Discuss the moral argument for the existence of God and assess the claim that the argument can be used to prove God's existence

Morality, from the Latin "*moralitas"* meaning "proper behaviour", refers to a code of conduct held to be authoritative in matte rs of right and wrong. We as human beings are aware of actions as being right and wrong, obligatory and forbidden. In addition, such awareness carries with it the though that they are bound to do some things and bound to avoid doing others, i.e. if I make a promise, this creates an obligation to deliver whatever is promised. So where does this concept of morality come from?

According to Dostoyevsky, "If there is no God, then everything is permissible." The moral arguments claim that God is the source of ou r morality, and they appeal to the existence of moral laws as evidence of His existence (from some observations about morality in the world). All moral arguments for the existence of God begin with the fact that all people recognise some form of moral code (that things or right or wrong), and work off this principle of a shared sense morality.

Despite cultural differences, humans worldwide have a vague idea of what is right or wrong, which is more or less continuous spatially and temporally. In the appendi x of C.S. Lewis' book *The Abolition of Man*, he lists various virtues that have been accepted across the ages and civilisations (Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Native American, Indian, Hebrew, etc.). Stealing and murder are condemned in these law codes, while honouring parents and keeping marriage vows are applauded.

A moral argument for the existence of God would say that this mutual understanding is proof of God's existence. In other words, because the moral law transcends humanity, this universal law requires a universal lawgiver. This, it is argued, is God. This theory has found much support over the years, and has been backed by many influential figures.

As all moral arguments are based on the concept of a universal moral law, this must be examined before we can assess the adequacy of the moral arguments themselves. C.S. Lewis (1898 – 1963), in *Mere Christianity*, argued for the existence of the universal moral law, and thus the existence of the mind which created it (God).

According to Lewis, we appeal to a universal moral standard daily – whenever we call something "unfair" or "evil". When we do so we often do not need to explain why these things are considered orally bad, as this is understood without question by the majority of people. For example, if someone walked into your house and left with your TV, you would expect everyone to agree with you that there exists a principle for all people to not take things which aren't theirs. If someone disagreed with you, you would think they were very strange, or indeed crazy – that something is seriously wrong with them. Lewis believed that all this is best explained by the assumption that there exists a universal moral law.

In addition, Lewis alleged that there must be a universal moral law, because otherwise all moral judgments would be meaningless. Without this moral standard, we would simply be expressing an opinion if we said "The Nazis were wrong to murder the Jews". Since it seems clear that the moral status of certain actions, such as genocide, is not a matter of subjective opinion, this, we presume, is the result of universal moral law.

If we accept Lewis' argument, we accept that there does exist a universal moral standard. However so far we have not been forced to conclude that the God of classical theism is the source of this moral code. Indeed, many people argue against this conclusion, and believe that universal morality is grounded in something other than God's laws, such as what is good for society (Utilitarianism).

A popular line of argument against the conclusion that God is the creator of our morality is made from the observation that atheists can act morally without needing guidance from God, and equally on the other hand, that theists can act immorally in the name of God (e.g. the crusades, terrorism, witch-hunts etc.)

Atheist Michael Martin explains this by saying that atheists can act morally by attempting to avoid acts which damage society or violate a person's rights. He argues that they avoid these evils because of the negative effects they have on society, and that God has nothing to do with it. However, moralists claim that God has given those without His special revelation (scripture, Jesus Christ etc.) the ability to know what the right thing to do is, "Gentiles, who do not have the Law [of Moses] do instinctively the things of the Law." (Romans 2:14-15). This means that they are (subconsciously) following His laws, and adhering to His moral code; the reason they know right from wrong is because they have God's general revelation of his basic moral law in their conscience.

The moralist response to this challenge could certainly explain why atheists and theists can affirm the same values. So how do they explain the differences in theistic beliefs across the globe? Surely, if there is just one universal moral law, everyone should be adhering to it in the same way? Do the differences signify variations in translating this moral code, or do they undermine arguments for its existence?

A moralist response to this issue might be to point out that, although there are indeed differences, people all over the world share a strikingly similar idea of what is moral. Even the most remote tribes, cut off from the rest of civilisation, observe a moral code comparable to everyone else's. It is argued that, although differences certainly exist in civil matters, virtues such as bravery and loyalty, and vices such as greed and cowardice, are universal. This is said to point towards God's hand as the source of this moral code as, if the code were created by men, we would expect there to be vast differences – the uncanny resemblance between societies all over the world indicates a creator separate from the creation.

