

Solid Ground

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July/August 2014

IN THIS ISSUE:

Quick Summary

- [The Brighter Side of Evil](#)
- [Good without God?](#)
- [Goodness and Grounding](#)
- [Readers and Writers](#)
- [Science as Morality](#)
- [“Flourishing” Falters](#)
- [Bait and Switch](#)



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SOCIAL MEDIA

In this month's edition, I explain why challenges from atheists like, “We can be good without God threats,” and, “If there were no God, would you still be good?” completely miss the point. It's the same reason Christopher Hitchens's famous dare—“Name one moral action performed by a believer that could not have been done by a nonbeliever”—misses the mark, too.

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The kind of analysis I offer in this *Solid Ground* is often missing in the broader Christian community. The result is that empty challenges—like those promoted by Sam Harris—go unanswered and gain traction in our culture. That's why Stand to Reason is so important. And that's why your support makes such a big difference. Your generosity helps us train tens of thousands to defend classical Christianity with arguments that are both gracious and compelling. Please consider a gift of any amount this month to support this vital work that's bearing fruit in the lives of so many people.

Greg Kousser





July 1, 2014

Dear Friend,

In the last *Solid Ground*, I began my defense of the moral argument for God's existence by demonstrating that no appeal to either Darwin or Rousseau—to the evolved individual or to the constructed social contract—was capable of doing it damage.

Neither of those alternatives could, even in principle, account for the existence of objective moral obligations. Both collapse into relativism.

In this month's edition, I explain why challenges from atheists like, "We can be good without God threats," and, "If there were no God, would you still be good?" completely miss the point. It's the same reason Christopher Hitchens's famous dare—"Name one moral action performed by a believer that could not have been done by a nonbeliever"—misses the mark, too.

Finally, I critique new atheist Sam Harris's clever—but compromised—attempt to escape the relativism trap in his book, *The Moral Landscape*.

The material in this *Solid Ground* is not as easy as other installments. As always, though, I worked hard to "throw the ball so you can catch it"—stepping you through the information so you grasp the key issues because this theme is a common objection from atheists. You'll encounter it sooner or later if you haven't already.

Give this analysis some attention and you will begin to understand a central component of this debate that virtually every atheist misses. It's called the grounding problem. I think you'll see that nothing the atheist can throw at us will deliver him from the daunting problem that the existence of objective morality poses for his materialistic worldview.

The kind of analysis I offer in this *Solid Ground* is often missing in the broader Christian community. The result is that empty challenges—like those promoted by Sam Harris—go unanswered and gain traction in our culture.

That's why Stand to Reason is so important. And that's why your support makes such a big difference. Your generosity helps us train tens of thousands to defend classical Christianity with arguments that are both gracious and compelling.

Please consider a gift of any amount this month to support this vital work that's bearing fruit in the lives of so many people. And thank you so much for your partnership.

With confidence in Christ,

Gregory Koukl





GOD, EVOLUTION, AND MORALITY

PART II

By Greg Koukl

In 1982, I lived in Thailand for seven months supervising a feeding program in a Cambodian refugee camp named Sakaeo. My charge: [18,250 Khmer refugees who had escaped the holocaust perpetrated on Kampuchea by the Khmer Rouge](#) after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975.

The first-person accounts told to me of the slaughter that took place were mind-numbing. Even children relayed stories of unthinkable brutality. By 1979, nearly two million Cambodians had perished, almost half of the population. It was the greatest act of genocide ever inflicted by a people on its own population.

It's virtually impossible for any thoughtful human being to countenance such barbarism—such innocent suffering, such inhumanity to man—without recoiling from the wickedness, the depravity, the unmitigated evil that took place there.

Surprisingly, though, atrocities like the Cambodian carnage provide an unusual opportunity for the theist and a striking liability for the atheist.

The Brighter Side of Evil

The problem of evil is a daunting one for Christians, to be sure, yet ironically it places us on very solid footing to make the case for theism. The very same problem, though, puts atheism on the ropes. To make this point during debates, I ask two questions of my audience after I describe, in gruesome detail, the events of the Khmer crisis.

