

Morality

Without God?

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Some argue that atheism must be false, since without God, no values are possible, and thus "everything is permitted." Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that God is not only not essential to morality, but that our moral behavior should be utterly independent of religion. He attacks several core ideas: that atheists are inherently immoral people; that any society will sink into chaos if it becomes too secular; that without religion, we have no reason to be moral; that absolute moral standards require the existence of God; and that without religion, we simply couldn't know what is wrong and what is right.

Sinnott-Armstrong brings to bear convincing examples and data, as well as a lucid, elegant, and easy to understand writing style. This book should fit well with the debates raging over issues like evolution and intelligent design, atheism, and religion and public life as an example of a pithy, tightly-constructed argument on an issue of great social importance.

"In his call for sincere dialogue with theists, Sinnott-Armstrong provides a welcome relief from the apoplectic excesses of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, while also addressing objections to homosexuality and evolution frequently raised by evangelical Christians." --*Publishers Weekly*

"[I]t is accessible and lively, my hope is that it will be widely read, especially by theists." --Peter Lamal, *The Humanist*

..". the clarity of this text successfully defuses many erroneous claims about religion and morality, both popular and academic; this volume certainly deserves a wide audience in this increasingly secular and skeptical world." -*Choice*

"*Morality Without God?* is an engaging, pithy book arguing against the necessity of God and religion for a robust morality. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has distinguished himself as a leading philosopher in his work on metaethics and moral psychology, as well as books on moral and epistemological skepticism, and in *Morality Without God?* he commendably succeeds in writing a philosophically respectable introduction to the problems facing religious morality suitable for virtually any audience." --*Philosophia Christi*

Morality Without God? Details

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Shreyas says

Very well argued and thorough. The most important part of this book in my opinion, however, is the message it conveys about how Atheists and Theists have to learn from each other and how we should tolerate one another's beliefs.

The book tends to get rather repetitive though, where the same core point appears in almost every chapter.

Micheal says

Atheophobia and religious bigotry fuels rage and adds to much misinformation and distrust when debates about god are the main topic. They are mostly conversation stoppers. Those who are the victims are mostly lay audience and unfortunately they're more than willing to adopt views than to analyze them (believer or not) for their soundness or cogency. This means that atheists have to addressed questions that may have been otherwise unconventional and not even slightly controversial but the debate today is not only limited to academics or the specialist and for this reason, books like these are of tremendous value for the public audience. I couldn't write a book liked this because I can't take god based morality seriously and even besides that it just takes a lot of patience to deal with claims that are so passionately inherently anti-atheistic as much of them are, (at least based on traditional reading of religion), and show little to no willingness for change.

But regardless of how I feel (it's logically irrelevant), the response is a must have and it's a good thing that Wielenberg and Armstrong have engaged with this constant rhetoric.

I deducted one star because the author could have mentioned very briefly some Platonic or non natural or even hedonistic accounts of morality for the sake of displaying the varieties off secular reasoning when it comes to morality (Arnhart or maybe a bit of Darwall?). All said, it's a short and accessible work more of which is not doubt yet to come.

Moses Operandi says

An engaging read, but Sinnott-Armstrong's "harm-based" morality is not an objective morality in any tangible way. That means it is not *really* useful for the sorts of things people use traditional moral systems for. If he had qualified it in that way, I would have been more interested.

I was interested by Sinnott-Armstrong's desire that atheists and theists be better friends, but I found that he couldn't resist taking shots (even cheap shots) at Christianity throughout. All in all, he is very assured of his intellectual superiority.

Ceyda says

Seküler ahlak teorisini ç^hitli argümanlarla aç^hıklamaya çal^hıan uzun bir makaleden olu^huyor kitap. Temellendirmeleri daha sa^hlam olabilirdi.

Bill says

This was a good book, and his argument was solid. I just wish I cared more about the argument and less about my mortgage these days. A few years ago, I would've eaten this bad boy up.

Jim says

It was a short book but a slow read. I don't know if it's because he was preaching to the choir or if I thought his writing style was slow.

"...the Bible cannot provide a solid foundation for morality or for knowledge of morality."

This is what I'm wrestling with right now.

