Do we need gods to be moral? Of course not!

by Massimo Pigliucci
It’s the year 399 BCE or thereabout, let’s take a walk in ancient Athens...
How does Euthyphro know what the gods want?

“The best of Euthyphro, and that which distinguishes him, Socrates, from other men, is his exact knowledge of all such matters. What should I be good for without it?”
Socrates asks the crucial question: “And what is piety, and what is impiety?”

“Piety, then, is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them.”
The Dilemma:

“The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.”
Rephrasing Euthyphro’s dilemma in modern terms:

Is something moral because God says so?  

Does God approve of something because it is moral?  

Then morality is arbitrary, a matter of might makes right  

Then there is a source of morality independent of God
If we go with the first horn of the dilemma (God is mighty, whatever he says goes), then consider these passages from the “good book”:

In Genesis 6:11-17 and 7:11-24 God exterminates nothing less than the entire human race with the exception of a single family. He also kills every other species on earth, save for a pair of individuals to repopulate the earth later on.

In Genesis 34:13-29 the Israelites, with God’s approval, kill Hamor and his son, together with the entire male population of his village, while not neglecting of course to take for themselves women, children, cattle and other possessions.
In Exodus 14, 9:14-16, 10:1-2, and 11:7 God brings plagues upon the Egyptians (even though there is no historical record that the Jews were ever held in captivity in Egypt). The reasons given do not seem particularly convincing from a moral perspective, and include showing that He is the Lord and there is nobody else like him, to display His power, and to give something to the Israelites to pass on to their children.

In Exodus 17:13 Joshua slaughters Amalek and his people, with God’s approval.
In Numbers 15:32-36 someone breaks the Sabbath by gathering sticks for a fire. One might think this to be a minor offense, but the God-sanctioned punishment is stoning to death.

In Deuteronomy 2:33-34 the Israelites wipe out the men, women and children of Sihon (needless to say, with God’s approval).

In various passages in Joshua (6:21-27, 8:22-25, 10:10-27, 10:28, 10:30, 10:32-33, 10:34-35, 10:36-37, 10:38-39) said character kills a great deal, including respectively the people of Jericho and Ai, the Gibeonites, the people of Makkedah, the Libnahites, the people of Lachish, the Eglonites, the Hebronites, and the Debirites.
... and the list goes on, and on, and on ...

OK, then let’s go with the second horn of the dilemma (there is an external source of morality to which even God has to conform)

but then we can access such source by way of reason (it’s called philosophy) and therefore we don’t need gods (even if they exist)!
Where, then, do we get morality?
Is it just a matter of opinion, anything goes, relativism??

Nope!
Two steps:

Innate sense of right/wrong (our "moral instinct") comes from evolution

We then built on our moral instincts, over centuries, by reflection (i.e., philosophy)
care for kins

sense of justice / right & wrong

care for non-kins (altruism)

sense of punishment
Virtue ethics: moral is that which furthers human flourishing.

Consequentialism: moral is that which maximizes happiness and minimizes pain.

Deontology: moral is that which you would want others to do to you.