First, what is their *assessment* of the behaviors I just recounted? It's a rhetorical question. To a person, they judge the savagery profoundly evil. Second—and this is the important question—what are they *describing* when they call these acts evil? Do they mean to be describing the *actions themselves*—the cruelty, the torment, the injustice—or merely their own *feelings* or *beliefs* about the actions?

If the actions *themselves* are evil—if the wrongness is somehow in the *behaviors* regardless

of what people think or feel (remember, the Khmer Rouge had no moral qualms about what they did)—then the evil is objective. If the wrongness is only in the *mind of the subject*—the person or group making the assessment—then the evil is merely subjective and relativistic. In that case, the atrocities were only wrong *for* those who object, but would be right for those who approve. The behaviors themselves would be morally neutral; Pol Pot would be off the hook.

Here's the take-away: The problem of evil is only a problem if morality is objective, not subjective. Relativistic morality is not sufficient grounds for the complaint about human suffering. Only objective morality will do. As it turns out, though, [objective morality supports theism and undermines atheism](#).

The theist must rise to the challenge of evil, to be sure. But for her, the problem turns out to be an ally. It fits her worldview like a glove. First, genuine wickedness depends on the existence of good in the same way shadows depend on the existence of light. One cannot have the first without the second. The theist accounts for that good by grounding it in the character of God. Second, the biblical view of reality doesn't merely *explain* atrocities like the Cambodian massacre; it actually *predicts* them. It is precisely what you'd expect if the biblical take is true.

The very same problem of evil, though, undermines atheism. The atheist must also take his turn offering his own explanation for evil, but he faces a complication the theist does not encounter. How can anything be ultimately evil *or* good in a materialistic universe bereft of a transcendent standard that make sense of the terms in the first place?

When an atheist bemoans real evil—not the relativistic “evil” that evolution fooled us into believing or the actions violating a social contract that serves our cultural purposes for the moment—he must explain how objective evil could exist in



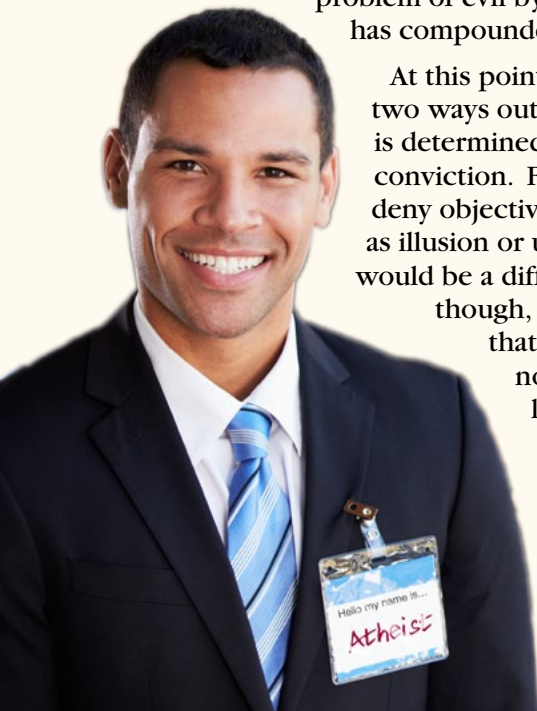
the first place to make room for his protest. He must account for the objective, transcendent moral standard that has to be in position before moral judgments of any kind can be made. His complaint would be unintelligible without it.

“NO, THE ATHEIST HAS NOT GOTTEN RID OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL BY REJECTING GOD. HE HAS COMPOUNDED THE PROBLEM.”

So, the atheist who challenges Christianity by asking how God can exist in a world with evil faces a bigger challenge than the theist. The atheist must account for the problem of evil *and* the problem of good. The difficulty is, there is nothing in his worldview that allows him to ground—to make sense of—vice *or* virtue in the objective sense. There is nothing in atheism proper that allows him to say anything meaningful about morality other than that our current moral convictions reflect either our evolutionary adaptations or the fashion of the moment—which is to say nothing meaningful about morality.

No, the atheist has not gotten rid of the problem of evil by rejecting God. He has compounded the problem.

