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## Does Naturalism Necessarily Lead to Moral Relativism?

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**#STRask** - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether naturalism necessarily leads to moral relativism and the ways naturalists try to ground objective morality.

\* Does naturalism necessarily lead to moral relativism, and what are some ways naturalists try to claim objective morality?

### Transcript

Thanks for joining us on the #straskpodcast. As always, we have some great questions for Greg today. Welcome, Greg.

Thank you, Amy. We're going to start with one of your favorite topics, I think. This one comes from Eric.

Does naturalism necessarily lead to moral relativism? What are some ways naturalists try to claim objective morality? Okay, that's a really good question because it's so pertinent. Naturalism is probably being used here as a synonym with physicalism or materialism. These are metaphysical views, and a metaphysical view is a view that tells you essentially what the foundational fundamental nature of reality is like.

It tells you what's real. Naturalism or materialism or physicalism, the only things that are real are physical entities, the kinds of things that could be examined by science, for example. They are kind of pushed and pulled around these entities by natural law.

If somebody who are being really precise, they'd say, "Well, what natural laws are aren't actually laws outside of the system that cause things to happen." They are just summaries of the regularities of nature that we observe because part of naturalism has to do with, and materialism and physicalism has to do with the physical nature of the world. So there can't be non-physical laws causing physical things to happen. So to be very precise then, what we mean by naturalism is the physical world operating according to regularities that we observe, and that continue to operate as far as we know according to those regularities, and that's why science is possible.

We look at the stuff and the way it moves consistently, and therefore we can draw conclusions and make predictions and use the physical world to our benefit. So that's naturalism. Now, you notice though that nothing in my comments has said anything about morality.

So where does morality fit in? Well, let's just think about the nature of morality. The binaryity of nature entails assessments of actions and conditions which assessments are not pertaining to anything physical. So when I say that rape is wrong, rape is a physical action.

The wrongness of rape is not physical. That is something that is brought to bear as an assessment. It doesn't follow natural law because there is no natural law related to rape.

No one's ever claimed such a thing. It is not a physical category, not a physical property. It's a moral property, an ethical thing, so to speak.

Which by the way is why a lot of people deny objective morality or the kind of morality I'm just discussing, this outside of us, this mind-independent quality that we have access to in some way to assess certain actions. And they'll say there are no non-natural qualities of any kind, no properties that are non-natural. And if morality turns out to be a non-natural quality, then there ain't none of that stuff.

No. So this is what we're talking about is the nature of a worldview compared to a different worldview. A worldview is one's take of the nature of reality.

If you are a materialist or a physicalist or a naturalist and I'm using those terms interchangeably now, though they have little nuances, but for our sake, they aren't those nuances are relevant, then you are inside a world that is closed off to any outside non-physical things. They just don't exist. So there's no God in that world.

There are no angels, there are no demons, there are no leprechauns, there are no miracles, there are, well now you've got another problem here. What about thoughts? Thoughts are not physical. They may be connected with physical things like brain activity, but the brain activity is different from the nature of the thought.

I'm having a thought about being on the show right now with Amy, but nothing in my brain corresponds with that thought. What's going on in my brain is sea fibers firing, but a sea fiber isn't a thought about being on a show. Now one may cause the other.

They may be constantly correlated, but they're different. Point of making is if you're a physicalist, you're really living within a truncated world. It's limited to only those things that can be assessed in principle now by science and chemistry and physics.

And those things incidentally control everything. The reason that science works is because if you set up the physical circumstances just the same in every single case, you

always get the same consequence. That's called experimental repeatability.

Why is that? Because the physical world run by physical natural law is deterministic. You set the dominoes up in the same way every time they're going to fall in the same way every time. Now this creates a problem if that's your worldview for free will.

Okay, what about personal freedom? Well that becomes an issue because that requires something outside of the physical world that can control those dominoes. And stop the dominoes from falling, can initiate the falling of the dominoes. That's called agency when an individual agent starts or stops something.

