



# Does Christianity have an Objective Morality?

## Section 1: Introduction

"One of the greatest tragedies in mankind's entire history may be that morality was hijacked by religion" - Arthur C. Clarke [1]

In Part 1, "Introduction to the CSF Morality Series", I provided an introduction and context to the series, as well as a few key definitions. This 2nd part will continue by thoroughly and systematically assessing the common claims of Objective Christian Morality, which probably muddy the waters of the public moral debate more than anything else.

The typical Christian claims I will be addressing:

- Christianity has an objective morality
- Without an objective morality, no morality is possible
- Secularists consequently cannot have morals
- Without this objective morality it is impossible to reject even the most evil historical events, like Hitler's Holocaust. Given the length of this article, this rather substantial topic will be dealt with in a follow-up article (Part 3).
- This claimed objective morality is implicitly or explicitly used as proof that their god exists (the so-called Morality Argument).



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One could argue that it should be obvious that Christian morality is not objective, and that this article is not necessary. However, if one looks at the pervasiveness and the categorical nature of this claim [4], as well as the disproportionate influence it has on the public debate (and people's convictions), my conclusion is that dealing with it thoroughly and in concrete terms, is still called for. With these erroneous Christian claims out of the way, the rest of the series can hopefully then proceed in a constructive fashion in clearer waters. Those interested in definitions can open the modal block at the bottom of this article (for the PDF version) to view the provisional terminology used for this article.

## Section 2: Critically Assessing the Starting Assumptions of Christian Morality

A theistic morality is typically either based on Natural Law or on Divine Command Theory (DCT). Both are equally problematic, but since most Christians of all walks of life partaking in the public morality and political debates, ascribe to some form of DCT, this article will focus on that. The starting assumptions of DCT are:

- There is a god
- An objective Morality is based on his commands, which we have to follow (he is the divine lawgiver)
- His commands are revealed to us in the Bible (for a Christian DCT).

These will be critically assessed below in a slightly different order and the philosophical arguments against DCT will be addressed in Section 10. This article is not only applicable to fundamentalist Christianity, but to all Christian claims of an objective morality.

### Which deity is the divine lawgiver?

Hundreds (and possibly thousands) of gods are still being worshiped today. When contemplating a theist basis for morality the first and most obvious question is, "Which god is the legitimate divine lawgiver and how can that be demonstrated as an objective fact?".

Grounding morality in specific deities, is a common historical phenomenon:

- Shamash (the Babylonian god of Justice) was claimed to have presented the Code of Laws to Hammurabi in Mesopotamia [8]
- In Greek mythology Zeus took pity on humans and provided them with a moral sense, to facilitate better cooperation between them and in this way give them a better chance to compete with physically superior animals. As an aside, this myth (like many others), showed profound and useful insights.
- Tyr (the son of Odin and the god of War) was regarded as the lawgiver among the Norse gods [9]
- Allah is claimed to be the lawgiver of Shariah law (the Path to be followed by mankind)
- Likewise, Moses is claimed to have received the 10 Commandments directly from Yahweh.



*Some of the Greek gods at the Academy of Athens (Image: iStock by Getty Images)*

Followers of different religions regard different gods as the divine lawgiver of an objective and typically a universal morality. In all cases, the god whom theists regard as the universal lawgiver, is the one they experience a personal relationship with. This subjective experience of faith has a remarkably high correlation to the religious tradition they were raised in. This in turn, is largely determined by geography, and the outcome of historic events, like specific wars and the spread of different religions violently and/or peacefully. These are random historical factors. The bottom line is that there are no objective criteria or proofs to determine which god (if any), should be obeyed.

### **Is the existence of their subjectively selected deity an objective fact?**

Let us work on the arbitrary assumption that Christianity's Trinity is somehow the one true god and we can ignore all the other deities without any objective measure. Does he even exist?

There is no objective proof of his existence and it cannot be determined as an objective fact. On the contrary, bringing rational scrutiny to the Biblical (and changing theological) claims about this god, his nature, and his commands, reveals many discrepancies and implausibilities. It seems highly unlikely to the critical observer that these claims could be true. See Section 7 for more details.

### **If he exists, how do they know what their subjectively selected deity commands?**

The Bible claims to contain his revelation and commands but by which objective measure can we determine these claims as objective facts?

- Christianity regards the Bible as the word of their god and therefore as authoritative. The Bible claims it is the word of their god, and this claim must be accepted, because it is the word of their god. This is clearly a circular argument. Its authority is based on its own claim.
- Section 8 lists several Biblical moral commands, which cast serious doubts on its possible divine origin.
- A complex and problematic canonical history
  - The Bible was the historical result of millennia of developments: long oral traditions, different authors from different time periods and regions writing in different languages, different genres of writing, all collectively

declared canonical by different churches at different times, and consequently eventually regarded as sources of dogma. It involves many text-critical discrepancies, translation differences, disagreements about canonical status, etc.

- Only towards the end of the 4th century was there almost consensus on a Biblical Canon in the Western Church (at the Council of Cartage in 397). The Book of Revelation was added to the Canon in the 5th century (419) and there remained ongoing disagreements between different churches and traditions. The current Biblical Canon was only accepted as official Church Doctrine by the RCC at the Council of Trent in 1546, by the Church of England in 1563, and by the Eastern Orthodox Church at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672. Lee Martin McDonald published very comprehensive books on the history of the Biblical Canon. [10] [11]
- The bottom line: which documents should be part of the Biblical canon, and which version of those included contains god's true commands? Where there are disagreements (and where there is consensus) how can we be sure which documents (if any) are really messages from the Christian god? This is not nearly as clear-cut as the majority of Christians seem to think and there certainly is no objective way to demonstrate a divine origin for specific versions of some historical documents.

