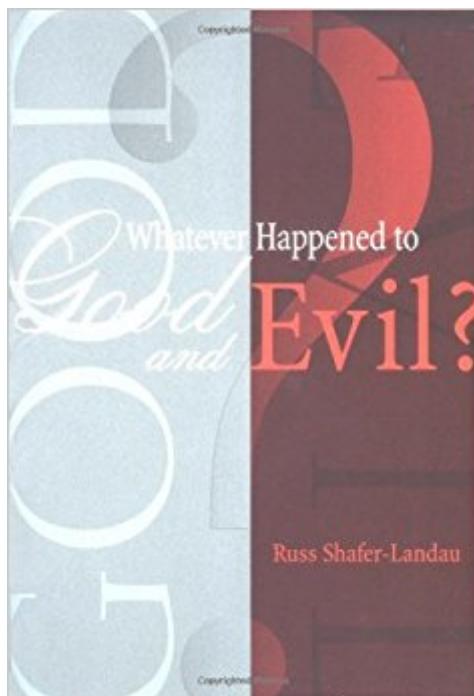


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Whatever Happened To Good And Evil?



Synopsis

Since September 11, 2001, many people in the United States have been more inclined to use the language of good and evil, and to be more comfortable with the idea that certain moral standards are objective (true independently of what anyone happens to think of them). Some people, especially those who are not religious, are not sure how to substantiate this view. *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* provides a basis for exploring these doubts and ultimately defends the objectivity of ethics. Engaging and accessible, it is the first introduction to meta-ethics written especially for students and general readers with no philosophical background. Focusing on the issues at the foundation of morality, it poses such questions as: How can we know what is right and wrong? Does ethical objectivity require God? Why should I be moral? Where do moral standards come from? What is a moral value, and how can it exist in a scientific world? Do cultural diversity and persistent moral disagreement support moral skepticism? Writing in a clear and lively style and employing many examples to illustrate theoretical arguments, Russ Shafer-Landau identifies the many weaknesses in contemporary moral skepticism and devotes considerable attention to presenting, and critiquing, the most difficult objections to his view. Also included in the book are a helpful summary of all the major arguments covered, as well as a glossary of key philosophical terms. *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* is ideal for a variety of philosophy courses and compelling reading for anyone interested in ethics.

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Customer Reviews

"The idea behind this book was ingeniously conceived, and the execution of that idea is handled

brilliantly. This is a superb book. It is philosophically astute, passionately argued, and written in a wonderfully accessible and eloquent style. I've never seen a better introduction to meta-ethics." --Brad Hooker, University of Reading "This is an excellent introductory textbook on moral relativism and objectivity. It is concise, well-written, well-organized, and well-reasoned. It fills a real gap in the literature." --Paul K. Moser, Loyola University of Chicago "The topic is timely, the execution is admirable, and there is no other book quite like it. I would gladly assign it to my students and recommend it to other teachers." --Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Dartmouth College

Russ Shafer-Landau is at University of Wisconsin.

Russ Shafer-Landau's **Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?** is the more reader-friendly counterpart to his **Moral Realism: A Defence**. After a brief introduction of the philosophical terrain that he is to cover, Shafer-Landau begins his case for "ethical objectivism" (moral realism) by urging a powerful *prima facie* case against the varieties of moral skepticism. The moral skeptic is unable to account for the seeming possibility of moral error, moral disagreement or moral progress; affirms a position that, ironically, yields a kind of moral dogmatism (because each person's moral views are "correct" in the only possible sense that the skeptic can allow) and is unable to ground the value of tolerance, and must hold the implausible position that the respective moral views of a Mother Theresa and a Charles Manson are morally equivalent and arbitrarily espoused. The entire section is well done as it puts the moral skeptic on the defensive and challenges the common assumption that skepticism is the "default" position. A strong positive case for some variety of moral realism in the final section, Part Three, would, when combined with the conclusions of Part Two, provide a powerful case for moral realism indeed. However, in my opinion, Part Three does not ultimately deliver the goods. He opens this section with a chapter noting that ethical objectivism solves the various problems raised by moral skepticism, and this is surely correct. He also argues, convincingly, I think, that the fact of moral disagreement--even intractable disagreement--yields no conclusions of philosophical importance. (If we thought that it did, then what should we make of the fact that there is intractable **metaethical** disagreement? Shall we conclude that there is no truth of the matter of whether there is any truth of the matter?) And his final three chapters, which take on a variety of skeptical arguments, are quite good, I think. Chapter 20, in particular, "Why Be Moral?," takes on the "Argument from Rationality," which urges that (1) one is morally required to do A only if one has a reason to do A, (2) one has a reason to do A only if doing A serves one's own interests (Rational Egoism), (3) that what is in one's interests is fixed subjectively, so that, (4) moral

