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Can Morality Be Objective without God?

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Some theologians claim that if God did not exist, there would be no grounding for our moral judgments. Our moral prescriptions, they argue, would be subject only to our changing whim and fancy. Leslie Allan challenges the presumption that moral objectivity consists in tapping into a realm of human-independent facts. He endeavours to show that moral judgments are expressions of human preferences taken from an impartial standpoint. This view, while explaining the nature of objectivity in ethics, leaves no room for a deity. Allan concludes by showing how this account of moral objectivity makes sense of a long-standing universalist tradition in moral philosophy and religious thinking.

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1. Introduction

By way of introduction, let me say a little about my background. From a very early age, I was very interested in the sciences. My first keen interest was in astronomy, like many young children at that age. Who could not wonder at the expanse and beauty of the universe and all that it held? I then developed a curiosity for chemistry, spending many hours cataloguing which chemical reacted with which other chemicals to produce something new. I next got very interested in electronics after casually picking up a hobby electronics magazine. I then went on to study and eventually work in electronics, it becoming my career for the first three decades of my working life.

In my early years, I was also surrounded by people who believed strongly and sincerely that both our earthly lives and all that exists in the celestial sphere are governed by a superhuman force. I thought a lot about how these two views of humankind and our place in the universe, the scientific view and the religious view, could be reconciled. In my later teens, I had many long debates over this question with a couple of religious friends of mine. These discussions prompted me to enrol in an undergraduate degree in philosophy and history of religion at my local university. Even though I started with a keen interest in the philosophy of religion, it did not take me long to develop an even bigger appetite for two other areas of philosophical enquiry. These were moral philosophy and epistemology. The latter is the formal name for the philosophy of knowledge.

I've recently now mostly retired from the business world, which has thankfully freed up time for me to get back to my primary loves; science and philosophy. I'm using that time now to update a number of essays I wrote in earlier times and to publish them on my [Rational Realm](http://www.RationalRealm.com) web site. I am also writing and publishing new material, and this talk tonight is based on essays I've written more recently on the subject of moral reasoning. My time now is also taken up with managing my local humanist organization's web site and social media presence.

The subtitle of tonight's talk is *Do we really need a God or religion to define for us what is good and bad, righteous and evil?* In exploring this vexed question in my talk, I want to present to you four key ideas. Firstly, I will argue that there is an important sense in which we objectively reason about what's right and wrong in a way that does *not* refer to God's commands. The second idea is that ethics is neither exclusively 'objective' nor 'subjective'. I want to say that it has both an important objective and subjective dimension. Thirdly, I will propose that the central requirement for moral reasoning is that we reason impartially; that is, without regard for a person's identity, social position, ethnicity, gender, etc. And finally, I want to show how the recognition of this requirement for impartiality has a long and distinguished tradition in both moral philosophy and religious thinking.

2. Christian View of Morality

Let's get started. One of my interests in ethics is enquiring about what things are good and bad and what actions are right and wrong. Is abortion ever justified? Ought we allow people to euthanize themselves? What is a just distribution of wealth in society? The other key area that interests me is the nature of ethics itself. When we debate these big moral questions of our day, are we just negotiating our separate wants and interests? Or is there some extra-human dimension to morality that underpins and validates our moral judgments? This question about what validates our judgments is often couched as the question of whether ethics is 'objective' or 'subjective'. Some moral philosophers have argued that without a human-independent 'objective' foundation, all of our moral judgments are baseless. Let me illustrate this view using two prominent Christian theologians.

1. Firstly, writing in *The Huffington Post*, well-known Christian philosopher, William Lane Craig, had this to say about the possibility of moral objectivity without God:

In a world without God, there can be no objective right and wrong, only our culturally and personally relative, subjective judgments. This means that it is impossible to condemn war, oppression, or crime as evil. Nor can one praise brotherhood, equality, and love as good. For in a universe without God, good and evil do not exist—there is only the bare valueless fact of existence, and there is no one to say you are right and I am wrong.