I have argued for a long time that the Bible is not a book to give us a list of moral rules. In fact, though I believe in God, I would agree with the author's harm-based morality.

Reading this book makes you realize how arbitrary people truly are with their morality. Especially religious people. How many religious people state their morality is based on God's commands, yet do all kinds of inference to preach against things that God never explicitly commanded against (e.g., abortion and gay marriage). And since no two groups of fundamentalists can agree on the specific rules, it ends up being completely arbitrary. If Christians can't agree on morality then which one has the right to impose to impose his (or hers)?

R.K. Cowles says

3 1/2 stars

Steven Williams says

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues in this book that the basis of morality can be found without god, as the subtitle states. In addition to this he argues for why morality based on god, in particular the Christian god, can not form a basis for morality. His basis for morality without god involves the concept of harm. Those who harm another, or fails to prevent a harm when possible, commits a moral wrong.

After he sets the stage, he presents that there is no factual evidence that atheists or secular societies are any less moral than Christians or Christian societies. From there he goes on to give a version of objective morality based on the concept of harm as stated above. After making his case for a workable morality without god, he confronts god based morality, and shows the problems with it and how it is not a workable solution. He ends up discussing what more needs to be investigated in coming to a better secular morality.

Here are some comments I made at particular points in reading the book. Numbers in brackets [] are pagination in the Kindle edition.

[21] After Sinnott-Armstrong mentions the story of the fall in the Garden of Eden, I thought there is a form of human evolution here. Human beings evolved the capability to obtain moral knowledge. When humans evolved from some form of ape to humans moral knowledge became possible in the reality of real life, not the made up biblical kind.

[52] “Theists use this popular slogan [‘If God is dead, everything is permitted’] to assert that nothing can be objectively morally wrong if God does not exist. The question, in short, is whether atheism entails nihilism, which is the denial of all real moral values, duties, and obligations.” Even supposing moral subjectivity, atheism does not necessarily entail nihilism.

[56-7] “Everyone I know—whether theist or atheist or agnostic—agrees that rape is morally wrong.” The theist is questionable on this if he or she really accepts the Bible as the word of god. The Old Testament does not condemn rape, at least not in all cases, and the New Testament is silent on it. So, the Christian can believe that rape is not morally wrong, at least in some cases. And, marital rape occurs in some Christian marriages. The fact that most theists believe rape is morally wrong is because they feel it is, not that they are commanded not to.

[59-60] “Almost everyone agrees that death, pain, and disability are bad.” But, the reason for this does not have to be an objective standard. People when they think that these things are bad, usually have feelings associated with this thinking. Matter of fact this kind of thinking without feeling may not lead to moral behavior, and it maybe that the feelings actually lead to the thought. A reason for people to believe these things are bad is that they, in most cases, would not want them occurring to themselves or are in psychological pain when they observe these situations. So, it is possible that morality does not depend, or at least initially, on an objective standard. I think that it is moral feelings that lead to objectivity in morality.

[62] “Certainly each item [in a list of harms] needs to be specified more precisely.” This and other statements he makes leads me to admire his sense of grayness.

[85] “Call that harm-based core of morality ‘shared morality,’ because it is shared with theists, who agree that rape, murder, theft, child abuse and neglect, and so on are morally wrong.” However, some Christian parents abuse their children when administering punishment because they believe the Bible sanctions severe punishment. So, if moral feelings are the basis of morality, how is it that some people do not see some acts that most people consider to be harmful to be immoral? It is because feelings can be overridden by thoughts, especially thoughts that are repeatedly reinforced by others and supposedly sacred texts.

[131] Speaking of group discussion as an aid to making moral decisions, he writes: “An example should help to bring these abstractions down to earth. This case illustrates a real problem that hospital ethic committees have faced many times and that has been controversial in the past.” Never mind the specifics of his example, the point I wish to make is that few of us have the benefit of a committee discussion when faced with a moral decision, and certainly not when the decision is urgent. So, while hospital ethics committees are useful in their domain, as a general approach to finding out the differing amount of harm among moral choices is not much use.

