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# **The Socratic Method Research Portal Presents:**

## **THE MORAL BANKRUPTCY OF FAITH A Modern Socratic Dialogue**

Version 1.1

by

Max Maxwell

### **Introduction**

This dialogue is an example of the Socratic method applied to a modern topic. In this Socratic Dialogue, a Christian preacher states the often claimed idea that atheists cannot be moral because faith in God is the basis of morality. The Socratic Method is used to question this idea in a way that demonstrates it is not religious faith, but secular knowledge that is needed in order to carry out moral deeds and to interpret moral principles.

It is important to remember that this written dialogue is much more tidy and succinct

than the real conversations. The written dialogue goes from one question to the next immediately, but in real life a 30 minute conversation may have been necessary to get to the next question. The written dialogue here merely illustrates the typical outcome, but not the exact path that might be taken in any particular live conversation to that outcome. Different conversations on this topic would have different questions. It all depends on the responses of the participant.

This dialogue uses the name of Socrates as the questioner. This is not intended to imply that the historical Socrates or Plato would have agreed with my writing. It is merely a self amusing historical convention that I used. However, I did make an attempt to portray the dialogical character of Socrates as I found him in my own reading of Plato.

This dialogue is not intended as an attack on faith, nor is it in any way an argument in favor of atheism. This dialogue is merely a plea for the use of common sense when speaking about morality. With regard to the Socratic method, this dialogue demonstrates the ability to use the "scope of application" of a field of knowledge in a Socratic conversation. If we really know something, we should be accountable to how that knowledge is applied. It also demonstrates the usefulness of the "one example technique" to further a Socratic questioning process. The one example technique allows an idea or definition to stand or fall on the basis of finding one example that is able to stand up to further examination. This dialogue will be integrated into the essay, "The Fundamentals of Education: PART V". The commentary discussing how to use this type of dialogue for different subjects will be added at that time. The actual dialogue below will remain the same.

I have asked the questions in the dialogue below in real conversations. Although the verbal maneuvering of the respondents vary tremendously, the end result is the same as the dialogue you read below. That end result is the inability of religious persons to give one example of faith being able to carry out moral deeds or interpret moral principles without the absolutely necessary assistance of ordinary, secular, human knowledge. The implications of this speak for themselves.

## The Dialogue

**Preacher:** An atheist cannot be a moral person. Without faith in God, no human being can be moral at all. You must first have faith in God in order to have any capacity for morality. Faith in God is the only true basis of morality.

**Socrates:** It sounds like being an atheist is an unfortunate state of being.

**Preacher:** The atheists are most unfortunate Socrates.

**Socrates:** Sadly, I am more unfortunate than the atheists. I do not even understand the nature of morality. Thus, I could not tell you whether or not you need to first believe in the gods in order to be moral. So I ask you to help me and teach me something important.



**Preacher:** Of course, Socrates. That is why I am here.

**Socrates:** Thank you my good friend. I would like you to answer a question. What is morality?

**Preacher:** Morality is the expression of human behavior that is based on the knowledge of right and wrong.

**Socrates:** And one must believe in the gods in order to know what is right and wrong?

**Preacher:** Exactly. It is the knowledge of God, which comes through faith that gives us the ability to know right and wrong. And Socrates, there are no gods. There is only the one almighty God who created all things and redeems us through his son Jesus Christ.

**Socrates:** I am afraid I have never been very good at understanding all the amazing stories about all the different gods. I must admit that I am very excited about the idea that knowing your God will also give me the knowledge of right and wrong. But there is just one thing I would like to understand, if you could instruct me.

**Preacher:** What is your question?

**Socrates:** You say that knowing God will give me the knowledge of right and wrong.

**Preacher:** Yes.

**Socrates:** In what area of life will the believer know right and wrong as a result of believing in God?

**Preacher:** The knowledge of God permeates our whole being in every aspect of our lives.

**Socrates:** By the gods, dear preacher! I declare that nothing could be more useful than to learn right and wrong from a deity who knows! Will the knowledge of God help me know right and wrong pertaining to the calculation of the sums of numbers?

