

The Universal Moral Principle and The Existence of God



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Summary

Many people find it difficult to decide whether God exists, but are very certain that there is a difference between right and wrong. The difference between right and wrong is apparent to almost all human beings and is universal - people over all ages and over different cultures have been able to agree on the same principle, although the details may be worked out differently in the contexts of different societies.

For example, everyone agrees that it is wrong to kill a stranger for no reason, and that it is a good thing to help a stranger who has become injured by accident, even if providing help will disadvantage the helper. There may be differences over how many wives a man can have, but everyone agrees that fidelity in marriage is a good thing.

Of course, while most people know the difference between right and wrong it is clear that this principle is often ignored in action, and most people do things that they know to be wrong.

This idea, which is held in common by most of mankind and provides a basis for deciding right from wrong, is described as the universal moral principle. The existence of such a principle is tacitly agreed across cultures by human beings, and is used in regulating human conduct, in international treaties like the Geneva Convention, in propaganda (attempts to show that members of an opposing force have committed evil acts against innocent people) and the like. This can only be the case because it is shared by humanity.

The existence of such a moral principle requires an entity to underwrite it. It cannot be explained in any other way. This entity has to have moral purpose and considerable subtlety, as well as the power to ensure that the principle is present throughout humanity. Such an entity can only be God.

Thus the existence of a difference between right and wrong requires the existence of a moral and powerful God, who is separate from humanity.

This article develops the picture of a universal moral principle and its consequence in terms of the existence of God.

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The idea of a universal moral principle is powerful and tends to be assumed by all people, sometimes even while they are denying its existence. The moral principle is the principle which allows one to distinguish right from wrong and good from evil. One curious feature of this principle is that it is to a great degree universal; there is a general agreement over all human cultures of the difference between right and wrong, even though details may vary. The interesting point is that the existence of the principle is a pointer to the existence of God.

The Universal Moral Principle

It is a matter of general experience that human beings share a common idea of right and wrong. While details may differ from one person to another, there is a general idea of fairness and justice which defines right and wrong and which all men share.

This principle is regularly appealed to in arguments. Human beings will tell other humans off for behaviour which violates the principle in the expectation that the other person will see how their behaviour stands and will modify it. The moral principle extends very much to important matters such as murder, but it can also be seen on the small scale. Here are two trivial examples:-

- A has tripped B up. B is likely to remonstrate with A and tell A that his behaviour is unacceptable. A can be expected to know that he has done something wrong.
- A has taken B's seat in a railway train. Again, B will feel that A's behaviour is unacceptable and will be likely to tell A so, in the expectation that A will see the moral force of the argument and restore B's seat to him.

These examples are trivial, but they derive from an idea of fairness and justice which is shared by most people. The same principle is generally applied to much more significant matters and tells us that murder is wrong and that corruption among the powerful is morally indefensible.

The principle appears to be universal and will be described as "The Universal Moral Principle" throughout this paper. It has the following properties:-

- The principle is expected to be appreciated by all men. The common idea of right and wrong can be used by different people as a basis for the debate of whether actions are acceptable or not.
- The principle is universal. It is shared by cultures from different ages and from different places. Aristotle's arguments on morality indicate an appreciation of the same rights and wrongs as any modern philosopher, and the same moral principle is used in China and Africa as in Russia and the West. Lewis (1934) examined various cultures and showed that there are elaborated ideas of the same basic principle among: Ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Classical Chinese culture, Greeks, Romans, and modern Europeans. [Lewis C. S. (1934) "The abolition of man", Zondervan, republished 2001.]

The Universal Moral Principle

The universal moral principle is well defined, but is often confused with other moral ideas. The principle is a general idea of right and wrong which is the basis of other moral systems.

The principle does not give a set of detailed moral rules. It does not, for example, rule directly on whether slavery is an acceptable part of society. Human beings are left to work out whether such elements of their way of life are consistent with a moral outlook or not.

The principle is generally simple. It requires that people be treated fairly; the most succinct statement of it is from Jesus of Nazareth: "As you wish others to treat you, treat them in the same way." (Luke 6:31). The rule requires one to treat others without respect of person, and without counting the cost for oneself.

People from all cultures understand this principle without necessarily having accessed one of the great statements of it. It can form the basis of dialogue between people of different cultures and beliefs about what is right and wrong. The principle is shared between Christians and Atheists, and between people from different parts of the world. It is universal.