[[The Absurdity of Life without God](#), *TheHuffingtonPost.com*, December 18, 2013]

2. As my second example, take the famous Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis. In his book, *Christian Reflections*, he railed against (and I quote)

. . . the fatal superstition that men can create values, that a community can choose its 'ideology' as men choose their clothes.

Lewis then goes on about the moral subjectivists' moral indignation against the Axis' powers during World War 2. He objects that (quote)

. . . this indignation is perfectly groundless if we ourselves regard morality as a subjective sentiment to be altered at will. Unless there is some objective standard of good, overarching Germans, Japanese, and ourselves alike whether any of us obey it or no, then of course the Germans are as competent to create their ideology as we are to create ours.

[The Poison of Subjectivism, [Christian Reflections](#), 1967: 73]

I think Craig and Lewis are right about morality requiring an 'objective' foundation. Deciding what's right and wrong is not at all like deciding which tie to wear. However, introducing a super-human law-giver adds nothing to our capacity to make moral judgments. Tonight, I want to offer an alternative approach. This alternative view is that even without a God, a rule-giver outside of ourselves, there is a crucially important sense in which we can reason about what's right and wrong in a way that is 'objective'.

3. Nature of Moral Reasoning

To introduce this approach to moral reasoning, picture this scene. Three friends are sitting around the coffee table arguing over a moral question that is very much in the news—voluntary euthanasia. They are discussing whether people enduring unbearable pain much of the time while suffering a terminal illness ought to be able to end their lives as they choose.

1. The first friend, Fred, says: 'The terminally ill ought to have that right as people have a right to act autonomously unless the act harms someone else.'
2. The second friend, Mary, objects: 'The terminally ill ought not as instituting such a right will lead to abuse with some elderly coerced into ending their lives.'
3. The third friend, John, says baldly: 'The terminally ill should be prevented from choosing the manner of their death.'

Fred and Mary ask John why he thinks so. After a brief pause, John replies: 'I just like it that way.' Fred and Mary press John further, 'Why do you want to prevent people from choosing how they die?' John pushes back, simply insisting, 'That is just what I want.'

I want to propose that Fred and Mary are offering a *moral* reason for their judgment. Their reasons are based on considerations broader than their own personal wants and preferences. Of course, we may disagree with one or both of their justifications, but I think it natural to say that they are advancing a *moral* argument.

Regarding John, however, I propose that he is not offering a *moral* reason for his judgment at all. Recall that John replied, when he was pressed to support his judgment, 'I just like it that way.' and 'That is just what I want.' By exclusively appealing to his own personal preferences, he seems *not* to have engaged in the moral debate at all. He may be advancing a *prudential* reason for his view. However, I think it's natural to insist that he is *not* putting forward a moral justification for his position. His stated reason is outside the bounds of moral discourse.

4. Objectivity in Ethics

I think this scenario shows that for a reason to be a *moral* reason for action, we expect it to be impartial; without appeal to the speaker's peculiar interests or the interests of their favoured group. We think people who give a partial or selfish reason for a moral judgment as being conceptually confused about what constitutes a *moral* reason for action. This requirement for *impartiality*, I want to say, is built into the very concept of morality.

Most moral philosophers down the ages have felt that morality is objective in some sense. And here they are in agreement with the person on the street. However, in their attempt to explain this sense of objectivity, some philosophers and most theologians have been looking for this objectivity in the wrong place. They have been looking for it in some mind-independent or human-independent metaphysical realm. And I think this project has failed. Here are four prominent examples. The first two examples do not require the existence of God, while the latter two do require his or her existence.

