



SHOULD WE TELL A NOBLE LIE?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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He knows everything you do, so be good if you want to receive your reward. This makes God sound a little like Santa Claus, doesn't it?

But look at a child who believes in Santa Claus. Does that belief consistently keep the child on its best behavior? And when the child learns that there really is no judgmental Kringle watching, does the child's morality suddenly turn sour unless you point out that the more-difficult-to-disprove God has taken over the sin-monitoring duties for Santa?

If you believe that God's judgment is necessary to compel good behavior, ask yourself this: if the government stopped enforcing the law, would you steal? Would you kill? Would your answer be different if you didn't believe in God? A moral atheist doesn't feel the need for laws or a divine watchdog to live a moral life. But a cynical atheist might look at a film of a riot and wonder how many of the people breaking windows and looting stores in the absence of law enforcement also believe that God is watching their every move.

SOME THEISTS ARGUE against atheism by saying that without God there is neither moral law nor punishment so all things are permitted.

For the moment, let's assume that this argument is correct. Let's also assume that we have exhaustively studied the subject and concluded that in all likelihood a law-giving, justice-dispensing God does not exist. Then what do we do?

One solution, going back to Plato's *Republic*, is the noble lie. A noble lie is a lie told for the purpose of creating a better society or controlling a populace. In this case, we would be trying to convince people that God exists not because we believe that there is a God but because if people believe that God will punish wrongdoing they will behave better.

When the theist argues that the atheist must be wrong or morality is not compelling, then the theist is essentially asking the atheist to tell a noble lie. They are insisting that you'll only be moral if you believe that God is watching, whether or not He really is.

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QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

We appreciate your interest in helping us spread information about moral atheism! To make copies of this pamphlet for your own use or to share with friends, follow these simple steps:

1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on blog.iamanatheist.org. Thanks!