- The basic principle is simple. It was stated elegantly and succinctly by Jesus in the words “As you wish that others would do to you, so do to them” (Luke 6:31; see also Matthew 7:12). In this form the principle is often described as “The Golden Rule” and this convention will be used in this paper.
- In spite of the simplicity of the principle it needs to be elaborated to fit circumstances. Thus different situations lead to different detailed laws; the Law of Moses elaborates the principle in a different way from a modern Japanese philosopher, but this is because the circumstances in which the law is being expanded differ between the two cultures.

There are various objections to this principle; these are dealt with in appendix A below. However, when it comes to a matter of severe disagreement about actions, all cultures will appeal to what is essentially the universal moral principle, which fits in with the Golden Rule.

There may even be debates in which the morality of different cultures is compared. In situations like this there is often a comparison between the cultures which presumes a universal moral standard against which they can be measured, or at least which allows them to be compared so that one can say which is the better.

The Moral Principle and the Bible

The moral principle is expressed in the New Testament as the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would that they do to you” (See Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12). However, it is not only found in the Bible. Other statements of it exist in places which are not dependent on the New Testament.

The statement of the Golden Rule appears in the Old Testament. It also appears in some of the hadith collections of Sunni Islam (although not in the Qur’an). It is used by Atheists when discussing ethics and morality, and something approaching it is found in Plato.

The Bible contains a particularly elegant statement of the universal moral principle, but the principle is known to people who have never read the Bible.

The consideration of the universal moral principle does not require a study of the Bible. However, the Bible is consistent with the moral principle, and is thus a good place to begin a study of ethics.

Atheism and the Moral Principle

One feature of Atheist polemic is the claim that Atheistic moral ideas are better than the moral principles of the Bible (there is little Atheist discussion of or polemic about the Qur’an). Atheists regularly assert that the Bible does not have a moral position on slavery, for example.

This, of course, is a tacit admission that there is a universal moral principle. If no such principle exists, then one cannot claim that the morality of the Bible is any better or worse than the ethics proposed by some Atheists; there would be nothing to allow a comparison of the two systems.

It is only if an external moral standard exists that an Atheist can make any claim about whether the Bible has a good or a bad moral standard.

Any Atheist who argues that there is no such thing as a universal moral principle and then argues that the Bible contains commandments which are morally defective is simply producing a contradiction. Atheist arguments presume a universal moral principle.

For example, it is generally agreed that the culture of Nazi Germany was less morally acceptable than the culture of modern day, liberal, Sweden. This is not possible if there is no way of deciding which of the two is better. It is only because we know as an absolute value that putting people to death for no other reason than their racial background is wrong (among other areas of comparison) that we can decide that modern liberal democracies such as Sweden are morally more advanced than Nazi Germany.

The only way that such comparisons can be made is if there is a moral principle which states that some actions are right while others are wrong. To suppose anything else simply reduces morality to a matter of personal preference. The preference may be one shared by a whole society, but if the principle is not external to mankind then it is simply a preference such as whether one prefers to live in a town or in the country side, or whether one prefers a breakfast of bacon and eggs to one of fruit juice and muesli.

Slavery and the Moral Principle

One issue which is commonly raised in support of the idea that moral principles change is the attitude to slavery. In Old Testament times the Law of Moses legislated for slavery, thus condoning it, while in the modern day almost everyone would regard slavery as a moral evil. On the basis of this, some Atheists argue that there is no consistent moral principle.

The fact, of course, is that it is slavery, rather than the moral principle, that has changed. The slavery of the Old Testament was a temporary condition which was used to allow one to recover from a bankruptcy. If one was unable to pay one's debts then one could work them off by serving one's creditor for a maximum of seven years. This is a complete contrast to the slavery of the eighteenth and nineteenth century which was on the Arab model where a slave was captured in a raid and then sold for cash to a master; such a slave could never be free, nor could his descendants.

It is therefore no contradiction that Christian campaigners in the nineteenth century could accept the idea of Old Testament slavery while opposing nineteenth century slavery.

Curiously, most Atheists tacitly accept the existence of a universal moral principle, even though they may deny it. As soon as an Atheist attacks the Bible on the grounds that it does not contain a thorough denunciation of slavery, or attacks Christianity on the basis of the bad behaviour of certain churches, that Atheist is presuming that there is a principle against which the assessment of moral worth can take place. Slogans like "Good without God - millions are" supposes that there is some method of measuring whether someone has acted morally.

If there is no external moral principle then the question of whether the Nazis were morally inferior to the Swedish liberals is merely a matter of taste, and one could say that they personally prefer Nazism to Liberalism. It is only because of the existence of a universal moral principle that moral debate can take place at all, let alone a consensus idea that some societies are less moral than others.

