

THE MORAL ARGUMENT

INTRODUCTION

The 'moral argument' draws its conclusion from the observation of human behaviour.

It starts from the basis that we live in a world of moral order, where people know the difference between right and wrong without being taught. This 'right and wrong' is ingrained within us. If these are moral commands, then it is logical to assume that these commands were instilled within us by a moral commander. The only person who can be seen to be this moral commander is God. Therefore, God exists.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE MORAL ARGUMENT

1. Theology

Christians believe that God provides guidance to them about how to treat other people, their attitudes and how they behave. They follow what the Bible tells them about all manner of things, such as forgiveness, being kind to the poor and caring for the sick.

They follow the Ten Commandments, also known as The Decalogue, a set of laws that were given to Moses on Mount Sanai many thousands of years ago. These are:

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make idols.
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honour your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet.

Consider

The Ten Commandments and other laws given to the Israelites form the basis for the laws of most countries in the world today. Yet they first appeared with a group of slaves who had just escaped from their oppressors; not the sort of source that you'd expect such wisdom to come from. Did they have help?

Christians also believe that God gives them guidance on moral issues through their conscience. If they start feeling guilty about something, they recognise the possibility that God is telling them to stop.

Many Christians would support the moral argument providing evidence of God's existence because of this.

2. Saint Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas (1225-1274) formulated 'The Five Ways', which offer support for the existence of God. The fourth of these lends support to moral argument for God's existence.

The Fourth Way: God, the Absolute Being

Sometimes known as the Henological Argument, this argument considers the existence of God through degrees of perfection.

It is best explained as follows:

- Objects have properties to greater or lesser extents.
- If an object has a property to a lesser extent, then there exists some other object that has the property to the maximum possible degree.
- So, there is a being that has all properties to the maximum possible degree.
- The only possible being is God
- Therefore, God exists

Aquinas confirms that the being which has all the properties of perfection to the maximum possible degree is also the cause or explanation of the existence of these qualities, and such a cause must be God. Therefore, God exist.

This supports the moral argument as it presupposes that the most perfect, moral being is God. We, as humans, have the same properties of morality, albeit to a lesser extent.

You can read more about Aquinas' 'Five Ways' [here](#).

3. Immanuel Kant

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was, arguably, the most influential philosopher proponent of the moral argument. He was opposed to David Hume's (1711-1776) scepticism. Hume maintained that reason and experience were separate, therefore arguments, such as the moral argument, don't prove God exists. Kant aimed to show that reason and experience could be united.

He believed that the theoretical arguments for God's existence were unsuccessful but presented a rational argument for belief in God as a 'postulate of practical reason'.

Crucially, Kant believed that the other classical arguments - teleological, cosmological and ontological - were all closely connected due to their ultimate dependence on the idea that God is necessarily existent.

Like the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC), Kant believed that knowledge begins with experience.

Moral principles can be understood by studying human experience: reality can tell us how things ought to be.

He talked about two types of reality:

- Noumenal World - the world as it is without being observed
- Phenomenal World - the world as we perceive it

The act of observation changes the very thing that we observe, because our minds are created in a certain way so we cannot truly understand that which we observe. Therefore, we can never rely on empirical evidence. It cannot lead to certainty. Because of this, he maintained that reason is the only way to truly know the universe.

'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not seek or conjecture either of them as if they were veiled obscurities or extravagances beyond the horizon of my vision; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.'

- 'Critique of Practical Reason' (1788)

According to Kant, morality belongs to the noumenal. Moral laws within the vast majority of humans are so strong. For example, we intrinsically understand that to kill someone is wrong. Consequently, we do not make a regular habit of killing people.

BUT...

Kant rejects the idea that God's will or commands are the basis of morality because he emphasises that reason is the basis of morality.

He held that God does not make laws that we have to obey; this would make us mere robots, taking away all our autonomy. Rather, God's moral law is followed by acting according to reason alone.

To clarify, he doesn't take God out of the argument; he simply changes the emphasis on human interaction with this innate moral law. Indeed, he argues that in order to explain morality you have to include the belief that God exists.