1. Intuitionists mistakenly conflate moral attributes with some mysterious realm of non-natural properties and transcendent rules. On this view, the 'goodness' of giving to the poor, for example, is as much a part of the objective properties of the act as how much money was given and who it was given to.
2. Kantian Rationalists try to derive moral rules from the demands of pure reason. According to Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative, we should act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.
3. Natural Law theorists and virtue ethicists rely on a dubious teleology of life's evolution on earth. For them, we act morally when we act according to our innate natures; natures that allow us to fulfil our purpose.
4. Divine Command Theorists try to identify the good and the right with God's preferences and commands. On this view, to say that something is 'good' is just to say that 'God approves it'.

I mention these approaches here to show how theologians' attempts to ground morality in God's commands are not the only game in town. I'm not going to critique these four views tonight, except to point out one shortcoming that is common to all four. Before I get to that, I want to highlight one major problem faced in particular by the last view; Divine Command Theory.

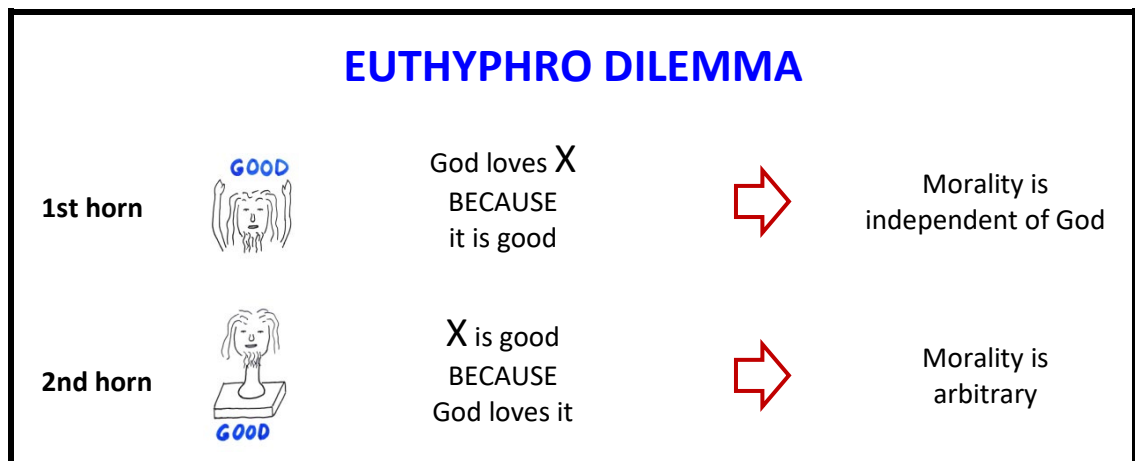
5. Euthyphro Dilemma

The major problem with the Divine Command Theory is exposed by the Euthyphro dilemma (pronounced as *U-thee-fro*). The name of this dilemma is inspired by Socrates' question to Plato's character, Euthyphro, in Plato's play of the same name. In this play, Socrates asks Euthyphro:

'Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?'

[Euthyphro 10a]

In today's language, we can express this question as 'Does God love the good because it is good? Or is it good because God loves it?' In trying to answer this question, Divine Command Theorists are placed on the horns of a dilemma, illustrated in the following diagram:



Let's consider the implications of sitting on each of these horns in turn.

First horn: If God loves the good because it is good, then, as the above diagram illustrates, goodness is independent of God's wishes. This option conflicts starkly with the central premise of Divine Command Theory. On this option, William Lane Craig's and C. S. Lewis' God is now done out of a job. At most, God is simply a law-transmitter and not a law-giver.

Second horn: If the good is good because God loves it, then to say that 'God is good' is just to say that 'God loves God'. This is true, but it's trivially true. It says nothing of moral significance. It also makes morality entirely arbitrary; a conclusion summarized above. God could have commanded genocide or the taking of sex-slaves and then this would have been 'good'. This divine capriciousness is what we actually find told in the Old Testament. However, we think that what is 'good' and 'right' today was 'good' and 'right' yesterday and will be 'good' and 'right' tomorrow. Taking this horn of the dilemma reduces Divine Command Theory to the worst forms of subjectivism and relativism, a charge that Christian theologians have levelled consistently at non-believers. Think back to William Lane Craig's and C. S. Lewis' critique of non-theistic ethics that I quoted earlier.