Discussion of the Principle

The universal moral principle is unusual in that it is not like an instinct or a law of nature. It has characteristics all of its own in that we know about it but don't necessarily obey it. In addition the situation in which we might use it, when we need to make a moral decision, may be very complicated so that it is very difficult to know what to do.

A law of nature is always blindly obeyed. If one drops a stone over the edge of the cliff the stone does not need to decide whether to fall or not; it will always fall. This is a law of nature, and is simply a statement of how the universe is, and how it works. Newton's laws of motion and the law of gravity are sufficiently powerful to ensure that the objects to which they apply follow them without any possible alternative.

Instincts are different, but are still mindless. We all know what it is like to be subject to instinct. We instinctively seek food when we are hungry and drink when we are thirsty. We can put off the satisfaction of the instinct for a while, or even divert it entirely in some cases, but it remains an unthinking force in our minds. Instinct also tends to be uncomplicated. It gives us a goal and tends to make that goal initially attractive in our minds and then, if not satisfied, more and more urgent.

The universal moral principle is unlike instinct. We tend to be prompted to act in a moral manner, but we can ignore moral promptings and we can teach ourselves to ignore them all the time. We can sharpen our moral sense by contemplating moral issues, and we can distort it by concentrating on some actions as opposed to others.

Thus a thief can choose to ignore the promptings of the moral principle when it comes to consider his own actions in stealing other people's property, but at the same time the thief may find that queue-jumping is unacceptable, or that theft is morally unacceptable when it is his own property

Moral Principle and God

that is being stolen. The thief may need to invent ideas about his victims to justify this - for example that they are very wealthy or bound to be well-insured and thus do not really feel the loss. Nevertheless one can turn one's back on the moral principle; everyone from time to time does something that is wrong and frequently manages to justify themselves in doing this.

Similarly the moral principle can be buried by Pharisaism, where one develops a set of rigid rules which cover moral actions in certain circumstances but which can be applied rigidly to circumstances for which they were not intended to produce some morally questionable actions.

One can also learn to improve one's understanding of right and wrong. It is the experience of many that a study of the Bible in general, and the New Testament in particular, improves their moral sense so that they tend to act in a more moral manner.

However, the application of the universal moral principle is dependent to a great degree on context. C. S. Lewis provides various examples of this. In one of these examples he suggested that we would be angry with someone who tripped us up deliberately in an attempt to make us fall. However, if we found that the tripping up was entirely accidental, or was our own fault for not looking where we were going we would not be as angry with the person who had tripped us (although we might decide that they were careless). We would also not be angry with someone who had tripped us as part of a Judo contest, merely annoyed with ourselves for not taking appropriate counter-action.

Another of Lewis' examples concerns our reaction to finding that a window seat in a train on which we wished to sit was taken by someone else. If we had reserved the seat and the other person had taken it even though it was clearly marked as reserved we would be justifiably angry, whereas if it had been reserved by the other person we would not have any reason for anger.

This matter can extend to changes in society. At the present time it is considered to be a morally bad thing to put witches to death, whereas it was considered to be a highly moral action in the middle ages. Lewis points out that this is not a question of a change of the moral principle, but of beliefs about witches. In the present day people think of witches as harmlessly eccentric and of no real danger to anyone. In the middle ages people believed that witches had sold their entire being to evil and that they could do harm at a distance even if they were locked away, and that they were determined to cause extreme harm and suffering to others. If this was the case the protection of society would demand that the witches were put to death. A change in belief is a change in the circumstances of the case, and it is clear that the moral principle is altered by circumstances.

There are also circumstances where the situation is so complex that it is difficult to decide what a moral action would be. There are accounts in the book of Judges where the situation has gone

C. S. Lewis



C. S. Lewis was an atheist in his teenage years but was convinced of the existence of God at the age of 31 as a result of a consideration of the idea of a universal moral principle. He did not become a Christian for another three years. He wrote about his findings in his book "Mere Christianity" which contains an account of the idea of a universal moral principle.

