

Option 2 – Resolved: Religious belief is a prerequisite for morality.

In many ancient civilizations, religious institutions served as the primary custodians and disseminators of moral principles. Commandments, divine laws, and religious narratives provided clear guidelines for ethical conduct. These doctrines often promised divine reward for adherence and punishment for violations. The idea that morality must come from a divine source was, for a long time, the dominant view in many cultures. 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.

The second resolution offered for Big Questions for the 2025-2026 academic year is “Resolved: Religious belief is a prerequisite for morality.” It delves into a profound and ancient philosophical debate concerning the origins, foundations, and necessity of ethical behavior. It challenges us to consider whether a belief in a divine being or beings, a sacred text, or a religious framework is an essential precondition for individuals or societies to discern right from wrong and act accordingly. This question has significant implications for how we understand human nature, the role of religion in society, and the basis of our ethical systems.

The debate draws from various philosophical traditions. Theistic arguments often state that objective moral truths require an objective lawgiver, which they generally identify as “God.” Without such a divine source, morality might be seen as merely subjective, relative, or a matter of human convention. Conversely, secular ethical philosophies have developed independently of religious belief, arguing that morality can be derived from reason, empathy, human flourishing, social contract, or natural law, without recourse to supernatural explanations.

Religions often provide comprehensive frameworks for morality, guiding adherents on what is considered right and wrong. For example, in Christianity, the Ten Commandments offer a foundational moral code, emphasizing principles like honesty (“You shall not bear false witness”), respect for life (“You shall not murder”), and fidelity (“You shall not commit adultery”). Judaism dictates divine laws and teachings as found in the Torah and elaborated in religious literature. This emphasizes concepts like justice, compassion, and the sanctity of life. These principles guide adherents to act righteously, treat others with dignity, and strive to “repair the world” (tikkun olam) through ethical conduct and social responsibility. Islam’s Sharia law outlines detailed ethical guidelines for personal conduct, family life, and societal interactions. This stresses justice, mercy, and honesty. Hinduism, through concepts like Dharma (righteous conduct and duty) and Ahimsa (non-violence), encourages compassion toward all beings. In Buddhist teaching, The Eightfold Path promotes ethical living through right speech, right action, and right livelihood, focusing on principles like non-harming and mindfulness. These examples illustrate how diverse faiths offer distinct yet often overlapping moral directives that shape the daily lives and worldview of their followers.

Philosophically, one could argue that morality stems from divine commands, natural law, or universal reason. Thinkers like Immanuel Kant who emphasized reason and duty, or utilitarians like John Stuart Mill who focused on maximizing happiness, represent attempts to build moral systems on non-religious foundations. They would state there is an objective basis for right and

wrong. Others like Hume emphasize the role of sentiments and emotions as the drivers of moral judgment, suggesting a more subjective or intersubjective foundation.

Scientifically, evolutionary ethics proposes that moral behaviors such as altruism and cooperation evolved through natural selection to enhance group survival and reproductive success with precursors observable in social animal groups. Neuroscience further explores the biological underpinnings, identifying specific brain regions (e.g., prefrontal cortex and the amygdala) involved in moral reasoning and emotional responses to moral dilemmas. Complementing these, socio-cultural theories highlight the immense influence of cultural norms, values, and social institutions in shaping an individual's moral compass leading to the diverse moral codes observed across human societies.

In modern times, as our societies move toward more diverse and secularized societies, this resolution gains renewed attention. Statistically, fewer and fewer people feel influenced by or believe in a religion that in the past. In response to this, many religious groups often question the sustainability of the moral order. Can a society maintain a shared sense of ethics without a common religious foundation? How do individuals who may not have a religious belief or whose beliefs might differ from another within the group develop their moral compass? This resolution directly addresses these concerns, forcing a re-evaluation of morality's origins and its relationship to faith.

Next, we need to isolate the concepts at the core of this debate.

1. Religious Belief: This refers to adherence to a system of faith or worship, often involving a belief in a transcendent being, a spiritual dimension, or a set of sacred principles, and typically includes associated doctrines, rituals, and communities. As previously discussed, legally, it is often defined by its sincerity and the comprehensive role it plays in an individual's worldview.

2. Morality: This encompasses principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior. It refers to a system of values and principles by which human actions and choices are judged. Morality can manifest as individual conscience, societal norms or through formal ethical codes.

3. Prerequisite: This term is crucial. Generally speaking, it means "a thing that is required as a prior condition for something else to happen or exist." The resolution asserts that religious belief is necessary for morality to exist. It's not merely a helpful guide or a common source, but an indispensable foundation.

Proponents of the resolution might argue that there is an objective foundation for moral principles, such as sacred texts or spiritual scripture. They might contend that without a transcendent source, morality becomes subjective and relative, lacking the universal authority needed to ensure societal order and individual ethical conduct. On the flip side, opponents might assert that morality can and does exist independently of religious belief. These draw upon secular ethical systems like humanism, utilitarianism, or virtue ethics, which derive moral principles from reason, empathy, and the pursuit of human well-being. They might highlight examples of moral atheists or argue that many religious moral codes are culturally rather than divinely

derived, or even that some religious doctrines have historically led to immoral acts, demonstrating that belief in a deity is not a necessary condition for ethical behavior.

The resolution “Resolved: Religious belief is a prerequisite for morality” asks us for a deep examination of the very roots of human ethics. It asks us to consider whether our sense of right and wrong is fundamentally tied to a transcendent source or if it can emerge from human reason, empathy, and social cooperation. The debate involves historical perspectives, philosophical arguments, and contemporary observations about the moral landscape of diverse societies. Ultimately, it probes the question of whether humanity can be “good” without “God,” or if a divine framework is indeed the indispensable foundation for all ethical life.