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Does This Prove We Can't Ground Objective Morality in God?

January 25, 2024



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about an objection to grounding objective morality in God that states that if God has a morally perfect nature, and he either engaged in or directly allowed genocide, slavery, and torture, then that means genocide, slavery, and torture are objectively good.

* How would you address this atheist challenge to grounding objective morality in God: If God has an unchanging, morally perfect nature, and he either engaged in or directly allowed genocide, slavery, and torture, then doesn't that mean genocide, slavery, and torture are objectively good?

Transcript

Welcome to the hashtag STRask Podcast. I'm Amy Hall and I'm here with Greg Koukl. Hashtag Greg Koukl.

All right, Greg, we're going to talk about... Here we go, fast in your seatbelts. I've seen the questions. We're going to talk about morality and the moral argument today, and hopefully we can get through a couple questions here.

This first one comes from Ralph Anderson. How would you address this atheist challenge to grounding objective morality in God? God has an unchanging, morally perfect nature. God either did or directly allowed genocide, slavery, and torture.

Therefore, genocide, slavery, and torture are objectively moral goods. All right, this is confused, all right, and I'll try to clear up the confusion. But I do want to make the point, what he's challenging, the atheist, is the legitimacy of the moral argument for God, because it seems to justify immoral things.

All right, so then what's the alternative? If there is no God, there is no foundation for morality, and therefore genocide, torture, and slavery are not immoral, and they're not

moral. These are terms that have no meaning in an atheistic world where you only have molecules in motion. All right, so I'm not going to sidestep the question, but I just want people to see what's going on.

And it shows also a misunderstanding of how this all plays out, and I'll try to clarify as much as possible. But notice that the challenge is against the moral argument, morality is grounded in God's nature. If morality is not grounded in God's nature, then there is no morality.

There's no way someone can bring a claim or an objection against anything that happened in the Old Testament on moral grounds. And this happens frequently with atheists, and they never ask the question, where are you getting your moral standard to judge God by? All right, and that's the question that has to be answered. First, we find a way to ground morality, since we are aware that morality is objective.

When I say we're aware, we already know this because of our intuitive awareness of moral categories that some things are good and some things are bad, and it's not just culture, because it doesn't matter where you lived or when you lived, everybody knows that something is morally wrong with the world. That's called the moral or rather the problem of evil. But there can't be a problem of evil unless there are objective moral standards that are being violated by people in the world.

If it's just a subjective moral standard that's being violated, they're doing something I don't like or I wouldn't do. Who cares? Because no individual is adequate to ground morality for other people. No human individual.

It's got to be an appropriate person that creates the obligation. The appropriate person for transcendent moral obligations is a transcendent person. This is not tricky.

Okay, if I put up a stop sign right in front of my house, nobody has to obey that because I don't have the authority to put a stop sign up. But if the government does, then it becomes obligatory for them to obey the government, not the sign, but the government, because the government is operating within its appropriate authority. So the first point is that the moral argument for God establishes the only adequate foundation for any morality at all.

If someone rejects God as grounding, as the appropriate authority, then there is no appropriate authority. There are just subjective authorities, and it turns out that there is no morality that's objective, which means there is no problem of evil. But there is a problem of evil, so there must be objective morality, therefore there must be an objective moral maker.

So the objection here about the specifics about genocide, slavery, and torture are ones that are not, do not affect the issue of the grounding question. The grounding issue must

be in place before someone can raise the concern, the moral concern, about those three things. All right, so I'm just separating out two issues.

All right. But the point seems to be here. Well, if you're making your God the ground of morality, then your God affirmed in a certain fashion, I'm pausing because I need all that.

I know this all needs qualification, but this is the challenge. You're God affirmed these things as morally good. So they must be morally good.

Okay. So now I have to make some points about the particular charges, genocide, slavery, and torture. It is interesting the way people use this language of somebody who complains about everlasting hell, how to, how to may say or is complained about it.

So God is going to torture people in hell forever. Notice the language they use to make it sound illegitimate. Thank you for that word.

No, God is not going to torture them in hell forever. He is going to judge them forever. And that will not be fun, but it will not be torture.

Okay, torture is a whole different kind of thing. All right. Now it may feel bad like torture, but that doesn't make it torture.

So I just want to point out that at least in one case here, the word torture is, is um, species. It is meant to prejudice your view about God. I actually don't know where God approves something in through scripture that could be legitimately characterized as torture.