The Universal Moral Principle (Summary)

The universal moral principle is a basic idea which decides what is right and what is wrong. It has the following properties:-

- The principle is basic - it will give guidance for simple situations but more complicated systems require thought to decide what options are right and what are wrong.
- Situations can alter ethical ideas. Thus the working out of the moral principle may change with time as the context of a decision changes.
- The working of the moral principle is considerably more subtle than that of a basic instinct like hunger.
- The way that one applies the moral principle can be learned and can be improved by the learning process.
- Equally one can choose to ignore the moral principle when deciding how to live one's life, and thereby to act immorally
- The moral principle is consistent with the Bible and application of Biblical ideas can improve one's moral response, but the universal moral principle does not depend on the Bible; it is understood by people who live no form of Christianity, including Atheists and followers of non-Christian religions.

so far from the circumstances envisaged in the Law of Moses (or for that matter the Gospels) that it is very difficult to decide who is acting justly in a particular decision. This kind of complexity is common in the modern Western world, where situations have gone far away from a simple ethical decision because of strings of questionable actions taken by victims in the past, or because of the general moral complexity of modern life. Questions such as euthanasia or abortion can lead to some very difficult moral decisions, although there are guidelines in the Bible which make decisions of this kind much simpler.

The universal moral principle is thus unlike simple instinct in that we do not always know instinctively when to apply it.

A further point is that while the moral principle is in part inherent in people it often has to be developed and learned. Children are frequently taught the moral principle by their parents or teachers, and in many cases they will have their innate understanding of moral matters modified by those who teach them.

This does not invalidate the idea of a universal moral principle. The multiplication tables have to be learned in their entirety by most children, and they are taught to do so by teachers and parents. However, the multiplication tables, like many other principles of mathematics, are not purely an invention. They have an external existence independent of human culture. Three times four will always be twelve, regardless of how well the next generation is taught arithmetic or the culture in which they are raised. The universal moral principle has an existence on the same level.

One can conclude that:-

- The universal moral principle has an existence independent of human minds.
- Human beings tend to know it in general terms, although their understanding can be modified.
- Human beings often choose not to obey it, and may learn to ignore it in certain circumstances.

Alternative Explanations of the Universal Moral Principle

Having decided that there is a difference between right and wrong which is outside the simple preference of individuals, it is useful to ask the question of where such a principle might come from. Atheists have rarely denied the existence of the moral principle (although some do so) but have tended to propose that it either arises as a consequence of Neo-darwinian Evolution, or that it is derivable from basic logic and moral thinking. In fact both these explanations fail.

The evolutionary explanation fails because the universal moral principle does not improve our chances of survival or of passing on our genes to the next generation. Sometimes a moral decision would require us to put ourselves into danger, while an immoral decision would allow us to seek safety. Consider the situation of a passer-by who sees a complete stranger being washed away by the current in a flooding river. A moral decision would suggest that the passer-by attempts to save the stranger, even though this might put the passer-by in some danger themselves.

Those who wish to account for the moral principle in terms of evolution would argue that the moral principle has arisen because we are used to the person who is in trouble being a relative. This, of course, doesn't help. If we find someone who is patently not related to us taken seriously ill in the street (for example someone who is a complete stranger from a different part of the world) then we recognise that it is a moral action to give first aid to that person and to call an ambulance. A purely evolutionary response would be to eliminate a potential competitor.

The idea of an evolutionary origin for the universal moral principle fails on the concept of altruism. Altruism involves providing a benefit for someone else even though it causes a disadvantage to ourselves. The universal moral principle states that altruism is a good thing. We know that it is right to help a stranger in trouble, even if it has a cost in terms of our own wellbeing.

Evolution and the Moral Principle

A few atheists claim that the Moral Principle is the result of evolutionary development.

However, it is easy to show that evolution will generally favour selfishness and behaviour which eliminates competitors.

Evolutionary theory indicates that individuals should evolve behaviour which increases the probability that their genes are passed on to the next generation. Thus, if one's response to ethics is the result of evolutionary adaptation it should lead one to eliminate competitors and to become a sexual predator. As one evolutionary theorist points out, genes are selfish.

Human beings often do follow these lines of behaviour, but we know that they are usually wrong. The behaviour that we know is right is often counter-evolutionary.

Sometimes it is suggested that ethical behaviour evolved in a situation where most of the people we meet are close kin. Doing good to someone who shares most of our genes might confer an evolutionary advantage if it does not cause too much of a disadvantage to ourselves.

However, if our ethical sense was the result of evolution one would expect a person to check whether someone was related before helping them. That we believe that it is more moral not to do this indicates that our moral sense is not the result of evolution.

Altruism

Altruism is unselfish interest in the welfare of others. An altruistic act is one which would benefit someone else but at a cost to the person who is doing the helping.

One sees altruistic acts many times in human behaviour. The passer-by who jumps into a fast-running river to rescue a stranger, the person who spends a great deal of time caring for a sick stranger to whom they are not related is showing altruism.

