism

Does this scenario suggest that some moral principles are ‘absolute’ (something is always wrong or right) or that morality can be ‘relative’ (changes based on the situations) to the situation and consequences?

How does the concept of ‘human dignity’ play into your decision, regardless of religious belief?

Activity: Shared Moral Values

Objective: Students will collaboratively design a "moral compass" (a set of guiding principles) for a hypothetical society, then justify their choices by identifying potential religious and/or secular origins for each principle.

Common Core Standards:

> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2 / RI.11-12.2:** Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
>
> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6 / RI.11-12.6:** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.
>
> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10/11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Materials:

- Large sheets of butcher paper or poster board
- Markers or colored pencils
- Index cards or sticky notes
- The value handout: This has various ethical values and common moral principles from different religious traditions (i.e., the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, the Five Precepts of Buddhism, secular human rights documents – *ensure these are presented as examples for study, not endorsement*).

Time Allotment: 45-60 minutes (can be extended with deeper research)

Procedure:

1. **Introduction (5-10 minutes):**
    - **Review Ground Rules:** Reiterate the rules for respectful discussion, neutrality, and academic focus. Emphasize that this is about *understanding* different moral frameworks, not judging personal beliefs.
    - **Define "Moral Compass":** Explain that a moral compass is a set of principles that guides an individual or a society in making ethical decisions and determining right from wrong.
    - **The Hypothetical Scenario:** "Imagine you are designing a brand new, ideal society from scratch. You have the task of creating the fundamental moral rules – the 'moral compass'

– that everyone in this society will ideally follow to ensure peace, justice, and well-being. These rules shouldn't be about specific laws, but about underlying principles."

2. **Brainstorming Moral Principles (15-20 minutes, small groups):**
    - Divide the class into small groups (3-4 students per group).
    - Give each group a large sheet of paper and markers.
    - **Task:** "As a group, brainstorm at least 5-7 core moral principles that you believe are essential for your ideal society to thrive. Think broadly – what would make people treat each other well? What would ensure fairness? What would create a good quality of life for everyone?"
    - Encourage them to think beyond just "don't steal" to principles like "compassion," "respect for autonomy," "honesty," "justice," "environmental stewardship," "forgiveness," "personal responsibility," etc.
    - Have them write each principle clearly on their poster.
3. **Justification and Origin (15-20 minutes, small groups):**
    - **Task:** "Now, for each moral principle you've listed, discuss *why* it's important and, more importantly, *where* such a principle might originate from. Does it seem to come from a religious teaching, a secular ethical idea, or potentially both?"
    - For each principle, have them write brief notes or use sticky notes next to it, categorizing and explaining its potential origin.
        - **Examples:**
            - **Principle:** "Treat others as you wish to be treated."
                - **Origin:** "Often found in religious texts (Golden Rule), but also makes practical, secular sense for a harmonious society (reciprocity, empathy)."
            - **Principle:** "Protect the vulnerable."
                - **Origin:** "Many religious traditions emphasize care for the poor/weak; also, a secular humanistic principle based on empathy and social justice."
            - **Principle:** "Respect for individual freedom."
                - **Origin:** "Core of many modern secular democracies; can also be interpreted through certain religious concepts of free will."

        - **Principle:** "Truthfulness/Honesty."
            - **Origin:** "Explicitly commanded in many religions (i.e., Ten Commandments); also essential for trust and functionality in any society."
    - Circulate among groups, providing prompts and clarifying questions. Remind them to think broadly about sources of morality.
4. **Group Presentations and Discussion (10-15 minutes, whole class):**
    - Each group briefly presents their "Moral Compass" poster, explaining their chosen principles and their proposed origins.
    - **Facilitated Discussion Questions:**
        - "Are there any principles that appeared on multiple groups' posters? What might that suggest about their universality?"
        - "Were there any principles that your group identified as *solely* religious in origin, or *solely* secular? Can another group offer a counterargument for a different origin?"
        - "Did any principles seem impossible to justify without either a religious or a secular basis?"
        - "What was challenging about assigning origins to these principles? Did you find that many could have both religious and secular justifications?"
        - "Does this activity suggest that people from different backgrounds (religious, non-religious) might still agree on many cores moral principles, even if they justify them differently?"
        - "How does this exercise help us understand the complex relationship between morality and religion in society?"