The point I'm making though is if you're stuck in a worldview that is a naturalistic, physicalistic, empiricistic, empiricism is the way that you learn about that world because you're looking at the physical qualities and this is how you know what's going on because that's all that's left to you by and large in a physical world. If you're stuck in that world, there's a whole bunch of stuff that seems real to us common sense persons that cannot be real from the perspective of that worldview, which is why Daniel Dennett, one of the so-called new atheists, says that consciousness, that is one's awareness of one's self and the rest of the world, well that's not physical obviously. It can't be reduced to something physical and so Daniel Dennett understanding such simply declares that consciousness is an illusion, pardon me for chuckling but it's so obviously false.

You think you're thinking about yourself, you are having an awareness, that awareness is an illusion, it's this point. There are problems with that, I don't have time to get into that but notice what he does. He has to deny something obvious about the world or no to hold on to his naturalism, his physicalism.

Now zeroing it down, the same thing is true about morality. Safety is a feature of the world that provides a basis to assess whether an action or a thought or a circumstance is ethically corrected on, is right or wrong in the sense of being moral. I'm kind of using the same words to define the words but I think we all know the difference between getting your sums right and which is one way of thinking about being correct and whether you solve the problems without cheating.

That's a different type of right but there are two different categories. One is functional, maybe you could say, the other one is moral. In the second case though, this moral obligation has no place in the physicalistic naturalistic world and therefore if you're physicalistic, naturalistic, materialistic then even morality is an illusion.

Now there's two ways out of this, one is to partially, well let me back up, the most popular way is to attribute morality to evolution, Darwinian evolution. We learn morality because that's how we get our genes into the next generation so we evolved these ideas of right or wrong. Now keep in mind what has been evolved according to this view are ideas of right or wrong.

What wrong doesn't evolve because right or wrong is not physical and Darwinism is a completely materialistic process. What ends up evolving is our beliefs about things, not the things themselves, that not whether not morality proper. In other words, biology cannot make right wrong.

It's a different kind of assessment and if Darwinism is all we have to explain morality, then it turns out there is no objective morality of any kind. There are just beliefs people have and when the morality is in your head on the inside and not in the world on the outside that's relativism. Ability on the evolutionary take of things is simply beliefs individuals have in their heads subjectively that certain behaviors are right or wrong, that evolution has put there somehow to help them get their genes into the next generation most effectively.

What evolution cannot do is make anything right or wrong in itself. That's why the notion of right or wrong since it's no longer objective, it's subjective can change as the subject changes. Which by the way, when I say subject, I mean the individual, not the topic and it changes when the individual changes.

Which by the way, raises a question. If Darwinism is all we have access to or is the only means by which we can in this system have moral sentiments or beliefs or feelings, then how can anyone else be faulted for not having the same evolutionarily developed moral sentiments that you happen to have? People complain about the God of the Bible. Look at how evil he is.

Well, wait a minute, you're judging them on your evolutionary development. Maybe the people who wrote the Bible had a different evolutionary development and that was right to them. What are your grounds for objecting? Now in this system, there can't be any because everything is individual and subjective.

The only way you can make a real substantive objection is to have an objective rule that applies to everybody equally, but now you're out of Darwinian model and you're into something else. Darwinism is one way they go, it gives you relativism. The other way, some go very few.

Almost never heard this. It's called moral Platonism. This is an attempt to hang on to morality but get rid of God.

Moral Platonism is an adaptation of Plato's forms, these ideals that exist in the abstract realm and one might say that these ideals include moral ideals like kindness and goodness and mercy and forgiveness and whatever ideals that you have in mind. Notice by the way, when you do this, you are outside of your naturalism. In order to go to Plato here, you have to surrender your naturalism at least at some level.

The question is, can even Plato's forms or a platonic morality give us objective morality

that we're concerned about? The answer is no. The reason is because these things on this view are abstract. Abstract things don't do anything.

Kind of they're real and some can test whether they're real or not, they still have no power to do things. Just because there is an abstract form for kindness doesn't mean you have an obligation to be that but isn't that the nature of morality that we're discussing, the obligation to be good. The platonic forms can't do that so it's not going to be an adequate answer.

The long and short of it is, well the long part is behind me, not the short. I don't know of any other way that a naturalist or an atheistic naturalist, materialist, physicalist can ground genuine morality. Ontologically we're not talking epistemology here.

