# GOOD WITHOUT GOD
Richard Norman

*In the fifth of our articles on "Good without God", Richard Norman explains why he believes we can be good without God.*

'You can't be a morally good person unless you're religious.' This view dies hard. Among philosophers it has relatively few adherents, but in the wider world it is remarkably resilient. I want to have another go at dislodging it.

## The 'Euthyphro' Dilemma

Philosophical discussions of morality and religion regularly begin with something called 'the Euthyphro dilemma'. I'll explain what this is, but I'll suggest that it doesn't take us very far. Still, it is important as far as it goes, and since it is so often mentioned, we had better take note of what it does and does not show. It is so called because it derives from Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, though modern versions of it differ in important ways from Plato's version.[1] This is how it goes.

If you think that there is some significant connection between what is morally right and what God tells us to do, you have to choose one of these two ways of stating the connection.

*Either:*

1. What is right is right because God commands it

*Or:*

2. God commands what is right because it is right.

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That is the dilemma. If you go for option 1, you are saying that absolutely anything which God commanded, whatever it might be, would thereby become right. If God were to require us to engage in child sacrifice, or to massacre and enslave our enemies (preferences which have indeed been ascribed to the gods of certain religions), that would make them morally right. In fact, however, most of us would regard such actions as morally appalling, so option 1 seems to have the effect of doing away with the very idea of morality.

'Oh, but God would never command anything like that, since he is a good and loving god', the response might be. This, however, shifts us to option 2, for the implication now is that we have some prior moral standard, by reference to which we can say that God is a good god, and that what he commands us to do is in fact the right thing for us to do. In other words, what is right and wrong is right and wrong independently of God's commanding it. You may still believe that there is in fact a god, and that he wants us to do what is right. But the upshot of this position is that even if there turned out to be no such divine commander, there would still be a standard of right and wrong by which to assess our actions. So if, as it seems that we should, we go for option 2 of the dilemma, we have accepted that morality does not depend on the existence of a god.

So far, so good – but it's not very far, I suggest. Why not? Because the Euthyphro dilemma is damaging only to a 'divine command' theory which purports to provide an account of what we *mean* by 'good' or 'ought' or 'morality'. Typically, however, the defenders of a link between morality and religion have had something other than a definitional link in mind. They have suggested that though we can make sense of the idea of morality independently of the idea of God's commands, the fact remains that it is possible for human beings to act morally only if they follow God's guidance about what it is morally right for us to do. Why might they think this and what might they mean by it?

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## Human Limitations

Here are some possible views:

1. There are moral truths or values which are independent of human beings and human concerns, and which cannot be fully grasped by human beings with their limited cognitive powers. Only God has full knowledge of these, and in order to live a good life we need to follow his revealed moral commands.

Here is a rather different version of what is essentially the same idea:

2. There are moral truths which derive from our nature as human beings, but our limited cognitive powers prevent us from having full knowledge of them. Only by following the commands of the divine creator who formed our human nature can we live a good life.

In response to both these suggestions, it might be asked: 'If our cognitive powers are so limited that we cannot know for ourselves how we should live, how are we capable of recognising that God's commands, when they are revealed to us, are indeed the right way for us to live?' Some analogies might help to make the position plausible.

Suppose that there is a mathematical proof which is so difficult that so far only one mathematical genius has been able to work it out. Once she has done so, other mathematicians are able to recognise it as a good proof, but if it were to be lost, no other mathematician would be capable of rediscovering it. So the knowledge can be retained only by keeping a record of what the mathematical genius discovered. The first position above could be seen as analogous: knowledge of values, because it is remote from and transcends our everyday experience, is difficult for us to achieve. (Plato thought something



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like this.) It can be fully known by a divine intellect, and if it is then revealed to us, we can then connect it with our experience and recognise its truth, but our limited cognitive powers are not fully up to the task of discovering it for ourselves.

Here is another possible analogy. A very complicated device has been invented by a genius. It is so complicated that no one else would be capable of working out how it functions. If we follow the instructions of the inventor, we can see that the device does work, but if those instructions were lost, no living inventor would be able to rediscover them. This is more like the second position above. God is our creator, and he has designed us to function in a certain way. We couldn't have worked this out for ourselves, but if we follow our 'maker's instructions' we can then recognise that by doing so we function as we should.

