

**If there is no God, why are  
we even talking about  
justice at all?**

**The Existence of God  
provides us with a better  
basis for doing justice**

# Can You Be Good (or Just) Without God?



**Can You Be Good (or Just) Without God?**

**Can you Be Morally Obligated to be Good  
(or Just) Without God?**



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**If Christianity Were True, What Would  
that Moral Obligation Be?**



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**“If God does not exist, everything is permissible.”**

**Dostoevsky**  
Brothers Karamazov

“Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nonetheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the spirit of God. Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and description of nature?” ...

**John Calvin**

“Shall we say that they are insane who develop medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without the greatest of admiration. Let us accordingly learn by their example how many gifts the Lord has left to human nature.”

**John Calvin**

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**What does it mean to  
have moral obligation?**

**It means to have a course of  
moral action you are required  
to take regardless of feeling  
or situation**



**So can we account for moral  
*feelings* without God?**

**You could say it's because of  
atheistic evolutionary theory**

**You could say that all goodness  
is really social constructed**

**You could say that you can make  
up what is good and right as an  
authentic, freely choosing moral  
agent in the world**

## UNSPEAKABLE ETHICS, UNNATURAL LAW\*

ARTHUR ALLEN LEFF\*\*

I want to believe—and so do you—in a complete, transcendent, and immanent set of propositions about right and wrong, *findable* rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live righteously. I also want to believe—and so do you—in no such thing, but rather that we are wholly free, not only to choose for ourselves what we ought to do, but to decide for ourselves, individually and as a species, what we ought to be. What we want, Heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free, that is, at the same time to discover the right and the good and to create it.

I mention the matter here only because I think that the two contradictory impulses which together form that paradox do not exist only on some high abstract level of arcane *angst*. In fact, it is my central thesis that much that is mysterious about much that is written about law today is understandable only in the context of this tension between the ideas of found law and made law: a tension particularly evident in the growing, though desperately resisted, awareness that there may be, in fact, nothing to be found—that whenever we set out to find “the law,” we are able to locate nothing more attractive, or more final, than ourselves.

My plan for this Article, then, is as follows. I shall first try to prove to your satisfaction that there cannot be any normative system

\* A somewhat different version of this paper was presented on April 2, 1979, as the Brainerd Currie Memorial Lecture at the Duke University School of Law.

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THE FOLLOWING CITATIONS WILL BE USED IN THIS ARTICLE:

R. NOZICK, *ANARCHY, STATE, AND UTOPIA* (1974) [hereinafter cited as R. NOZICK];

Posner, *Utilitarianism, Economics, and Legal Theory*, 8 J. LEGAL STUD. 103 (1979) [hereinafter cited as Posner].

**“majority-tarianism”, or  
majority rules**

**Use some kind of  
empirical study**

# Evolution



“There is no way to prove one ethical or legal system superior to any other, unless at some point an evaluator is asserted to have the final, uncontradictable, unexaminable word.

That choice of unjudged judge...is completely arbitrary.

[To say] ‘individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them without violating their rights’...is nothing but an assertion.”

**Arthur Leff**

Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law

**“Thus, In the presumed absence of God, each ethical and legal system will be differentiated by the answer it chooses to give to one key question: Who among us ought to be able to declare law? Who among us ought to be obeyed by all the rest?”**

**Stated that baldly, the question is so intellectually unsettling that one would expect to find a noticeable number of legal and ethical thinkers trying not to come to grips with it.”**

**Arthur Leff**

**Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law**

...If we go to find what law ought to be governing us and if what we find is not an authoritarian, Holy Bible, but just ourselves, how can we be governed by what we have found?

**Arthur Leff**

Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law

We all believe that napalming babies is bad, starving the poor is wicked, buying and selling each other is depraved, there is in the world such a thing evil. All together now: Says who?

**Arthur Leff**

Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law

**“Although I believe that all values are socially constructed rather than God-given, I am not a relativist; in the sense that I think there are, and there should be, universally recognized codes of conduct.**

**Mari Ruti**

**Call of Character**

“For instance, I do not believe that gender inequality is any more defensible than racial inequality, despite repeated efforts to pass [gender equality] off as a cultural specific custom rather than an instance of injustice.

It would be possible to assert that my insistence of gender equality violates the traditions of other cultures and that I am merely prolonging the legacies of Western colonialism by imposing my Western values on the rest of the world.” ...