Oh, I know it's right or wrong. It's so obvious. Well, that's epistemology.

It is so obvious in many cases. The question is what makes those things that are so obvious right and wrong? Morality is a matter of obligation. To whom or what are we obligated? That's the question.

And that's the question that can't be answered by a naturalist because there is no to whom or what in existence according to that worldview that is adequate to explain our moral obligations. This is why I think that the moral argument is one of the most powerful arguments for the existence of God, especially since there is a problem of evil which proves that moral is objective, not relative. I think that's such an important point, Greg, that the obligation is not, can never be in any sort of materialistic system.

So even if you say that, well, objectively, if you do these certain things, you have a better life, which already smuggles in some idea of good. Sam Harris. Yeah.

That's atheist Sam Harris's approach, but you're right. That's some, smuggles in what it means to be better. But even if you say there's some sort of objective thing going on, there's no way to ground obligation without a person behind it.

Would you say that's? Yeah. That's like saying there's a, there is a, here's how, here, here is how to hit a nail with your hammer without hitting your thumb. There's a better way to do that.

This is the good way to do it so you don't hit your thumb because if you hit your thumb, that's on human flourishing. Okay. Well, that's good only in a consequentialist way.

That's a way to keep you from hitting it. But what makes not hitting your thumb a good thing in the abstract, in the absolute sense, nothing. That's just simply presumed.

Okay. So we can find better ways to do all kinds of things. But if we're saying we want to find better ways to accomplish the good thing, now we need an external standard to

clarify what makes that thing good that we're trying to accomplish.

It's presumed it's better because we don't like something. We don't like pain. So that brings it back to the idea that it's just what we like.

So I'm trying to think if there was anything else. Oh, one last thing I wanted to say about this, and you touched on this, Greg, Eric asked, does it lead to moral relativism? And I think that depends on what you mean by lead to. If you're asking just intellectually, does it follow, then yes.

Does it lead every person who's a naturalist to be a moral relativist? No, because a lot of people are inconsistent. So and this goes back to what you were saying, Greg, about epistemology. We can know because we're human beings made in the image of God, what is right and wrong, even if our ideas don't support that.

So don't assume that we're saying that nobody can be good. Well, Christopher Hitchen would offer this challenge. Show me one good thing you can do as a theist that I can't do as an atheist.

And he misses the point completely as brilliant as he is. He can go through any action virtually. Now, of course, he can't glorify God because he isn't believing God.

So that's one thing he can't do. And that's the sumum bohtum. So with, but with that aside, I'll just take his challenge of face value.

He can do anything that I can do apart from that one thing. He can even tithe for good to say. One guy made a joke.

Oh, you can't tithe. Of course, he can tithe. Okay.

The question isn't whether he can go through the motions. The question is whether the motions that either the Christian or Christopher Hitchens emulates are good. If there is no objective standard for goodness, then Christopher Hitchens actions that emulate the Christians are not good.

And neither are the Christians. They're not good either. They're just actions.

If it turns out that there is an objective standard, then that grounds the goodness of the Christian's actions. But if Christopher Hitchen does the same nice things, then they're just as good. He just has no rationale in his worldview to make sense of that.

So we're not denying this to underscore your point, another aspect of your point that even people who are atheists can't do good things if morality is objective. If there is a God, if there is no God, then morality is not objective, then it's subjective. And then there is no objectively good for anybody to do Chris Hitchen or Mother Teresa for that matter.

And that's the issue. It's called the grounding problem, but it's the issue. I talk about that in the 10th anniversary edition of Tactics.

You can go there for it and I'll probably talk more about it. This is the problem with the problem of evil. I have a chapter in this new book called the problem with the problem of evil.

And you can't have a problem of evil unless you have objective morality, but you can't have objective morality without God. And therefore you can't use the problem of evil to get rid of God because you're speaking incoherently. Well, Greg, we've done two episodes in a row with one question.

It's not a move, but they're important. I actually have another question to follow up from this one. So I'll save it for the next time since we are at 20 minutes.

So all of you, this is another cliffhanger. I think the second time I've done this. So we will build on this in the next episode, Greg.

So thank you, Eric, for sending in your question. If you have a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #STRask or send it through our website. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.

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