

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper, I will argue for an evidential connection between Christian moral behavior and the existence of the Christian God. By Christian moral behavior, I mean the set of actions performed by Christians that can be judged as either being morally good or morally bad. By the Christian God, I mean the entity recognized by the three major faith traditions: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. While it is difficult to achieve consensus on all of the details, such an entity is commonly believed to possess attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection. Furthermore, most who identify as Christians believe that this entity bears an important relation to human beings via creation, revelation, incarnation, and other actions throughout human history.

Let C represent the claim that the moral behavior of Christians who satisfy the appropriate conditions is better to some significant degree than the moral behavior of non-Christians. What those appropriate conditions are will vary from tradition to tradition. However, each of the major faith traditions identifies some path towards the cultivation of virtue. This path may consist of practices like the sacraments, service, or various devotional practices. The assumption here is that there is some means by which we can identify those Christians who meet the appropriation conditions referred to in C.

In the second section of this essay, I will defend two claims. First, I will defend the claim that the probability of C is significantly higher given the hypothesis of God's existence than it would be given the hypothesis of God's non-existence. Second, I will defend the claim that the probability of not C is significantly higher given the hypothesis of God's non-existence than it would be given the hypothesis of God's existence. In the third section, I will argue that it is possible to make comparative judgments between the moral behavior of Christians and the moral behavior of non-Christians.

## **2. The Evidential Connection between Moral Behavior and God's Existence**

In this section I will argue for the following two claims:

H1: The probability of C is significantly higher given the hypothesis of God's existence than it would be given the hypothesis of God's non-existence.

H2: The probability of not C is significantly higher given the hypothesis of God's non-existence than it would be given the hypothesis of God's existence.

My argument for both claims will appeal to two notions in Christian theology. The first is the idea of sanctification. The second is the idea of a fallen nature. My argument is that the conjunction of sanctification and fallen nature imply H1. If there are such things as sanctification and fallen nature, then we should expect a gap between the moral behavior of Christians and the moral behavior of non-Christians, i.e. we should expect C. Furthermore, the nonexistence of both sanctification and fallen natures imply H2. If neither of those things exist, then we should expect there to be no gap, i.e. we should expect not-C.

I assume that both notions are closely tied with the existence of God as understood by Christians. Both ideas are present in some form when examine the scriptural data. Given the role that these notions play in Christian theology, to deny these notions while at the same time affirming the existence of God will amount to the affirmation of a god that is outside of Christian recognition. The following examination of scriptural data is intended to support the claim that the Christian God exists just in case the notions of sanctification and fallen nature are true. Consequently, the discussion serves to support H1 and H2. I will begin with the notion of sanctification.

Sanctification is a process by which an individual becomes holy. The word "holy", as it is found in the Bible, is generally understood to mean "set apart." Holiness has both ritualistic and moral connotations. It is the moral understanding of holiness that interests us here, and I will show below that scriptural data supports the view that the moral element of holiness is implied by sanctification. Hence, the Doctrine of Sanctification is more or less generally understood as the thesis that individuals who meet certain requirements (e.g. faith, works, etc.) will be made holy by God.

We can find a number of cases in the Bible where the reader is either commanded or exhorted to live a holy life. An example of a such a passage can be found in Colossians 3:1-17. As this passage makes clear, Christians are exhorted to live morally praiseworthy lives and to avoid living lives that are morally blameworthy. These sorts of prescriptive passages provide support for the idea of sanctification if we assume the truth of the “ought implies can” principle. The reasoning goes as follows: God, communicating to us via divinely inspired text, would not command us to live virtuous lives if we were not able to live virtuous lives. Since God does command us to live virtuous lives, it follows that we possess the capacity to live such lives. If, despite our best efforts, we could not live the lives God commands, and if the New Testament is a reliable source of divine revelation, then what follows is God must be an entity other than that of traditional Christian belief (i.e. this god is a liar, makes commands out of ignorance, or etc.).

Aside from injunctions to live a life of virtue, there are also a number of passages where the audience receives some form of assurance that they will have the resources and assistance needed to live virtuous lives. An example can be found in 2 Peter 1:3-11. Similar kinds of passages can also be found in the Old Testament. The following excerpt is taken from Ezekiel 36:24-32.

The support that passages like these provide for H1 is straightforward. God promises to provide the means by which the appropriate individuals can live virtuous lives. Therefore, we should expect the appropriate individuals to live virtuous lives. In conjunction with the notion of fallen nature, which I will discuss below, we should expect the lives of these individuals to be significantly more virtuous than individuals with no such relation to God.