Core Values and Ethical Principles

Use this list as a guide for the Shared Moral Values activity. It is not the final list. If there is a value or rule that you follow, please write it down. This is only a starting point and a guide to help your group get started.

- **Treat others as you would want to be treated (The Golden Rule):** This foundational principle encourages empathy and reciprocal respect. It's about putting yourself in someone else's shoes before you act.
- **Be honest/Tell the truth:** Integrity and trustworthiness are crucial for building strong relationships and a functioning society. It's about being truthful in your words and actions.
- **Share/Be generous:** This teaches the importance of not being selfish, contributing to the well-being of others, and understanding that resources can be distributed.
- **Be kind/Show compassion:** Demonstrating empathy, caring for others, and responding to their suffering with warmth and concern.
- **Respect others and their property:** Valuing individuals for who they are, regardless of differences, and recognizing boundaries around personal belongings and space.
- **Take responsibility for your actions:** Owning up to your choices, both good and bad, and understanding the consequences they have.
- **Be fair/Play by the rules:** Ensuring equitable treatment, upholding established guidelines, and making decisions that are just and unbiased.
- **Forgive others:** Letting go of resentment or anger when someone has wronged you, allowing for reconciliation and healing.
- **Don't steal:** Respecting others' ownership and the idea that property is earned or rightfully belongs to someone else.
- **Don't lie:** Avoiding falsehoods or deception, which erodes trust and can cause harm.
- **Clean up your messes:** Taking accountability for disorder or problems you create, whether physical or metaphorical.
- **Be polite/Use manners:** Employing courteous language and behavior (i.e., "please," "thank you," "excuse me") to show consideration for others.
- **Be patient:** Cultivating the ability to wait calmly or endure difficulties without frustration.
- **Help those in need:** Extending assistance to individuals who are struggling or vulnerable, demonstrating altruism and community spirit.

- **Work hard:** Understanding the value of effort, dedication, and diligence in achieving goals and contributing to society.
- **Keep your promises/Be dependable:** Upholding commitments and being reliable so that others can count on you.
- **Be grateful/Show appreciation:** Recognizing and valuing the good things in your life and the efforts of others.
- **Listen actively:** Paying full attention to what others are saying, both verbally and non-verbally, to understand their perspective.
- **Control your temper/Manage emotions:** Learning to regulate strong feelings like anger, frustration, or sadness in constructive ways.
- **Respect authority:** Acknowledging and adhering to the legitimate guidance of parents, teachers, law enforcement, and other figures in positions of responsibility.
- **Protect the environment:** Understanding the importance of caring for the natural world and ensuring its sustainability for future generations.
- **Don't cheat:** Upholding academic and personal integrity by engaging honestly in tasks and competitions.
- **Think before you act:** Considering the potential consequences of your words and actions before you make them.

Activity: The Trolley Problem. Utility vs. Duty

Objective: Students will understand the core differences between Consequentialism (specifically Utilitarianism) and Deontology by applying both frameworks to a dilemma and articulating the reasoning behind each.

Common Core Standards:

> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8 / RI.11-12.8:** Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid, and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.
>
> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2 / W.11-12.2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
>
> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10/11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Materials:

- **Worksheet:** "Two Ways to Decide: Utility vs. Duty" (provided below)
- Pens/pencils
- Optional: Whiteboard or projector for drawing the trolley problem or for group sharing.

Time Allotment: 40-50 minutes

Procedure:

1. **Introduction to Utility and Deontology (10-15 minutes):**
    - **Review Ground Rules:** Emphasize respectful discussion and focusing on the *ideas* of the ethical systems.
    - **Introduce Two Core Ideas:**
        - **Utility / Utilitarianism (The "Good Results" Rule):**
            - *Simplified Explanation:* "This way of thinking says the *right action* is the one that produces the *best* (like happiness, safety, or well-being) and the *least harm* for the *greatest number of people involved*. It's all about maximizing the positive **consequences**."

        - *Key Question:* “What action creates the greatest good for the greatest number?”
        - *Analogy:* Think of a calculator trying to get the highest score or the best overall outcome.
    - **Deontology (The “Duty and Rules” Rule):**
        - *Simplified Explanation:* “This way of thinking says that certain actions are *inherently right or wrong*, no matter what the consequences are. It’s about following universal moral **duties** or unbreakable **rules**. For example, ‘It’s always wrong to lie,’ or ‘You should never intentionally harm an innocent person.’”
        - *Key Question:* “What is my duty here? What is the universal rule I must follow, even if the outcome isn’t ideal?”
        - *Analogy:* Think of a strict rulebook you must always follow.
  - **Crucial Point:** Emphasize that these two systems can sometimes lead to different conclusions about what the "right" thing to do is.