So, the claim of an Objective Christian Morality falls at the very first hurdle, none of its foundational assumptions can be objectively demonstrated. It is a subjective Moral Theory.

- While there are several subjective Moral Theories with strong scientific arguments in favour of their starting assumptions, that is not the case with DCT. Its starting assumptions are not only subjective, but quite arbitrary.
- Even though the foundational assumptions of a subjective Moral Theory cannot be objectively demonstrated, a good subjective Moral Theory can still have a set of consistent principles which can be objectively applied within its framework. That is also not the case with Christian morality.

Even if their starting assumptions are granted, there is still no objective morality flowing from this foundation, as shown in the rest of this article.

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### Section 3: Which Current Christian Denomination has the Correct Interpretation?

There are literally thousands of Christian denominations today, with widely divergent views on morality. A reasonably comprehensive overview of the denominational families and their denominations can be found here [12]. These denominations do not have consensus on most moral issues.

We do not have any objective way to determine which denomination is correct, and the reason for these differences comes down to different interpretations of the Bible, which is subjective. There are several factors exacerbating these differences in subjective interpretation:



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- Vague Biblical statements, some of which played a major role in the reinterpretation of Biblical morality (Christ fulfilling the "Law" in Matthew 5:17 is the primary one - see Section 7)
- Numerous content contradictions in the Bible. There are many good sources on this:
  - Prof Bart Ehrman, a New Testament (NT) scholar, highlights all the direct discrepancies between the 4 Gospels (using books, blog posts and YouTube videos) [13][14][15][16]. He also writes about the even bigger discrepancies in the Old Testament (OT) [17]
  - The Sceptic's Annotated Bible is quite a comprehensive source [18]
  - Donald Morgan published lists of Biblical contradictions on the infidels.org website [19]
  - Many of these are factual contradictions, which cannot be reconciled. Others can be reconciled if one sets out with the explicit purpose/agenda to reconcile them. Either way, it is fertile ground for confusion, disagreements, and different interpretations.
- The complex and rather messy canonical history, as outlined in the previous section
- Different denominations ignoring different parts of the Bible and conversely, focusing on other parts of the Bible, based on ideological differences, other biases, cultural differences, and the specific religious traditions people were raised in.
- The absence of a consistent, objective, and authoritative method to interpret the Bible.

There is simply no objective way to determine which denomination has the correct interpretation (if any).

## Section 4: Christian Morality Continues to Change

Even if we subjectively select one of the thousands of Christian denominations, we are still faced with the next challenge, that Christian dogma and morality fundamentally changed over the centuries and continue to change to this day.

A hypothetical example: A member of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is a staunch proponent of freedom of religion now that Christianity's influence is declining, and proud of the Judeo-Christian tradition that she is convinced gave Western Civilization this principle.

- If she goes back 1800 years, she will discover that the Trinity was not even a dogma of her church yet. That was only accepted in 381 at the First Council of Constantinople
- If she goes back 600 years, she will find her church still persecuting, torturing, and killing pagans, heretics, and witches based on explicit commands to this effect in the Old Testament (like Deut 13: 6-10).
- If she goes back 300 years, she will discover her church still largely supporting slavery (despite claims to the contrary by some Catholic apologetics). A comprehensive, well-researched and balanced source in this regard by Pius Onyemechi Adiele is [20].
- If she goes back 60 years, she will find her church still hotly debating the freedom of religion doctrine. It was only officially accepted by the RCC at the 4th Session of the Second Vatican Council on 7 Dec 1965 (with 70 votes against the motion). This Declaration is available in the Vatican Archive [21][22].



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A few relevant issues to ponder:

- Even using the "right" god and the "right" denomination, at what point in time did they follow the correct morality?
- Are the more recent changes in their morality a deviation from the objective morality (the original "revelation") and therefore a sign of moral decay or are these changes a sign of moral progress and improvement?
- If the former, how far back should we go in history? An additional challenge for people arguing for a return to the original revelation is the fact that the further back we go in history the more barbaric Christian morality was.
- If the latter, it can hardly be an Objective Morality. And when some Christian apologetics argue that their god's divine spark in every human being is enabling moral progress, they give up all pretense of an objective morality, whether they realize that or not.

What are the objective measures to determine when your subjectively selected denomination followed the correct version of morality? I argue there is none and we are back to subjectivity, yet again. But this raises bigger issues too, which will be addressed in detail in Section 7.

## Section 5: There is no Consensus on Morality within any Christian Denomination

Church leaders, theologians and ordinary church members alike have never had consensus even within a specific denomination and at a specific point in time, despite broadly sharing the dogmas of their denomination and the belief in an objective Christian morality.

Dogmatic differences typically led to splits in churches, which is how many new denominations came into existence over the years. Ethical differences often just led to disagreements and discord within denominations. Differences in political views are one of the factors which often result in ethical disagreements.

What is the objective way to determine which people within the "right" denomination at the "right" time have the correct interpretation of their god's moral commands? Another subjective link in the chain.

## **Section 6: How to Access Objective Moral Truths about Modern Moral Issues not Mentioned in the Bible**

Many modern moral issues are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, as it was completely foreign to the Late Bronze Age or Galilee and Judea 2000 years ago. How can we have access to objective moral truths about these modern issues? Examples are, euthanasia, artificial insemination, animal rights, cloning of animals, cloning of people, stem cell research, bionics, cryogenics, artificial intelligence, contraception, DNA editing, etc.