**Preacher:** No.

**Socrates:** Will the knowledge of God give me the knowledge of right and wrong with regard to the practice of medicine?

**Preacher:** No.

**Socrates:** How about right and wrong regarding the architectural design of buildings?

**Preacher:** No. Morality is not about this kind of right and wrong.

**Socrates:** Then the knowledge of God does not give us the knowledge of all right

and wrong. It just gives us the knowledge of a particular kind of right and wrong that you refer to as moral.

**Preacher:** That is correct.

**Socrates:** It seems that we have not defined morality yet and I need to ask my first question again. What is morality? Please have mercy on my stubborn ignorance and define it in a way that does not exceed the scope of its application.

**Preacher:** Morality is about right and wrong regarding the treatment of other human beings.

**Socrates:** And does this moral and right treatment serve to benefit a person or does it hurt them?

**Preacher:** Moral behavior always serves to the benefit of humanity.

**Socrates:** Then this moral knowledge from God is expressed in behavior that benefits people?

**Preacher:** Yes.

**Socrates:** Who would know more about the beneficial treatment of people who need a cure for their sickness? Is it the believer in God or a doctor?

**Preacher:** A doctor, although healing is sometimes possible through prayer.

**Socrates:** And when the doctor behaves in such a way as to bring much needed healing to another human being through the secular science of medicine, would you consider this act of healing to be a moral or immoral act?

**Preacher:** There is nothing immoral about it.

**Socrates:** But does the doctor learn how to treat sickness from believing in God or from medical school?

**Preacher:** Medical school.

**Socrates:** Did you not say that moral knowledge comes only from the knowledge of God and that people who do not know or have faith in God cannot be moral?

**Preacher:** Yes.

**Socrates:** Then to the extent that beneficial behavior leads to healing through the knowledge of the secular science of medicine and not through faith in God, can it be moral?

**Preacher:** Based on what I said, I guess I would have to say no. However, this does not seem to be a proper outcome to my statements.

**Socrates:** First you said that morality was the knowledge of right and wrong, which comes from believing in God. But we found that this moral knowledge of God does not cover all right and wrong. Then you said that morality is right behavior that benefits people. Now we find that not all right and beneficial behavior needs a faith in God in order to be either right or beneficial to people. It seems that we have failed to properly define this faith based morality in that we still have not correctly described the scope of its application to human life.

**Preacher:** That seems to be true.

**Socrates:** Perhaps, if you give me one example where morality is fulfilled to the benefit of another person through knowledge gained from religious faith, then I will be able to understand your concept of morality.

**Preacher:** Ok. Jesus said that the most important laws were to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus taught that on this love all of the law and prophets depended. This means that love is the fulfillment of all law and morality. Any time a Christian, who has faith in Jesus and desires to fulfill his teachings, loves or helps her neighbor as Jesus taught then she is being moral.

**Socrates:** Even if that Christian is a doctor and helps her neighbor through her secular knowledge of the science of medicine? Perhaps you should give me a specific example of how morality is fulfilled in a way that comes from belief in God.

**Preacher:** A Christian who has faith in Jesus' teachings about loving his neighbor as himself and expresses that faith by helping his neighbor fix his car is a good example.



**Socrates:** Do you see a difference between just wanting to be moral and, through action, being moral?

**Preacher:** Absolutely.

**Socrates:** And who is actually moral? Is it the person who wants to help his neighbor because he believes it is right and yet does not help, or is it the one who wants to help his neighbor and actually does it?

**Preacher:** It is the one who loves his neighbor with real deeds that is the moral person.

**Socrates:** Now, can a Christian help his neighbor by fixing his car if he does not know anything about cars?

**Preacher:** No.

**Socrates:** Does a person learn about cars from believing in God or by studying auto mechanics?

**Preacher:** By studying auto mechanics.

**Socrates:** Is auto mechanics a religious knowledge that is gained through the belief in God or is it a secular knowledge that is available to any human being?