Finally let's consider a third possible view of the link between morality and divine commands. Accepting that knowledge of moral values is not totally beyond human cognitive capacities, this position nevertheless asserts:

3. Only a minority of human beings (perhaps Plato's philosopher-kings) are capable of understanding what a morally good way of life is and why they should live in that way, or of being motivated to do so. Most human beings can be got to live in that way only by being told that the requirement to do so is the requirement of a super-human divine authority. (It is not enough simply for them to follow the human authority of the morally enlightened, for this will not appear to them to be sufficiently authoritative.)

All these views of the relation between morality and religion depend on claims about the limitations of human moral knowledge and/or moral motivation. To reject them, and to argue that morality doesn't have to be tied to religion, we would need to show that human beings in general are capable of knowing what they ought to do and are capable



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of acting on their knowledge of what they ought to do. Can we do so?

We may be encouraged by the thought that these questions of moral knowledge and moral motivation have been central concerns of the western tradition of moral philosophy for the past two-and-a-half millennia. On the other hand, we might also be discouraged by the thought that the philosophers who have discussed these questions do not seem to have reached any agreement. I want to suggest that, despite the obvious and deep disagreements within the philosophical tradition, we can draw from that tradition some key insights which are sufficient to meet our needs and to show that human beings are capable of acting morally without religious belief.



## Hume and Sympathy

Consider first David Hume's account of what he variously calls 'sympathy' or 'humanity' or 'fellow-feeling'.[2] It is, he says, a feature of human nature that we are affected by other people's happiness and misery. We have some propensity to identify imaginatively with other people's experiences, to take pleasure in their pleasure and to be moved by their suffering, and to act on those responses. Note that it is not an implausibly strong claim that Hume is making here. He is not saying that we *always* sympathise with others' happiness and suffering, nor that we all *equally* do so, nor that we always *act on* such responses. Of course people vary, of course each of us is more capable of feeling sympathy at some times and in some situations than others, and of course we sometimes find it difficult to act on that sympathy if it demands too much of us. What Hume is claiming is that other things being equal, we all have *some* tendency to do so.

> . . . though great superiority is observable of one man above another; yet none are so entirely indifferent to

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> the interest of their fellow-creatures, as to perceive no distinctions of moral good and evil, in consequence of the different tendencies of actions and principles. . . Let us suppose such a person ever so selfish; let private interest have ingrossed ever so much his attention; yet in instances, where that is not concerned, he must unavoidably feel SOME propensity to the good of mankind, and make it an object of choice, if everything else be equal.[3]



We may think that this is still too optimistic. We know how, under the pressure of extreme conditions, human beings can be corrupted to the point where, as we say, they may lose all human feeling and become ruthless and sadistic monsters. But we also know how to describe this outcome – they have been *dehumanised.* And in saying this we are recognising that, in losing their capacity to be affected by other people's suffering, they have lost something which is fundamental to what it is to be human.

Hume sometimes seems to suggest that sympathy is *all* there is to morality, and to the making of moral decisions and the forming of our moral views. Our moral judgements, he says, are direct expressions of our feelings of sympathy. In some important passages, however, he recognises that because our feelings of sympathy are wayward and variable, they have to be *corrected* in order to furnish a consistent basis for our moral judgements, as a condition of our being able to share a common moral vocabulary and to act on *general rules*. This concession brings Hume closer to the philosopher who is often thought of as his polar opposite in moral theory, Immanuel Kant.

## Kant, Reason and Universality

Where Hume is thought of as the philosopher who bases morality on *sentiment*, Kant is thought of as the philosopher who bases it on *reason*. According to Kant, as rational

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beings we have the capacity to think about how we ought to act in terms of *universal principles*.[4] Like Hume on sympathy, Kant sometimes seems to think that this can do all the work of morality – that invoking the purely formal idea of universal law is sufficient to enable us to arrive at substantive conclusions about what is right or wrong. As Kant's critics have argued ever since, this does not seem at all convincing. But if it is allied to Hume's account of sympathy, Kant's emphasis on reason committing us to universal principles becomes powerful. Our capacity for sympathetic responsiveness to others is the starting-point for moral awareness, but as Hume himself says, our limited and wayward sympathies need to be 'corrected', and it is reason that enables us to do this and so to move to a consistent understanding of how we should act.