Kant held that a rational, moral being must necessarily will 'the highest good', which consists of a world in which people are both morally good and happy, and in which moral virtue is the condition for happiness. The latter condition implies that this end must be sought solely by moral action. However, Kant held that a person cannot rationally will such an end without believing that moral actions can successfully achieve such an end, and this requires a belief that the causal structure of nature is conducive to the achievement of this end by moral means.

This is equivalent to belief in God; a moral being who is ultimately responsible for the character of the natural world.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE MORAL ARGUMENT

1. Evolution

In his book, *'The Descent of Man'*, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) stated that morality was a spin-off from evolution. He claimed that morality is a human trait that arose as natural selection shaped man into a highly social species. By necessity morality was needed, therefore it evolved.

Being nice and moral might be argued to be a good survival strategy. It pays to be sociable, otherwise we may have become extinct or very lonely.

Evolution suggests that - rather than morality being instilled within us by an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being - it has grown and adapted within us as we have evolved.

Let's apply this!

Imagine the following scene. One and a half million years ago, four of our early ancestors find a forest glade close to a riverbank. Living by the river already is another band of four of our early ancestors. What do they do? Do the bands fight against each other? Do they try and steal from each other?

If they did, what would be the sense in that? By doing so they might weaken both bands so that when winter comes both bands die out. Instead, the two groups learn to work together. They hunt for food, build homes, huddle together for warmth. They start to help each other and by doing so they increase their own survival chances.

Because it works, the willingness to work together and avoid making enemies becomes the normal way of behaving. The feeling that working together and not fighting is the best thing to do remains as a powerful instinct inside of us. Our moral values and feelings of guilt are evolved attitudes that helped us survive.



2. Social Construct

There are many scholars who maintain that morality is not something bestowed on humans by God but, rather, is something that becomes instilled by the socialisation children experience. It is entirely contextual, depending upon the group in which they grow up.

Humans learn from each other, behaving according to the social constructs of whichever society they are brought up in. What we are taught becomes part of our unconscious mind and creates the conscience. This is called social conditioning.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) claimed that there was a clear tension between the needs of society and each person. According to Freud, moral development occurs when the person's selfish desires (the id) are repressed and replaced by the values of important social constructs provided by people around them, for example family, teachers.

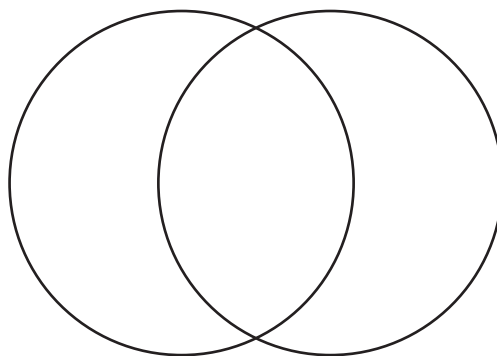
Id - Ego - Super-ego?

According to Freud's theory:

- The id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories.
- The super-ego works as a moral conscience.
- The ego is the part which is a buffer between the desires of the id and the moral warnings of super-ego, making us behave according to the rules of our social group.

TASKS

1. Why do you think that humans seem to know what is right and wrong? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think our sense of morality comes from God? Explain your answer.
3. Why might a Christian agree with the moral argument? Explain your answer in full.
4. Kant wrote much about the morality argument.
 - a. What did he agree with Aristotle on?
 - b. With reference to his 'Noumenal' and 'Phenomenal' worlds, why does he say we can never rely on empirical evidence. It cannot lead to certainty. Explain your answer in full.
 - c. Explain Kant's idea that, 'a rational, moral being must necessarily will 'the highest good'.
 - d. Explain the connection between Saint Thomas Aquinas' 'Fourth Way' and Kant's theory.
5. Complete this Venn diagram to illustrate Freud's 'Id - Ego - Super-ego'.



6. How does Freud explain the presence of morality, our 'super-ego'?
7. Research in more detail Freud's work on morality. Summarise your findings.
8. Where do you think morality comes from?
 - God?
 - Evolution?
 - Social construct?

Explain your answer, including the reasons why you agree or disagree with each of these.