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why believe in a creator God?

Chris Knight on religious experience

In the previous article we examined the arguments from the origin of the universe and its fine-tuning that suggest there is a 'someone' responsible for the creation of the universe. In this article we will examine two areas; first whether our experience of right and wrong can tell us about this Creator - who is starting to look rather like the God that Christians believe in - and second whether our 'religious' experience might also tell us about him.

why are some things objectively wrong?

Just as we can examine a building to find out more about its designer's purposes, our examination of the universe we live in can tell us more about the nature of its Creator. The belief that some things in life are good (or right) and others are evil (or wrong) is one significant aspect of our experiences as human beings. The laws and sanctions by which human societies and groups regulate their actions is a direct result of such beliefs.

While there is some disagreement about *which* actions are right and which are wrong, there is general agreement that some things are right and others are wrong (even if on occasion it can be difficult to determine which is which). If this is the case, it is fair to ask whether a person's or society's moral code is based merely on *preference* or on some objective moral standard that exists apart from that society. That is, are moral values more than an individual's or society's preferences for how people should conduct their lives or are these moral values validated by a moral code that exists independently of human beings?

Many theories have been proposed advocating the evolutionary origin of moral values.¹ All of them presuppose that such values, eg that murdering children is wrong, might have been different if human society had been subject to different evolutionary pressures. In that case, moral values are contingent - they could have been different. The inevitable consequence of that, however, is that no action can be said to be objectively wrong. On such a view, we might not like the way that certain people behave at times,





former research scientist
Chris Knight is content
coordinator of *bethinking.org*

eg torture, rape or female circumcision, but the most that we can say is that we would prefer them not to happen. Although people can campaign for their preferences to become the norms of society, they are simply trying to get their preferences adopted by more people. They cannot say that someone is wrong to commit rape, only that they want society to punish it.

On the other hand, if someone maintains that certain moral values are objectively true and therefore should be binding on everyone in all societies and at all times, then the basis for these moral values needs to be more than mere preference or evolutionary pressures. Many atheists agree. Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre maintained that:

*The existentialist ... finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with him all possibility of finding values... It is nowhere written that 'the good' exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men.*²

So if moral values have the character of an objective command from outside any human individual or society, then they are not only personal (commands require a giver and a receiver) but they must be rooted in some transcendent or supernatural basis, such as the nature of God. As Paul writes of Gentiles: 'the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness'.³

We can put this argument into a concise form as follows:

- (1) If objective moral values exist, they require a basis in a being such as God
- (2) Objective moral values do exist

Therefore (3) a being such as God exists
The existence of objective moral values can be seen as an independent argument for the existence of God, or it can be seen as adding to our understanding of the moral character of God.

religious experience

'Religious experience' probably means different things to different people. Here we will examine some different aspects of religious experience and see what value, if any, it may have in people's journeys of faith.

the argument from religious experience

One argument from religious experience argues from a commonly expressed view that there must be 'something more' behind the universe we normally perceive. This idea might be aroused by more earthly feelings - of beauty, of desire or of love - or the feelings accompanying the birth of a child. It seems to have been a part of C.S. Lewis' conversion. In his sermon 'The Weight of Glory', Lewis writes: 'Now, if we are made for heaven, the desire for our proper place will be already in us, but not yet attached to the true object, and will even appear as the rival of that object. And this, I think, is just what we find.... we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy'.⁴ More poetically, God 'has set eternity in the human heart'.⁵

The barely conscious expression of this desire or longing for a deeper meaning is the reason that popular culture (film, TV, music, novels) can be so helpful for apologetics. Their output so often incorporates concepts

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expressing a deep desire for something more – or at the very least a perception that the world is not actually as we would like it to be nor as we think it ought to be.

Francis Spufford's book *Unapologetic*,⁶ is an extended meditation on this concept. Chapter 1 records his feelings of sorrow and despair, from which Mozart's Clarinet Concerto spoke clearly to his inner self: 'Everything you fear is true. And yet. And yet.... You are still deceiving yourself, said the music, if you don't allow for the possibility of *this*.'⁷

Religious experiences of this kind can point to God as the source of such feelings and can lead to the earnest desire to find the one who is behind them.

A variation of the argument proposes that an individual's claims to an awareness of the presence of God should be accepted, unless there are good reasons to doubt them. Normal sensory perception is accepted as valid in a similar way – it requires no additional validation. The Bible is full of such examples: Moses' experience of God in the burning bush; Isaiah's vision of God in the temple; Zechariah's and Mary's encounters with the angel Gabriel; Saul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus.⁸

Similar experiences have been recorded through history and cannot be lightly dismissed. For the individual, they can be definitive, life-transforming experiences. However, the difficulty is that such 'religious experiences' occur within many different religious settings with varying content and conclusions about the nature of God. The experience may be of the holy nature of God. Or of Jesus Christ's love or his reassuring presence during difficulty. But more 'mystical' experiences talk of a very different sense of unity with or absorption into God. Muhammad's

religious experiences led to the writing of the Qur'an.