Here is an example. The campaigners against the slave trade, whose success two hundred years ago has been commemorated this year, produced medallions depicting a slave with the words "Am I not a man and a brother?" To ask that question is in effect to say: 'If you encountered suffering such as ours in someone close to you, a member of your own race or your own family, you would recognise that such suffering is intolerable and ought not to be permitted. Apply that judgement consistently, and you will recognise that our suffering too is intolerable, that you should no longer tolerate it, and that you should do what you can to prevent it.' So the moral recognition resides not simply in the sympathetic response which may or may not be felt, but in the consistent recognition of what it is like to suffer as a slave suffers.

Just as Hume's account of sympathy does not commit him to the implausible view that human beings are always motivated by sympathetic concern for others, so Kant's attempt to found morality on reason does not commit him to the implausible view that human beings are always rational. On the contrary, he recognises that our characteristic experience of moral reason comes when it is in conflict with our inclinations. He goes so far as to suggest that



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we cannot with certainty identify in our experience any unequivocal example of purely rational moral motivation. What he is committed to is the claim that human beings, along with their various desires and inclinations and emotions, also have a capacity for rationality and that it is therefore always appropriate for us to ask ourselves and others what universal principles could consistently guide our actions.



## Aristotle: Human Beings are Social Beings

Hume's emphasis on sympathy, then, and Kant's emphasis on universalising reason, successfully identify two preconditions of morality, and help to show that morality is possible in virtue of our characteristically human capacities. However, even taken together, they do not yet provide a complete account of morality. We need also to draw on the philosophical tradition for a third claim about what it is about human beings that make them moral beings. A classic statement of it is a famous passage in Aristotle's *Politics*.

> It is clear why a human being is more of a social animal than bees or any other gregarious animals. Nature, as we say, makes nothing in vain, and humans are the only animals to possess the power of speech. Whereas mere voice, then, is an expression of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature goes only as far as sensations of pleasure and pain and the expressing of them to one another), speech is for showing what is useful and harmful, and so also what is just and unjust. It is distinctive of humans, as compared with other animals, that they have a sense of good and bad and just and unjust and the rest, and the sharing of these is what makes a family and a community.[5]

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In other words, a human life can be lived only in a human community, which is a community of shared values. Aristotle's emphasis on the social nature of human beings reinforces Hume by showing that there is nothing mysterious in the fact that human beings are capable of showing concern for one another. Their capacity to do so is an essential condition of cooperating in a community. To this we can add two further insights derivable from Aristotle. First, because moral life is lived in a community, it consist not just in a general willingness to respond to the needs of others, but involves also all the more specific responsibilities and obligations which we have to specific others – to friends, to family, to colleagues, to fellow-citizens. Though a full moral awareness extends our concern to all our fellow human beings, it does not follow that our moral responsibilities consist simply in the same undifferentiated obligation to promote the well-being of everyone. They are more complex, and their complexity derives from the network of social relations in which we exist.

Secondly, Aristotle helps us to see how and why moral knowledge is possible for any normal human being. Aristotle rejected the view of his teacher Plato, that knowledge of values is a form of philosophical knowledge which requires the ability to define abstract moral concepts, and which is therefore difficult for most people to achieve. For Aristotle, moral knowledge is the kind of knowledge which any normal human being can acquire simply by being brought up in a human community, where we come to understand in practice the use of words such as 'generous' and 'mean', 'courageous' and 'cowardly', 'fair' and 'unfair', 'honest' and 'dishonest', and we learn to apply these values appropriately to our own and other people's actions. This is something which we learn simply by being raised as participating members in a human community.

The upshot of what we can learn from Hume, Kant and Aristotle is that moral knowledge and moral motivation are not something impossibly difficult and alien to us. They do not need to be imposed or reinforced from outside by a



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non-human authority-figure. Morality does not, therefore, need the backing of religion. My account of why this is so has drawn on some of the central figures of the philosophical tradition. As I suggested above, we can make use of their insights without having to settle all the on-going philosophical disagreements which remain contentious. Does what I have referred to as 'moral knowledge' really count as a form of *knowledge* in the strict sense, or is it more accurately analysed as a kind of *attitude*? Do moral values have a real *objective* existence, or are they essentially the products of human *subjective* feeling? These and other long-running disputes remain open, and we don't have do settle them in order to build on the common ground which I have identified. What we can take from Hume, Kant and Aristotle is enough to show that moral knowledge and moral motivation are possible, and that they do not depend on religion.