Almost by definition, evolution should not favour altruism, and some atheistic evolutionary theorists have argued that real altruism doesn't exist. These people argue that apparently altruistic behaviour has evolved because there is in fact a benefit caused by the effect on society. Other evolutionary theorists dispute this idea.

It is difficult to believe that human beings are never altruistic. From time to time one reads of acts of heroism carried out to save the lives of people to whom the rescuer is unrelated. However, the fact that the concept of altruism exists and that it is considered to be an example of the highest moral behaviour shows that the moral principle has not evolved. A being whose behaviour was the result of evolution would not find the idea of altruism to be praiseworthy.

The fact that the concept of altruism exists, and that it is considered morally a good thing to be altruistic is sufficient to show that the universal moral principle is not the product of evolution. We know that it is morally good to be altruistic even if such an action never has an opportunity of happening. The fact that we believe that a counter-evolutionary action to be morally laudable is itself counter-evolutionary.

The alternative explanation put forward by Atheists is the idea that any moral philosopher who thought clearly about ethics would come up with the same moral principle, working from first principles using pure reason alone.

The problem is that this idea doesn't match any historical look at philosophy. A large number of philosophers from Kant to Wittgenstein have attempted to derive a universal moral principle from general philosophical logic and have failed to do so, remarking instead that either there is an external guarantee of morality or that there is no basis for morality at all. A brief summary of the findings of these philosophers is given in appendix B below. However, the clearest writing on the subject is Emmanuel Kant who examined the problem in his "Critique of Pure Reason" and deduced that it is not possible to arrive at any kind of moral standard using reason alone. What is needed is an external entity to underwrite the moral principle, and in his Critique of Practical Reason he stated that the drawing of moral conclusions needs to assume the presence of some such external entity.

One is therefore forced to the conclusion that the universal moral principle exists, but that it cannot have arisen by derivation from first principles of philosophy by logic, and that it cannot have been the product of biological evolution. There thus needs to be something else which provides a basis for the universal moral principle.

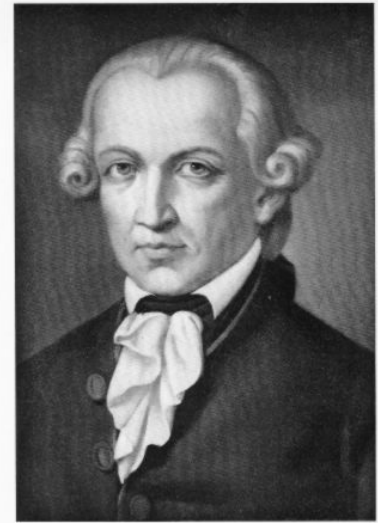
The Basis of the Universal Moral Principle

So far we have seen that there exists a universal moral principle of right and wrong which provides a basis for any kind of moral judgement, and which is outside human nature. We noted that human behaviour often fails to conform to this moral standard, although most human beings are aware of it to some degree. In reality human beings are aware of the difference between right and wrong - often acutely aware - but are still prone to do things that are wrong. We have also seen that the moral principle is universal and that it is outside the system in which it operates. As an example of this last point, consider the argument about altruism. Atheistic philosophers are aware that there is nothing inside creation which can account for the existence of altruism, but they are prepared to admit that altruism, if it occurs, shows the moral excellence of the person who exhibits altruism.

We can therefore deduce that some entity exists which is outside of the human race (and probably all other living creatures) and which determines the difference between right and wrong. It is possible now to go further and to deduce a few points about this entity.

- The entity has the characteristics of mind. It is able to give instructions of some complexity. The Universal Moral Principle is fairly subtle and certainly abstract. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is nothing like as simple as the law of gravity which works the same way on everything and requires no look at the context of the situation. C. S. Lewis writes that we know of two types of object in the universe, mind and mindless matter. He goes on to point out that the moral principle is in the realm of mind rather than of mindless matter.

Immanuel Kant



Kant was an 18th century rationalist philosopher who, among other things, attempted to derive a basic ethics from pure reason. In his 1781 book "Critique of pure reason" he showed that it was impossible to derive any system of ethics from reason alone. In 1788 he followed this up with a later volume "Critique of practical reason" in which he showed that if a system of ethics was to be produced it would be necessary to assume the existence of an entity outside the creation to underwrite any moral principle or principles derived.