You know, there's no examples of God says, okay, water board this guy or, you know, let him die a slow torturous death, whatever. I don't know where that is, but that's the claim that's made. I'd like to know where that is.

Okay, here's the second point, because God is the ground of morality, that doesn't mean that the moral, um, principles that apply to God apply equally to everybody else. Okay. It's, it, um, trying to think of a good example, I was going to use disciplining children, but we'll just use the government, the government's right to punish you a lot better.

Right. It's, it's the government may have a right to lock someone away, but that doesn't mean that human beings have a right to kidnap and imprison average citizens, I mean. So the legitimate authority given objective morality, um, let me get back up and put it this way because there's objective morality doesn't mean the same moral principles apply to everyone.

And I'll give you an example of this. I'm glad you brought the government up because there's, this is evidenced in the way people sometimes try to argue against capital punishment. And so there are people against capital punishment.

Why? Well, this is what they'll say oftentimes is they say it's not right for people to play God. All right. It's not right for people to play God.

Now I actually don't think that's a good argument against capital punishment. And I won't get into the reason why, but I want you to see the intuition that is revealed in that kind of pushback. And the intuition is that God has prerogatives that humans don't, moral prerogatives.

It may be that God can take human life, but that's for God to do. Remember, the scripture says, vengeance is mine. Don't take your own vengeance.

This is, I think, part of the point that Jesus was talking about in the servant of the Mount, we talked about turning the other cheek. Okay. As we are not taking our own vent, excuse me, vengeance.

We are, we are letting the proper designated authorities execute provisions of the law and punishment themselves. This is why Paul says that Caesar, I think it's Paul, Caesar does not bear the sword for nothing. Caesar can bear the sword.

We don't bear the sword for individual getbacks kind of thing, but Caesar can bear the sword. All right. So all I'm establishing here is that the legitimate authorities operate according to a different moral standard than those who are not legitimate authorities.

And this is a common sense principle. We have parents and children. My kids say, well, you don't do that.

I said, I'm dad, you're not. You answer to me. I don't answer to you.

And I'm talking in an obviously non moral circumstance for me. You know, if I put restrictions on, you don't go to bed at 9 30, you stay up because those rules don't apply to me. Okay.

So this is a common sense notion. So when we say that God is unchanging and morally perfect in his nature, we mean that everything that God does and says is good, and therefore everything that he tells us we can or can't do reflects his good nature and becomes obligatory to us. It does not mean that everything he tells us to do or not to do applies equally to him.

This is, I'm not sure who the atheist is, but this is a borderline unconscionable mistake because anybody who thinks about it for well will realize we don't, for God to be morally good doesn't mean that we then can do everything that he does and our actions will be morally good. So if it turns out that God, let's just for the sake of argument, go along with this point that God justifies genocide, slavery and torture on his side, that doesn't mean that genocide, slavery and torture is morally good for everyone to do. So that's the distinction I want to make.

Now the question is, is genocide, slavery and torture good when God provides for it? I don't accept, as I pointed out, that God endorses torture. I don't know what that person is getting at. This looks like a rhetorical flourish to me.

But what about genocide and slavery? Okay. Now I've talked about this before. I've actually gone into detail in street smarts about this.

Although I thought of something after I wrote street smarts, I wish I had included on the genocide issue. And the question here is, what is genocide? That's the question to ask. People complain about this.

I'll ask the atheist, what is genocide? Well, it's when a whole bunch of people get wiped out. Did you mean like what the Germans tried to do with the Jews? Yes, that was genocide. Okay, and notice by the way that they were, and this is an interesting, this is an interesting detail.

I just read about it recently because of the charges of genocide in the Middle East recently. And that is genocide is not just the action, but it's also the intention to wipe out an entire race of people. Now, it's interesting that that didn't happen with the Jews in the Second World War, but the attempt was to do that.

And millions, obviously of Jews were murdered by this attempt. Is that genocide? Yes, that's genocide. So this is, I'm kind of loosely role-playing this conversation.

Well, wait a minute. I have another question though. When the Allied soldiers invaded Germany and bombed Germany, was that genocide? Because they killed a whole lot of Germans.

Millions of them. Was that genocide? No, that wasn't genocide. Why not? Because they were attacking the ones committing genocide and trying to stop the Germans and trying to get them to stop the genocide that they were committing, though the full nature of the genocide wasn't clear at the time.