At this point, there are only two ways out for the atheist who is determined to cling to his conviction. First, he can try to deny objective evil, dismissing it as illusion or useful fiction. This would be a difficult pill to swallow, though, since his certainty that evil was real (and not a fabrication) launched his protest to begin with. Simply put, the atheist knows too much to go down this road with ease.



Second, he can cast about for an alternate explanation for our universal experience of morality. The current main contender is Darwinian evolution.

In the last issue of *Solid Ground*, I showed why that route is a dead end. I argued that since the moral argument for God is based on the existence of *objective* morality, only a successful naturalistic accounting of the same—objective morality—would be sufficient to undermine it. However, evolution is not capable—even in principle—of delivering to us anything but relativistic morality.

If Darwinism is only capable of explaining our *feelings* of morality—if the definition of good and bad is simply subjective and “up to us” in some sense (biologically or culturally)—then objective evil is reduced to a fiction after all and the complaint against God based on the existence of evil vanishes into the relativistic mist with it.

If, on the other hand, our indignation against evil is well-founded, then one’s objection against God is at least intelligible. Atheism then becomes the casualty, however. One cannot have it both ways.

Good without God?

Some atheists are not convinced, however. It’s clear to them they can be good without any belief in God at all. Just ask them. “I’m as good as any other religious person, pretty much,” Michael Shermer has pointed out, “and I don’t believe in God.” The defense rests.

In the same vein, New Atheist Christopher Hitchens consistently fired off this famous salvo during debates: “Name one moral action performed by a believer that could not have been done by a nonbeliever.”

Of course, this is not really the issue, is it? Careful theists do not claim that *belief* in God is necessary *to do good*, but that *God* is necessary for any act *to be good* in the first place, that without Him morality has no ultimate objective foundation at all. The question is not whether believers and non-believers can perform the same *behaviors*—of course they can—but whether any behavior can be objectively good in a materialistic world bereft of God.





HE CANNOT WORSHIP THE ONE FROM WHOM ALL GOODNESS COMES, AND THEREFORE IS WORTHY OF OUR DEEPEST DEVOTION AND UNERRING FIDELITY.

For a simple rejoinder to Hitchens’s challenge, point out that an atheist can mimic many things Christians count as good—he can feed the poor, love his neighbor, even sacrifice his life for others—but he can never do the *summum bonum*, the highest good. He can never love God with his whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. He cannot worship the One from whom all goodness comes, and who therefore is worthy of our deepest devotion and unerring fidelity.

Of course, atheists would likely dismiss the point with a sniff and a sneer, but they mustn’t miss the deeper implication. At bare minimum, the response demonstrates that regardless of who is right on the God question, the entire moral project is altered significantly when He is added to the equation. Simply put, the atheist and the theist do not share the same morality.

The difficulty goes deeper, though, and Hitchens and those like him have missed the larger concern entirely. It’s what philosophers call “the grounding problem.”

Goodness and Grounding

Long before scientists hammered out the details of gravity, ordinary folk could still predict how objects moved under its

influence. They knew *that* something caused (for example) fruit to fall, and they could calculate *how* it worked, to some degree. But they didn’t know *why* things behaved that way in the world.

The “why it works” issue is called the “grounding” question. What is it that accounts for things being the particular—and sometimes peculiar—ways they are? It applies in science. It also applies in morality.

Moral facts are odd kinds of facts. They are not merely *descriptions*—how things *happen* to be. They entail *prescriptions*, imperatives—how things *ought* to be. They have incumbency, a certain obligation to them. What explains these unusual features? What is their foundation?

What “ground” do they rest upon? What—or who—actually obliges us and why should we obey?

It’s true that any sane, reasonable person can *know* the difference between right and wrong.

But *why* there is a right and wrong to begin with is a different kind of question. Why

do objective moral obligations exist? Why do they seem to apply uniquely to humans? And why do we go astray so often and so consistently?

If one’s worldview is going to be comprehensive, it’s got to account for the things that really matter in the world. Objective morality is one of them. Atheists may *know* the right thing to do—and even do it consistently. That alone, though, does not bring them any closer to answering the grounding question.

An illustration might be helpful at this point.