- The entity underlies a moral principle, and therefore must itself have a moral purpose. This means that the entity will have an interest in right and wrong. This is a property of mind and is different from the pantheistic idea that everything in the universe, good or bad, forms a god without moral purpose. Such a god cannot account for the universal moral principle.
- There can only be one supreme entity which defines the difference between right and wrong. If there were two such entities with different standards, then we would decide that one of these was good and the other was less so by the universal moral principle. This requires a controlling entity to set the moral standard for any other entities. The single controlling entity is the supreme entity and any others can only be subordinate to this one.

Essentially the existence of a universal moral principle has led us to the point where we have deduced the existence of a single God who defines the difference between good and evil.

The idea of a single entity which controls the ideas of good and evil leads on to a further question, which is whether this means that good and evil are simply arbitrary constructs put together at the whim of a capricious God. Might not the God who defines good and evil change his mind at some time and produce a completely different set of ideas. This question is probably best answered by the idea that good and evil are not determined by an arbitrary choice, but by the character of God. As God's character does not change, then neither will the moral principle that he underwrites. The character of God is thus seen in what he defines to be right and what he defines to be wrong.

This allows us to deduce another fact about God, which is that God has a great interest in morality, or at any rate in the distinction between good and evil. This should give us pause for thought, as we all know that while we understand the difference between good and evil we have frequently not stood by the universal moral principle but have chosen to do things that are wrong. We stand opposed to the one being who rules the world.

Conclusion

The arguments considered in this paper lead to the inescapable conclusion that there exists a being who is outside the universe but who is able to define good and evil for all other beings.

The argument begins with the observation that the distinction between good and evil exists. This is a matter of observation and introspection. We are able to make moral judgements and different people, from widely different cultures and over long periods of time have come up with the same moral standards.

It goes on to show that there is no method of making this moral distinction from within the world that we know. An evolutionary based morality should simply favour any action which improves the probability of the survival of one's genes and philosophy has failed to derive the universal moral principle from first principles and logic. The only method of underpinning the existence of the universal moral principle is by the existence of an entity outside the ordinary world who can define what is right and what is wrong.

There can be only one such entity, who we will now call God. This God must be unique, and has a strong interest in the distinction between good and evil. He must have the power to instil the understanding of right and wrong in the world and he is capable of abstract and subtle thought. This corresponds very strongly to the God of the Bible.

Appendix A: Objections to the idea of a Universal Moral Principle.

A few people (some of them philosophers) have objected to the idea of a universal moral principle. These objections have tended to be on similar lines to one another and have tended to fail even in the eyes of atheists. Here is a picture of the objections that have been met in the causes of preparing this paper.

A.1 The Universal Moral Principle is Learned

This objection notes that one can, and should, teach moral principles to the young. This supposes that the moral principle can be learned; otherwise the parents and teachers who attempt to impart the moral principle would be wasting their time.

There are certain difficulties with this objection:-

- It is likely that the moral principle is only learned in part, but that the basic approach is inherent. If this is the case, then the parents and teachers are not generating a new principle but are helping their pupils to adopt the inherent moral principle to their circumstances.
- Suppose, however, that the idea that the moral principle is not inherent but has to be taught is true. This does not invalidate the idea that there is a genuine universal moral principle. There are several things around of this type. The multiplication tables, for example, have to be taught to the next generation; we are not born with an inherent idea of multiplication. However, this does not prevent the multiplication tables from having an existence which is outside human invention. The multiplication tables are universal and cannot be changed by human beings. If civilisation were to die out and restart, the multiplication tables in the new civilisation would be the same as in the old one.

The universal moral principle is similar. Regardless of whether it is taught or inherent, the principle is the same, and one can see this by examining the ethics of different and independent cultures from the classical Chinese to Aristotle and the modern world. Even though these cultures are independent of one another, the moral principle that they derive is the same. The principle is independent of culture and must therefore be attributed to a great mind outside of humanity.

A.2 The idea of Moral Progress

This objection starts with the claim that civilisations, and particularly Western Liberal thought, has improved its ethical systems and moral values over time. The proponents of this idea suggest that morality has improved because people now see Slavery, the execution of homosexuals and animal cruelty as wrong, whereas in the past this was not so. The people who propound this objection suggest that as morality is improving there cannot be an absolute moral standard.

Again, there are considerable difficulties with this position.

- The change in ethical standards is often due to a change in circumstances, so that like is not compared with like. C. S. Lewis gives the example of putting witches to death. In the modern day we do not think it is right to do this because we see witches as harmless old women. In the past they were seen as extremely dangerous and incurably evil people who had taken an oath to harm others and could do so at a distance, even if locked up. The only course of action to provide security for humanity as a whole, and for the local community in particular, was for the witch to be put to death. The change is not, therefore, a change of ethics but one of belief. Lewis goes on to give the counter-example of someone who has decided not to set mouse-traps in his

house. If he does not believe that there are any mice in the house, then this cannot be considered to be a moral stand.