requirement is itself a subjective matter. Though Shafer-Landau observes that "most philosophers" embrace (2), he displays, I think, good philosophical instincts in rejecting it, and offers some plausible counterexamples to it. Good chapter. The weaknesses of the book are in chapters 15, 16 and 17. In chapter 15, Shafer-Landau takes up the question of whether the existence of God is necessary for the truth of ethical objectivism. He suggests that people who think so would appeal to the need of a "law maker" in order to have moral laws. Against this, he notes that there are all sorts of "laws," such as physical laws, that do not seem to require a law maker. And then he raises the standard Euthyphro argument against the law maker view. First, it is not clear to me that physical "laws" serve as a good analogy. Is there anything *normative* about gravity? Further, some theists might be inclined to argue from the existence of any normative construals of law (logic, epistemology) to God's existence. Consider, for instance, Victor Reppert's souped-up version(s) of C. S. Lewis's "Argument from Reason" (C.S. LEWIS'S DANGEROUS IDEA). But my main problem with Shafer-Landau's argument is the blithe assumption that those who see God as essential to morality must have the "law giver" model in mind. Some might argue that a respect-for-persons ethic is necessary to make sense of our considered moral judgments, and that a theistic worldview accommodates the notion of dignity in a way that a naturalistic worldview does not. Or they might argue that it is God's essential *nature*--rather than his arbitrary will--that serves as the ultimate criterion for morality. Such formulations have been worked out by the likes of Robert Adams (*Finite and Infinite Goods*) and William Alston ("What Euthyphro Should Have Said" in William Lane Craig, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*), and they seem immune to Euthyphro objections. Chapters 16 ("Where Do Moral Standards Come From?") and 17 ("Values in a Scientific World") are Shafer-Landau's opportunity to make his positive case for ethical objectivism, but I found the chapters rather disappointing. In chapter 16, he entertains the plausibility of both ethical naturalism (moral properties are either identical to or constituted by natural properties) and non-naturalism (moral properties are *sui generis*), even though the latter is his actual position. But he offers precious little by way of defense of either, beyond appealing to other sorts of "standards" that may very well be "just true," and then asking why we should view moral standards with greater suspicion. The argument of chapter 17 makes similar appeals and, I think, displays similar weaknesses. Read on. Throughout the book, after covering a variety of arguments for moral skepticism, Shafer-Landau never entertains an argument that I, for one, find particularly compelling. If we assume the truth of metaphysical naturalism, and we appeal to a Darwinian explanation of our moral beliefs, then, arguably, we have an undercutting defeater for those moral beliefs. It seems plausible to suppose that, given the contingencies of the evolutionary landscape, we would have

