

They must not believe in God

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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“They must not believe in God.”

These words from my daughter came after a conversation we had been having at bedtime about someone who she had heard yelling at their baby. For her, it was clear: someone who believed in God simply would not do something as monstrous as scream “shut up!” at an infant. People who believe in God don’t do such things, after all. Right?

Needless to say, an interesting conversation followed. We talked about how all kinds of people who believe all kinds of things exhibit all kinds of behaviours. We talked about belief and behaviour and the connection between the two. We talked about how we don’t always do the good we ought (or want) to do and how we sometimes do the bad we don’t want to do ([Romans 7:14-25](#)). We talked about repentance and forgiveness and redemption. It was an eventful bedtime—at least, more eventful than usual.

And, of course, is set my mind a-whirring on timeless question of the grounds of goodness. Is God required to legitimate objective goodness? Can we be good without God? What about the bad behaviour of those who claim to know God? These are old, old questions dating at least as far back as Plato’s *Euthyphro* and have constituted the subject matter of countless books and articles and lectures and conversations in coffee shops ever since.

They are also the subject of a recent post called “[Good Minus God](#)” by University of Massachusetts Amherst philosopher Louise Antony, for [The Stone](#), the *New York Times*’ philosophy blog. I didn’t have high expectations in clicking the link, truth be told. This way of framing the issue is rarely helpful, and it seems

always to centre on either, a) demonstrating that there exist good people who do not believe in God (hardly a revelation); or b) that belief in God is required to do good (at least the right kind) in the world, depending on whether it is atheism or theism being advocated. Regrettably, my low expectations were barely met.

Antony offers a fairly predictable critique of “divine command theory” (D.C.T.) and “divine independence theory” (D.I.T.). In the former case, if things are only good because God decrees that they be so, then anything God decrees is good and goodness is arbitrary. The illustrative example is equally predictable: “If God were to command you to eat your children, then it would be ‘right’ to eat your children.” In the latter case, if what is good is *independent* of God—that is, if God prefers it *because* it is good—then its goodness obtains its existence and resides outside of God, therefore God is unnecessary.

But surely there are better ways of framing the connection between goodness and God. What about, for example, the possibility that God is inherently good and loving? What if there is no contradiction between a property owing its existence to God *and* it being constitutive of God’s identity? What about the possibility that in creating us in his image, God made us to resonate with and respond to what is good? What if our human evaluating and deliberating upon matters of good/bad, right/wrong is not us *defining* or *determining* what is good, but *responding*, more or less accurately, to the goodness that precedes, surrounds, guides, and leads us?

For me, this provides a better image of both God and human beings. God does not arbitrarily decide that some things are good and some are bad just to see if his puppets will dance accordingly, and we do not slavishly obey and align ourselves with a dictatorial God’s commands simply because “God said so.” Part of what it means to bear God’s image, it seems to me, is to share a deep and intrinsic connection to goodness. As believers, we do not (or *ought* not) behave ourselves out of fear or duty or out of the promise of reward or punishment, as Antony suggests in this post. Rather we strive to do what is good out of a God-given hunger and longing, however fitfully and incoherently this is understood or expressed, to be and to

do what we were made to be and to do.

Of *course* commands are necessary at various points in the human story. Of *course* we do not and cannot comprehensively apprehend the scope of what is good and true and beautiful. Of *course* we do not always live consistently with what we do know of these things. This is part of what it means to be fallen creatures, whether we believe in God or not. We are complicated beings who believe and do things for a dizzying amount and variety of reasons, some good, some bad.

As disappointing as I found Antony's construal of the view that God is necessary for good, I was even more surprised by how little she had to say about the atheistic justification for goodness. This is about all we are offered:

We "moralistic atheists" do not see right and wrong as artifacts of a divine protection racket. Rather, we find moral value to be immanent in the natural world, arising from the vulnerabilities of sentient beings and from the capacities of rational beings to recognize and to respond to those vulnerabilities and capacities in others.

Aside from the fact that there is nothing inconsistent between believing that the above tells part of the story *and* believing that God is involved in the process, this simply isn't very much to go on. Why might such a thing as morality be immanent in the natural world? Why might our species alone among sentient beings have the capacity to identify and reflect upon and respond to this immanent property? Why, for that matter, might sentience and consciousness be linked to morality? At some level, the answer will undoubtedly be linked to *some* kind of evolutionary advantage that these capacities conferred upon their possessors, but these questions are mostly left untouched.

At any rate, after reading this post my thoughts returned to my conversation with my daughter. How would I like for her to understand the connection between God and goodness? How

would I like her to understand our human inconsistencies and confusions when it comes to what we believe and what we do? How would I like for her to understand and affirm the goodness that she sees around her, whatever its professed source?

Quite simply, I think, I would like for her to know that God is good, that he has made (all of) us to long for, respond to, and participate in goodness, and that all people—whatever they “believe” about God—resist God and resist good. Most of all, I think that I would like her to know that God delights in, longs for, and pursues his children with a fierce and determined goodness. The good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, the confused and conflicted, the rebellious, the joyful, the just-about-convinced, the hard-hearted and stubborn, the fearful, the expectant and hopeful.

Which is to say, all of us.

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