**Preacher:** Auto mechanics is a secular knowledge.

**Socrates:** If, as you said, being moral is in the deed then is it true that the Christian can only fulfill morality through actual deeds in this example by having secular knowledge about cars?

**Preacher:** That appears to be true.

**Socrates:** Then could we say that when morality is fulfilled because religious people

actually behave in moral ways, this behavior is possible because of secular knowledge and not because of their faith in God?

**Preacher:** Based on what we have just said that seems to be true, but we must have missed something.

**Socrates:** I know what I missed. I missed getting the example I requested.

**Preacher:** What do you mean?

**Socrates:** I did not ask for an example in which secular knowledge could fulfill morality. Such examples only show that an atheist could in fact be moral. Instead, I asked for an example in which religious knowledge that is gained from faith in God fulfills morality by empowering people to carry out moral deeds. Can you give me one example?

**Preacher:** I guess we could say that a person who helps his paralyzed neighbor by changing his living room light bulb is an example. In this case, it is the religious

desire to bless the neighbor that fulfills morality.

**Socrates:** And if the Christian does not know how to change a light bulb?

**Preacher:** You have got to be kidding.

**Socrates:** Not at all. Nobody is born knowing how to change a light bulb. We learn it. Do we learn it from divine revelation received through our faith in the gods or through reading the bible? Or is this another example of secular knowledge that we learn from our experience in the world?

**Preacher:** It is an example of secular knowledge.

**Socrates:** So, if the Christian does not know how to change a light bulb, isn't it true that this Christian cannot fulfill his desire to be moral and help his neighbor?

**Preacher:** Yes.

**Socrates:** In this case, is it faith in the gods or simple, secular knowledge that leads to the fulfillment of morality?

**Preacher:** It is secular knowledge.

**Socrates:** In order for me to understand how faith in God is the basis of morality, all I need is one example where the knowledge gained by faith and not secular knowledge leads to the fulfillment of morality.

**Preacher:** I think that is going to be difficult.

**Socrates:** You say the atheist cannot be moral. Yet, if we continue to fail in our search to find even one example in which religious faith is able to actually fulfill morality in the absence of secular knowledge, then I must say that it is not the atheist but religious people who rely on faith without regard to knowledge that are morally disadvantaged.

**Preacher:** But religious people do have secular knowledge.

**Socrates:** Yes they do, and does it not seem to you that every example of moral behavior we can come up with involves some secular knowledge that is necessary to perform that behavior?

**Preacher:** I must admit that this seems to be true.

**Socrates:** Since we have seen it is secular knowledge that fulfills morality by empowering the carrying out of moral deeds, isn't it true that religious people are capable of fulfilling morality only to the extent that they possess the secular knowledge that they share in common with atheists?

**Preacher:** It appears so.

**Socrates:** Then to the extent that a Christian is lacking in secular knowledge, are they not also lacking in the capacity to be moral?

**Preacher:** Only to the extent that they cannot act to fulfill their moral desires.

**Socrates:** Can you think of one example in which a Christian can act morally without any secular knowledge whatsoever?

**Preacher:** No.

**Socrates:** Then is it true that it is not faith in God but secular knowledge, which gives us the ability to carry out moral acts and thus actually be moral?

**Preacher:** I will grant that our conversation makes it seem so, however it does not seem right to me.

**Socrates:** What would we say of a person, who knew what was morally right, yet was incapable of acting in accordance with his knowledge by behaving morally?

**Preacher:** Such a person would be morally bankrupt.

**Socrates:** To the extent that religious persons always need secular knowledge to carry out moral actions, should we not also say that religious faith in the absence of knowledge is morally bankrupt?

**Preacher:** It seems so.

**Socrates:** In light of this, perhaps we should acknowledge that atheists indeed have something of what it takes to be moral?