Now, you could object that God cannot love one thing one day and the opposite on another day because he or she is unchanging and is virtuous by nature. I think a couple of problems arise with this response. Firstly, if God is unable to change his or her nature, then it appears his or her power is limited. I can change my nature with a little effort. I can work on myself to be a better listener or to be less of a perfectionist. If God cannot do what I can do with a little effort, then how can we claim God to be omnipotent?

The second problem I see is this. If God finds him or herself possessing a particular kind of immutable nature, then he or she could have had a different nature. Let's suppose that it just so happens that God loves charity. Then it could equally have been the case that God had an immutable greedy nature. And in that case, today we would have been calling greed 'good'. So, appealing to God's immutable nature only pushes the problem of the arbitrariness of God's moral injunctions one step back. If you'd like to find out more about the Euthyphro dilemma, you can read a good introductory article on handling the dilemma in the *Wikipedia* entry of the same name.

6. Objectivity versus Subjectivity

Let's get back to the question of 'objectivity' in ethics. The mistake made by these theologians and the three other kinds of moral thinkers I mentioned is their thinking that 'objectivity' in ethics must be contrasted with 'subjectivity' in the *private feeling* sense. They take 'subjectivity' to mean being grounded in people's personal attitudes and preferences. Their mistake is in thinking that ethics can only be objective in the 'knowledge' sense; that ethics is about human-independent facts that are there to be discovered and known.

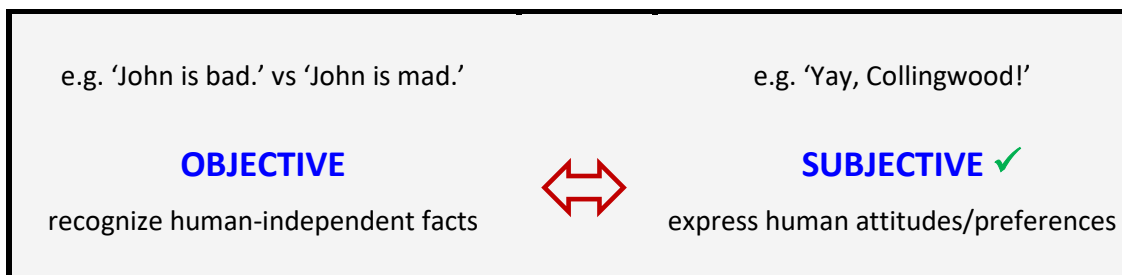
Why is this a mistake? Because they ignore the central expressive function of moral language. When we say that 'charity is good', we are not simply describing the act of charity. We are also expressing our preference or pro-attitude to charity. Think for a moment about someone who says, 'Charity is good, but I don't really care for it one way or the other.' Or someone who says, 'Torturing innocent children for fun is abominably bad, but I'm not really fussed about it.' We think it extremely odd. We feel that they have expressed some kind of practical contradiction. And that's because that in saying that something is 'good' or 'bad', we are expressing our preference or aversion to it. There are many words such as this in the English language that have this central expressive meaning. Examples of words with emotive meaning include 'hero', 'villain', 'chaste', 'whore', 'nigger' and 'patriot'.

So, when someone calls a woman a 'whore', they are describing her as a person who has many sexual relations. However, the speaker is also expressing their disgust; their con-attitude to the woman's sexual practices. The word 'whore' is richly value-laden. It has emotive meaning in addition to its descriptive meaning. The word 'chaste', likewise, describes a person's sexual activities. In this case, the lack of them. The emotive meaning in this example is the expression of the speaker's approval or pro-attitude to the chaste person's sexual status.