It can only be attempted by applying certain principles/arguments/verses from the Bible to these issues. Interpretation is subjective by definition, so we are dealing with subjective interpretations of a subjectively selected document claimed to be the commands of a subjectively selected deity. Yet, Christianity has no qualms about adding these subjective interpretations (on which there are vehement disagreements among themselves) to their supposed objective morality and taking strong stances on all these matters.

## **Section 7: Insurmountable Issues Raise by the Fundamental Changes in Christian Morality**

This is such a critical section, that I will dedicate enough space to it, to do it justice.

### **A multitude of divine commands in the Old Testament are no longer followed**

Let us look at a few explicit OT commands:

- Killing your own kids when they are disrespectful (Ex 21:17) or disobedient (Deut 21:20-21)
- Killing people for working (or just picking up sticks) on the Sabbath (Ex 31:14-15, Ex 35:2-3, Num 15:32-36)
- Permissible to assault and kill your slaves if they do not die on the spot or on the same day (Ex 21: 20-21)
- Killing your own family who do not worship the right god (Deut 13: 6-10)
- Honour killings, by burning the daughters of priests alive if they should become prostitutes (Lev 21: 9)
- Burning "witches" alive (Ex 22:18)
- Killing gays (Lev 18:22) and adulterers (Lev 20:10, Deut 22:22).

None of these rules/commands is followed by Christianity today, although there are still some fundamentalists pushing for gays (but not adulterers) to be killed. A key verse used over the last few centuries to justify this change is Matt 5:17-18 [23], quite a vague verse which gained a pivotal role rather late in the history of Christianity.

### **The Fundamental and Ongoing Changes in Christian Morality**

This list, and how it functioned within Christianity, pose insurmountable issues for those claiming an Objective Christian Morality. A primary issue is the fundamental and ongoing changes in Christian morality. An Objective Morality is by definition not dependent on cultural circumstances or the developmental levels of its followers, it transcends these factors.

These original OT commands are explicit and categoric. There are also many of them, painting a consistent picture. Christianity ignoring these commands is not based on explicit new divine instructions, but on interpretations of a few vague and controversial verses. This is subjective and questionable. This subjectiveness is confirmed by the inconsistent interpretations throughout history. For more than 1000 years Christianity continued to follow some of these commands, until the Enlightenment when the Western World started to civilize slowly.

The fact that Christianity eventually and gradually stopped following these commands at best implies cultural relativism.

### Theological Implausibility

A second issue is the implausibility of the mythological storyline. A few suggested critical questions:

- How is it possible that an omniscient divine being changed his mind so drastically about his initial commands and “objective” morality in general?
- Why was this god so completely vague about his change of heart and what he really expected from his followers? For example, why was his change of mind not clearly revealed and explained by his “son” in the New Testament? Why did he not issue unambiguous new commands?
- This is especially implausible given the cruel executions he supposedly commanded and the fact that as an omniscient being he had to know that the Christian Church would continue killing hundreds of thousands of people brutally for centuries, apparently completely unnecessarily.

### The Brutal Barbarism as such



*A Medieval Torture Chamber (Image: Dreamstime)*

A third issue is the barbaric nature of Christian morality until well into the Enlightenment, while being explicitly based on OT commands like these, or related Biblical arguments:

- These OT commands are barbaric by any contemporary moral standard. How could a supreme divine being, who is the “ultimate good”, issue these commands (working on the assumption that an all-loving divine being acting more than 3,000 years ago would have had a sense of morality that was at least as advanced as civilized human beings in the 21st century)? Not surprisingly, these barbaric commands led to a barbaric initial Christian morality.
- In 385, a mere 5 years after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, a Spanish Bishop (Priscillian of Avila) and 6 of his followers were beheaded for heresy [24]. This was the start of the persecution of pagans, heretics, witches, blasphemers, and later scientists, which continued for almost 1500 years.



- The persecution was later formalised into several Inquisitions, which led to a sharp increase in torture and executions [25]:
  - The Medieval Inquisition formalised by Pope Lucius III in 1184
  - Pope Innocent III decreed in 1199 that heresy was “high treason against God” [26]. This dramatically increased the torture and killing of heretics, and caused heresy to become the major reason for executions by far. It also shows how intertwined church and state was, and the political power of the RCC.
  - The Spanish Inquisition approved by Pope Sextus IV in 1478. It was not abolished until 1834, with its last execution of a Spanish schoolmaster in 1826 [27].
  - The Portuguese Inquisition established in 1536
  - The Roman Inquisition established by Pope Paul II in 1542. It imprisoned Galileo Galilei in 1633 and still exists to this day, but has been renamed “The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith”.
- After the Reformation, the Protestant Churches in Europe also took a strong stand against protestant heretics, but were especially active in witch trials, based on Exodus 22 and their strong dogmatic focus on the Bible as the inerrant word of their god. Academic estimates put the executions of witches from 1450-1750 to over 50,000, with a climax reached in protestant Germany in the 17th century [28].
- There are many reliable sources outlining the brutal execution methods used throughout the Middle Ages: burning people alive, boiling people alive, disembowelment, “quartering” using 4 wild horses, crucifixion, crushing people to death, decapitation, impalement, etc. [29][30]. These executions were designed to inflict as much pain, suffering and humiliation as possible, and were worse than anything we currently witness in Saudi Arabia or even from ISIS.
- The torture devices and torture manuals they used for centuries were official and systematic, but every bit as gruesome and included “sawing” (hanging people upside down and sawing them in half), tearing off limbs, specialized crushers (for legs, knees, feet, thumbs, hands, heads), the Pear of Anguish, breast rippers, “rocking horses”, the Iron Chair, the Breaking Wheel, flesh rippers, tongue rippers, water torture, coffin torture, branding irons, the Barrel Pillory, the Heretic’s Fork, the Judas Cradle, the Brazen Bull, the Rack, the Spanish Donkey, etc. [31][32][33].
- “As many historians have noted, the most vicious procedures in Medieval times were inflicted on devout Christians by even more devout Christians” [34]. The Physicist, Steven Weinberg (who won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1979), made the following insightful statement in a speech at a Scientific conference in 1999, “Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.” [35]. To which I would add that
  - They did not have a problem with criminals or non-believers burning people alive in the Middle Ages; it took the Bible and the Christian Church to achieve that
  - The root cause was not “sinful” people straying from the Bible. It was devout Christians zealously following their god’s commands in the Old Testament and modelling their morality on that.

“Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.” - Steven Weinberg [35]

### Should this not be seen in the context of those Uncivilized Times?

Many Christians argue that brutality of this nature was typical of those uncivilized times, should be seen in this context and not judged by today’s standards, to which I would make 2 points:

- If Christianity had an objective and divine morality, one would expect it to take a strong stand against this barbarism. If they simply followed the morality of the time, that would mean their morality amounts to nothing more than cultural relativism.

- Christianity had unfettered political power and was therefore the main cultural influence in medieval Europe. It led the way in brutality and violence. It actively promoted a Bronze Age morality from the OT in the Middle Ages.

This brutality, and the barbaric nature of Christianity's morality until the Enlightenment is a significant historic fact, and highly relevant in assessing their current claims. This is the same religion claiming a prominent/dominant seat at the morality debate table today, while still basing their claim on the same supposed objective morality. It is with some disbelief that I observe a religion with such a history still continuing its ironic efforts to monopolize morality.

## **Section 8: Historically we find Christians with Biblical Quotes on all Sides of Moral Arguments**

### **The Bible was/is used to Support a Multitude of Conflicting Major Moral Issues**

As can be expected from the previous Sections, every major historical moral controversy and all moral progress in the Western World had Christians, with their Biblical quotes, on both/all sides of the argument. A few examples, showing that it is clearly possible to make a reasonably convincing argument from the Bible for almost any moral position:

- For and against slavery
- For and against burning "witches"
- For and against Hitler and Nazism (see Part 3 for details)
- For Segregation and for Civil Rights in the USA, with the Bible used to support segregation, civil rights, and a 3rd position, that blacks should accept their situation even if it was an injustice [36][37][38]
- For and against gender equality
- For and against same-sex marriage
- For and against Donald Trump, with several prominent Evangelical leaders calling him, "God's anointed" and that his removal from office would herald "the end of the world," while at the same time, Christianity Today published editorials calling Trump "profoundly immoral" and calling for his removal from office.



Image: Dreamstime

## A consistent Obstacle to Moral Progress

This also means that in all cases where Western civilization made moral progress, there was strong Christian opposition. These Christians opposing progress all claimed an objective morality and divine authority. In all these cases they had explicit Bible verses they could use against progress. This is a significant historical fact. Two of these examples are especially noteworthy:

- Slavery: Eph 6:5 [39]
- Gender equality: I Tim 2:11-15, I Cor 14:34-35 [40].

In these two cases Christians who opposed progress also had explicit NT verses to support slavery and chauvinism. The abolitionists and those supporting female emancipation had to rely on more general verses and reinterpretations.

## Strategic Reasons for Change

Apart from the obvious subjectiveness and relativism involved, it raises a more fundamental issue.

- If the Bible contains the only objective morality and even the NT explicitly condones the undesirable status quo, on what basis did Christianity reach new moral insights? Were there other moral sources and/or other factors at play?
- I would argue that there were at least also strategic reasons involved, like pragmatic considerations how to stay relevant and acceptable in a changing world.
  - **Would you still belong to a religion advocating slavery or killing your own kids or burning “witches” alive?**
  - **Would such a religion still be legal in the Western world today?**

## Section 9: Research Confirming Historical Observations that Christians project their Views onto their god

With churches and individual Christians taking such a wide variety of moral positions over the centuries and today, it is a reasonable conclusion that they tend to project their own beliefs onto their god.

On 22 Dec 2009, a fascinating research report was published, investigating this phenomenon with controlled experiments [41]. It was a Psychological and Cognitive Sciences research project, conducted by multi-disciplinary scientists from different universities in the USA and Australia using different randomly selected groups of Christians.

In the 1st 4 experiments they asked different groups to rate their own views on a controversial moral topic, and then rate their expected views of other public figures and the hypothetical "average American". Lastly, they had to rate the view of their god on the topic. There was a high correlation between their own views and that of their god, significantly higher than with the other public figures. However, it was not clear if people modelled their views on their god's views or if they projected their own views on their god.

Two additional studies then used techniques to successfully change participants' views. In both cases that had little impact on the views they ascribed to the public figures. However, in both cases their ratings of the views of their god moved in correlation with the shifts in their own views.

Some of this study's key conclusions were:

- "Correlational, experimental, and neuro-imaging methodologies all suggest that religious believers are particularly likely to use their own beliefs as a guide when reasoning about God's beliefs."
- **"This research suggests that, unlike an actual compass, inferences about God's beliefs may instead point people further in whatever direction they are already facing."** [41].

## Section 10: Divine Command Theory (DCT)

An article like this will not be complete without briefly looking at the key philosophical response to DCT. It was strongly criticized by Philosophers throughout history. An early, enduring, and quite profound refutation was by Plato around 400 BC, in the form of a dialogue between Socrates (an Athenian Philosopher, Plato's teacher) and Euthyphro (an Athenian prophet).