2. **Individual Worksheet Completion (15-20 minutes):**
    - Distribute the” Utility vs. Duty” worksheet.
    - Explain that students will read a classic ethical dilemma (a simplified “trolley problem” variant) and then, for each ethical system, describe what action might be taken and why, applying *only* that system's logic.
    - Encourage individual thought before group discussion.
3. **Small Group Discussion (10-15 minutes):**
    - Divide students into small groups (3-4 students).
    - **Task:** “Share your answers for each section. Did you come up with similar or different ideas for each system? Discuss which way of thinking felt more difficult or easier to apply, and why.”
    - Circulate among groups, listening, clarifying, and prompting deeper thought. “Why is it hard to stick to the ‘rules’ in this situation?” or “What’s uncomfortable about the ‘greatest good' here?”
4. **Whole Class Debrief and Discussion (10-15 minutes):**
    - Bring the class back together.

- **For each ethical system:**
    - "What did groups suggest should be done if applying **Utilitarianism**? What was the reasoning?" (Focus on consequences: saving more lives).
    - "What did groups suggest should be done if applying **Deontology**? What was the reasoning?" (Focus on duty/rules: not directly causing harm, no killing).
    - "What are the main differences between the actions suggested by each system in this scenario?"
- **Discussion Questions:**
    - "Which system's recommendation felt 'more right' to you personally in this specific scenario? Why?"
    - "What are the strengths of using **Utilitarianism** to make moral decisions?" (i.e., focuses on positive outcomes, considers everyone).
    - "What are the weaknesses or potential problems with **Utilitarianism**?" (i.e., might require sacrificing an individual, hard to predict all consequences).
    - "What are the strengths of using **Deontology** to make moral decisions?" (i.e., clear rules, protects individual rights, actions are intrinsically good/bad).
    - "What are the weaknesses or potential problems with **Deontology**?" (i.e., can be rigid, might lead to worse outcomes, what if duties conflict?).
    - "Do you think real-life moral dilemmas are usually clear-cut, or are they a mix of these ideas?"
    - "How might understanding these two ways of thinking help us understand why people have different opinions on complex moral issues in the world?"

Worksheet for: The Trolley Problem. Utility vs. Duty

Introduction: When we face difficult choices, especially ones where people's well-being is at stake, we can think about them in different ways. Today, we'll explore two important ways philosophers guide moral decisions:

- **Utility / Utilitarianism (The "Good Results" Rule):** This way says the best action is the one that creates the *most good* (like happiness or safety) and the *least harm* for the *greatest number of people*. It focuses on the **consequences** of an action.
    - *Question to ask:* "What choice will bring about the best overall outcome for the most people?"
- **Deontology (The "Duty" Rule):** This way says certain actions are *always right* or *always wrong*, no matter the outcome. It's about following universal **duties** or clear **rules**, like "Don't lie" or "Don't kill innocent people."
    - *Question to ask:* "What is my moral duty here? What is the universal rule I must follow?"

The Scenario: The Runaway Train

Imagine you are standing next to a train track. You see a runaway train barreling down the tracks. Ahead, on the main track, there are **five people** tied up and unable to move. They will certainly be hit and killed by the train.

You are standing next to a lever. If you pull the lever, the train will switch to a different sidetrack. However, on *that* sidetrack, there is **one person** tied up and unable to move. If you pull the lever, that one person will be hit and killed instead of the five.

You have only a few seconds to decide.

Now, let's think about what you might do, using each ethical "lens":

1. Using the “Good Results” Rule (Utility / Utilitarianism):

- **Remember:** This rule focuses on creating the *greatest good for the greatest number*.
- **What action would you take if you were thinking only about Utilitarianism? (Pull the lever OR do nothing?)**

- **Why would a Utilitarian choose this action? Explain your reasoning based on maximizing good outcomes.**

2. Using the “Duty and Rules” Rule (Deontology):

- **Remember:** This rule focuses on following universal *duties* and *rules*, even if the outcome isn't ideal. One common deontological rule is “Do not intentionally cause harm to an innocent person.”

