

Whence human rights? Some moral evidence for theism

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Abstract

Given the voluminous amount of ethical discourse in both the Christian and the wider philosophical community, it is surprising that so little of it addresses moral epistemology – that is, how we justifiably arrive at judgments regarding normative propositions. Appeals to intuition, with a preference for broader explanatory principles, form the basis for most ethical discourse, with the assumption that these intuitions are both widely held and epistemically justified. There are secular problems with such an approach: the heterogeneity of ethical intuitions across people and cultures, the possibility of evolutionary debunking arguments, and the apparent conflict between many intuitive positions.

These problems take an acute form on the issue of human rights. It is far from clear that atheism renders probable any theses favourable to the notion of human rights – especially since most secular conceptions of ethics place far more value on hedonism and neo-Lockean conceptions of personhood than an approach which includes those rendered less valuable according to these categories.

In contrast, the Christian tradition has readily emphasised the common humanity and dignity of all human beings, independently of their race, gender, cognitive capacity, economic expedience or level of development. It is this sort of approach which predicts the moral success of human rights movements: the abolition of infanticide, the slave trade, apartheid, and so on.

What are the implications of this? An important implication is that if human rights movements like the abolition of the slave trade are held to be the major moral successes they seem to be, then this provides evidence for theism, and particular forms of theism, over atheism. I end by offering a fuller framework about the relationship between theological claims, epistemic justification and ethical discourse.