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Is the God of the Old Testament Immoral?

When I was seventeen-going-on-eighteen, I got it into my head that I should probably give reading the whole Bible a go. I blitzed through the bright blue hardcover New International Version this guy at church called Nick had given me, but I'm not sure I actually took any of it in, because for years afterwards I'd find random books called 'Ezekiel' or 'Amos' or whatever and have no idea how they got there or how I'd missed them the first time around.

What's even tougher is that the Old Testament is a really complicated read even when you read it carefully - stories of war and exile and violence all over the place. At times, I caught myself wondering if we were *ever* going to get to the parts where Jesus talked about love and generosity and kindness, because the parts where Joshua and the Israelites are killing a bunch of Canaanites seem a million miles away from *love thy neighbour*.

It's not just me that struggles with that disconnect, as Richard Dawkins says:

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

To be honest, I am not sure what some of those words mean, but they don't sound nice. These descriptions are based on the view that the Judgements of God as documented in scripture are unjust. If unjust, then God by this view is Immoral. If immoral then the God of the Bible is not the pinnacle of divine reason, since our moral autonomy (judgment) has exceeded His. If so, then the God of the Old Testament doesn't meet the requirement to be labelled as 'God' at all.

Yet it doesn't take long to doubt this conclusion. The nature of this argument assumes that there is objective morality to recognise one's moral judgment as 'better' or 'worse' than the other, that there is a moral line by which we may measure the standard of one's actions. Yet how does the atheist justify this assumption?

In the atheistic view, if ultimately reality is simply matter and its movement, that we are nothing more than electrons and selfish genes, temporary structures of stardust in a purposeless universe which mindlessly came into existence, destined to end in the nothingness it arose from, then what really is right and wrong in itself? If we are honest, the answer is nothing.

In a world where matter alone exists there can be no objective standard for morality.

Morality is therefore just a man-made control system that changes, alters and differs according to traditional and cultural influences, which means good and evil in itself cannot be anything of definite

truth, it's just subjective. You may say your moral judgment is preferred or desired to you or your society as a matter of personal opinion, but you cannot claim it as anything fundamental. For where does our concept of evil come from apart from the changing preference of evidently imperfect humans in a meaningless universe? C.S. Lewis noted this same point saying: "*Where do you get the idea that God is either just or unjust if we're in a universe of meaningless fortune and tragedies?*"

Only if you have the view that there is a morally perfect being who transcends us and who by fixed nature defines and purposed us, can there be a fixed reference for moral reasoning, because a fundamental moral law requires an absolute to give that moral law, otherwise it's just relative. This point can be summarised as below.

1. Morals are a subject of meaning
2. Meaning requires intention
3. Intention requires a mind
4. So for there to be objectively true morals to govern reality, there therefore has to be an ultimate mind which intended our reality
5. That ultimate mind is God

So to say that God or anyone or anything is by definition morally evil, you first have to appeal to some real independent fixed reference of right and wrong to define against, but this of course cannot be explained within an atheistic worldview. So these terrible descriptive words for God that Dawkins uses put him in a real philosophical and existential quandary. He begins by saying that the God to whom these actions are attributed is really a "*creature of fiction.*" But if God doesn't exist, as Dawkins suggests, and all these descriptions bear weights, then the evil that Dawkins is railing against is really coming from human beings playing God isn't it? If atheism is correct, his nauseating list from genocide to infanticide does not describe Gods character but the character of actual people. So the source of such evil is human, not divine by his paradigm, but this is where the confusion begins, because elsewhere the same Dawkins goes on to say that as the base of it "*there is no good and evil; we are all dancing to our DNA.*" The conclusion Dawkins draws is to deny the existence of God, and he is forced, therefore, to dismiss evil and good as absolute categories.

If God does not exist except in the mind and writings of His followers, then it is us - human beings, who are in fact genocidal, misogynistic, infanticidal, homophobic... Yet how in the name of reason, does Dawkins think that his judgement as a human being is a fair and correct assessment of other people? If evil does not exist, as Dawkins claims, his is merely a "preferred flavor"... as is theirs. So here is where I am confused - what is his point? Is he admitting to a truth of a moral realm in which it is inescapable that God is present, or denying it altogether, in which his allegations against God bear no weight? His reasoning is either circular or self-defeating. By saying that there is no God but that these attributes of God are evil, he has put in a bind and is playing God himself.

Dawkins is a patent moralist. He condemns God on moral grounds, all the while marvelously oblivious to the contradiction with his ethical subjectivism. Richard Dawkins himself said that "there is at bottom... no evil, no good" and if God doesn't exist, as he would have us believe, then he is right - there is no real right and wrong, "all things are permitted." But no atheist, no agnostic, can live consistently with such a view of life. Are atheists willing to actually live with the implications of their own denial of ethical absolutes?