### The Euthyphro Dilemma

The famous question Socrates asked Euthyphro was: "Do the gods command a particular action because it is morally right, or is it morally right because the gods command it?" [42].

- The first horn of the dilemma: if whatever god commands is moral, then morality becomes quite arbitrary as god can command any cruel or evil deed (or change his mind), which will then become a moral obligation.
- The second horn of the dilemma: if god commands that which is right, then morality exists independent of god, he is no longer the basis of morality, he just conveys morality to human beings. The logical implication is that morality would still exist, even if god does not.

### Modified Divine Command Theory (MDCT)

Plato's Euthyphro Dilemma posed a very insightful challenge to DCT, which was never adequately addressed. MDCT is a recent attempt published by Robert Adams in 1987 [43] and is currently still used by some Christian apologetics. In essence it postulates that morality is not just based on god's commands, but on his good being. He can only command what is good due to his good being, which means morality is not independent from him, but based on his being.

MDCT is negating the problem by means of speculative theoretical constructions (dogmas) without any objective basis.

- It still does not escape the Euthyphro Dilemma posed by Plato, while all the fundamental issues raised in this article (especially Section 2) are fully applicable to both DCT and MDCT too
- Looking at what we find in the Bible, the Christian god regularly commanded atrocities, including genocide, often of innocent people. He also changed his mind (see Section 7 and 8 for details).
  - In other words, the Biblical account combined with historical facts, seem to argue quite strongly for the first horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma (an arbitrary morality based on the whims a god changing his mind and issuing pretty questionable commands)
  - And regarding MDCT, it also argues against this god as the ultimate good who can only issue good commands due to his good being.
- MDCT simply makes subjective, faith-based dogmatic claims about their god without any objective way of substantiating it (or in many cases, any effort to do that).
- An Objective Moral Theory requires much more than just a claim, faith-based arguments or theoretical dogmas.

## Section 11: The Moral Argument

Many Christian apologetics do not only use the claim of an Objective Christian Morality to assert moral superiority or to argue that secularists cannot have morals, but in the final analysis they also use it directly or indirectly as proof for their god's existence. This is called the Moral Argument for divine existence, and it had many minor variations over the centuries. The core argument runs as follows:

Premise 1: God (in this case the Christian god) is the source of objective moral facts

Premise 2: There are objective moral facts

Conclusion: Therefore, god exists.

- A first observation is that even if this argument were valid, it could effectively be used to prove the existence of any god, by simply modifying the 1st premise to claim Allah or Zeus or Tyr or Shamash is the source of objective moral facts (all of which happened historically, see Section 3).
- As this article showed in the preceding sections, **Premise 1** is unequivocally false; it is only an article of subjective faith, based on random geographic and historic factors. It is easy to claim that any specific deity is the source of objective moral truths, but there is no way of objectively demonstrating that. Many religions made this claim, but none was able to objective demonstrate that
- **Premise 2** is likely false too, but it has more Philosophical proponents and somewhat stronger arguments. However, it falls outside the scope of this article and will gradually be addressed in the rest of this series. Either way, the conclusion is invalid even if Premise 2 should be true, as both premises must be true for a valid conclusion. And it is likely based on two false premises, making it as invalid as can be.

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The next 5 Sections look at additional factors posing problems for the Christian claims of objective morality: two historical and 1 scientific, followed by another 2 which will be handled as separate follow-up articles.

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## Section 12: Core Moral Tenets precede Christianity and Judaism

Some of Christianity's core moral tenets pre-date Christianity and even Judaism. They developed independently of any divine revelations or religious texts (or as part of other, older religious texts). We'll only look at two key examples.

## "Thou shalt not kill"

It is one of the 10 Commandments we find in the Old Testament, and probably the most agreed upon moral principle around the world (as codified in virtually all legal systems). The Code of Ur-Nammu is the oldest legal code which survived, and its fragments are on display in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. It is from Mesopotamia and is credited to King Ur-Nammu of Ur (2112 - 2095 BC) [44]. It predates the Code of Hammurabi by about 3 centuries and the 10 Commandments by about 8 centuries [45][46].

Some of the significance of this Legal Code

- It established the principle of "an eye for an eye", which was much later taken up in the Bible too
- It outlawed murder, robbery, adultery and rape as capital offenses
- The prohibition of murder was therefore well-established law in Mesopotamia many centuries before the 10 Commandments
- In addition, one could argue it not only predates the 10 Commandments, but was superior to it, since it established rape as a capital offense too. Rape did not make the 10 Commandments and was only punishable by a fine in the Old Testament, as a crime against the property of another man.

## The Golden Rule

A core tenet of Christianity is the Golden Rule (in theory, if not in practice), as ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 7:12 "Treat others as you want to be treated, for this sums up the Law and the prophets" (around 25-30 AD). However, we find the Golden Rule in many other religions and philosophies centuries before Jesus [47][48]:

- Buddha (563 - 483 BC): "There is nothing dearer to man than himself; therefore, as it is the same thing that is dear to you and to others, hurt not others with what pains yourself"
- Confucius (551 - 479 BC): "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you"
- Jainism (around 550 BC): "A monk should treat all beings as he himself would be treated"
- Zoroaster (6th Century BC): "Don't do to others what isn't good for you"
- Hinduism (around 400 BC): "One should never do to another what one regards as hurtful to one's own self"
- Sextus (a Greek Philosopher and follower of Pythagoras, around 300 BC): "As you wish your neighbours to treat you, so treat them. What you censure, do not do".

## Humanity established these moral insights independently and in quite similar form in different parts of the world

This raises three intriguing questions:

- Why did different societies reach similar moral insights independently?
- Why is there a clear influence from other older religions (including morality) visible in the Bible?
- If morality was revealed to humanity by the Christian god why are some of its core tenants much older than Christianity and Judaism?