The idea of a fallen nature is the notion that human beings are somehow spiritually and morally defective. This defect brings about a tendency in an individual to commit sin. Sin is generally understood as any offense against God. This defective state is often associated with the Doctrine of Original Sin. Briefly stated, the Doctrine of Original Sin holds that the fallen nature of humanity came

about as a result of events described in the third chapter of Genesis, where Adam and Eve disobey God's command and proceed to eat fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This narrative is commonly referred to as "the Fall." While traditions may disagree with respect to the relationship between this story and humankind's fallen nature, all seem to agree that human nature exists in a suboptimal state. Human beings lack the full capacity to act in perfect accordance with God's will. How this is understood in further detail will vary from tradition to tradition. In what follows I will provide some exposition on the notion of fallen nature as it is understood by the three major faith traditions of Christianity.

Evidence from Scripture can be found in support of this notion of fallen nature. The notion is particularly emphasized in the theology of St. Paul. We can observe the role that fallen nature plays in Paul's theology via exposition of his letter to the Christian church in Rome. After salutations, Paul begins the substance of his letter by describing the consequences of mankind's disobedience. Paul described this state of disobedience as one ruled by a "depraved mind." (Romans 1:18-32)

As mentioned above, the notion of a fallen nature can play an important role in Soteriology. We can see this in play further along in Paul's letter. Paul compares Adam, through whom sin entered the world and thus suggesting Original Sin, to Jesus Christ, through whom the world is redeemed from sin and death. (Romans 5: 12-17)

The notion of a fallen nature can be found elsewhere in Paul's writings. One example comes from his letter to the church at Ephesus. Paul describes the life of the Gentile (i.e. non-Christian) as individuals with "darkened understanding" and "given to sensuality." (Ephesians 4:17-24) In another example from his letter to the church at Galatia, Paul describes the acts of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit, suggesting a difference in behavior between Christians and non-Christians. (Galatians 5:19-26)

If we are convinced that both the notions of sanctification and fallen nature are central doctrines in all major Christian faith traditions, then we can piece together the following line of

reasoning. First, by accepting both doctrines as central to Christianity, we are taking under consideration a particular conception of God. We can deny both doctrines, and by doing so sever the evidential connection between the moral behavior of Christians vis a vis non-Christians and the existence of God. But by denying both doctrines, we are now countenancing a god that is not recognized by nearly all of Christianity. So, everything said here, and the arguments set forth concern not just any divine entity, but a divine entity as understood by Christianity. As such, acquiring evidence that either confirms or falsifies these doctrines amounts to evidence that confirms or falsifies the existence of God as understood by Christianity.

If we accept both doctrines as constituting a central theme in Christian theology and anthropology, and if these doctrines are both true, then we should expect C, i.e. a difference in behavior between Christians and non-Christians. The doctrine of fallen nature states that there will always be limits to the moral behavior of Christians. The fallen nature of human beings prevents them from living a life of virtue beyond a certain degree (or perhaps to no degree at all, under one interpretation of the doctrine of total depravity). The doctrine of sanctification states that under the right conditions Christians will live a life of virtue beyond the limits imposed by their fallen nature. Furthermore, under the doctrine of sanctification, Christians under the right conditions will live a virtuous life that improves over time, further distancing themselves from the aforementioned constraints placed by their fallen nature. Consequently, if both doctrines are true, then we should expect C. Furthermore, if both doctrines are not true, then the observation of not-C should come as a surprise.

However, if the Christian god does not exist, then we lack a significant reason believe in the truth of either doctrine. If both doctrines are false, then we don't have any theologically based reasons to expect C. We have no reason to think that the moral behavior of Christians that satisfy the right conditions for sanctification is better than any other group of individuals. If the Christian God exists, then we should expect not-C. In particular, we should at least expect that the moral behavior of any

Christian is on average no better or worse than any other group. Under the hypothesis that the Christian god does not exist, the observation of C would be surprising.

In sum, I argued that the doctrines of sanctification and fallen nature are what support the claims H1 and H2. To recap, H1 states that C is evidence for God's existence. H2 states that not-C is evidence for God's non-existence. Both doctrines are tied closely to the existence of God as recognized by Christianity, and both doctrines explain why there should be an observed gap in moral behavior. Put another way, both doctrines serve as the bridge between God's existence and the observed moral behavior of Christians vis-a-vis non-Christians. In the next section, I will discuss the notion of observed moral behavior.