Another pair of words with emotive meaning is 'hero' and 'coward'. Both words describe a person's response to danger or risk. In this example, the former expresses approval of the person's actions while the latter expresses disapproval. Well, the words 'good' and 'bad' and 'right' and 'wrong' have the same kind of emotive meaning, serving to express the speaker's approval or disapproval.

It is important to note here that in expressing our approval and disapproval when we use moral language, we are not *stating* that we approve or disapprove. That would simply be adding to the description of the thing or act we are describing a description of our psychological state. That would be making the same kind of mistake that 'moral subjectivists' make. In fact, in saying that 'charity is good', for example, we are *expressing* our attitude in the same kind of way that when we say that 'charity is rare' we are expressing our belief and not stating that we believe it to be true.

So, us trying to be 'objective' in our moral deliberations can't simply be about coming up with smarter and more accurate ways to describe reality while trying our hardest to shut out our emotions. When we contrast being 'objective' in ethics with being 'subjective', this can't be how we should draw the distinction. Let me illustrate this mistaken way of thinking with the following diagram.

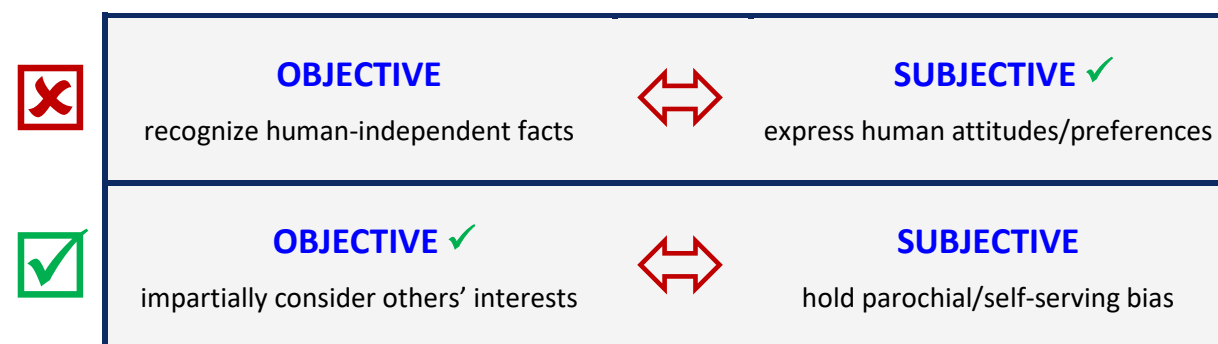


However, we also know that morality is not just about what we like or personally prefer. There is more to saying torturing children is morally abominable than just expressing our dislike or disapproval of such torture. Our scenario with Fred, Mary and John concretely brings this point home. The puzzle is solved, I suggest, by thinking of 'objectivity' in ethics as more correctly contrasted with 'subjectivity', where 'subjectivity' is meant in the sense of being partisan, selfish and parochial. Think of the inappropriateness of John's response in our scenario. Being 'objective' in ethics, then, is more like this:



So, being 'objective' in our moral judgments is not about tapping into some transcendental realm of moral facts or divine commands. It's about being impartial/non-partisan in our moral judgments. Conversely, when we accuse someone of being 'subjective' in their moral reasoning, we are not calling them out for expressing their preferences and attitudes. We are accusing them of basing their moral judgments on their own selfish interests or on those of their favoured group. This, then, is how we properly contrast objectivity in ethics with subjective preferences.

Contrasting now the two ways of viewing ethical discourse, we can say the initial view, the view of many theists, the intuitionists, the Natural Law theorists, and so on, is mistaken. I will put a big cross next to that view (see below). I will also now put a big tick next to the second of our considered approaches that contrasts objectivity in ethics with partisanship.



Let's go back for a moment and revisit our two theologians. William Lane Craig said, 'In a world without God ... it is impossible to condemn war, oppression, or crime as evil.' Well, I think it is possible. Taking the moral point of view is to take an impartial stance towards people's interests; to their preferences. It's to take what the famous utilitarian and social reformer, Henry Sidgwick, said, the 'point of view of the universe'.