## Section 13: More Sophisticated Moral Reasoning Centuries before Jesus

There are many examples of more sophisticated moral thinking centuries before Jesus:

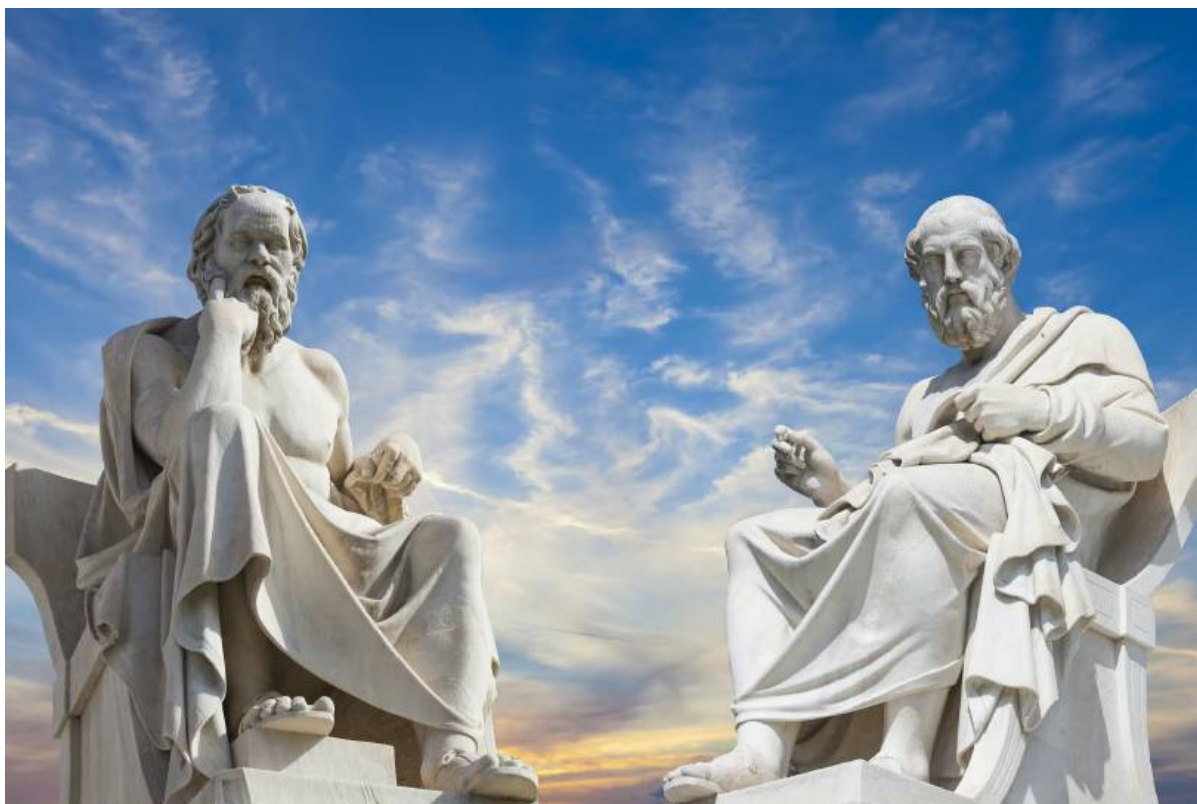
### Jainism and Buddhism

For the sake of brevity a single Jainism example is quoted, but the same applies to Buddhism. The Jain Patriarch, **Mahavira**, lived in India in the 6th century BC.

"If you think that it would be impossible to improve upon the Ten Commandments as a statement of morality, you really owe it to yourself to read some other scriptures. Once again, we need look no further than the Jains: Mahavira, the Jain patriarch, surpassed the morality of the Bible with a single sentence: 'Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being.' Imagine how different our world might be if the Bible contained this as its central precept. Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible." [49]

If one compares the morality of Jainism and Buddhism with that of the OT and early Christianity, one can see why Christianity had such a violent history, while Jainism and Buddhism did not. Why did a divine morality not lead Christianity to a less violent history than morality based on mere human insights?

## Some examples from the Ancient Greek Philosophers



*Aristotle and Plato (Image: Dreamstime)*

- **Plato** (around 424 - 348) [50]. The Euthyphro Dilemma he posed around 400 BC, was already mentioned in Section 10 as a good example of a profound moral insight, which still stands today.
- **Aristotle** (384 - 322 BC), formulated types of syllogisms and rules of logic, still in use today. He also made ground-breaking contributions in Physics, Astronomy, Geology, Epistemology, etc. [51]. However, what is more relevant for our purposes in this article is the sophisticated moral reasoning we find in the Virtue Ethics he advocated in his **Nicomachean Ethics**, written around 340 BC. One quote from Book 5:

"Now the laws in their enactments on all subjects aim at the common advantage either of all or of the best or of those who hold power, or something of the sort; so that in one sense we call those acts just that tend to produce and preserve happiness and its components for the political society. And the law bids us do both the acts of a brave man (e.g. not to desert our post nor take to flight nor throw away our arms), and those of a temperate man (e.g. not to commit adultery nor to gratify one's lust), and those of a good-tempered man (e.g. not to

strike another nor to speak evil), and similarly with regard to the other virtues and forms of wickedness, commanding some acts and forbidding others; and the rightly-framed law does this rightly, and the hastily conceived one less well. This form of justice, then, is complete virtue, but not absolutely, but in relation to our neighbour." [52]

## Conclusion

The moral reasoning of Jesus we see in the NT (although an improvement on the OT), is primitive even for that historical period. Compare any NT verse with the Aristotle quote above. Nobody can credibly argue that humanity only discovered morality through Christianity, or that Christian morality and history are superior. To the contrary, I think there is enough historical evidence to argue that Western Civilization would have been far more advanced if it was based on Greek Philosophy instead of Christianity and its Bronze Age morality.

