Sample: Philosophy - Argumentative Essay

Can one be moral and not believe in God?

The question of what makes people observe moral laws and behave according to them is one of the most challenging and controversial not only for philosophy and ethics but also for other spheres of human knowledge, including theism, epistemology, psychology, and others. The arguments and controversies surrounding the issue have been studied for centuries, and various approaches have been offered to account for the sources of human morality and ethics. However, the arguments are still going on, and realities of people's daily lives, as well as various events taking place across the world, only add to the complexity of the problem under discussion. The key point in the discussion remains virtually unchanged for centuries and can be formulated in the following way: does objective morality depend on God or, in other words, can an individual be moral and not believe in God? The study of existing approaches and interpretations offered by them, as well as a multitude of facts from human history, does not seem to be a sufficient basis for any of the two opposed positions to prove completely its validity. Therefore, similarly to other major questions, the answer to this one is based on certain premises that are recognized by both opposed parties but get different interpretations, with neither of them demonstrating arguments that can completely explain the truthfulness of their stance against the position of the opposite party. However, this is the question not of a purely philosophical nature that can be left for experts to dwell on. Instead, this is something all people have to think of and find their own answer to if they want their lives to have meaning and plan them consciously, not reducing themselves to taking care merely of basic daily needs. Taking into consideration available interpretations and discussions, it is more plausible to claim that the principles of human morality are universal in the contemporary society and, therefore, an individual can be moral without having faith in God.

1

Starting from the periods of ancient history, people strived to find an all-embracing definition of morality, the sources of it and effective ways of maintaining morality in society. For ancient philosophers, ethical questions started from the point of finding out what good means and how happiness and good can be achieved. With the progress of the human society, the questions inevitable came down to what the origin and characteristics of moral values were, as well as how their sources and objectivity could be explained. Ethics is an important part of various philosophical schools that was developed by outstanding philosophers like Plato, later in Kant's theory of moral imperative, by pragmatics, and other systems of philosophy. The key question of ethics has always been the objectivity of moral values. How deeply are moral values engrained in human mind and behavior and are they guarded by a supreme force or result form human experience, social conventions, and other wisdoms developed according to standards of human communities and societies and, therefore, operating as a kind of complex reflexes? Is there a foundation outside human consciousness that guides human actions by setting standards independently of people's apprehending their source? What makes people behave morally, a convention that has been worked out by many years of social experience and if yes, how it gets resolved in situations of conflict with self-interest?

The theistic position recognizes the objectivity of moral laws and values due to them being unquestionably posed by God. Echoing Plato's concept of supreme pure forms that are inherently good and, moreover, the only source of the good for people, religions and theist-based concepts proclaim God's holy will as the only and ultimate moral authority and source of moral values for people. According to these views, only a perfect, unblemished entity like God is capable of setting absolute standards of moral behavior that people should be guided by in a variety of situations they find themselves in. The loving, generous, just, and forgiving nature of

God is yet another manifestation of His supreme morality over anything that can be suggested by people themselves. Analyzing the arguments concerning the objective morality that exists independently of God and His will, theists present the following arguments.

The claim of humans having a certain awareness of morality reduces complex moral values to biological mechanisms and functions that developed in the course of adaptation to environment. Such an understanding of morality cannot explain its essence since it reduces moral values and principles to biological mechanisms possessed by different living beings and makes the understanding of morality superficial and illusory by depriving it of its profound meaning. The only principle capable of securing the objectivity of moral laws, values, and duties is human faith in God. In a world without God, any moral principles may easily become subjective and non-binding. Their interpretation then becomes ambiguous, and the basic questions of what is good and what is bad become vague and lend themselves to different interpretations. Therefore, God is the only guarantee of the objectivity of moral principles and values that is ubiquitous and sufficient and, therefore, directs human morality on the principles that are laid down in the tenets of all major religions (Craig, 2014). God's ideal nature is supposed to act as a guarantee of the absolute and objective nature of morality. In addition, God has set standards that are unquestionable due to their highest imaginable standards of morality. Available to everybody by means of holy books like the Bible or Quran, these tenets have been tested by many centuries of human experience of living in accordance with them. No other sources can be as true and reliable as these sacred books containing the God's words addressed to people. Therefore, checking one's actions and decisions against these "golden standards" of God's wisdom and living in accordance with the will of God is the moral virtue that serves as a source for other moral principles and values people live by.

The presupposition that a true or natural morality inherent to people exists outside their faith in God and that it is definitely more complex than what we see as conventional rules raises the question of its origin, which again leads to the idea of a certain outside force guiding people's will (Taylor, 1984, p. 56).

The philosophers who deny faith in God as the key premise for a person to be moral underscore the principle of moral objectivity as being independent of people's religious affinity. "The existence of and actions of God make no difference to the fact that there are moral truths, but that they make a great difference to what those moral truths are" (Swinburne, 2008, p.7). It would be very tempting to have a clear-cut classification of actions that discriminates all of them into good, bad, and indifferent (neutral) ones, as suggested by Swinburne (2008). He proposes such a simple classification based on the principles of whether actions are obligatory and, therefore, good, or obligatory not to do and, therefore, bad. The rest of the actions are, most probably, supposed to be indifferent, although the author of the article further focuses his attention only on good and bad actions. However, in a number of situations such a classification may get ambiguous. Nevertheless, various examples from human history illustrate people's principles of high morality as being independent of their believing in God. In fact, even the story of a Good Samaritan from the Bible confirms the principle that the true moral nature of a person is broader than affinity to God.

Secular morality comprises ethical concepts that exist independently of religious tenets and traditions. Humanism, fighting for human rights, free thinking, and other democratic and humane principles developed by the contemporary society have their own principles that suit people of any religion, as well as those who have no religious beliefs. This ubiquitous nature of such moral principles spells their own great moral value. The concept of human goodness as a result of

4

sublimated human experience is a broad enough aspect that explains different principles of human actions and decisions and, in addition, avoids religious dogmatism in interpreting them. Such an approach can also help to integrate the principles and tenets of different religions, for example, oriental and occidental, the worldview concepts of which are different enough. At present, when "even religious leaders talk more about global poverty and climate change and less about promiscuity and pornography" (Singer, 2011, p. 2), the principles of what can be seen as practical ethics become ever more important. "An ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice" (Singer, 2011, p. 2). In reality, many people who do not have true beliefs in God demonstrate ethical principles, while a religious person who claims loyalty to God's principles and tenets may turn out to be immoral in his or her personal life and attitudes to other people. Therefore, religion is in no way a guarantee of morality in terms of practical ethics exercised by its adherents. However, it may have made (historically) an important contribution to the moral principles of the family and community that have a strong influence of the ethics of young children and teenagers maturing in them. Therefore, a person does not have to believe in God to be moral, although the humane religious principles may be an important part of the integrated concepts of morality exercised by a family, community or society. The contemporary society, despite all its flaws and deficiencies, is committed to developing universal principles of human morality that can provide an adequate basis for the moral progress of any individual or entity, no matter what their religious or atheistic views can be.

References

Craig, W. L. (2014). Can We Be Good without God? *Reasonable Faith with William Craig*.

Retrieved from http://www.reasonablefaith.org/can-we-be-good-without-god

Singer P. (2011). *Practical Ethics*. 3d ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Swinburne, R. (2008). God and Morality. *Think 20*(7), 7-15. doi:10.1017/S1477175608000158

Taylor, R. (1984). *Good and Evil*. New York: Prometheus Books.