But nevertheless, the distinction is clear that there are times when, and by the way, was that my question would be, was it a good thing for the Allied soldiers to take back the continent of Europe and push the Germans back into Germany and defeat the Germans, killing a whole bunch of millions of Germans. And as it turns out, German citizens in the process, was that genocide? No. Was that a good thing? Yes, because they were stopping the genocide.

So therefore, and this is the key point, genocide is not just killing a bunch of people. Genocide is killing a bunch of people for the wrong reason, because the Germans were pursuing a genocidal approach to the Jews, but the Allies were not committing genocide against the Germans, though they killed a bunch of Germans. And just to put it into moral terms, it's not just a wrong reason.

It's an unjust reason. So it's a just reason versus an unjust reason. Yes, right.

Okay, that's a good way of putting it. Thank you. All right.

So they were justified in killing the Germans. Okay. So the real question about the alleged genocide in the Old Testament is not whether a lot of people got killed, because lots of people got killed everywhere in the Old at every time.

It wasn't just the Jews taking the land. It was the Canaanites that took the land from somebody else. It was the Assyrians.

It was the Babylonians. It was the Egyptians. It was everyone.

Okay, now this then, but does raise the question. Yeah, but God told them to do this. All right, did he have a reason? That's the question.

And there were two reasons that were, in my view, morally sufficient. And one of them was that these people were really evil. And so this was an act of judgment.

It wasn't to wipe out the entire group of people. In my view, I think there is some hyperbole that's going on there. But it was to punish the Jews that rather to flourish and provide for a savior in Jesus.

That's the long term plan. But this was the land. I will give you the land.

This is Genesis chapter 12. He even says, oh, sorry, he even says directly that he has to wait hundreds of years until their sin is so bad that it's worthy of judgment. That's in Genesis 15, exactly.

And so we see the patience of God and then God finally using a human tool to wipe out evil people. Now, people strain at the so-called genocide of the conquering of the land, but they forget about the flood. Everybody got wiped out then.

Now he didn't use a human means. He used a natural means, but he killed everybody. All right, now this, so the justification, the moral justification is a punishment on these people and a driving them out of the land just punishment and a driving them out of the land to make a place for the Jews because God promised that land to them.

Here's the other part. God doesn't need a morally sufficient reason in our minds because God himself is the maker of everything. And if you make it, it's yours.

And if yours, you can do what you want with it. And if he wants to destroy the entire world, he could do that. Now, it turns out he had a reason they were evil, but that was men, women, and child.

Everybody save eight on the whole inhabited planet. They're all gone. Now, some people

aren't going to like that.

And there is a difference between giving a satisfying answer and giving an adequate or a, what's the better word, sufficient? A sound answer, okay, a sound answer because sufficient, well, yeah, I guess sound would be the same problem. These answers are not going to be satisfying to naysayers, even though in a certain sense, their objection doesn't even make sense because if you get rid of God, then you can't even call any of these actions evil, which this atheist is identifying as evil. He's also misunderstanding the grounding notion that if God is good, what is good for God isn't necessarily applicable to us.

We don't have the same liberties that God has. That's another misstep that's big bait here. But the third thing is that God had a justifiable reason for punishing these people.

And by the way, another one's coming. It's called the book of Revelation. And a whole lot more people are going to die, massive populations because God is bringing judgment on the world.

And I've just been, I just finished reading the book of Jeremiah and Lamentations. And I'm going going through Isaiah and it is not a fun read because almost and Psalms. I'm going through Psalms every night.

I read another Psalm before I go to bed. And I'm, you know, when you get past about 25, and now I'm into almost 200, the Psalm. Almost every judge, a song is, Psalm is a, not just an acknowledgement of judgment, but the one I read last night was a celebration of judgment.

A lot of the Psalms are actually. It says that the mountains will clap their hands and the seas will rejoice because God is bringing judgment. Okay, so, so this God, God is just and right to judge sinful people.

All right. And he doesn't always do surgical strikes. Sometimes his whole populations that have to be wiped out.

And that's the way these things work. Okay, and if people don't like that, okay, what's your alternative? This is a very important question to always ask what's the alternative. So now I've addressed a little bit the genocide issue.

And by the way, these Canaanites are really bad. And if you want example, they practically practice child sacrifice. And incidentally, when the Jews did the same things that the Canaanites did, the Canaanites, I'm sorry, the Jews got the same punishment, discipline, and judgment that the Canaanites got.

Which shows it was always a matter of morality, not a matter of ethnicity or anything like that. It was a matter of what is right and what is wrong. And God said, if you do these

things, I will do the same to you.