had the moral beliefs that we do *regardless* of whether they are true or false, since our having them is a non-moral means to the non-moral end of reproductive fitness. And, as Darwin observes, had that landscape been different, our "social instincts" and attending conscience would have urged us toward quite different behaviors, such as siblicide and infanticide (see chs. 4 and 5 of DESCENT OF MAN). Call such considerations "Darwinian Counterfactuals." If the moral laws that are in effect are contingent in this way, then it appears that there is a striking disanalogy between moral laws and, say, the logical laws to which Shafer-Landau appeals in establishing laws without a lawmaker. On the Darwinian scheme, there are possible worlds in which, say, the social system of the Taliban is considered just. But Darwin or no Darwin, there is no possible world in which modus ponens correctly replaces Affirming the Consequent. And the Darwinian explanation seems capable of accomodating and explaining the seeming objectivity of morality and its constancy and insistence within the human psyche. As Michael Ruse has observed, a part of the trick of getting us to cooperate is the widespread illusion of objectivity. Were we all convinced that the sense of moral obligation is, as Lewis once put it, the same sort of thing as our "fondness for cheese," we would be less likely to persevere in hard times. Shafer-Landau could, of course, either deny that any Darwinian Counterfactual is true, or that prevailing moral beliefs are true in those worlds in which the antecedents obtain. That is, on the one hand, he could argue that the sorts of moral beliefs that prevail in the actual world (e.g., justice as a kind of equality) are evolutionary "forced moves," to use Daniel Dennett's term. (Vision of some sort may be such a "forced move" in any world in which there are "locomotors.") So Darwin's speculations regarding counterfactual moral belief systems are simply false: such counterfactual moral beliefs would never be selected for their fitness. But on metaphysical naturalism, those Darwinian counterfactuals seem both possible and plausible. The social instincts or "epigenetic rules" that are at the wellsprings of our morality are in place precisely because they prompt us towards fitness-conferring behavior. To imagine a change in the circumstances of reproductive fitness is to imagine a situation in which different behaviors-and instinctual proclivities--are fitness-conferring, and, thus, Darwin's suggestion just seems right. On the other hand, he may allow that the evolutionary landscape may have produced widespread belief in "Talibanian" justice or the like, but simply deny that the beliefs in such worlds are true. The sense of justice that enjoys widespread acceptance in the actual world corresponds to and apprehends that transcendent standard of justice among the verities. But barring some Moral Author of the world who sees to it that humans cultivate generally true moral beliefs, how plausible is it that the contingencies of our evolution would have led us to embrace such transcendent standards as the objects of our moral beliefs? The option under consideration here has it that the Darwinian

counterfactuals suggest very real possibilities: we might have turned out to have regarded as obligatory and meritorious those very acts that, in the actual world, are seen as atrocities. But we did not. How shall we then explain the fact that, of all the possible moral psychologies that could have emerged, the contingent circumstances of the landscape aligned themselves in such a way as to produce creatures who apprehend the necessary Moral Truths? A sort of "Moral Fine-Tuning Argument" suggests itself. I would very much like to see Shafer-Landau interact with such evolutionary arguments for moral skepticism. Shafer-Landau writes in a straightforward, engaging and sometimes humorous style, and exudes a becoming modesty regarding the strength of his own arguments. The clarity of his reasoning and exposition makes it easy even for the philosophical neophyte to understand just what is at issue and what must be argued in order either to make or break his case. In fact, a very helpful appendix reduces the main arguments of the chapters to syllogistic form, helping the reader to identify crucial premises of the arguments. Indeed, here is an author who understands that there is no such thing as philosophy without argument, and he models for the reader what it is to **do** philosophy, in offering and assessing arguments. I used the book as the first text in my class on Ethical Theory, and with great success. I found that even those students new to philosophy were gaining a clear understanding of what separates the sheep from the goats when it comes to philosophical argumentation. For this reason, I highly recommend the book not just as a text in Ethics, but perhaps even as an opening text in a course in Intro to Philosophy.

Good book for ethics class. Normally a little expensive though considering it's so small

This book put a lot in perspective in terms of skepticism and its many forms. Answered many questions and set me on a better mental path! Read for a class but look forward to keeping it for the years to come.