And what of C. S. Lewis's appeal to 'some objective standard of good, overarching Germans, Japanese, and ourselves alike'. This standard that is blind to people's nationality is precisely what I am referring to. Building on this, the central moral requirement for impartiality not only requires us to ignore a person's nationality when deciding how to treat them, but also their religion, social status, gender, and so on.

7. Objectivity as Impartiality

Now, you may think that I have misappropriated the word ‘objective’ to suit my own philosophical position. Let me say just a few brief words on this point. All of the major dictionaries give a central sense of the word ‘objective’ as pertaining to things external to the mind. This is true and I accept this. However, all of the major dictionaries list a second central meaning of the term as ‘impartial’ and ‘unbiased’. Here, I point you to the *British Dictionary*, the *Penguin Macquarie Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*. Just to quote Merriam-Webster’s, it gives this sense of ‘objective’ as:

free from favor toward either or any side. . . . OBJECTIVE stresses a tendency to view events or persons as apart from oneself and one’s own interest or feelings

[*Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*: Synonym Discussion of objective]

It’s precisely in this sense that our laws are held to the ideal of being applied ‘objectively’. Consider our Lady Justice, who sits outside many of our courthouses, sporting a blindfold. *Wikipedia* has a good summary of what that blindfold represents:

The blindfold represents objectivity, in that justice is or should be meted out objectively, without fear or favour, regardless of money, wealth, fame, power, or identity; blind justice and impartiality.

[*Wikipedia*, [Lady Justice](#), 2016]

Thinking more broadly about our two definitions of ‘objective’ and our two definitions of ‘subjective’, I think we can say that ethics has both an ‘objective’ *and* a ‘subjective’ dimension. To say that it is either one *or* the other is to cast a false dichotomy. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

The **subjective** dimension encapsulates the human-centeredness of morality. I think it captures two aspects:

1. the evolutionary underpinning of our behaviours. Here, I include the coding of kin altruism in our genes and the social learning aspect of reciprocal altruism (refer to Richard Dawkins, [The Selfish Gene](#)/Peter Singer, [The Expanding Circle](#))
2. how our moral norms are historically grounded in social contracts, customs and laws

The **objective** dimension, on the other hand, encapsulates the impartial nature of morality. This dimension explains these two key aspects:

1. our appeal to reason and argument based on general principles
2. the barring of appeals to parochial interests (Think again of John in our scenario saying, ‘I just like it that way.’)



Justitia at Court of Final Appeal, Hong Kong
(Reprinted with permission under CC-BY-SA-3.0)

8. Impartiality in Ethics and Religion

I want to talk now about this idea of ‘impartiality’ as it has appeared throughout the history of moral philosophy and religious conceptions of justice. This is not a new idea. There is a strong philosophical tradition in incorporating this notion of impartiality as essential to the nature of ethics. Here are five prominent examples:

1. **[David Hume’s \(1711–76\) Ideal Observer](#)** — For Hume, when we make moral judgments, we are trying to stand in the shoes of a dispassionate observer, without regard for self and our particular social group. Even though our judgments are fundamentally based on sentiment (that is, personal feelings), they are formulated from what he called a ‘general’ point of view. [David Hume, [A Treatise of Human Nature](#): book III, part III, §I; [Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals](#): 228f] Henry Sidgwick, writing some 100 years later, called this the ‘point of view of the universe’.
2. **[Immanuel Kant’s \(1724–1804\) Categorical Imperative](#)** — Kant tried to capture this idea of universality in his categorical imperative. This was his notion that a moral rule necessarily must be such that it is willed for all; that it be universally applied. [Immanuel Kant, [Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals](#)]
3. **[Richard Hare’s \(1919–2002\) Prescriptivism](#)** — Hare built into his theory of universal Prescriptivism the idea that moral judgments are prescriptions that we want to apply to everyone. [Richard Hare, [The Language of Morals](#)]
4. **[Henry Sidgwick’s \(1838–1900\) Utilitarianism](#)** — Sidgwick and other prominent Utilitarians, such as and [John Stuart Mill \(1806–73\)](#), encapsulated moral objectivity with their ‘principle of impartiality’. This famous principle is translated as the requirement for the equal consideration of all interests. [Henry Sidgwick, [The Methods of Ethics](#); John Stuart Mill, [Utilitarianism](#)]
5. **[John Rawls’ \(1921–2002\) Social Contract](#)** — Refining the work of earlier social constructivists, such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rawls put the requirement for ‘impartiality’ at the centre of his view of the social contract. For Rawls, our moral norms are rules agreed upon by actors communicating behind a veil of ignorance about one’s wealth, gender, nationality, etc. [John Rawls, [A Theory of Justice](#)]