DVD

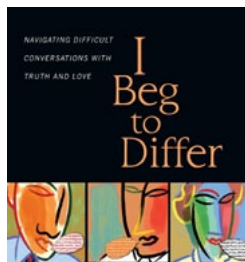
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Readers and Writers

Imagine I handed you a copy of *Vanity Fair* (a periodical Hitchens frequently published in) and asked you to read it. Could you? Sure. So could I. Reading requires only that we possess a certain set of skills mastered well enough to allow us to comprehend the meanings of the words on the page.

Notice that, strictly speaking, for this simple act of reading no *additional beliefs* about authors or publications or editors or typesetters or newsstands or

delivery boys are necessary. You don't need to believe in writers, etc., in order to be *able* to read, but you would never have a text to read unless there were writers in the first place. That's because the existence of authors is *logically prior* to the skill of reading.

What's required for someone to read, then, is very different from what is required for things like magazine articles to exist in the first place. Being able to read and having something to read are two completely different things. If you didn't believe in authors, you could still read books. If, however, your belief were true and authors did not exist, then books would not exist, either. Books, then, turn out to be evidence for authors.

THE ONLY ADEQUATE GROUNDS FOR TRANSCENDENT MORAL LAW, THEN, IS A TRANSCENDENT PERSON WHO HAS PROPER AUTHORITY OVER THE UNIVERSE HE COMMANDS.

That's why readers who deny authors sound silly. Sure, they can say they don't need to believe in authors to be good readers, and they'd be right. They can challenge you to show them one article you can read as a believer (in writers) that they can't read as unbelievers, and you'd be hard-pressed. Yet neither retort will rescue them from their foolishness. Articles are, by nature, the kinds of things that require authors.

Objective morality is the same way. The issue is not whether we can *follow* an objective moral code or not, or even *know* what its obligations are, but rather what accounts for something like a transcendent moral code to begin with. Denying God because you think you could be a fine chap without Him is like denying authors because you fancy yourself a first-rate reader and lover of

literature, nonetheless. Morality is evidence for God in the same way that books and articles are evidence for authors.

One more detail: Morality entails obligation, and obligations—like contracts—are held between persons. If there is no *one* to whom we are obliged, then there is no obligation. Only a person can make a demand or issue a command, and only the right *kind* of person—one with proper standing and appropriate authority—can do so with legitimacy. The presence of a water-stained rock outcropping by the side of the road with the image “Keep Right” weathered into its face signals no obligation for motorists, nor does a ten year old waving a “Buy Lemonade” sign.

The only adequate grounds for transcendent moral law, then, is a transcendent person who has proper authority over the universe He commands.

Consequently, when atheists claim, for example, “We can be moral without God's threats,” they're simply missing the point. When they ask me, “If there were no God, would you still be good?” it's like asking if I'd still be faithful to my wife if I weren't married. Clearly, the question is meaningless.

Science as Morality

In *The Moral Landscape*, New Atheist and best-selling author, Sam Harris, promises a way out of this predicament. Harris thinks the choice between Darwin and the Divine is a false dichotomy. There's a third option.

Harris is not a relativist. He understands that moral obligations are real and require objective criteria. Yet the grounding need not come from God. Science can do the job:

Questions about values—about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose—are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood. . . . Morality should be considered an undeveloped branch of science.

The tools to accomplish this, Harris says, are found in neuroscience and psychology.

The argument. . . rests upon a very simple premise: human well-being entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain. Consequently, there must be scientific truths to be known about it. A more detailed understanding of these truths will force us to draw clear distinctions between different ways of living in society with one another; judging some to be better or worse, more or less true to the facts, and more or less ethical.



Harris's approach is straightforward. First, human morality is (obviously, to Harris) about human flourishing. Second, the means to accomplish that end are scientifically quantifiable (science can measure things that relieve suffering, increase satisfaction, etc.). Science, then, can provide objective standards for human morality.

Harris's approach has advantages. For one, he aims to escape the relativism trap his colleagues have fallen into by appealing to empirical criteria. Second, he acknowledges the role of human flourishing in the ethical equation. I lack space for a thorough critique here (others have already given that), but I do want to briefly point out two serious drawbacks with Harris's project.

