

# “Morality Makers” or “Made to be Moral”?

by Todd Stewart

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the last few hundred years, enlightenment rationalists<sup>1</sup> waged an increasingly hostile war against traditional moralists<sup>2</sup> in the western world. Initially, enlightenment rationalists relied upon guerilla warfare tactics and avoided a frontal assault upon the larger, entrenched forces of traditional morality. Eventually, enlightenment rationalists gained enough power and credibility that the positions on the field of battle flipped — traditional moralists found themselves on the defensive against the overwhelming forces of their “enemy.”<sup>3</sup> However, the twentieth-century demonstrated that humanism fared far better when attacking theism than it did in attempting to build a good and unified society. Two catastrophically destructive world wars and countless other atrocities painfully exposed the humanistic assumption that society would inevitably continue to improve through education and technology. Though this realization has prompted some to return to theism, most have followed the next logical step in the humanistic journey — namely, if there is no unifying morality in the modern world, then all individuals must determine their own personal morality. Although in the minds of many this conclusion sounds like the path to freedom and harmony, it has actually produced a society that is confused and divided along moral lines. Since society lacks both a shared understanding of truth and a shared commitment to the “good,” public discussion of moral matters has devolved to the lobbing of vitriolic and irrational verbal bombs.

There is a timeless and universal question that haunts all who find themselves stuck in this modern morass — “Is there such a thing as objective morality?” This haunting question cannot be separated from another — “If objective morality exists, what is its basis?” In this essay, I will argue that humanity is made to be moral, rather than to function as our own morality makers. The Bible has much to say about this topic and other issues that face modern society. Contrary to popular belief, the Bible does not function like a rulebook with a concise list of moral do’s and don’ts. Rather, the Bible provides a rational framework for understanding and addressing the moral issues that perplex our disjointed modern society. Since the most concise (and most controversial) biblical text on relevant moral issues is found in Romans 1, I will focus my analysis on this important passage.

## **INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 1:18-32**

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<sup>1</sup> “Enlightenment rationalism” refers to the belief that humanity is capable of discovering all truth by relying upon human sense perceptions and rational processes. In this worldview, the scientific method has been awarded supreme authority to weigh in on and evaluate all truth claims. Humanism and modernism are used as synonymous terms for enlightenment rationalism in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> I use “traditional morality” to refer to the moral views that reigned within western society for centuries prior to the rise of enlightenment rationalism. Traditional morality largely arose from theistic beliefs about the nature of the world and humanity’s role within it. Theism is used as a synonymous term for traditional morality in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> I put “enemy” in quotes because this was and often continues to be how traditional moralists view enlightenment rationalists. However, as this essay hopefully demonstrates, rationalism is not the enemy of traditional morality. In fact, the argument of this essay relies heavily upon rational thinking!

**Romans 1:18-23** — <sup>18</sup>For God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, <sup>19</sup>since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup>For His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what He has made. As a result, people are without excuse. <sup>21</sup>For though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became nonsense, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles.

***Primary argument of the passage***

The primary argument of this passage must not only be understood in its immediate context, but it also must be understood in the letter’s broader context. The big idea of chapters one through eleven of Romans is that all humanity is under God’s judgment due to sin. “Sin” is understood not as individual “sins,” but as the sinful nature that all humanity inherits at birth. In essence, our sinful nature predisposes us to rebel against God and live under the authority of and for the advancement of self. The original readers who came from a Jewish background would have fully accepted this proposition for Gentiles, but had a hard time seeing God’s chosen people as sinful by nature. On the contrary, they understood themselves to be special and chosen based off of their family lineage.

Paul was very familiar with the Jewish worldview since he had been a rising star among the Jewish leadership prior to his conversion to Christ. In Romans 1:18-23, he begins his argument by asserting that, via creation and the natural world, God had revealed enough about Himself so that people were without excuse for denying Him. Paul’s description of humanity’s foolish thinking and idolatry clearly fit contemporary Jewish views of the Gentiles. However, Paul could just as easily be developing a chronological argument of how humanity had responded to knowledge of God. Regardless, his main point is that humanity rejected the knowledge they had of God, and instead chose to glorify and worship created things.

**Romans 1:24-25** — <sup>24</sup>Therefore God delivered them over in the cravings of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves. <sup>25</sup>They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served something created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen.

