Without God

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Without God, Are All Things Permissible?

“But what will become of man then...without God and immortal life? All things are lawful then, they can do what they like?” –Dmitri, The Brothers Karamazov

The question posed by Dostoevsky’s Dmitri is one that motivates many to believe that morality is inextricably linked to God. They believe that, if there are things called moral truths, then they must be given and enforced (either on earth or in the afterlife) by God. Just as civil laws are given by lawgivers (e.g., the state), moral laws are given by God. Further, if there is no God to hold us accountable for following these laws then we are free to harm others as we please. Since this conclusion is undesirable, so the story goes, in order for there to be a moral law, there must be a God.

It’s worth observing that there is a logical error in this argument: the fact that a claim is undesirable, does not imply that the claim is false. For example, it is undesirable that many suffer and die unnecessarily, but, it is still true. We will overlook this logical problem and consider the essence of the argument, that, without God, all things are permissible.

There are (at least) two plausible answers to the claim that, without God, all things are permissible. The first answer, which is similar to an argument given by Socrates (in Plato’s Euthyphro), attempts to show that, even if there is a God, moral laws do not depend on God, and thus, not all things are permissible. The argument goes as follows: if God believes that an entity or action X is good, it is either because (1) X possesses some properties—properties that are independent of God—that make it good, or (2) X is good only in virtue of the fact that God believes that X is good. But, if (2) is true, then it seems as though moral laws are completely arbitrary. For, if X is good only because God likes it, it follows that, if God happened to like senseless torture, then senseless torture would be good. But, baring an extreme and unjust moral relativism—one that a benevolent God ought not allow—senseless torture is not good. So (1) must be true. But, if that is so, then we do not need God to study what is moral; rather, we just need to study the properties of X that make it good. So, Dmitri’s worries are in vain—without God, there is still the possibility of moral goodness.

The second answer, given by 20th century existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, accepts the notion that there is no God, and the notion that without God, there is no objective moral law or punishment. But, for Sartre, it does not follow that all things are permissible in the sense that Dmitri meant it! The absence of God comes with extreme responsibility. For Sartre, rather than conforming to the moral law, with every action, you are writing your own part of the moral law. So, if you
decide to treat others with disrespect, cause suffering, kill, cheat, etc., you are expressing to others that it is permissible to do these things. Dmitri’s worries about morality are important, but not just because the absence of God implies the possibility of chaos and anarchy; instead, they are important because they summon one to think very seriously about who they want to be, and what kind of picture they want to paint of humanity.

So, what do you think? Is it possible to have morality without God? If so, is it because morality isn’t dependent on God, as Socrates argues? Or, do we have a deep responsibility for writing the moral law through our actions, as Sartre argues?