HOWEVER, JUST BECAUSE SCIENCE CAN PROVIDE OBJECTIVE CRITERIA DOES NOT MEAN SCIENCE CAN GIVE GROUNDS FOR OBJECTIVE MORALITY.

“Flourishing” Falters

Harris stumbles first when he identifies the flourishing of conscious creatures, especially humans, with the good. Two problems here.

One, Harris has either simply equated the two by definition, creating an unhelpful tautology, or human well-being is already good *in itself* (it isn't *identical* with the good, but it is an *example* of something that's intrinsically good).

If the first, Harris has made no progress. Tautologies are mere repetitions telling us how words are used, not how the world is. They are conventions and therefore arbitrary. Why define human flourishing as “good” rather than, say, fern flourishing?

If the second, Harris is still dead in the water. If human flourishing is intrinsically good to begin with, then he has simply assumed at the outset what his project is meant to explain—objective morality. He has not grounded the good, but has smuggled it into the front end of his enterprise. One can always ask, “What, then, makes human flourishing good in the first place?”

Here's the second problem. The concept of flourishing is ambiguous. What, or who, defines human well-being? It's easy to imagine a culture “flourishing” (according to some definition) in the midst of all sorts of things others consider evil.

Some want to live fast, die young, and leave good-looking corpses. Others seek a life of service rather than self-pleasuring. Some champion human rights, others ethnic cleansing. By what standard does Harris arbitrate between these options without presuming at the front end that humans were designed for particular moral ends to begin with—assuming, once again, the morality he's obliged to explain?

Bait and Switch

Second, Harris's approach is not ethical, strictly speaking, but consequentialist. It merely provides, through science, the most effective way to get the desired results (consequences). Whether those results are morally good or not is an entirely different matter.

This problem is easy to miss, since there are two entirely different ways for a thing to be “good,” and Harris bounces back and forth between them without warning. Behaviors that are morally virtuous are called “good.” However, the word “good” can also signal an effective way to accomplish a goal, irrespective of its moral content.



To make this distinction strikingly obvious, consider this: The Nazis stumbled upon the scientifically “good” way—the best, most efficient way—to kill Jews, Zyklon B. Any liquidation of innocent people, though, is morally wrong, and the “better” you get at doing it, the more evil the act becomes.

It’s hard to overstate the significance of this problem for Harris. Morality is not just an end, but a certain *kind* of end. Science is clearly capable of determining the most effective means to accomplish certain goals. However, just because science can provide objective *criteria* does not mean science can give grounds for objective *morality*. That must be established separately, and this Harris has not done.

In *The Moral Landscape*, Harris’s “objective standards” are nothing more than pragmatic criteria for accomplishing Harris’s vision of the good. His use of words like “good” or “right” simply identify the most effective means to an end, nothing more.

Science is descriptive, not prescriptive. Nothing Harris has said changes that. His “moral objectivism” is just utilitarianism, in this case, a sophisticated form of relativism.

Clearly, the kind of robust morality necessary to both parry the moral argument and to ground the atheist’s complaint about evil is impossible on a materialist take on reality.

What moral provision is there in atheism *itself*—not in the individual views *held* by atheists, but central to *atheism*—that precludes genocide or that endorses, for its own sake, specific acts of genuine virtue? What are the moral dictates generated by atheism *per se* that guide us here? Where are the great acts of humanitarianism or self-sacrifice done in the name of materialism? What authentic virtues follow from a physicalistic view of the world?

No, atheism does not—and cannot—provide these things. It does not have the resources. [Theism alone gives the only reasonable foundation for morality.](#)

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Putting This Solid Ground into Action

- Keep in mind that morality entails obligation, and obligations—like contracts—are held between persons. If there is no one to whom we are obliged, then there is no obligation.
- In talking to an atheist about good and evil, remember the problem of grounding. Atheism does not have the resources to explain the “why” of objective goodness.
- Understand that Sam Harris’s attempt to explain goodness without God fails because science is descriptive, not prescriptive. His “moral objectivism” is just utilitarianism – a sophisticated form of relativism.
- Remember theism alone gives the only reasonable foundation for morality. Authentic virtues cannot follow from a physicalistic view of the world.