**Preacher:** Yet, without the knowledge of what is right and the desire to do it, which I still say does come from religious faith, the atheist cannot be moral.

**Socrates:** Are you really going to tell me that you have never, not even once, seen an atheist who knows what is right and wants to do what is right?

**Preacher:** No, I guess I cannot say that.

**Socrates:** And does an atheist, who knows what is right and desires to do it, get that knowledge and desire from their faith in God?

**Preacher:** Obviously not.



**Socrates:** Then isn't there some basis of morality in them independent of faith in God?

**Preacher:** Perhaps.

**Socrates:** I am still fascinated by the idea that faith in God will teach me right and wrong. I greatly desire to grow in my understanding of right and wrong. Can you tell me about that?

**Preacher:** I would be delighted. Jesus taught us a primary moral principle. He said that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves and the fulfillment of the whole of the law and the prophets depend on this love. This principle can guide us every day and give us the knowledge of what is morally right. In fact, this principle is the heart and soul of a Christian's daily morality.

**Socrates:** So I should love my neighbor as myself?

**Preacher:** Yes, this is the teaching of Jesus.

**Socrates:** If I had a heart condition and took medication, should I share my medication with my neighbor as an act of kindness and well wishing for the health of his heart?

**Preacher:** No. That would not be a good idea.

**Socrates:** But I really am loving him exactly as myself in this case. How can it be wrong?

**Preacher:** Obviously, you could harm your neighbor by giving him medication that may not be good for him.

**Socrates:** What if I am enjoying all kinds of sweets that I received for my birthday. Should I share them with my diabetic neighbor?

**Preacher:** Obviously not. Sweets are not good for a diabetic.

**Socrates:** When I try to obey this teaching of Jesus and attempt to love my neighbor

as myself, how will I know what is helpful or hurtful to my neighbor?

**Preacher:** Oh, come on Socrates. Surely you know that you just have to talk to your neighbors and get to know them.

**Socrates:** Then there is no special revelation in the bible that will help me to know if a particular action will help or harm my neighbor?

**Preacher:** No.

**Socrates:** Is it true the knowledge of what is helpful and harmful to our neighbors comes through our ordinary secular experience in the world and not through the revelations of faith?

**Preacher:** Yes. That is true.

**Socrates:** You said that the principle of loving your neighbor as yourself is the heart and soul of daily Christian morality.

**Preacher:** Yes.

**Socrates:** Yet it appears that, without ordinary secular knowledge, the attempt to love a neighbor may bring harm to the neighbor.

**Preacher:** Yes, that is true.

**Socrates:** Does it seem to you that not only do we need secular knowledge to carry out specific moral acts, which we know to be right, but we also need ordinary secular knowledge to interpret the moral principle itself?

**Preacher:** That appears to be true in some cases.

**Socrates:** Oh, in some cases? Can you give me one example in which the principle of loving your neighbor as yourself can be understood in its practical daily meaning without any form of ordinary secular knowledge?

**Preacher:** Come to think of it, no I cannot.

**Socrates:** Then isn't it true that secular knowledge is necessary not only to fulfill morality in the carrying out of moral deeds, but is always needed even to interpret the main moral principle of Christianity?

**Preacher:** Apparently so.

**Socrates:** If faith alone cannot interpret moral principles or carry out moral deeds, is it not true that faith without knowledge is incapable of leading a person to morality?

**Preacher:** That does appear to be the case.

**Socrates:** How far a turn we have taken. It now appears that in the absence of secular knowledge, the religious person of faith is completely morally bankrupt and incapable of being moral. It appears that there is no faith, no belief in God, no revelation in any sacred text that can replace ordinary secular knowledge when it comes to actually understanding moral imperatives and successfully carrying out the resulting moral acts.

**Preacher:** This seems to be true.

**Socrates:** What of the claim that religious faith is the only basis of morality? If faith always needs secular knowledge to interpret moral principles and carry out moral acts, then is it true that this knowledge is necessary for morality?