And they did. And he did. There you go.

So the genocide ethnic cleansing charge is not an accurate charge given the actual circumstances, but they are its language that really bugs people. Okay, so now you got a rid of God. And I asked this question, and it's a part of the dialogue in street smarts.

Now you got rid of God. Okay, now what? Those those things still happen. Is genocide happen? Does the rape and tortured murder and all that ethnic cleansing? Does that happen? We just had a big incident in I think in Africa, a big massacre.

That was ethnic cleansing. That still happens. Yes, is it still evil? Yes.

Okay, explain to me how you as an atheist explain all this account for all this evil in the world when you have no basis for judging anything as evil. That's the alternative. And so now I haven't said anything about slavery.

I'll get to that in just a moment. But but notice how when you parse these things out, look carefully at it, the rhetorically compelling challenge doesn't work as well as people think it does. But you have to think more carefully about some of this.

Now the slavery issue is a little bit different. And part of the problem is the translation. And it really, really bothers me.

I talk about this in street smarts. I quanachronically. You know, the King James, let me back up the Hebrew word Abed, E-B-E-D anglicized.

Abed, Abed, I'm not sure exactly how Jews would pronounce it. But that word is the same word that's translated servant, servant, slave, slave, servant. Okay.

And prior to within the King James version, I have a concordance key to the King James version. It's almost never, Abed is almost never translated slave. At the turn of the century, a whole bunch of translations began translating that word as slave.

The problem is, of course, after the turn of the 20th century, a certain image is conjured up in our minds when we see the word slave. And we don't see what the scripture is describing there. But the scripture is describing, for the most part, is indentured servitude.

And it's the way people got jobs. And there were limitations and protections. You couldn't, you couldn't kidnap somebody for that purpose.

That's what happened in American slavery. Kidnapping was a capital crime. You couldn't just kill them with impunity.

That's murder. You could do that in the American system. You couldn't do that in the Jewish system.

That was a capital crime. If you broke a servant's tooth, because you abused them, you had to let them go. So there were all kinds of protections.

If they ran away, you weren't allowed to bring them back. That's right. In fact, they were due protection.

So anyway, there is no parallel between what people think when they see the word slave comparing it to the American system and what was actually going on in the Hebrew scriptures. Now, one other detail here is that I admit it wasn't tidy. It wasn't a perfect system, but it was nothing like the American system.

And it's been largely distorted simply because the people read the word slave and they go to town with it based on what they recall from the American system. To this, I have this comment to make and it echoes something that Jesus said with regards to divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19. Jesus makes it clear that God's purpose was not divorce.

And the Jews asked the question, well, then why did Moses make a provision for divorce in the law? And Jesus said, because of the hardness of your hearts. And so there was a provision that protected the woman. God knew that people were going to enslave other people.

Its slavery has existed from the beginning of time and then and still exists today, especially sexual slavery. Okay. There was no way that it was going to be totally obliterated at that time.

But it was Christian people and Christian principles that was the animus for obliterating slavery, at least in the West, now in England and then the US. So what God did is he created a way of protecting the servitude system that was available that some might consider, okay, that's still kind of a slavery. Okay, whatever.

But it was improving on a terrible circumstance because of the hardness of people's hearts. God wasn't promoting people owning other human beings. Rather, it was inconsistent with the creation order, but rather he is making the best of a bad situation.

And the curious thing is, though all countries practiced slavery and many still do today, it was only Christian countries that abolished it. And this is something that people don't understand. Well, a few weeks ago, Greg, we had another episode where it was called something like, did Moses do something wrong when he regulated something God hates? And so we talked a little bit more about this.

So if people have more questions about that, I recommend you go back and listen to that. But I want to make another big picture comment here, where I think the atheist is

going wrong. And it's this, if you want to determine the consistency of Christianity and evaluate the morality of the God of Christianity, you have to evaluate the God of Christianity.

And what I mean is, you have to look at what the text says about him, what he did, why he did it, and all the what he was doing through that whole time, through the whole Bible, you can't just come in and use these charged terms that create this idea that, well, I think what God did was he just wanted to kill everybody. Okay, well, you can't judge the Christian God by your idea of what you think he did. Yes.

You're bringing in other ideas that aren't related to the story. In order to understand what's happening and evaluate it, you have to understand God's judgment. You have to understand justice.