First of all, it is nice to see an academic eschew orthodoxy and consider seriously the possibility of some kind of cosmic standard of good and evil. That alone merits two stars. Second of all, Shafer-Landau does a pretty good job at describing the problematic implications of maintaining that there is no such standard (i.e., that there ultimately can be no non-arbitrary basis for any valuation of any practice, whether rape or altruism or anything else). Third, the author deserves credit for trying to write a book intelligible to those not accustomed to reading scholarly treatises. That said, it seemed to me that this book could have used a good sweeping through by an unsparing editor, to brush out the numerous repetitions (I presume, added so as to try to make the

points clearer). Fourth, the author does a pretty good job of arguing how a theory of ethical objectivism may *logically* be sustained in the face of criticisms of it. In particular, he attempts to place this theory outside the realm of that which is scientifically testable. He does so by noting that science can only vindicate causal or predictive principles - not those of the normative variety, like moral principles. What this all adds up to, however, appears to be the creation of a mental "environment" that can facilitate belief in the possibility that morality has some constant nature. But anything is possible, isn't it? I feel almost as though at the end of the book, I am right where I was at the beginning of it. What I miss in this book is a serious attempt at proving that morality is something like a property fundamental to the cosmos (essentially the author's argument). Where is the evidence? If morality were more than human invention, how would we know? It may be that rival theories of morality - subjectivism, relativism, nihilism - fall under the weight of their own internal inconsistencies. But is that the best evidence for "ethical objectivism"? While internal incoherence might basically prove impossibility, internal coherence alone doesn't prove certainty or even plausibility, does it? Michael Shermer, in his "The Science of Good and Evil", argues that our present notions of good and evil derive from ideals and behaviors conducive to survival as developed by our recent and ancient ancestors. In other words, "morality" for Shermer is only transcendent in the sense that moral notions and obligations, because of the momentum of their long history, have acquired a kind of transcendent force that elevates them above the inclinations of any individual - not that they "transcend" an original human invention. According to him, there is wide agreement amongst different groups about moral laws not because those laws do not share a human origin, but because they do. They were, and are, expressions of a virtually universal human nature as it plays out in the quest for survival and well-being. Shermer's argument is powerful in its plausibility. Where is Shaefer-Landau's response to it? On what grounds is the human race really justified in presuming a supra-human nature to morality, when what appears to be a very plausible argument against that view does NOT rely on this additional assumption? C.S. Lewis, of course, noting with Shermer the wide agreement on moral law but disagreeing with him on its implications, infers from this agreement the existence of "natural law" (see "The Abolition of Man", a cosmic, absolute moral code of sorts which God has enabled us to discern through the spiritual part of ourselves. Perhaps this is hogwash - but at least he tried. I wish Shaefer-Landau had made more of a Lewis-like attempt at trying to marshal or organize evidences (presuming there really are any) - rather than present formulations of logic - to support the claim that there is some objective standard of right and wrong somewhere out there. If moral law is a fundamental property of the universe - if there is such a thing as natural law - why shouldn't that be testable, rather like the existence of gravity is? Why shouldn't

the child who's grown up out in the woods by himself not also have an intuitive sense of moral law, or a kid who's been in a coma for the first ten years of his life? In short - most people sense there is something wrong with relativism and the rest. Moreover, natural law (moral law as fundamental property, not created by humans), can be contemplated as a possibility by most people. The problem is, this proposition appears to be entirely untestable, and so seems to most rightly belong to a category which might also include claims about the true nature of Zeus, the existence of extra-terrestrials, or whether all human action has been pre-destined; that is, I don't see how Shaefer-Landau makes any headway in overcoming this biggest strike (total untestability) against the "ethical objectivism" theory. He doesn't seem to even try (except, as I noted, within the realm of logic). Russ, you seem like a great guy, but what we need now is a big, bold argument that acknowledges that a proposition about any fundamental cosmic property (normative or not) at some point, has to be testable in SOME reliable way for us to really feel okay about subscribing to it; explains what that way is; and then demonstrates how ethical objectivism meets that test (evidentially and/or phenomenally). You know? Was the Holocaust evil because it was, ultimately... "inconvenient"? That evil equals "inconvenient" (and by the way, the Nazis thought it was very convenient) seems absurd - all the more reason to expect a substantial defense of the proposition that it was much more than that, and that evil has an entirely different nature and origin than mere inconvenience. I want a sequel!

Good

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