Such religious experiences tend to be interpreted within the recipient's previous religious framework, which may explain the contradictory interpretations. While I accept that many Christians have had true religious experiences of God, it is not easy to justify accepting these experiences as true while at the same time arguing that a Muslim's religious experiences are in some way in error and do not provide evidence that Islam is true. Whereas religious experiences can lead individuals to start to think about God or lead to a deeper commitment, the apologetic impact on the sceptics who hear such accounts is more difficult to discern.

Nevertheless, if Christianity is true, then, on the basis of God's revelation within Scripture, we would expect Christians to have religious experiences of God. Through the psalmist, God urges us to: 'Be still, and know that I am God'.⁹ Perhaps it is chiefly when we set aside the diversions and distractions of everyday life, that we can know God's presence in this way. Opportunities for time to meet with and hear God are often lacking, even in many church settings and certainly in the very busy and 'connected' lives that so many people lead. Finding time to meet with God can therefore be difficult, which is why many today seek retreats, quiet days or away days.

Although an individual's religious experiences are personal and difficult for others to assess directly, the life-changing impact they can have may bring others to question what has brought about such a change. This gives an opportunity to follow Peter's command and 'make a defence ... for the hope that is in you'.¹⁰

the value of religious experience

Not everyone comes to a commitment to Christ through rational argument, but many do need some rational arguments to help break down the barriers to hearing the gospel that have built up over the years. The Holy Spirit works in individuals to bring them to Christ. Conversion is, in itself, a religious experience – the realisation of one's own sin and need for salvation and the realisation that God's grace and forgiveness are available to those who receive Christ.

Many are convicted of the truth of the gospel by the Holy Spirit without human reason or argument, responding rather to a straightforward proclamation of the gospel. It would seem unreasonable to claim that this work of the Holy Spirit leads to an unreasonable faith. If we are created by God for relationship with him then there must exist the ability to know God by some means, even though this may have been marred by sin.¹¹ In appropriate circumstances, therefore, I would suggest that experiences and knowledge of God may be directly and correctly perceived, just as we might perceive a butterfly in the garden on a fine summer's day. We were created by God with the capacity to perceive both.

conclusions

The moral argument suggests that the source of objective right and wrong must lie outside the material universe and is derived from the nature of God, for the moral law is written on our hearts.¹²

An awareness that eternity is written on our hearts¹³ can point to the God from whom it derives. The diversity and personal nature of other religious experiences can make them powerful for the recipient but easily dismissed by the sceptic. ■

key points

- Objective values of right and wrong require a source outside the natural world
- Some religious experiences can point to 'something more'
- Expressions of such desires can often be perceived within popular culture
- The diversity of religious experiences reduces their apologetic impact
- The personal nature of religious experiences means that their biggest impact can be from the transformed life that follows

further resources:

- Peter S. Williams, *Can moral objectivism do without God?* bit.ly/1g1cSyG
- Justin Brierley et al, *Is religious experience evidence for God?* bit.ly/1e7mjxP
- Carl Stecher and Peter S. Williams, *The arguments from desire and religious experience.* bit.ly/1IHFEQO

NEXT TIME – we will consider the use of Scripture and will look specifically at the resurrection of Jesus.

REFERENCES

1. See, for example, FitzPatrick W. *Morality and evolutionary biology.* *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Summer 2012 Edition for many references. plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-biology
2. Sartre J-P, *Existentialism is a humanism.* New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007:28. For other examples, and more on this whole argument see Williams PS. *Can moral objectivism do without God?* bit.ly/1g1cSyG
3. Romans 2:15
4. Lewis CS. *The weight of glory.* www.verber.com/mark/xian/weight-of-glory.pdf. See also his *Mere Christianity*, Book III, Chapter 10: Hope
5. Ecclesiastes 3:11
6. Spufford F. *Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense.* Faber and Faber, 2012. Despite its name, the book is an apologetic for the emotions, although I disagree with many of Spufford's views.
7. *Ibid*:16
8. Exodus 3; Isaiah 6; Luke 1; Acts 9
9. Psalm 46:10
10. 1 Peter 3:15, ESV
11. See, for example, Plantinga A. *Warranted Christian belief.* Oxford University Press, 2000
12. Romans 2:15
13. Ecclesiastes 3:11