

The Argument from Morality

“Examine the key features of the Moral Argument”

The experience of morality affects us all, and it affects us all in a very similar way; as a species we can have some very clear-cut ideas as to what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’. If we are to assert that humanity shares a common morality they we are led to question where that morality came from – and the argument from Morality suggests God - arguing from these seemingly objective morals we experience, to the existence of the God of classical theism.

There are four key versions of the argument, which can be generalised into two key features of the argument – either our sense of morality is derived from God. In this case the set of rules we experience as ‘morality’ have been built into us – or they are funnelled into us through the conscience. The second key feature of the argument is where morality objectively points towards God; with these versions God is inferred from our appraisal of the world around us.

The classic form of the argument comes from Aquinas, as the fourth of his five ways to argue the existence of God, as laid out in *Summa Theologica*. This version uses our experience of ‘goodness’ in the world to point towards a God. In the world we use “good” quantitatively, “Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like”ⁱ. It therefore follows that at the extremes of the scale there has to be an ‘ultimate’ good, beyond which nothing can be any more ‘good’. Aquinas calls this ultimate good, God.

D.I. Trethowen presents another key feature of the argument in his modern version. Trethowen rejects logic in establishing God’s existence; instead he bases belief on religious experience. Trethowen establishes that every time we made a decision, we feel a sense of obligation to the ‘right’ course of action. This obligation is based on the fact we appreciate each other’s personal value. For example, we generally accept murder to be wrong because it infringes on other peoples’ value. Just as the value of money has to be set by something external – i.e. the banks – so our personal value has

ⁱ *Summa Theologica* by St. Thomas Aquinas; cited in Faithnet.org.uk

to come from somewhere. To Trethowen this value came from God, “*we have value because we receive it from a source of value ... that is what I mean by God.*”ⁱ

Following this through every time we make a moral decision we are considering our God-given value, making the obligations we feel an indirect experience of God.

The remaining two version of the argument, by Cardinal Newman and HP Owen are different because they argue directly from our experience to God, whereas the arguments by Aquinas and Trethowen point towards God from the world around us. Cardinal Newman argues from our experience of the conscience – which he takes to be the voice of God. He says “*we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is one to whom we are responsible.*”ⁱⁱ This means our feelings of guilt in the conscience are the result of feeling responsible to *someone*, Newman takes this ‘someone’ to be God.

The final key version of the argument comes from H P Owen. Owen observes that just as an arrow requires the existence of an archer, so do laws require the existence of a law-maker. This version depends on our experience of objective laws – laws which span cultures, races and continents. Trethowen notes that “[*objective laws*] are far from self explanatory”, since these object laws cannot just ‘be’ (“*it is impossible to think of a command without also thinking of commander*”ⁱⁱⁱ) they must come from a law-maker, who we shall call God.

ⁱ *Absolute Value* by D. I. Trethowen; cited in *The Philosophy of Religion for A Level*.

ⁱⁱ *A Grammar of Ascent* by Cardinal Newman; cited in *The Philosophy of Religion for A Level*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* by HP Owen; cited in *The Philosophy of Religion for A Level*.