

Big Questions Topic Analysis 2019-2020

"Every once in a while, every once in a while, there's a day with an absolute right and an absolute wrong, but those days almost always include body counts. Other than that, there aren't very many un-nuanced moments in leading a country that's way too big for ten words."

— Jed Bartlet, *The West Wing*

The Big Questions debate series has returned with a generous grant extension from the John Templeton Foundation. This event gives students the opportunity to delve into the very nature of human existence, the concepts of morality, human nature, self-interest, and existence. Students achieve this through critical thinking, in-depth topic research, well written speeches, and deliberative oratory. This event was developed to explore aspects of science, nature, religion, and human nature, and philosophy. The 2019-2020 Big Questions resolution is Resolved: Objective morality exists.

At first glance, this resolution looks very simple. After all, it is only three words long and devoid of the qualifiers that complicate traditional LD and PF resolutions. However, debates about the source of moral thinking and objectivity rarely are simple and quiet. This year's Big Question's resolution contains the complexity and depth of any longer debate topic in a format that can be accessed by those with a wide degree of debate knowledge and experiences. Let's dive into the resolution.

First, let's look at what "objective morality" is by definition. By definition, the concept of objective morality is one where there is an absolute and universal "right" and an absolute and universal "wrong." As the introduction quotation from the West Wing states, there is rarely a correct time for absolutes in society. For instance, we are taught that it is wrong to break the law. However, what happens if you are driving a car and a passenger is dying and needs to get to the hospital? What if you are stealing food to feed your starving family? To what scale do we measure the morality of the action that has been taken and to whose scale do we use? These are questions that an objective morality seeks to rectify.

When looking at morality, one of the first things that comes to mind, or at least one of the first things that comes to the minds of the students that I've coached is that what is moral for me is not moral for others thousands of miles away in some far part of the world. An example that I've heard more often is that in some cultures in the world, eating dogs and other animals that we would consider pets is considered "moral" while in the United States, this is

wholly immoral. The students go on to say that this proves that morals and morality can't be universalized because of cultural differences. Their conception of morality is one that bases morality on the standpoint of the individual culture to determine what is right and what is wrong. To my students and that many novice students that believe in this theory, this is objective morality. However, there is a flaw in this line of thinking.

When weighing examples of "morality" to determine if it is 'objective,' you must treat the situation as if it were a scientific experiment. If you were in a laboratory and you were looking to test the truth claims of a hypothesis involving a chemical reaction, you would not just run an experiment and based on your data, declare success. You would need a standard or stasis point from which to compare data. Likewise, in the situation of morality, you need a reference point from which to compare the action in order to best judge whether it is moral or not. Sans this standard, to say that an action is moral or not moral is not "objective" but rather it is "subjective" or based on the standpoint of an individual. It would be similar to me saying that pineapple is the best pizza topping. It is relative to my own views and tastes, and it would differ from the views of others. In the example I gave above of my students looking at morality, their concept of morality is subjective because they are using their own beliefs as a moral standpoint without credence to why theirs are superior to anyone else's in the first place. Sure, to us, eating Fido would be immoral, but to someone from a country that does view dogs as a food source, it is a moral decision to do so and why then should we disregard their opinion for a student in my classroom?

So, the question has been reached on how to we discover the stasis point of morality. Or in layman's terms, how do we know what is absolute? In traditional philosophy, the concept of what is "objective" is conveyed through the belief in a god. In traditional belief systems, the supreme being's nature sets the emphasis and direction for what is right, wrong, good, just, ect. These standards are the backdrop for what all other decisions are measured. In religion, the moral statutes are expressed as divine commands. "Love thy neighbor," "Respect thy mother and thy father," and "Thou shalt not kill" would all be examples of commands that are tasked across multiple religions across the world and that take the form of the standpoint for morality. Through the commands of a god, we know what is moral and right and thus anything that is diametrically opposed to this is "immoral."

A pop culture example of objective morality exists in the tv show, The Simpsons. People have asked and still ask to this day. "Why do we need Ned Flanders?" At first, many people thought that he was the religious neighbor that every tv sitcom in the 1980's had or that he was a comic foil for Homer to mock for a quick laugh. However, Ned plays a deeper roll. In The Simpsons, you have a cast of thousands (this is what 30 years on tv gets you) where everyone has their own goals, aspirations, and beliefs. At the center of it all is Homer and his family. Based on the things they do and say, there are people that would compare the Simpsons to their own families or families they know. Based on families within the show, the Simpsons don't

even do that bad of things. So then how do we know that the actions of Homer are supposed to be questionable and at times, immoral? Because we have Ned Flanders as a backdrop to test against. In this show, even the Reverend Lovejoy partakes in immoral actions, and often, it is Ned that acts as the moral compass for the city of Springfield. In short, Ned is the way that the writers chose to show us what actions are moral or immoral. Ned is your objective morality.

The question that now arises is this; can we have an objective morality without a belief in god or a supreme being? When discussing this question with other coaches at a recent tournament, several brought up the idea that they have or know people that do not believe in a higher being that do-good things, donate to charity, and are probably better people than most. This is a complex question and in this we find the core of the debate that will or should take place in Big Questions for this year. The answer on a philosophical level is “no,” there can’t be an objective morality without a god. In the example of the people that don’t believe in a supreme being still being good people, that can still be 100% true. However, as the explanation from above details, good and bad without a point of reference are subjective and unless you have that universal constant to set a stasis point for what is truly good or bad, right or wrong, everything is based on an individual opinion.

