

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

Morality Without God.

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Discrimination against atheists is one of the last remaining socially acceptable prejudices. The recent rise of militant atheism (e.g. Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens) has hardly helped matters with its vitriolic and combative style. Sinnott-Armstrong's new book attempts to take a more moderate, balanced approach, entering into dialogue with believers (specifically, evangelical Christians) to demonstrate that atheists are not by their nature evil. His argument is twofold; first, that there is no good statistical evidence that atheists are by nature any morally worse than believers; and second, that atheists have just as good reason to be moral as believers.

The statistical evidence is just too thin to establish much of anything about the effect of atheism on morality. Still, it seems fair to grant the author's point that atheists as a class are probably not significantly better or worse than theists, for what it's worth. However, the author is unable to avoid some of the unfair characterizations of religion that are so familiar from the militant atheists, for example on the sensitive topic of physical and sexual abuse. He criticizes the biblical passage calling for wives to submit patiently to their husbands not only for its patriarchal assumptions but also on the grounds that it is 'easy to imagine' how men could interpret this passage as justifying domestic abuse (38). This is unconvincing. For the Bible could not be clearer on the duty of husbands to treat their wives well: 'husbands should love their wives as their own bodies' (Ephesians 5:28). It is not 'easy to imagine' how men could simply ignore this clear moral directive, but if they do one can hardly blame religion for that.

Even worse, the author raises the question of child sexual abuse by priests and ministers, and wonders whether 'this problem might be due to something about religion in general ... We do not know' (37). This insinuation that religion may actually cause child sexual abuse is troubling. First, just what element of religion could be said to positively encourage or promote such abuse? And second, statistics clearly show that the overwhelming majority of child sexual abuse occurs not in churches but in the home, usually by a family member or close relative. By the author's logic, we might wonder whether there is something about the family structure that causes child abuse—we simply do not know. Again, the tactic seems worthy of the militant atheists.

The most important part of this book is the author's attempt to show how an atheist can be a moral objectivist, and provide a plausible theory of ethics without need to invoke a deity. This is good to see, especially because most atheist tracts skip over this very important and uncomfortable question about the status of morality in a secular worldview. Indeed, even if one is a religious believer, the weakness of the Divine Command theory has been recognized since Plato, and so the problem of the objectivity of ethics is independent of whether one is religious or not (and of course there is no

necessary connection between being religious and accepting the Divine Command theory). This reviewer is on the side of the author in support of the objectivity of morality; still, the moral theory developed in this book is simply confusing. The author asserts that morality is independent of God and religion, but that '[m]orality instead concerns harms to other people' (54). This is a category confusion; it switches from the idea of the *source* of morality to its *content* (although, perhaps recognizing this problem, the author later refers to his theory as a 'secular harm-based morality'). And it gives short shrift to the all-important question of the source of moral obligation, though he appears to adopt a Kantian-type grounding in rationality. Clearly one should not expect a thorough exploration of metaethics in a book designed for the general reader. Still, if this account is confusing to a professional moral philosopher, it is unlikely to be very helpful to the general reader. As to the crucial question as to whether the theory of evolution undermines ethics, Sinnott-Armstrong declares that those who deny moral objectivity simply 'misunderstand' evolution (92). Again, the reviewer is in sympathy with the idea, but the argument is far too quick; the author does not address the widespread belief among many biologists and philosophers that evolution does indeed undermine the objectivity of ethics. (One would like to see Dawkins' response to the charge that he has simply misunderstood the theory of evolution!)

As to the content of morality, the theory seems to be an odd grab bag of social contract theory, intuitionism, Kantian theory, natural rights, Mill's Harm Principle, and Mill's utilitarianism. But as is all too predictable in naturalistic ethics, it seems to end up mostly as a form of utilitarianism, even though the author avoids using that name. Though it is not easy to follow his argument, the notion of a 'harm-based morality' seems to be an indirect way of stating the utilitarian ideal of maximizing happiness and avoiding suffering. Thus the author seems to endorse the key utilitarian principle that it is permissible to harm some in order to promote greater overall good: he declares that the basic goal of his theory is to minimize harm, and it is permissible to cause harm 'in order to prevent greater harm in the future' (71). (He also revealingly misinterprets the trolley problem as being grounded in the utilitarian principle [73], an interpretation that is quite implausible and is refuted by the very survey data he cites [i.e. the Fat Man case]). But this is precisely the morally objectionable feature of utilitarianism that has caused it to be widely rejected as implausible by moral philosophers, and by the vast majority of the general public, if one interprets the Trolley Problem results correctly. One wonders if the response of religious believers will be to say that, if this is what a secular morality gives us, then perhaps we are better off sticking with the Divine Command theory—a response for which one could hardly blame them, for at least it does not adopt the many objectionable features of utilitarian morality.

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