***Primary argument of the passage***

This passage is integrally connected to the previous section, but deserves its own attention since it both highlights humanity’s mental degradation process and also lays the foundation for the most currently controversial elements of Paul’s argument. Simply put, Paul argues that rejection of God leads to identity confusion for humanity. Without an identity that is rooted in the Creator, humanity invents its own identity source — and without the supernatural, humans resort to their own “natural” explanations for both reality and their own ultimate identity. The Bible refers to this process as idolatry. Human history demonstrates that idolatry tends to lead to sexual immorality. Without God, humans tend to glorify the sex act, but usually at the loss of their humanness. Ironically, while elevating self-based images or while pursuing self-satisfying sensual experiences, our essential human personhood is lost. Surprisingly, rather than immediately condemn or strike down the rebels, God “delivered them

over” to their foolish desires. This display of God’s wrath is important to keep in mind for how we should apply the entire argument presented in Romans 1.

**Romans 1:26-28** — <sup>26</sup>This is why God delivered them over to degrading passions. For even their females exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.<sup>27</sup> The males in the same way also left natural relations with females and were inflamed in their lust for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the appropriate penalty of their error.<sup>28</sup> And because they did not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, God delivered them over to a worthless mind to do what is morally wrong.

#### ***Primary argument of the passage***

These two verses have been argued over and interpreted *ad nauseam*. I do not have space in this essay to explore all the interpretations various people promote. Suffice it to say that, yes, this text is about how rejecting God leads to unnatural sexual actions. Specifically, it is about how it can lead to homosexuality — and homosexuality is morally wrong. Though this topic generally (and this conclusion specifically) is a lightning rod in modern culture, we must keep it in perspective within Paul’s overall argument.

**Romans 1:29-31** — <sup>29</sup>They are filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness. They are full of envy, murder, quarrels, deceit, and malice. They are gossips,<sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, arrogant, proud, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,<sup>31</sup> undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful.

#### ***Primary argument of the passage***

Interestingly, these three verses have been not been argued over and interpreted *ad nauseam*. However, Paul’s point is still to outline the extent of human degradation and immorality. Yes, he argues that homosexuality is immoral, but he also argues that actions like greed, envy, gossip, arrogance, and disobedience to parents are immoral. In addition, non-actions are also immoral — failure to discern, failure to be trustworthy, failure to love, and failure to be merciful. Many view these actions and non-actions as more normal, but Paul’s argument is that they are just as immoral (and thus abnormal) as homosexuality. In other words, he is not presenting a formula to measure the severity of sins, but he is presenting a general argument for the universality of human folly apart from God. Such folly displays itself in the final verse of this passage:

**Romans 1:32** — <sup>32</sup>Although they know full well God’s just sentence—that those who practice such things deserve to die—they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them.

Not only do individual humans ignore their consciences, but collective human society even applauds and approves of the above foolish thinking and behaviors.

#### **“But, is there such a thing as objective morality?”**

Does Romans 1:18-32 even address the main question of this essay? I think that it does in an indirect way. For example, one person may read this passage and wholeheartedly agree that some of the items

in Paul's list are immoral while others are not. On the contrary, another person may read this passage and come to the opposite conclusions. Which person's moral stance is correct?

### ***What is morality?***

Morality is the term that refers to what "should" or "ought" to be. When one looks at the list of morally wrong actions and inactions in Romans 1, how does one determine if the list is true or authoritative? One individual may dislike and even abhor some items on the list, while another person may think those same items are acceptable. Which person is correct?

### ***If there is no God, is it even possible to have objective morality?***

Unsurprisingly, theists confidently answer "no" to the above question. However, one might be surprised to discover that most atheists also answer "no." Ironically, the atheist line of reason follows the same path that Paul does in Romans 1 — namely, how everything was created determines whether or not objective morality exists. Paul argues that since God created everything, he has the authority to determine what ought to be. Most atheists argue that the universe was created through the big bang — a non-moral event. They also argue that humanity was created through the non-moral evolutionary process. As a result, most atheists conclude that a non-moral cause and a non-moral process can't create a moral product.

### ***Can humanity accept living in a non-moral world?***

Rather than philosophize about this question, I find it helpful to interact with a few revealing examples.<sup>4</sup> As you read these examples, take note of your response.

**Example #1:** Three Bosnian Serbs stand trial for creating and managing "rape factories" where Muslim women, some as young as twelve, endure unimaginable horrors. Victims tell of being savagely beaten, gang raped and tortured. The three Serbs state that they do not condone rape in general but argue that these particular women deserve it due to their ethnicity.

**Example #2:** A mother in South Carolina secures her two children in their car seats and then drives the family car into a lake, drowning both. She tells authorities she did it to win back her boyfriend, who didn't want children.

**Example #3:** The website *Ku Klux Klan for Kids* teaches young readers to be racists through cartoons, interactive games, puzzles and bedtime stories that portray people of color as inferior and dangerous. Creators of the website argue that they are merely doing what any good parent would do — passing on truth, values and convictions.

