

Chapter 6 – The Roots of Morality: Why are we good?

The gist of Dawkins' argument is this:

There is evidence that we have a common morality across the globe, whether people are religious or not. In fact, in certain moral dilemmas, religious people and non-religious people respond the same way. This shows that religion is not the origin of our morality. Instead, our sense of what is right and wrong must have evolved. So he concludes, "... we do not need God to be good."¹

Here we need to note two of the problems with Dawkins argument.

1. This is a straw man argument

The real question is, "Is it possible to have a concept of right and wrong without God **defining** what absolute right and wrong is?" But Dawkins changes the question to make it, "Can we be good without God?" which is entirely different!

Of course an atheist can do morally good things without believing that God is there. And of course, no one is claiming that actually we need the Ten Commandments written down for us before we know that murder is wrong. In contrast, Christians argue that all humans know that things like murder are wrong, precisely because we are made in God's image and so have a conscience. (See Romans 1:18ff)

The real question is where does this sense of right and wrong come from? The fact that we all have a sense of right and wrong does not for a moment show that this sense does not come from religion. On the contrary, it is evidence that we are all made in the image of God and therefore all have a conscience, as the bible teaches.

So the title "A case study in the roots of morality" which Dawkins gives to one section is actually misleading. It should really be entitled "A case study in the ubiquity of conscience" It is actually evidence for the fact that we are all made in the image of God. It is evidence for God, not against God.

2. He provides a story about how evolution might lead to morality, however he does not prove the case at all

There are alternative explanations involving God which are, in my view, much more convincing.

Dawkins' argument that Natural Selection can explain morality is as follows.

¹ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.226

It is not creatures that behave selfishly, but genes that behave selfishly. The selfish behaviour of genes can actually give rise to morality among people in four ways.

- Genetic kinship – Creatures with similar genes are programmed to be nice to each other so that the genes can survive. (e.g. Parents look after their children, or siblings care for each other).
- Reciprocation for favours given – Creatures learn to be nice to each other on the principal that “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.”
- There are benefits to getting a reputation for generosity: the generous are rewarded by those around the while the ungenerous are punished
- In some cases, superiority may be gained by being generous as a creature is seen to be dominant.

David Robertson replies to this argument as follows:²

1. This is not actually morality, but is just about selfishness. It defines morality too narrowly as altruism.
2. It is deterministic. In other words, we are just programmed to behave in a certain way, and we have no choice. A drunkard is a drunkard because of his genes. That’s just the way it is, according to Dawkins.
3. This morality is not absolute. Ethics become situational. If there are no moral absolutes, then no one can actually say that child abuse, rape or murder are wrong.
4. In fact, the Darwinian system cannot argue for morality as it has no basis to decide what is right or wrong. The best it can do is argue in favour of altruism.

Robertson goes on to quote Richard Dawkins himself, from *The Blind Watchmaker*, on this point:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.³

In contrast, the Bible’s view of the world provides us with:

- An absolute grounding for what is right and wrong
- An explanation of why humans are incapable of consistently being good⁴

² Robertson, *Letters*, pp.90-91

³ Robertson, *Letters*, pp. 91-92,

⁴ See, for example, Hebrews 9:1-14 – the problem is not the dealing with the outward effects of sin, but with the perfecting of our consciences.

- A solution to the problem, through Jesus, not just a description of the problem.

Here I would argue the biblical explanation has greater explanatory power and a greater coherence than Dawkins' story based on natural selection.