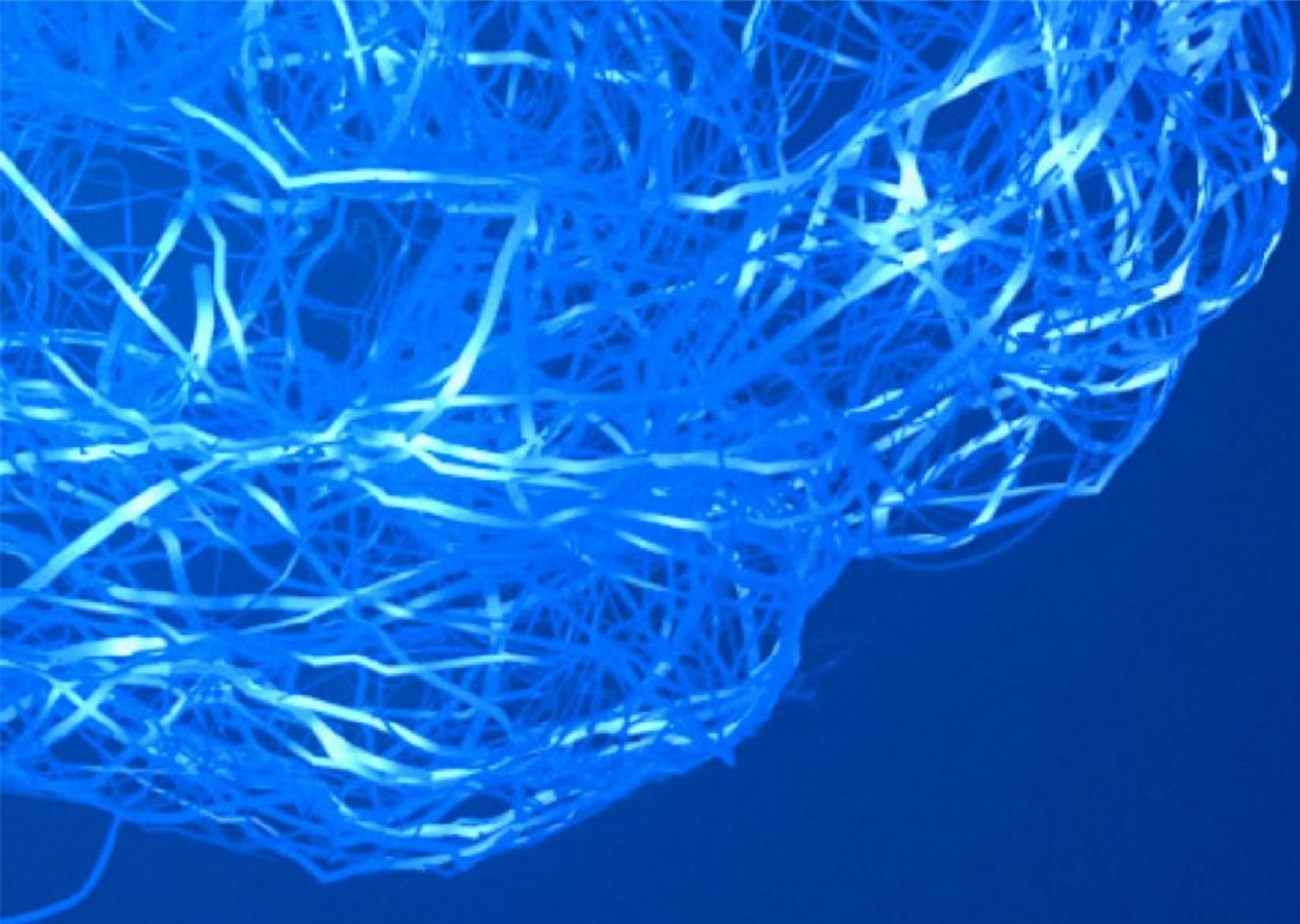
**Mari Ruti**

Call of Character

**"But, I do not believe gender inequality is a specifically Western invention, and I opt to uphold the ideal of getting rid of discrimination because it seems like an ideal worth upholding."**

**Mari Ruti**

**Call of Character**



**Moral obligation makes more sense in a world with God**

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Jesus continued: “There was a man  
who had two sons.”

*Luke 15 : 11*

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.'

*Luke 15 : 28 - 29*

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

*Luke 15 : 21*

**What is the Christian better basis  
for justice? The non-oppressive  
moral absolute of Jesus Christ**