- **What action would you take if you were thinking only about Deontology? (Pull the lever OR do nothing?)**

- **Why would a Deontologist choose this action? Explain your reasoning based on duties or universal rules.**

Reflection Questions:

1. Did the two ethical systems lead you to the same decision, or different decisions, in this scenario?

2. Which system's approach (Utility or Duty) felt "more right" or "more comfortable" to you in this specific situation? Why?

3. What are some good things about using the "Good Results" rule to make decisions? What are some potential problems?

4. What are some good things about using the "Duty and Rules" rule to make decisions? What are some potential problems?

Activity: Sorting Our Worldviews

This activity is designed to introduce the foundational concepts of theistic and non-theistic systems by having students categorize various examples based on the presence or absence of a central divine figure. This allows them to grasp the distinction intuitively before learning the formal terms.

Common Core Standards:

> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2 / RI.11-12.2:** Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
>
> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6 / RI.11-12.6:** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.
>
> **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10/11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Materials:

- Whiteboard
- Markers or colored pencils
- Index cards or sticky notes with the following belief systems written on them. (Christianity, Atheism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Agnosticism, Hinduism, Secular Humanism, Jainism, Taoism.)
- The value handout: Exploring Moral Systems
- Electronic devices for the class.

Time Allotment: 50-60 minutes

Procedures:

1. Preparation (10 minutes):

On a whiteboard or large piece of paper, draw a large circle on the left side and a large circle on the right side. Do not label them yet.

Create a set of cards with the names of various belief systems and philosophies. You can use index cards or sticky notes.

Examples for cards: Christianity, Atheism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Agnosticism, Hinduism, Secular Humanism, Jainism, Taoism.

2. Introduction (5 minutes):

Explain to students that every person and culture has a way of understanding the world, answering big questions like “Where did we come from?” and “What is the meaning of life?” These are called worldviews or belief systems.

Tell them that there are many different kinds of belief systems, and their first task is to figure out the primary way we can group them.

3. The Sorting Game (15 minutes):

Have students work in small groups (3-4 students).

Give each group a set of the cards.

Task: “Your challenge is to sort these belief systems into the two large circles on the board. There is a single, clear reason why each one belongs in one circle or the other. Your group must figure out that reason and be ready to explain it.” Groups will be allowed time to research these in class on an electronic device.

As groups finish, have one student from each group place their cards in the circles on the board. Don’t correct them yet; let them sort them as they see fit. This allows for initial misconceptions to surface naturally.

4. The Big Reveal (10 minutes):

Once all the cards are sorted on the board, ask the class: “What is the one major difference you found between the belief systems in the left circle and the ones in the right circle?”

Guide the discussion toward the central point: the presence or absence of a god or gods.

Once students have identified this core distinction, label the circles. The one with Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc., should be labeled “Belief in a God or Gods” or “Theistic Systems.” The one with Atheism, Humanism, etc., should be labeled “No Belief in a God or Gods” or “Non-Theistic Systems.”

5. Worksheet and Application (10 minutes):

Distribute the worksheet (below).

Task: Have students individually or in their groups complete the worksheet. This solidifies their understanding by having them write down the formal definitions and apply them to a few more examples.

Worksheet: Exploring Belief Systems

Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 1: The Great Sort

Look at the circles on the board. What is the main difference you discovered between the belief systems in the first circle and the ones in the second circle?

Based on this difference, write a short title for each circle.

Circle 1 Title: _____ Circle 2 Title: _____

Part 2: Defining the Categories

Now that you've discovered the main difference, let's learn the correct academic terms for these categories.

A theistic system is a belief system that centers on the belief in a god or gods. These systems often teach that a divine being created the universe and is involved in it.

A non-theistic system is a belief system that does not include a belief in a god or gods. These systems find meaning and explain the universe without a divine being.

Part 3: Testing Your Knowledge

For each of the following belief systems, write a short explanation of whether it is a theistic or non-theistic system, based on the definitions above. You may use an electronic device to find the information.