To further develop this point of a creator, many moralists are fond of the argument that, since all laws require lawgivers, *moral* laws imply the existence of a *moral* lawgiver. H.P. Owen defended this argument, *"…it is impossible to think of a command without also thinking of a commander."* This is known as the formal moral argument.

Critics have, however, responded readily to this argument. They claim that there are all sorts of normative principles that seemingly have no need of a lawgiver to make them true, e.g. mathematical laws. For example, nobody decided that 2 + 2 = 4; it is just this way as a brute fact. This objection, although admitting that there may be objective moral laws, attacks the premise that morality depends on God, and asks why they too cannot merely be brute facts.

The problem with this criticism is that it cannot explain why m oral values – if they were brute facts – should have anything to do with us, and why we should adhere to them. The challenge raises once more the question of why we are moral.

This challenge was met by Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), who constructed perhaps the best known version of the moral argument. Kant argued that moral behaviour is rational, and that we therefore have good reason to be moral. In other words, it simply makes more sense to act morally than immorally. So how does this equate to God?

Kant asserted that moral behaviour is only moral if justice is done, if it were rewarded. Since we know moral behaviour to be rational, this therefore posits that God exists, and it is He who exerts this justice. This view is obviously accepted in many traditio ns, including the traditional Christian view of life after death, where sinners are sent to eternal torment in Hell, whilst the righteous receive the reward they deserve, aka eternal life in Heaven. (However it should be noted that Kant did not set out to prove God's existence as he believed this to be a task beyond the scope of any theoretical proof since God lies beyond our experience.)

Kant's argument has, however, been accused of committing the Naturalistic Fallacy - that to argue from objectively vali d moral laws based on a 'scientific' understanding of man's nature to a divine or supernatural law -giver is unjustified. As it is pointed out in *Philosophy of Religion* by *Anne Jordan*, *"…while the existence of a moral God would indeed suggest the existence of moral laws, the existence of moral laws in one form or another cannot point us back to the existence of God."*

Even if we accepted Kant's argument, and ignored the criticism relating to naturalistic fallacy, his argument is clearly not enough to convinc e atheists to act morally. If they don't believe that they will end up in either Heaven or Hell, what incentive do they have? Cardinal Newman (1801 – 1890), addressed this question of how we could explain the fact that people often refrain from immoral act s even when there is no risk of their being caught?

Newman argued that, although they don't believe it to be God, even atheists hear a voice which guides them towards certain actions and away from others. *"If, as is the case, we feel responsibility,… are frightened at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies there is One to whom we are responsible"* . Newman believed that this was evidence of God's existence, and his will that we should be moral.

Almost everyone would agree with Newman that we a ll hear a voice of conscience which tells us right from wrong, yet it is highly debated whether this is the voice of God or something else.

The famous psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) understood conscience to be guilt, the voice of authority figur es from our past, which we remember throughout our lives (internalised parental authority). He believed that behaviour which was destructive to a person's society was seen as bad or evil, thereby provoking fear or contempt. Conscience is therefore, not the voice of God, but rather our drive to avoid provoking fear or contempt in others, which would lead us to experience guilt and/or shame.

Freud's argument has found great support because it offers an explanation for our basic moral instincts, such as revulsion at taking innocent human life or rape, an inward affirmation regarding self -sacrifice for the well -being of a child.

However, an alternative explanation for our basic moral instincts was put forward by Dom Trethowan, whose version of the moral argument rejects the use of logic and instead interprets morality as a religious experience, which points towards the existence of God. He argued that a sense of obligation guides us every time we make a moral decision. He traces this obligation to the fact that every person has value. Imagine, for example, you walked past a burning building and heard a child crying inside. You would feel a natural urge to save that child. Trethowan argues that this value must come from somewhere – it is instilled by God. We therefore have an obligation to God to observe this value.

As far as the argument from conscience is concerned modern critics argue that Freud's explanation of the phenomenon of conscience is more plausible than either Newman's or Kant's. If the moral argument can be defended against the various objections that have been raised against it, then it proves the existence of an author of morality, of a being that has authority over and that actively rules over all creation. Together with other arguments, e.g. the ontological argument, this would give us proof that there is an perfect, necessary and eternal being that created the universe with life in mind and has the authority to tell us how we are to run it. The correct response to this would be to seek God's will and to practise it.

In conclusion, I believe that someone who already believes in God might find their faith strengthened by the moral argument; however I do not think that it is persuasive enough to convince sceptics of God's existence.

Bibliography

- Dialogue Articles
- Class notes
- Philosophy of Religion, for A Level, OCR edition