### **3. Moral Behavior as Evidence**

In the previous section I argued for the truth of two claims. First, if the God of Christianity exists, then we should expect the moral behavior of Christians who satisfy some set of criteria to be significantly better than those of non-Christians. Second, if the God of Christianity does not exist, then we should expect the moral behavior of any Christian to be more or less the same as any non-Christian. These claims presuppose that we can somehow justifiably make comparative judgments between the moral behaviors of individuals. In this section I will examine this presupposition further.

It seems fairly intuitive that we can justifiably make comparative judgments with respect to moral behavior, but it is worth stopping to examine this notion more closely in order to allay any skeptical concerns. I will conduct this examination by considering how these comparative judgments would look under the three major ethical theories. Each theory provides some resources to allow us to justifiably make comparative judgments. First, utilitarianism provides us with a straightforward way to compare behavior. Simply calculate either the net well being or net harm generate by individuals' actions and compare these figures. The other two theories are not so cut and dry, but there are still ways to compare behavior. The notion of a moral exemplar is one that plays prominent role in virtue

ethics. The idea that there are such individuals as moral exemplars implies that some kind of comparative judgment is possible. How this is done likely involves identification of virtues and individuals that instantiate these virtues more fully relative to others. Under deontological ethics, one might be able to compare the behavior of individuals by observing how consistently they comply to some moral law or principle.

This very fast gloss is just to show how it might be possible to make comparative judgments under major ethical theories. If there is some possible way to make comparative judgments with respect to moral behavior, then we can justifiably make these judgments. Skeptics may criticize a particular view, pointing out various problems the view faces. This doesn't affect my position, however. The skeptic only succeeds if she shows that there is no possible way of making comparative judgments under any way of thinking about ethics. This is an ambitious claim, and the burden is on the skeptic to demonstrate its truth.

Another argument against skepticism about comparative moral behavior is to appeal current practice in scholarship. The idea here is that if we are truly not able to make comparative judgments between the moral behavior of various individuals or groups of individuals, then studies or research involving these of comparative judgments have no basis. If we are to take such research seriously, then we should think that it is possible to make comparative judgments about moral behavior. Let's consider the work of Eric Schwitzgebel. Schwitzgebel has engaged in a number of projects that presuppose the ability to make comparative judgments about moral behavior. First, Schwitzgebel has written extensively about the moral behavior of ethicists.<sup>1</sup> The primary question that he addresses in these studies is, "Do professional ethicists behave morally better than non-ethicists?" It should be evident that in order for this question to be answerable, it must be possible to make comparative judgments about ethical behavior. Skepticism about this would make Schwitzgebel's project completely

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<sup>1</sup> See his (2009a), (2009b), (2012), (2013), and (2014).

unmotivated. Schwitzgebel has undergone other projects that presuppose this ability to make comparative judgments. He has argued that people aim for moral mediocrity, i.e. people aim to be at the same moral level as their peers, not better, not worse.<sup>2</sup> Obvious this thesis would not get off the ground if we were complete skeptics about comparative judgments between people's behavior.

These arguments purport to show that it is at least possible to justifiably make comparative judgments with respect to the moral behavior of individuals. If this is true, then it is possible to make comparative judgments between the moral behavior of Christians (that satisfy the appropriate conditions) and the moral behavior of non-Christians. Consequently, these comparative judgments can then serve as evidence for the hypotheses stated in the previous sections.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I argued for the following three claims:

1. The probability of C is significantly higher given the hypothesis of God's existence than it would be given the hypothesis of God's non-existence.
2. The probability of not C is significantly higher given the hypothesis of God's non-existence than it would be given the hypothesis of God's existence.
3. It is possible to justifiably make comparative judgments with respect to the moral behavior of individuals.

If all three claims are true, then we have an empirical means by which we can either be justified in the belief that the Christian God exists or be justified in the belief that the Christian God does not exist.

Some, including myself, may find this argument more appealing than traditional arguments given for or against the existence of God. Atheists will not share intuitions that ground arguments like the Cosmological Argument and the Ontological Argument. Theists will be skeptical of the central claims made in the Argument from Evil and the Argument from Divine Hiddenness. However, it seems

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<sup>2</sup> See his (2019).



plausible to think that both theists and atheists might find this argument plausible. What makes this argument unique is that it can be used by both sides of the debate. Here I have only considered the argument as it applies to the Christian conception of God. However, there are certainly open questions about whether this argument can be applied to a more general conception of God that applies to the Abrahamic faith traditions and perhaps to other world religions. I believe this argument presents opportunities for more fruitful research and discussion.

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