**Preacher:** Yes, I could agree with that.

**Socrates:** To the extent that knowledge is necessary for morality, will atheists have a capacity to be moral?

**Preacher:** Only to the extent that secular knowledge can empower us to determine what is the right thing to do or how to carry out a right act. It seems correct to state that ordinary secular knowledge is needed to interpret and carry out all moral imperatives, but faith in God is needed to get our basic moral imperatives in the first place. For example, who would come up with the idea of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" if God did not reveal it through Jesus?

**Socrates:** Actually, Confucius came up with it centuries before Jesus was born. He said, "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you." This is the same principle worded slightly differently. He was not a believer in either Judaism or Christianity was he?

**Preacher:** No.

**Socrates:** Did Confucius have any faith in God?

**Preacher:** No.

**Socrates:** If this unbeliever was able to articulate such an important moral principle of Christianity centuries before Jesus was born, would you not say that it is possible for a person to come to moral understanding without believing in God?

**Preacher:** Apparently it is possible sometimes. However, I believe it is more difficult to reach moral knowledge without faith in God.

**Socrates:** But it is not impossible?

**Preacher:** It seems that it is not impossible.

**Socrates:** At this time, I still have more questions on what morality is and what is its scope of application. This talk with you has also raised some questions for me on the nature of God as a moral authority. For example, does God command something because it is right or is it right because he commands it? And if God commands something because it is right, then is it the rightness of the thing in question that contains the moral authority and not the God who commands? For those who command or do something because it is right are not appealing to their own authority, but submitting themselves to the authority of the rightness of that, which they value. Unfortunately, I have more questions than answers. It is my plight in life.

**Preacher:** Perhaps we can pursue more questions about morality on another day?

**Socrates:** I look forward to it.



## **OTHER ESSAYS BY MAX MAXWELL and MELETE:**

### **How to Use the Socratic Method**

This essay serves as a conceptual site map to my writings.

[http://www.socraticmethod.net/how\\_to\\_use\\_the\\_socratic\\_method/using\\_the\\_socratic\\_method.html](http://www.socraticmethod.net/how_to_use_the_socratic_method/using_the_socratic_method.html)

### **A Socratic Perspective on the Nature of Human Evil**

The relationship between ignorance and wrongdoing is explored in a defining manner.

[http://www.socraticmethod.net/socratic\\_essay\\_nature\\_of\\_human\\_evil.htm](http://www.socraticmethod.net/socratic_essay_nature_of_human_evil.htm)

### **A Socratic Perspective on the Zombie Apocalypse**

(An essay about the most important thing zombies have to teach us about living the examined life)

<http://www.socraticmethod.net/essays/zombies/page1.htm>

## **The Socratic Temperament**

(An essay on the character traits of the Socratic teacher)

[http://www.socraticmethod.net/the\\_socratic\\_temperament.htm](http://www.socraticmethod.net/the_socratic_temperament.htm)

## **The Fundamentals of Education: A Socratic Perspective on the Cultivation of Humanity**

This essay (in three parts) lay out the philosophical foundations needed for all possible uses of the Socratic method and for a Socratic philosophy of education. The purpose of this essay is:

- To offer a philosophical basis for a broad range of uses of the Socratic method
- To demonstrate the principled potential for creating innovations in the use of the

Socratic method

- To indicate new directions for future Socratic method research

[http://www.socraticmethod.net/how\\_to\\_use\\_the\\_socratic\\_method/page1.html](http://www.socraticmethod.net/how_to_use_the_socratic_method/page1.html)

## **The Semantic Independence of Socratic Focus**

This essay demonstrates the ability to use the Socratic method independently from a reliance on the semantics of natural language. Socratic irony is not just a rhetorical stunt. The Socratic method can actually leverage the ignorance of a Socratic facilitator to productive results.

<http://www.socraticmethod.net/opening/page1.htm>