## The Distinctive Authority of Moral Demands

I want to turn finally to a different argument for the essentially religious nature of morality. Of course, it may be said, our moral awareness is not a servile submissiveness to an alien authority figure. It comes from within us and is a deep feature of our nature. But, it is suggested, the very fact that we find within ourselves this sense of morality is also at the same time an intimation of something outside ourselves which is the source of this morality. Our moral awareness is an awareness of something which makes *demands* on us, which exercises an *authority* over us. So just by being aware of the demands of morality, it has been argued, we are recognising, whether or not we know it, the authority of some being outside ourselves who is the source of our morality.

For those of us who see morality as independent of religion, then, the challenge is to account for the distinctive *demandingness*, the *authority*, of moral values. This I think we can readily do. The demands which morality makes on us are the demands made on us by the recognition of



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other people's lives and other people's needs. We recognise that cruelty and murder are normally wrong, because we recognise that such acts would be an invasion or violation of the lives of others, which are as precious to them as our own lives are to us. We recognise that dishonesty is normally wrong, however convenient or tempting it may be on occasions, because it would be an act of deceiving others and undermining their trust. We recognise that injustice is normally wrong because it would be cheating and exploiting others who have valid claims on us. We care about these things because we care about other people. And though our care may be sporadic and unreliable, we recognise also that we ought to be consistent, that we should treat others in the light of their own needs, whether or not we happen to feel like doing so on this or that particular occasion. So the demandingness of morality reflects the fact that other people *matter* to us.[6]

The defenders of a religious morality might at this point ask: 'What about those actions which are wrong, even though they don't have any adverse effect on other people? For instance,' they may say, 'we should refrain from certain sexual activities, not because they involve harm or disrespect for others or for ourselves, but simply because they are wrong.' Masturbation and gay sex have often been regarded in this way by various religious moralities. And in the same vein, some religious believers will say that we should refrain from the consumption of certain kinds of food and drink, not because doing so will benefit ourselves or others, but just because these restrictions are morally *demanded* of us.

At this point I simply want to say that ideas of this kind, however widespread they may be, are irrational. I agree, a non-religious morality cannot explain why these sorts of actions are wrong. But that's because they are *not* wrong. For some people these prohibitions may have the force of deep moral convictions, but we can easily account for this, in terms of the particular culture in which they have been brought up, and the social pressures which they have internalised. Recognising that our moral awareness is essentially



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independent of religion may have the additional advantage of enabling us to do a bit of moral spring-cleaning – of liberating us from some oppressive and irrational moral illusions. Separating morality from religion doesn't leave everything as it once was. It does enable us to identify the rational core of morality, and to explain it in terms of our social nature as human beings, our capacity for sympathetic identification with others, and our capacity to formulate rational universal principles.

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## Notes

[1] The original version can be found in Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a. Modern translations include the one in Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, published by Penguin.

[2] This can be found in David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (originally published in 1751), especially Section 5, 'Why Utility Pleases'. This is an easier text that Hume's earlier *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

[3] David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford, 1998), Section 5, Part 2, pp.113-4.

[4] Immanuel Kant's classic presentation of his moral theory is his *Grundlegen zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (originally published 1785), translated as *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, or *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, or *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals.* There are various modern English translations.

[5] Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, Chapter 2, 1253 a 8-19.

[6] I am leaving open here the question of whether we also have moral obligations to non-human animals. If we do, it will be because at least some animals matter to us in at least some of the ways that other humans matter to us. We would have to ask whether we can be motivated by the same kind of sympathetic concern for animals as for humans. We would have to ask whether, if we accept that there are certain ways in which we ought and ought not to treat human beings, rational consistency requires us to extend the same treatment to animals. And the question would then be whether there are morally relevant differences between humans and animals which would justify us in treating them differently.

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