## Section 14: Morality Evolved in the Animal Kingdom too

One of the most fascinating and significant developments over the last 50 years, is extensive research results by Scientists showing that morality is present in the animal kingdom too. All of these confirm, and built on, the original findings and insights of Charles Darwin. In Part 1 "**Introduction to the CSF Morality Series**", I listed several disciplines which have been making noteworthy contributions. In this section I am only going to expand on two of these.



*Orangutan mother with child in nature (Image: iStock by Getty Images)*

## Evolutionary Biology

Some of the most significant research findings of Evolutionary Biology include:

- Moral intuitions evolved, and it evolved in primates and other social animals too
- There are clear similarities between the core moral intuitions of non-human and human primates.



A good example of a scientist who made substantial contributions is **Frans de Waal**, a retired Dutch primatologist and ethologist, who worked in the field of Evolutionary Biology [53]. He conducted several high-profile research studies on the behaviour of non-human primates and published several books. The most noteworthy ones: [54] [55][56][57]. He applied his findings to human behaviour and morality. Some of his key insights [58]:

- Cooperation is more prevalent than competition among human and non-human primates alike
- Cooperation is achieved by 2 key pillars of morality for all primates, which are
  - Reciprocity (accompanied by a sense of fairness) and
  - Empathy (accompanied by a sense of compassion).

## Key findings of Evolutionary Psychology

In the field of Evolutionary Psychology **Jonathan Haidt's** research is a good example [59][60]:

- Core human moral intuitions are fairly universal regardless of geography, culture, religion, race, gender or age
- Small children from different countries and cultures have similar core moral intuitions, in some cases even before these concepts have been taught to them
- People typically make moral judgments immediately and intuitively and then try to find rational justification. Sometimes they can't even find rational justifications
- Their findings confirm the findings of Evolutionary Biology.

This continues to present us with mounting evidence that morality is not revealed by a specific deity to his specific followers or even a specific species. Similar moral insights developed independently in different parts of the world and in the Animal Kingdom. We will have to look elsewhere for the source of morality, which later articles in this series will do.

## Section 15: The Holocaust and Christian Claims about an Objective Morality

The Holocaust features consistently and prominently in Christian claims about an objective morality (as stated in the Introduction). This is quite ironic and highly relevant, so it deserves some scrutiny. To do it justice, this will be done in the next article (Part 3) "**The Holocaust and Christian Claims about an Objective Morality**". Not surprisingly, the Holocaust is actually a highly ironic example and a strong argument against an Objective Christian Morality, rather than for it.

For now just a single quote from Hitler's first radio address as new Chancellor on 1 Feb 1933, in which he explicitly pledged his protection for Christianity as the basis of Nazi morality [61]. "The National Government will therefore regard it as its first and supreme task to restore to the German people unity of mind and will. It will preserve and defend the foundations on which the strength of our nation rests. **It will take under its firm protection Christianity as the basis of our morality**, and the family as the nucleus of our nation and our state."



Auschwitz (Image: Dreamstime)

## Section 16: Are Religious Societies morally superior, more successful or happier?

In accessing Christian claims about morality (objective or otherwise), an obvious course of action seems to be to investigate religious (or specifically Christian) societies and communities to ascertain whether they tend to be morally superior or not. This will also be addressed in a follow-up article (Part 4) **"Are Religious Societies Morally Superior, more Successful or Happier"**.

## Section 17: Conclusion

I showed that there is no Objective Christian Morality, not logically, not historically, not empirically today. It is such a completely unsubstantiated claim that one wonders how so many Christians can make this categoric claim without a shred of doubt or a shred of evidence. They cannot demonstrate the objective status of their starting assumptions or their subjective interpretations of the Bible. Their morality started out as quite barbaric, has been changing fundamentally for 2 millennia, without any objective criteria or any consistent method. Throughout history we find Christians with Biblical quotes on all sides of moral arguments, and there is currently no consensus among Christians on major moral issues. Christian morality is not only subjective, but also arbitrary. It is demonstrably whatever you want it to be, as history and recent controlled Psychological and Cognitive Sciences research confirmed.

Even if we should grant that Christianity has an objective morality based on their god's commands as found in the Bible, where and how do we reliably access these objective moral facts? Which of the current thousands (possibly millions) of versions of Christian morality is the correct one? If I want to know what is the objective moral truth about any moral issue where do I go, who do I speak to, what do I do, which objective method do I apply, to ensure that I get access to this objective morality? And the answer is rather obvious, I have no unambiguous way to find the answer in Christianity despite all their categoric claims.

### **So how can we know what's right and wrong if a divine being does not instruct us?**

This common question by Christians demonstrates quite an infantile approach to morality and life in general, by looking to an external authority figure with all the answers and being sincerely perplexed by the daunting task of

finding these answers without the guidance of such an authority figure.

A short answer is that we will continue to deal with complex moral issues like with all the historical moral progress we made despite the resistance by Christianity and its erroneous claims. For example, the important human realization that slavery was immoral even though both the OT and the NT explicitly condone it, and Christianity largely supported it on Biblical grounds until the 19th century, when slavery was finally abolished in the US in 1865.