Most respond to the above examples with some level of disgust. The negative response that these examples provoke reveals one's moral framework. Humans seem to be truly unable to live consistently without measuring actions against what ought to happen. But, where does the, "That is horrible!" response to these examples come from?

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<sup>4</sup> These examples are taken directly from J.P. Moreland and Tim Muehlhoff's book, *The God Conversation: Using Stories and Illustrations to Explain Your Faith* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

## ***Potential Explanations for the Existence of Morality***

Although human history stretches back thousands of years, there are only a few viable explanations for the existence of morality:

1. Morality is a misfiring of evolution – each of us have different values wired in our brain.
2. Morality is determined by the powerful.
3. Morality is determined by culture.
4. Morality is determined by the individual.
5. Morality is determined by a good God (or gods).

Once again, rather than assess these explanations via philosophical abstraction, I find it helpful to run each of them through a test case — the Holocaust. The test is to determine if any of the five explanations justify the nearly universal “That is horrible!” response that humans have to the Holocaust.

**Explanation #1:** If morality is a misfiring of evolution, then Hitler and his Nazi cronies had anti-Semitism and malicious violence wired into their brains. However, if evolution predetermined that Hitler and his cronies would have this hard-wiring, then we can’t hold them morally culpable for their actions. Therefore, this explanation fails to account for the “That is horrible!” response to the Holocaust.

**Explanation #2:** If morality is determined by the powerful, then since Hitler and his Nazi cronies were in power they had the right to determine what was morally right or wrong. Once again, this explanation fails to explain how the Holocaust can be viewed as a moral atrocity.

**Explanation #3:** If morality is determined by culture, then Germans were right to create a culture in the 1930s and 1940s in which it was both acceptable and preferable to export and alienate Jews. In fact, numerous other cultures were also anti-Semitic in this era. Obviously, this explanation fails to account for the immorality of the Holocaust.

**Explanation #4:** If morality is determined by the individual, then Hitler was right to determine that what was best for him and Germany was the extermination of the Jews. Some individuals may exclaim “That is horrible!” when considering the Holocaust, but they don’t stand on any higher moral ground than did Hitler and his Nazi individuals.

The outcry over the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities prompted the Nuremberg trials (1945-1949). The most effective defense offered by those on trial was that they had simply obeyed their superiors or acted consistently with their own legal system, and that they therefore could not rightly be condemned because they deviated from the alien value system of their conquerors. In fact, this line of reason halted the trials! The chief counsel of the United States, Robert Jackson, came up with an answer. The only way to judge any culture, he argued, was to appeal to a “law above the law.” A “law above the law” transcends culture and applies to both the winners and losers of the war. The trial continued and justice was served.<sup>5</sup> *But where did this “law above the law” or sense of “justice” come from?* We are left with only one remaining explanation for the moral outrage over the Holocaust — morality is determined by a good God (or gods). This was the conclusion that Paul reached and argued for in his letter to the church at Rome.

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<sup>5</sup> Moreland and Muehlhoff, 116-117.

## Concluding Thoughts

If Paul's argument in Romans and the argument developed in this essay are true, then how should we interact with a morally-confused world? I have come to the following general conclusions:

1. **Nobody should care what the Bible says about morality if there is no God.** If God does not exist, then the Bible is just another book written by a bunch of people. It may be a very influential and amazing book, but at the end of the day there is nothing supernatural about it.
2. **The point of focus when talking with non-believers needs to be on the existence of God.** If Christians harass non-Christians about their immoral behavior, then they are basically promoting an unbiblical works-based theology. In fact, the Bible actually argues that when non-believers live immoral lives they are actually living consistent with their nature. True change comes from the inside out after people accept what Christ has done for them.
3. **The existence of objective morality has tremendous societal implications.**
  - a. *Without objective morality, social activism is nearly useless.* If there is no objective morality, then social activists should actually be called "personal activists" because they are merely advocating for issues that they care about personally. They have no basis from which to argue for what society ought to be like.
  - b. *Without objective morality, moral outrage is baseless.* There may be inconvenient events. There may also be personally painful events. But without objective morality, there are no true morally outrageous events.
  - c. *Without objective morality, society will (eventually) crumble.* The loss of objective morality leaves a society in the same position that the lawyers found themselves at the Nuremberg Trials — morally outraged without any ability to rationally back up their outrage. Currently, Western society repeatedly insists upon being morally outraged over certain events, while simultaneously tearing apart the foundation upon which this moral outrage rests.