Atheism:

Taoism:

Hinduism:

Christianity

Islam

Buddhism

Judaism

Agnosticism

Secular

Humanism

Jainism

Supplemental Video Guide

Title	URL
“Are Religious Ethics Relevant in a Secular Government Today? - Religious Studies Explained”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDGe9A0vZMw
“Atheist VS Agnostic - How Do They Compare & What's The Difference?”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRmX9RVeNkU
“Beyond Theism & Atheism—What is Non-Theism? John Vervaeke & Rafe Kelley”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyJIhxyc4BI
“Does Morality Exist Without God? Professor and Student Battle it Out”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yH21bfU2Y_I
“Frans de Waal: Morality Without Religion”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEQuIDqY6Cc
“How Do Secular And Religious Ethics Compare For Atheist Children? - Raising Atheist Children”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeZ5hA5x3U4
“How Does Secular Ethics Differ From Religious Ethics? - Learn About Atheism”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPK7LxSd3Hw
“Morals vs Ethics Explained in 2 Minutes w/Memes”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqfWt2OS4rI
“Nietzsche: Master and Slaves”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWqO-V02IzQ
“Open Theism: The Controversial Theology Explained”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTZBEX0ZKyg
“PHILOSOPHY - Religion: God and Morality, Part 1”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmhiibdwznQ
“Plato's Euthyphro - Which comes first: God or Morality?”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oltsfcVWe3A
“The Problem of Evil: Crash Course Philosophy #13”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AzNEG1GB-k
“What Is the Difference Between Religious Ethics and Secular Ethics?”	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYhWOy4RnAg

“Where Do Good and Evil Come From? | 5 Minute Video”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xliyujhwhNM

Supplemental Reading Guide

Title	Link
“A More Robust Ethics: The Weakness and Theistic Dependence of Godless Normative Realism”	https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8206&context=doctoral
“Atheists and believers both have moral compasses, but with key differences”	https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/02/210224143306.htm
“Atheism and the Basis of Morality”	https://philosophy.acadiau.ca/tl_files/sites/philosophy/resources/documents/Maitzen_ABM.pdf
“A Simple Explanation of the Moral Argument”	https://www.rightreason.org/2010/a-simple-explanation-of-the-moral-argument/
“Metaethics”	https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaethics/
“Moral Arguments for the Existence of God”	https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god/
“Morality and the Religious Mind: Why theists and non-theists differ”	https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262142673_Morality_and_the_Religious_Mind_Why_theists_and_non-theists_differ
“Non-Theists Are No Less Moral Than Theists: Some Preliminary Results”	https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272714088_Non-Theists_Are_No_Less_Moral_Than_Theists_Some_Preliminary_Results
“Religion and Morality”	https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4345965/
“Religion and Morality in Western Philosophy”	https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religion-morality/
“The Axiology of Theism”	https://iep.utm.edu/axiology-of-theismi/
“The Ethics and Morality: An Atheist vs. Theist View”	https://www.learnreligions.com/ethics-and-morality-philosophy-250527
“The Moral Argument for God's Existence”	https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god/

“The Moral Case Against Religious Belief”	https://philosophynow.org/issues/19/The_Moral_Case_Against_Religious_Belief
“Theistic Ethics and Mind-Dependence”	https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2014/theistic-ethics-and-mind-dependence
“Theism, History and Experience”	https://philosophynow.org/issues/99/Theism_History_and_Experience
“What is most likely the case Theism or Atheism?”	https://www.reddit.com/r/PhilosophyofReligion/comments/1b74nis/what_is_most_likely_the_case_theism_or_atheism/

Big Questions Time Sheet

Speech Name	Time	Purpose
Affirmative Constructive	5 minutes	The affirmative presents their case.
Negative Constructive	5 minutes	The negative presents their case.
Question Segment	3 minutes	The affirmative asks the 1st question and then the debaters trade questions.
Affirmative Rebuttal	4 minutes	The affirmative will provide counter arguments to the negative case.
Negative Rebuttal	4 minutes	The negative will provide counter arguments to the affirmative case.
Question Segment	3 minutes	The affirmative asks the 1st question and then the debaters trade questions.
Affirmative Consolation	3 minutes	The affirmative should reduce the debate to central elements and identify arguments they are winning. They should strengthen these arguments with logical analysis. They should also extend arguments against the negative case.
Negative Consolation	3 minutes	The negative should reduce the debate to central elements and identify arguments they are winning. They should strengthen these arguments with logical analysis. They should also extend arguments against the affirmative case.
Affirmative Rationale	3 minutes	The affirmative will present the voting issues from the debate that they feel will win them the round. .
Negative Rationale	3 minutes	The negative will present the voting issues from the debate that they feel will win them the round.
Prep Time	3 Minutes	Both debaters will receive 3 minutes of prep time to be used at any time in the debate before they have started speaking.