In addition to the significance and influence of these five giants in moral philosophy, a case can also be made for the pre-eminence of this concept of impartiality in the thinking of the founders of the major religions of the world.

In many religions, God is seen as the impartial judge. Consider, for example, the three Abrahamic religions:

1. Judaism (Ezek 18:30): ‘Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct,’ declares the Lord GOD.

2. Christianity (2 Cor 5:10): For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive his due for the things done in the body, whether good or bad.
3. Islam (Quran 2:281): And be conscious of the Day on which you shall be brought back unto God, whereupon every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned, and none shall be wronged.

Note how in these three religions, dispensing justice is about the nature of the deeds done, untainted by consideration of the judged person's particulars (e.g., gender, heritage, ethnic origin, position in society).

The Golden Rule is another excellent example of how this requirement for impartiality is embedded into our most central moral maxims. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' is the maxim expressed by all of the major religious and non-religious world views when they are at their noblest. Going back to the most ancient of civilizations, we can find it in:

- Ancient Egypt
- Ancient India [Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva 167:9]
- Ancient Greece [Thales, Sextus the Pythagorean, Isocrates]
- Hinduism [Brihaspati, Mahabharata (Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, Verse 8)]
- Taoism [T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien] and
- Confucianism [Analects XV.24]

We can also find it expressed in:

- Buddhism [Udanavarga 5:18]
- Bahá'í [Bahá'u'lláh]
- Judaism [Shabbath folio:31a, Babylonian Talmud]
- Christianity [Matthew 7:12] and
- Islam [Kitab al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 146]

[See Wikipedia entry on 'Golden Rule']

Note how the maxim makes no reference to God and is intuitively compelling as a way of acting for people of widely varying cultures and times. If you are going to expect others to consider your interests, then treat them with the same consideration. How can you expect any different? In dealing with others, your interests do not count for any more or less just because of who you are. This is the principle of impartiality that is at the core of what it means to act ethically.

9. Conclusion

To wrap up this talk, let me summarize what I've tried to show:

- I began by pointing to two prominent theologians' views that morality cannot at all be objective without assuming the existence of a divine law-giver.
- I introduced the scenario of three friends discussing the ethics of voluntary euthanasia to illustrate how the notion of impartiality fits in our everyday moral reasoning.
- Next, I highlighted how the wider philosophical and theological program attempting to ground 'objectivity' in ethics with mind- or human-independent facts fails to account for how moral judgments express attitudes.
- In particular, I also pointed out how Divine Command Theory is caught on the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma.
- I then properly contrasted being 'objective' in ethics with its antithesis; that is, being 'subjective' in the sense of being self-serving, parochial and biased.
- Lastly, I offered examples showing how 'objectivity', in the sense of 'impartiality', has a long and distinguished tradition in both moral philosophy and religious ethics.

To find out more, you are welcome to visit my www.RationalRealm.com web site, especially the [Ethics sub-section](#) under the main section titled 'Philosophy'.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to what I had to say. Now I'm interested in hearing what you have to say and in engaging in the discussion.

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