



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on December 2, 2023

## Claim: It's "Official" — Scientists Say Religion Is Unnecessary for Morality

"Let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion," warned George Washington during his farewell address in 1796. Increasingly, however, this supposition is indulged, most recently in an article boldly claiming, "Scientists say you don't need to be religious to have a 'moral compass.'" Of course, a critic may ask, "What kind of moral compass are you talking about?" Leaving it there, however, wouldn't do the issue justice because in this theist/atheist debate the two sides do the same thing: talk past each other.



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In the recent article, appearing at website [Indy 100](#), author Alex Daniel [writes](#):

Scientists have decided it's official — people do not necessarily have to believe in a "god" to have a moral compass.

A group of four University of Illinois surveys found that while there were subtle differences in behaviour between groups of atheists and religious people — or "theists" — they live by the same moral codes.

Tomas Ståhl of the University of Illinois said: "The most general take-home message from these studies is that people who do not believe in God do have a moral compass.

"In fact, they share many of the same moral concerns that religious believers have, such as concerns about fairness, and about protecting vulnerable individuals from harm."

The first two surveys crowdsourced responses from hundreds of American residents, and found that religion was unrelated to amoral tendencies, whether people would endorse liberty or oppression or whether people cared about being fair to others.

The second two surveys compared thousands of people across the US and Sweden, which is a much more secular country. The data came up with the same results.

Interestingly, the [research Daniel cites](#) is from 2021. No harm, no foul, though; this is an evergreen topic (which is why people have been debating it for millennia).

As for the research, Ståhl did actually find some notable inter-group moral differences. For example, religious "disbelievers were less inclined to view values that promote group cohesion — such as ingroup loyalty, respect for authority and sanctity — to be relevant for morality," [wrote](#) UIC Today in 2021.

"Religious disbelievers from both countries also were somewhat more inclined than religious believers to focus on the relative harm done by actions versus inactions when deciding whether it is morally



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justifiable or not,” the site continued — or as Ståhl put it, the irreligious “are more inclined to make moral judgments about harm on a consequentialist, case-by-case basis” (“situational values?”).

What of the real issue here, however, Washington’s assertion and those disputing it? Again, the two sides virtually always talk past each other. That is, no philosophically competent believer claims atheists can’t be “moral.” They certainly can. The informed claim, rather, is this:

If God is fictional, *no one* can be “moral” because morality, properly understood, *cannot exist*. I’ll explain.

To analogize this, no, you needn’t believe in God to have a “moral compass” any more than you must believe in magnetism to have an actual compass. But this fact nonetheless remains:

There couldn’t be something called a compass (to which a magnet is integral) if the *objective reality called magnetism didn’t exist*.

Since it does exist, however, we can have a compass and determine the right way to go because there is that objective external reality, the magnetic poles, to point toward. If morality doesn’t exist in the same way — apart from man — we could have something we fancied a “moral compass,” but *what* could it possibly point us toward? “What,” indeed.

This brings us to the sticking point: Many secularists find the aforementioned foreign because their definition of “morality” differs from that of theists. But what is the proper definition? Let’s reason this out.

A man I know of once told someone close to me, “Murder’s not wrong; it’s just that society says it is.” I can tackle this logically, saying “That’s not true because God and His moral law (Truth) exist.” Now, that man can dispute my theistic premise, but *not my logic*. It’s airtight. Atheists, however, could not rationally dispute the man’s assertion because their premise is *the same as his*. Under their worldview, only society can say murder is wrong because society is *all there is to say anything*.

To clarify this further, consider that what we call “right and wrong” can only be determined by one of two things: man or something outside of him. If it’s something outside of and above us, something all-knowing, all-powerful, and inerrant — what we call God — then we can say that Truth (objective by definition) exists; we can say it’s unchanging, universal, eternal, and non-negotiable. We can say that right and wrong are *real*.

But what are the implications if man is all there is? Well, if we learned that the vast majority of the world loved chocolate but hated vanilla, would we say this made vanilla “wrong” or “evil”? That would be silly; it’s all a matter of preference. But how would it be any different saying murder was wrong or evil if the *only* reason we did so was that the vast majority of the world preferred we not engage in what the vast majority of the world considers the “unjust” killing of others? As with flavors, it then would occupy the realm of preference.

If so, why muddy the waters and confuse the issue by calling our preferences, consensus or otherwise, “morality”? Just accept reality — that at issue is human preference and nothing more — and be done with it.

As for Ståhl’s research, while much more could be said, I’ll conclude with just two points. First, since a society will have a certain average moral framework, it’s not surprising that people within a society would instinctively share many moral positions even when their worldviews are nominally very different. Remember that humans are social beings and thus tend to conform to society’s norms,



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anyway. (In fact, one complaint pious Christians have is that their coreligionists too often accept the “ways of this world.”)

This, however, ignores a deeper truth: If the society has been shaped in whole or in part by religion, then the moral foundations of its members (whether believers or not) will have been shaped in whole or in part *by that religion*.

Second, faith or lack thereof is one of the best indicators of voting patterns, with regular church attendees robustly supporting the GOP and atheists breaking heavily for Democrats. Given this, and that the major parties are now highly polarized on moral issues, appears to indicate that theists and atheists are, in fact, quite different morally.

(Note, too, the examples of moral agreement Ståhl mentioned — believing in “fairness” and “protecting vulnerable individuals from harm” — are most anodyne. You may as well say we’re all morally aligned because no one claims to believe in pushing old ladies down stairs or kicking puppies!)

The problem with Ståhl’s surveys is that they are “surveys”: Self-reporting is often colored by self-delusion. And as for theists and atheists, the moral similarities perhaps lie more in the preaching than the practice.



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