[150] Coming to a firm conclusion to his exploration of morality he states: “But at least they [those who are willing to give up divine command morality and fear of atheism] would base their positions on the real foundation of morality, which *is avoiding harm and preventing harm.*” (My italics) I would agree that this is

a better standard than a god based morality.

Sinnott-Armstrong's whole concept of moral harm seems like a negative form of classic utilitarianism—the greatest happiness principle. And, while his concept of moral harm as an objective form of morality is on sound footing, it does not negate that it is moral feelings that lead one to see that harming or not preventing harm to others is not the way of moral action.

I think Sinnott-Armstrong firmly and effectively argues against the divine command theory of morality, despite not focusing on this in my comments. I really like the way he approaches the subject. He is respectful of others and refrains from obnoxious attacks like some atheists and theists are prone to do. And, while his conclusions are firm he does not present his exploration as leading to an absolute claim of correctness of his moral theory. I also felt he wrote very well and avoided technical jargon, so that it would be attractive to non-specialists.

I rated this book highly and would recommend it to anyone who is serious about how we can come to moral conclusions that would be acceptable to most people willing to reflect honestly. If you are a Christian he does not attack your beliefs per se, but divine command morality that is often associated with Christianity. Plus he spells out, at least as a beginning, an acceptable moral theory without god.

Genine Franklin-Clark says

This seemed . . . fuzzy. Not clear, a little wishy-washy, no real stand. I do believe it's good to listen to others' thoughts with an open mind, but not to the point that your own thoughts end up a fuzzy, foggy mess.

Landon says

This is a good, short book arguing that God and religion are not necessary for morality. Sinnott-Armstrong spends a chapter each arguing (1) that atheists are not inherently any worse than theists, (2) that a society of non-believers will not devolve into corruption and immorality (here he analyzes various studies which show correlations between atheism/theism and immoral behaviors), (3) a secular morality can be based on the harm principle, (4) traditional Divine Command Theory is problematic as a standard for objective morality, (5) the secular theory of morality gives people at least as good a reason to be moral as the religious morality, and (6) the secular theory of morality makes moral knowledge more accessible than Divine Command Theory. In addition to that, he has an introduction and conclusion. The book is good as an introduction to the issue, but lacks a careful analysis in some places. The main weakness, I think, is the author's treatment of Biblical texts. Although he offers a plausible face-value reading, the over-emphasis on this in some of the chapters leaves him vulnerable to more sophisticated Christian apologists coming along and bashing his ignorance of "proper interpretation of the texts." In any case, a good book by a good philosopher.

Vegantrav says

I wanted to read this book after seeing a review that indicated that Sinnott-Armstrong attempts to establish an

objective basis for morality in this book, but I was rather disappointed in his efforts in this direction.

Now, I should say that Sinnott-Armstrong's main goals in the book are to show that it is possible for atheists, agnostics, and secularists to justify their moral beliefs apart from appeals to God and religious texts and to show the problems with religiously-based ethical systems (particularly the divine-command approach to ethics). In these two areas, Sinnott-Armstrong succeeds quite well; however, for those interested in ethics, he really does not present anything new or different, but he never claims to be attempting anything particularly novel. Basically, Sinnott-Armstrong is just trying to present these arguments in terms that those without any background in philosophy or ethics can appreciate, and, again, I think he does this very well.

Sinnott-Armstrong's attempt to ground his ethical views in objective moral standards begins with the harm principle: rational agents should not take any actions that cause unnecessary harm to others, and they should take steps to prevent any unnecessary harms to others when they are able to do so. Now, this principle is one that the vast majority of rational, normal humans would accept; however, there is nothing whatsoever objective about it. It is an opinion, and nothing more than that.