- A similar point can be made for slavery. The Old Testament allows a form of slavery where a man could discharge debts by working for another man without pay over a period of seven years, at the end of which he had to be returned to liberty and given back his land so that he could make a living. This is far different from the more recent slave trade where a man was captured, sold in a market and then transported to work for life at the whim of someone in a different land. The change between the two is not one of moral progress, but a mix of moral progress and moral regress - the regress in inventing a system which needs condemnation and the progress in condemning it. However, in the end, the result is a society that is no better in this respect than was the case in the Old Testament, and which might be worse if there was no other method of paying off insurmountable debt.
- In fact the idea that there is moral progress presumes the existence of a universal moral principle. Without a yardstick against which to measure morality it would be impossible to say whether using modern slavery was more or less moral than the abolition of slavery. The same is true of all the other issues that could be raised in arguing moral progress; if there is no such thing as a universal moral principle which is external to humanity, then it is meaningless to say that humanity has improved its moral standing.

Slavery and the Bible

One occasional objection to the idea of a universal moral principle is the idea that what is considered to be moral changes from one generation to another. Many atheists will raise the idea that ethical thinking is developing and improving as people think more about ethical issues.

One example that is given of improvement in morals is the change of attitudes to slavery. Atheists sometimes point out that slavery was considered acceptable in Old Testament times while it is now regarded with abhorrence. This is taken to illustrate the improvement in moral standards.

However, the slavery permitted in the Old Testament was much different from modern slavery. The Old Testament allowed a bankrupt to discharge his liabilities by serving his creditor as a slave for up to seven years. This is a far cry from modern slavery, where bondage is permanent.

The main point of the issue is that in comparing a modern ethical system to the Old Testament, atheists are appealing to the universal moral principle, and thus confirming its existence.

Appendix B - Philosophers and the Moral Standard

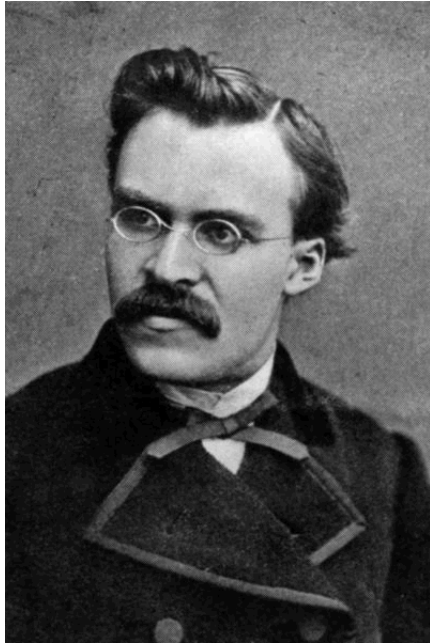
A number of philosophers have written on the subject of the source of morality in human beings. Most of them, even the Atheists, have a belief in a universal moral principle, although this may be a tacit belief. The philosophers have generally tended to try to find a reason for the universal principle rather than to decide whether one exists, although a few have attempted to do so.

The following is a brief and selective summary of the writings of a small number of philosophers who wrote on the subject.

Ayer, A. J. (1910-1989) Ayer was a prominent humanist philosopher who argued that, as morality cannot be verified experimentally, it is meaningless. To Ayer there was no meaningful distinction between right and wrong.

Kant, Immanuel (1724-1804) Kant argued in his “Critique of Pure Reason” that it is impossible to work out any tenable system of ethics if one was restricted to logical work within human experience. In his “Critique of Practical Reason” he argued that the existence of morality requires the existence of God as a moral fixed point.

Friedrich Nietzsche



Nietzsche was a prominent atheistic philosopher who spent a considerable time considering the consequences of the idea that there is no God. His conclusion was that without a supreme being to underwrite them there could be no meaning in any concepts of morality.

Right and wrong, according to Nietzsche were simply concepts invented by the weak in order to restrain the actions of the strong. As a consequence anyone who was sufficiently powerful would be able to ignore any kind of moral restraint. The only guide was that one's actions should improve the chance of survival for one's genes.