You have to understand why God did what he did, that he was giving them 400 years or however long it was for their evil to get so bad that he would judge them. And by the way, it's hard for us to understand that kind of evil now, because we live in a very civilized society. And it's hard for us to understand, well, why would God have to remove this nation from the land? But then when you think back, and just recently, if anyone saw or heard details about what Hamas did in Israel, it is so appalling and atrocious and evil, what was happening there, that I think it shocked a lot of people because it's so outside of our experience.

But when I looked at that, I thought, oh, yeah, that's that is evil. And that's the kind of evil that God was dealing with. It makes it a little bit easier to understand when we see the depth of evil because it's so outside our imagination at this point.

And a lot of it when you see films and movies, so it's it's it's glamorized in a certain way, you know, and so you don't get the full sense of it except for some really dark movies. But yeah, I agree. So, so that's my first point is that you you have you cannot come in with your ideas of genocide and what slavery was about and and call held torture if that's what he's referring to.

And think that you're you're actually evaluating Christian because you aren't you have to look at it in its own on its own terms if you want to understand. And my second big picture point is this, when it comes to slavery, how we know what God thinks about slavery. Well, let's just look at the entire story of the Bible.

What is the main event of the Old Testament? It's the Exodus. It's rescue from slavery. It's God bringing them out of slavery into freedom.

And that whole thing was only that wasn't indentured servitude either. No, that was the real, you know, crack the whip, make the bricks kind of slavery. And and that was to serve as the image for what he would do overall, his biggest plan is our redemption is

our freedom from the slavery of our own sin.

And so the entire Bible is against slavery, the entire Bible. That's the whole big picture. So you can't say God's forced slavery just because he regulated it, he allowed it to happen.

We know from the entire story that God is not forced slavery. So and that just brings us back to my first point, which is you have to look at the whole thing. You can't just pick little things out and think that you're saying something that actually critiques Christianity unless you take everything into account.

I was just thinking to say that God is no more in favor of slavery per se than he is in favor of divorce per se. Though he made provision a protective provision for divorce because of hardness of heart, he also made a protective provision for in for servanthood, what it amounts to indentured servanthood for the sake of the good of the people. And again, I want to underscore this is not the kind of slavery that people picture when they see the word.

And this is why the translation is so unfortunate. And I do not understand why the preponderance of translations now use the word slave to describe in English to described indentured servants since the word EBIT is the same Hebrew word to translate either direction. It just depends on the context.

And we are not believers are not slaves of God. I think MacArthur went kind of overboard on this once. But if you have to think of the connotation of the word slave and the connotation of the word servant, and it becomes very clear that even in the New Testament, the word doulas, which serves either function should be translated servant.

We are the servants of God. We are not the abused slaves of God. We are the cherished servants of God.

And this is just another example where a translation choice can create a false, a false understanding or a false impression about the nature of the thing. And just to add on to that a little bit, that's only one way of looking at who we are. We're also children who got we're adopted children were brothers of Christ.

So it's a completely different situation than that of a slave. Now, I want to just say one, I know we're way over time, but I just want to say one last thing in case this atheist, it's unclear what he means by directly allowed these things. So maybe he means, maybe he's talking about the removal of the Canaanites, and we've already discussed that.

I'm not sure what he means, but maybe he just means God doesn't stop evil. Well, that doesn't mean that God endorses everything. He doesn't stop.

And so just in case he's, he's saying this, I just want to say this, God has a lot of reason,

we live in a fallen world. So people are doing evil and God doesn't stop all evil. But we know what God thinks about that evil because of direct revelation.

And we also know Romans one talks about how he gave people over to evil. Now, why would he do that? Well, one thing that Roman says is that their evil demonstrates God's righteousness. So when God gives people over and then he judges them, he's revealing his own righteousness.

And that all plays a part in this overall story of redemption and revealing himself to people. So everything that happens does play a part in that that doesn't mean it's something God loves. He might have some good goal that he's giving people over.

There's a reason for it. He wants to reveal how being apart from him, what that results in, the pain, the suffering, how bad it is, he wants to reveal his, his righteousness and justice. There are all sorts of good things he's doing through that, even though that thing in itself is not good.

And again, you have to understand the whole story, if you're going to make sense of all of this. I agree. Well done.

Well, now we're really. Oh, we did not get to the second question. We'll get to that next show.

Maybe we'll do that next show. Yes. All right.

Well, thanks for sticking around this long today. If you have a question, you can send it on X with the hashtag SDR. Ask or you can go to our website at SDR.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cokel for Stand to Reason.