Who do you think God is?

Not all who doubt God are atheistic, even those who acknowledge God still decide that they cannot support God's judgments as documented in the Old Testament. We have all played the fool and questioned God at times. No one questioned the Almighty more about the pain and shame of human

evil and personal loss than the biblical writers. But here's the rub. They always raised it while still recognizing the nature of good and evil, victim and victimizer, human limitation and divine power. They not only understood the categories, they questioned where a sovereign God was in the midst of all this. And they found answers. What is dramatically real is that they do not raise it to question God's existence, nor do they raise it to prove that good and evil are not real. They raise it to find the answers to God's existence within the framework of the good and evil they undeniably see around them.

So: the Bible is concerned with good and evil, holiness and sin. We can all agree on that. But what I often find strange is how concerned the Bible is with stuff that I can't even *begin* to think of as important. Why should I care about mixing two different kinds of fabrics (Leviticus 19:19)? Why does God care about mixed fabrics? Doesn't He have better things to care about?

To answer that you need to ask yourself: who do you think God is? Is God just a cosmic CCTV camera, keeping His judgemental eye on us? Or is He a loving Father that's deeply invested in every element of our lives, no detail too small to escape His concern? I suspect that Richard Dawkins and I would give you two very different answers and two *very* different perspectives. And this is what every discussion about faith and belief comes down to: *Who do you think God is?*

Let me put it another way: if God is the ultimate reference for all purpose and meaning, who created the entire natural world with his word, and who from beginning to end holds all things, every good and evil deed into account, then surely God knows and sees more than we do?

Admittedly some of the judgments as recorded in the Old Testament seem intense and disproportionate, even brutal at times. I suspect many who have read the Bible may have felt this way. I have. But when I think about who God actually is, I remember that perhaps His understanding is perfected and that we may be the ones in the wrong. The book of Romans writes:

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things."

Richard Dawkins seems to have a pretty poor view of God, but it's so strange that it's so different from what the people writing all the way back in the first century thought about God. Perhaps it's because he's already got his mind made up before he even opens his Bible. But if Professor Dawkins simply moves the goalposts of what he deems 'right' and 'wrong' every time he wants to, how can he possibly understand the moral standards of a God who can never change, will never change, and remains implacably and fundamentally opposed to 'evil' in all its forms? Although the deaf man cannot distinguish between a whistle and a violin, Dawkins wants to go further and claim that the instruments are interchangeable depending on what would best suit him and his musical tastes on any given day. Man, fallen man, I believe, cannot fully understand what a vile thing sin is in the sight of that God whose nature is according to the faith, fully righteous. So I think we need to be in a state of humility before we question the sovereignty of God, and consider with evident reason that He sees something of good and evil which we don't. The scripture writes, *"Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?"*

When we see a Sobibor or an Auschwitz there's something in the human heart that aches and cries out *"if there's a God why doesn't he do something about this?"* We long for a God of wrath. God is reluctant to be the vengeful God we desire. Our problem is we're hypocrites, we don't see the evil in our own hearts. God will one day sort out the mess and evil of the world, but thanks to His mercy He's giving you and I the chance to turn away from our part to play in it all before he answers the

longing of justice in our hearts. The question is not *“why does God judge”* but *“why is He so patient”*.

Also, in regards to the nature of God, look at the testimony of those who were closely associated with God in the Old Testament. Take the prophets, or the Kings, or any of the individuals whose lives were touched by God. Did they think of God as a vindictive Being? The answer is no. In fact, all who came into contact with God’s presence wrote about him as “righteous”, “Good” and “Holy”. They did not determine his judgments to be wrong, but understood that God, judge of all the earth, will do what is right.

When reading the scripture it is clear that the judgments documented in the Old Testament were often commissioned by God in a particular time and place, and often deferred for many years, even generations. That these Judgements in the Old Testament were directed toward specific peoples on account of specific sins, and deferred for as long as possible.

Over the course of generations we begin to picture the sovereignty of God, that the whole Old Testament, throughout its judgments and blessing points to a relationship, a covenant. That as man by his disobedience fails to reach God which is shown throughout the Old Testament, the likeness of God, Jesus Christ, by his obedience came to reach man, shown throughout the New Testament. The Old Testament can often seem like a bewildering list of arbitrary rules and harsh penalties, and that might be a fair criticism; after all, the Old Testament is Israel’s guidebook to inheriting the promises of God. And, yet, it’s only in the person of Jesus that the promises of God are fulfilled. The New is in the Old contained, the Old is in the New explained.

This is the gospel, that God gave His one and only Son for the sake of humanity and our moral debt, so that we shall not perish, but in Him have eternal life. Those who reject this offer reserve themselves for the judgment of God, eternal separation from Him.