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Greg Koukl

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[2](#) Solace Church, Tulsa, OK [Contact](#)

[3](#) Trinity Baptist Church, Norman, OK [Contact](#)

[10](#) South Valley Community Church, Hollister, CA [Contact](#)

[14-16](#) CrossExamined Instructor's Academy, Matthews, NC [Contact](#)

[20](#) Pray's Mill Baptist Church, Douglasville, GA [Contact](#)



Brett Kunkle

July

[10](#) Summit Ministries, Dayton, TN Topics: "Tactics", "Evil, Suffering & the Goodness of God" [Contact](#)

[10-16](#) Grace Fellowship Church, Salt Lake City, UT Topic: Utah Mission Trip

[18-23](#) Lutheran Church & School of Messiah, Berkeley, CA Topic: Berkeley Mission Trip

August

[1](#) Village Baptist Church, Fayetteville, NC Topic: TBD Time: 6 p.m. [Contact](#)

[6](#) Hume Lake Christian Camp, Hume, CA Topics: "The Trinity" & "Tactics in Defending the Faith" [Contact](#)

[9](#) Lake Norman Baptist Church, Huntersville, NC Time: 5p.m. Topics: TBD [Contact](#)

[10](#) Life Fellowship, Charlotte, NC Time: TBD Topics: TBD [Contact](#)

[13-15](#) Cross-Examined Instructor Academy, Matthews, NC Topics: "Can We Be Good Without God?", "Why I Take Students to Berkeley and What I've Learned" [Contact](#)

[17-30](#) Summit Ministries, Manitou Springs, CO Topic: In-Residence Scholar [Contact](#)



Alan Shlemon

July

[2](#) Hume Lake Christian Camp, Hume, CA Topics: "The Trinity" & "Tactics in Defending the Faith" [Contact](#)

[6-7](#) Presbyterian Church of America, Lebanon, PA Topic: "Truth and Tolerance in a Whatever World", "Tactics in Defending the Faith", "Homosexuality: Truth & Compassion", "Why I'm Not an Evolutionist", "Bad Arguments Against Religion" [Contact](#)

[10](#) Summit Ministries, Manitou, CO Topics: "A Closer Look at Islam" & "The Case for Intelligent Design" [Contact](#)

[16](#) Hume Lake Christian Camp, Hume, CA Topics: "The Trinity" & "Tactics in Defending the Faith" [Contact](#)

[28](#) Summit Ministries, Manitou, CO Topics: "A Closer Look at Islam" & "Why I Am not an Evolutionist" [Contact](#)

August

[9-15](#) Middle East Focus on the Family, Lebanon Topics: TBD [Contact](#)

[28](#) Summit Ministries, Manitou, CO Topics: "A Closer Look at Islam" & "If God is Good, Why is there Evil?" [Contact](#)

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Endnotes

1. [“God, Evolution, and Morality: Part I,” *Solid Ground*](#) (May 2014), available at str.org.
2. For a lucid response to Hitchens’s challenge, see Amy Hall, [“Hitchens’s Challenge Solved,”](#) at str.org.
3. Note the distinction here between the *epistemic* issue—how we *know* moral truth—and the *ontological* issue—how we account for morality’s existence.
4. Frankly, if God did not exist, my actions *would be* different in lots of things. What those differences *would not be*, though, is immoral.
5. Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape—How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010).
6. See Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).
7. Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 1, 7.
8. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
9. See, for example, [William Lane Craig, “Navigating Sam Harris’s *The Moral Landscape*,”](#) reasonablefaith.org or Tom Gilson’s [“Unreason at the Head of Project Reason,”](#) in Gilson and Weitnauer, *True Reason* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013).
10. “Bachelors are unmarried males” is an example. The statement tells you about definitions, but nothing about the world. If neither bachelors nor males existed, the statement would still be true, but trivially so.
11. For those concerned that this challenge puts the theist at risk also, see my treatment of Euthyphro’s Dilemma in [“Who Says God Is Good?”](#) at str.org.
12. Resulting, in Harris’s case, in the fallacy of equivocation.
13. That Harris does not consider genocide to be consistent with human flourishing is beside my point. I’m simply showing here that the word “good” can be used in two entirely different ways—a detail critical to my critique of Harris.

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Greg Koukl

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