Another perspective is that the situation with Morality is, in my view, quite like the challenge Science faced during the Enlightenment. How were we then supposed to figure out Science and the complexities of the natural world if a god did not show us? The parallels are quite obvious:

- There was no useful scientific or cosmological guidance in the Bible
- The Bible also provided a false scientific start instead of useful guidance, with the pre-scientific cosmology it depicted: the flat earth resting on 4 pillars, with a firmament above it and the underworld underneath it; with the stars as small objects on the firmament and the sun revolving around this flat earth.
- The early Scientists had to deal with the challenges of a complex, unknown, and threatening physical world on their own, not only without divine guidance but while being actively persecuted by the Christian Church for not accepting the erroneous cosmological views in the Bible. Despite many ongoing challenges (including contemporary epistemological ones, and the provisional nature of scientific knowledge) they were spectacularly successful.
- My contention is that in principle this is still the situation we are faced with regarding our efforts to unravel the complexities of morality, even though it may be more complex than investigating the natural world. Scientists and Moral Philosophers will likely continue to find useful moral answers to increasingly complex issues, without divine revelations, despite a lack of consensus, despite the false start with morality in the Bible, the violent history of Christianity as early example, as well as its initial and ongoing obstacle to moral progress.

## **Using Historical Perspective and Scientific Research for the Critical Challenge of Moral Progress**



Image: iStock by Getty Images

History taught us that there are definitive disadvantages to religion monopolizing morality with erroneous claims of an objective morality, as Arthur Clarke aptly pointed out. We also learned the hard way that these claims and political power are a dangerous combination. Even without unfettered political power, the zeal and rigidity of those supposedly acting on the authority of divine beings advocating everlasting punishment, are an obstacle to a constructive morality discourse and achieving moral progress. No deference required for these unsubstantiated claims.

We briefly looked at the mounting evidence that morality is not revealed or commanded by a specific deity to his specific followers or even a specific species, but developed independently in different parts of the world and even in animals. We will have to look elsewhere for the source of morality, regardless of whether we like that, whether we find it daunting or unacceptable, whether it will be difficult, or whether it clashes with deep-seated beliefs and needs we have. This is one of the most exciting, important, and challenging endeavours of our time. Humanity will have to develop a more rational, tolerant and inclusive morality, in order to survive on our planet. The rest of this series will continue this exploration with an open mind.

"... (morality) developed independently in different parts of the world and even in animals. We will have to look elsewhere for the source of morality, regardless of whether we like that, whether we find it daunting or unacceptable, whether it will be difficult, or whether it clashes with deep-seated beliefs and needs we have."

### The next Morality Article:

Part 3: "The Holocaust and Christian Claims about an Objective Morality" (scheduled for 24 June 2022).

## Provisional Terminology

This article starts with fairly conventional definitions, which will be reviewed and updated in the rest of the series as that becomes necessary. My approach is **meta-ethical** (investigating the source of morality and how we can assess moral truths, if at all) and not normative (evaluating specific actions and/or moral principles). I will nevertheless attempt to steer clear of getting too abstract and avoid the complexities of the meta-ethical landscape, partially to avoid pointless terminological bickering and because this is not an academic article. I am not quoting from any specific sources in this section, but the following sources could be useful for further introductory reading about morality and morality definitions: [3][4][5][6][7].

**Science:** When I use the term "Science" in a generic sense, I refer to all branches of Science: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities.

**Objective:** "Something is objective if it exists independent of human opinions, feelings, beliefs and preferences". An example: "the earth is round" is an objective fact, which can objectively and consistently be demonstrated regardless of whether some people believe that or not. It was also true 3,000 years ago when no human being knew or believed that, or a billion years ago before Homo Sapiens evolved.

**Subjective:** "Dependent on human opinions, feelings, beliefs and preferences". Examples: personal preferences, like "I enjoy a sunny climate"; aesthetics, like "Dali's paintings are not beautiful"; custom, like "bow as a sign of respect when you meet somebody", and moral statements, like "contraception is immoral" (RCC) or "girls should not be educated" (The Taliban).

**Morality:** "The differentiation that actions and intentions can be classified as good or bad, with a set of related principles to govern appropriate human behaviour". This definition is deliberately general enough not to imply whether these principles are objective or subjective; whether they are the result of divine instructions, culture, or evolution; or whether we access them through revelation, rational thought, empirical science, a special moral sense, or moral intuitions. It will be redefined as this series progresses.

**Moral Theory:** "A **Moral Framework** used to provide answers to moral questions". A Moral Theory consists of **starting assumptions** (the foundation), as well as **moral principles** based on this foundation. Examples of well-known Moral Theories: Virtue Ethics, Natural Law Theory, Deontological Theories (like Kant's Categorical Imperative), Utilitarianism and Divine Command Theory. Some of the same principles can be found in multiple different Moral Theories.

**Objective Morality:** "Morality which exists independent of human opinions, feelings, beliefs and preferences." Any moral theory claiming objective status, must be able to demonstrate that its starting assumptions are objectively true.

**Subjective Morality:** "Morality based on human opinions, feelings, beliefs and preferences." Subjective moral theories acknowledge that their starting assumptions cannot be demonstrated as objectively true. **A subjective foundation does not equate to arbitrary morality.** It can still

be informed by Science and be rigorously scrutinized and challenged. Science and reason can also play a key role in evaluating moral decisions within a specific framework.

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None

#### **Section 6: How to Access Objective Moral Truths about Modern Issues not mentioned in the Bible?**

None

#### **Section 7: Insurmountable Issues Raised by the Fundamental Changes in Christian Morality**

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punished if the slave dies as a direct result, 21 but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property."

The NT also explicitly condones it in Ephesians 6:5 (NIV): "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ."

[40] I Tim 2:11-15 (NIV): "11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety."

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None

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None