Sinnott-Armstrong never tells us why or how his harm principle is objective, and I frankly have no idea what it would mean for any normative principle to be objective. (Yes, I am a nihilist.) In the realm of the objective we find empirical physical laws (e.g. Einstein's famous $E = mc^2$ or Newton's laws of motion) and analytic truths (e.g. linguistic truths like all quadrupeds have, by definition, four limbs or mathematical truths like two parallel lines never meet). Moral principles, however, are not empirically true: while it may be necessary that if we all want to live a life of relative peace and security that we should not cause harm to others, there might be some who would reject that idea that we should all want to live lives of relative peace and security. (Granted, they might be sociopaths or extreme egoists, but such people do exist.) Nor is it an analytic truth that it is good not to harm others, for what is good for some may not be good for others: a sociopath, for example, may find that it is good for him to be able to harm others but not for others to harm him, and the same might be said for a megalomaniacal dictator like Caligula or Stalin. We could argue with such sociopaths that their actions are not good for the whole of society, but they may very well not care about such principles, and there is no objective standard to which we can appeal. And it will not do to state that part of the definition of good is not harming others unnecessarily, for this is simply begging the question of what is good (and thus moral) in the first place. Morality, then, is a matter of taste and opinion. Moral principles are not principles that are true or false; they are principles that we establish if we want to achieve certain ends, such as living what most people would consider to be "the good life." But there are those who would not desire to attain such an end and so would not accept our principles in the first place. Thus, morality is not something that can be objectively grounded in any way.

Although Sinnott-Armstrong claims that he has given an objective basis for morality in the book, what he has really done is to provide rational arguments showing that the non-religious can rationally and consistently live a moral life despite lacking any belief in God: God is not necessary for morality. (Of course, Plato fairly well established this about 2,500 years ago in *Euthyphro*.) What Sinnott-Armstrong fails to do (and what, it seems to me, no moral philosopher could ever do) is provide an objective basis for morality.

Sally says

Conciliatory in its intentions, this book argues that the existence of God, belief in God, divine revelation, or a divine lawgiver are not necessary for morality, and that atheists, agnostics, free thinkers, and members of non-Abrahamic faiths can be just as moral as Christians. He offers a harm-based morality as one alternative,

and points out the weaknesses in God-based morality. One particular statement he shows false is "If God is dead, everything is permitted." His objective is to make atheists less scary to Christians and to counter the ad hominem arguments so often directed against them individually and as a group. Free thinkers may find him over-cautious and bending over too far backwards to not offend Christians, particularly Evangelicals, whose views he wishes to modify.

Ahmet Kaya says

Kitap teist ahlak? ele?tiriyor ve ateist ahlak anlay??n? formülide ediyor. Tabi ki bunu kendi bak?? aç?s?yla yap?yor. Çünkü yazara göre teistlerin aksine ateistler neyin do?ru neyin yanl?? oldu?unu söyleyen bir üst otoriteye tabi de?iller. Temelde teist ahlak?n "kutsal emir teorisi" temeline dayand??n? buna kar??l?k ateist ahlak?n ise "zarar teorisi" temeline dayand??n? söylüyor. Ayr?ca ahlak?n herkesin içinde bulundu?u böylece evrensel bir ahlak anlay??n?n var oldu?unu söylüyor. Bunun da temeli ba?kas?na ac? vermemekten geçiyor. Okunmas? gereken bir kitap.

Michael says

I read this on the recommendation to a friend (not of a friend; someone else suggested it to this friend) to explore how morality can stand without God. Sinnott-Armstrong is a philosopher. A professional one who teaches at a university and everything. So the fact that his characterizations of theistic positions regarding morality and really poor arguments were just disappointing as can be.

Paul says

One of my favorite books on the subject of God and morality. It is one of those controversial subjects and taboos in society since many people believe that religion (particularly Christianity) is the source, and foundation, of morality. Armstrong shows that this is not the case since morality can indeed be independent of all the religions and showed why the conservative religious account of morality is problematic. While it can be disputed as to whether Armstrong successfully demonstrated that morality is independent of God's will as well as his positive account of morality(I personally liked the arguments) he nonetheless exhibited virtues of the principle of charity and civility that you will less likely find in the New Atheist books. Armstrong is able to express his sympathy for the value of religion but was also able to criticize it in ways that is not hard to swallow for a conservative Christian who desires to understand the other perspective. I actually recommended this to my Atheist friend, after he read it he said "If I were to recommend an atheist book to my father, who is a conservative Christian, I would recommend this one" (paraphrase). This comes to show (if not prove) that the book is friendly to the wider audience including Christians.