When debating the affirmative on this topic, there are a couple of avenues to take. The first is to debate that “objective morality” has to exist because as a human race, we experience and share moral obligations to each other. The idea that I don’t burn down my neighbor’s house because I want his land for a pool or that I don’t steal from others and pawn their stuff to buy a new laptop is because I recognize on some deeper level that these actions are wrong. If there were no objective morality, then we might not be any better than a cat. A cat has no moral obligation to other animals like a mouse. Both might find a beneficial relationship in preparing for a cold winter, but in all actuality, the cat is going to eat the mouse. If there were no objective morals, then we should view human nature and actions much the same way. There would be no right or wrong and thus things like murder and theft would be legal at least not punished. How then do you respond to the idea that some people and cultures accepted things like child marriage and genocide at some point in their history? For that answer, we go to Michael Russ, a philosopher who writes that sometimes, people are just wrong. “The man who says that it is morally acceptable to rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says, $2+2=5$.”

Now, above I stated that it was necessary for there to be a supreme being or a god for there to be an objective morality. This is true insofar as we evaluate the concept of morality through a traditional and religious lens. However, in the most recent of times, philosophers, scientists, and thinkers have sought to prove the existence of an objective morality without a belief in god. After all, to them, it is possible to have a set of universal standards for morality without believing in a higher power. A person who does not believe in God is not predisposed to murder and likewise, they can feel and believe in a deep sense of honesty, love, and justice.

When doing reading and research into this topic, it became clear that this is going to be the road less traveled. However, it is not impossible.

First, it is important to make the distinction in this that we are not debating whether it is still possible to be good without god, but can there BE good without god. So, the distinction lies not in the actions that people take but in the underlying drive that guides said actions. This is important when debating on the affirmative as to not fall into this trap and when debating on the negative so that you don't let the affirmative lead you into this trap.

The arguments that revolve around the concept of an objective morality tend to be based on the concept that across human nature, there are sets of morals that are seen as good and bad. Killing would be seen as wrong whether there was a verse from scripture that told us such or not. The argument that we need a supreme being to give a divine command in order to set the standard need not exist because this interpretation of an objective morality is based in the generality of action. The generalist in this case would look at scripture and argue that in the case of killing, to objectively say that killing is wrong doesn't take into account self-defense or killing in the name of God. The generalist says that every situation has a set of criteria that is met before an action is determined to be immoral or moral, right or wrong. These standards are set by social norms without limiters. Action is evaluated based on the norms and judged based on a plethora of criteria before judgement is made.

Another argument is that an objective morality is based in biology. We developed the hard wiring for what is good and bad not out of a sense of a supreme being but out of a sense of what is good for survival. Killing and theft long ago were punished or lead to negative consequences and thus these things have become breed into our mentality from birth that they are not ok. Likewise, humans would be best taken to not kill as long ago, survival depended on sheer numbers for labor, defense, and reproduction. Every person lost was a person that couldn't contribute to society. In this case, the objectivity is "will it keep the species alive?" and if the answer is yes, then it is objectively good.

On the negative, the core of the debate is going to be centered around the idea of moral nihilism, or the belief that there are no such things as morals. According writer Mark Timmons, the concept of morals does not fit with in a functioning physical world. Things such as events, life, death, human interaction, nature, and other worldly processes are observable, testable, and can be studied by the scientific world to find their root cause. In this determination, Timmons writes that the concept of "morals" and thus an "objective morality" are false because no root cause can be found. Science can't study "good" or "wrong." Timmons even concludes his 1992 book on science and morality by stating, "The undeniable attraction of this outlook in contemporary philosophy no doubt stems from the rise of modern science and the belief that science is our best avenue for discovering the nature of reality"

One could also argue that morality and the overarching system of ethics known as “deontological thinking” are wrong because they would ignore the greater good. Take for instance the concept of starving children. In a traditional utilitarian debate, we would focus on how best to feed these children without causing or minimizing harm to others. In a deontological value system, as long as our moral system didn’t cause them harm, the ends are just. This ties back to the concept of who has moral obligations to whom. Take for example Peter Singer’s drowning child. If you come across a pond where a child is drowning and you have the ability to save the child, do you have the obligation? Even barring the idea that your life would not be put in harm’s way, the question is still murky. What if you come across an accident on the road and you go to help the crash victims out of their cars. In the process, you don’t realize that one of them has a broken neck and you paralyze them for life. Did the moral obligation exist without regard to what was best for them? How about buying lunch today? Did you need to buy that soda or could you have gotten free water from the tap and donated the money from that drink to charity? How far do our moral obligations go?

One final thought is that this debate asks us to debate the concept of “Truth” and “truth.” This is much the same as capitalizing things such as “god” or “Federal Government.” It signifies an absolute or a universal fact. To say that “pineapple is the best pizza topping ever” is a truth because there are those what would disagree with that statement. Likewise, “Gravity makes things fall towards the floor” is a Truth because it is an observable fact. Debates that center around the concepts of “morality” and religion tend to blur the lines between Truth and truth as personal beliefs and opinions are mixed with scripture, bias, social views, political views, and a thousands other factors. For those that will be debating this topic, it is very important to remember that as participants in a civil discussion, your job is to truth test. That is to say that your job is to find what is the most correct answer for the round at hand rather than trying to solve a complex problem that people spend thousands of dollars, advanced degrees, and their entire lives trying to solve. This debate event and this resolution are all based around the idea that we are searching for an objective truth that can be quantified as right or wrong. Both sides in this debate are going to argue that an objective morality are “Truth.” The important thing to remember is that this event exists in a microcosm of debate on a much bigger issue of morality, religion, and science. To say that in one round, one tournament, or one season, we are going to find out all of the answers and end the debate is foolhardy. The best that we can do is to search out the “truth” each round and determine at that moment what is true.

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