Lewis, C. S. (1898-1963). In his book "Mere Christianity" Lewis argues that there is a universal moral law which men can ignore if they choose to do so. He argues, however, that almost all men have an impulse to at least consider the morality of most actions and that where this is not the case it is the general feeling that there is something wrong with those who lack a moral sense. He then goes on from this observation to deduce that God is required to provide a fixed point for the Moral Law (universal moral principle). Lewis follows Plato in the argument that ultimately there can only be one guarantor of the moral principle, which he identifies with the one God of Christianity.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844-1900) Nietzsche announced the death of God, and argued that as a consequence objective truth was impossible. Concepts of right and wrong were no longer meaningful and were simply ideas invented by the weak to constrain the actions of the powerful. He went on to argue that if one was sufficiently powerful one could act without the need for moral restraint. His comment in this situation is "There is no good or evil, only power". In writing this Nietzsche accepts the idea that the existence of a universal moral principle implies the existence of God to underwrite this principle.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905-1980) Sartre argues that there is no God and hence no objective means of determining good and evil. However, he did admit that he could not help but think in moral terms. His attempt to replace God with some other principle involved suggesting that everyone was morally bound to become a good example of what they are so that the moral imperative for, say, a cook would be to become the best possible cook. This argument falls apart when one asks

what the moral imperative is for a murderer - is it to become the best possible murderer?

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1889-1951) Wittgenstein argues that moral statements are without meaning. He asserts that saying that X is a good man is the same kind of statement that X is a good footballer. Wittgenstein's football argument, of course, falls down. Someone is a good footballer if they compete well and do so within the rules of football. This implies the existence of an entity such as FIFA, outside any individual game, which sets the rules of the game.

The argument has, however, been taken further by other atheistic philosophers who suggest that it is more like the problem of what is a beautiful picture - a question which they assert will be decided very differently by people with different tastes. This leaves one without having to explain an external authority, but it also leaves one with no explanation for why human beings feel able to decide which of available moral systems is better.

Appendix C - A Panel Discussion on Ethics by Atheist Philosophers

This is a summary of video of a discussion between prominent atheist thinkers at an atheist convention in the United States. It was published in June 2012 on the “New Atheist Blogspot”. The question under discussion was “How does atheism produce a lasting set of ethics”.

The five atheists on the panel reached a general agreement that science couldn't provide a basis for ethics. They agreed that science describes what is now, and not what should be. Individual respondents made the following points:-

- 1) Morality is a good idea and science doesn't reject a good idea unless it can find a better one. Morality should therefore continue as it is.
- 2) The second respondent had the most to say on the subject. He agreed that science has been unable to provide a background for moral standards but argued that the moral standards which now exist are the result of “Enlightenment values”. He argues that ethics have developed. Aristotle, he says, saw nothing wrong with slavery, and moral standards have improved in various places due to the Enlightenment. He gave, as examples, a modern rejection of Slavery, the execution of homosexuals, and the rejection of animal cruelty.

This position is dealt with in Appendix A above.

- 3) The third respondent argues that morality must have evolved within people and announced a view that there are value systems (which he described as a proto-morality) within members of the Great Ape family. When questioned about this he claimed that there is some evidence that great apes are capable of reflecting on earlier actions. He admitted that the idea that this is the beginning of a moral principle was “undeveloped” and that it can't be proven.

Of course, the problem of whether a great ape's actions can be considered moral requires a universal moral principle against which to measure that action, and the existence of such a moral instinct (if it exists - the idea is a long, long way from any kind of proof) would simply be an extension of the idea that God has placed the knowledge of right and wrong in his creation.

- 4) The fourth respondent explained that the theory of evolution cannot provide a moral principle. The theory gives a story of what has happened, but it can't say what should happen or what we should do in a given set of circumstances.
- 5) The fifth respondent was the only one to attack the idea of an underlying moral principle. He followed the line of Wittgenstein in claiming that judgements of moral value are entirely subjective. The question of which of two alternatives was moral was seen as the equivalent of choosing a holiday location. The example that he gave was whether a holiday in the mountains is better than a holiday at the seaside; which one decides depends entirely on one's own set of tastes.

The respondents to this question had a major task on their hands, and showed the difficulties of an atheist moral system very well. The difficulty is that if one wishes to decide that certain kinds of action, or certain principles, are better than others then one needs an external fixed point, which means that there is something outside the universe to guarantee any idea of right and wrong. The group very much based their arguments on the Golden Rule, and hence on the sayings of Jesus Christ, even the one who denied any existence of right or wrong. Essentially the discussion confirms the existence of a universal moral principle and shows that it cannot be derived without invoking a mind outside the universe as a fixed point.