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**Do Secularists Have a Foundation for Morality?**

by [Avery Foley](https://answersingenesis.org/bios/avery-foley/) and [Ken Ham](https://answersingenesis.org/bios/ken-ham/) on July 12, 2016

Secularists and atheists frequently accuse Christians of behaving “immorally” and religion of being “evil.” But such objections to religion bring up an interesting question: how do secular humanists or atheists define evil and morality and by what authority do they make such statements?

**Nothing but Subjective Opinion**

For the atheist or secular humanist, there is no foundation for morality besides his or her own subjective opinion.[[1]](#footnote-1) These individuals often throw around words such as *evil*, *immoral*, *moral*, or *ethical*, often in the context of Christian religion or Christian individuals. They will say things such as “religion is evil”[[2]](#footnote-2) or that teaching creation to children is “child abuse,” but what do they mean by these phrases?

In their worldview, what makes anything immoral or wrong? Really it boils down to nothing more than their opinion.[[3]](#footnote-3) They *believe* that something is wrong, and therefore it *must* be. But who is to say that their opinion is the right one? After all, there are many different opinions on what is right and wrong. Who decides which one is right and which one is wrong?

That atheism and secular humanism cannot provide a foundation for morality is a strong argument. Here are a few responses that you may hear if you bring up this objection.

**Society Decides Morality**

Some atheists will argue that morality is simply decided by the society. For example, here in America our society has decided that murdering an innocent human being is wrong and therefore that action is morally wrong. But this kind of thinking simply does not hold up to scrutiny.

Society often changes its opinion. One clear example of this is in regards to gay “marriage.” What was considered morally wrong by most of society is now legal, applauded, and celebrated by some groups. In this view, homosexual behavior went from being morally wrong to being morally acceptable. What if our society decides that murder is acceptable, as it did in the case of *Roe v. Wade* when America legalized the killing of unborn children? Does murder suddenly become morally acceptable too? What about adultery, stealing, lying, or any other manner of morally reprehensible actions? Would the atheist or humanist accept a society that decides that society can kill all atheists and humanists? If society is the moral compass, then the compass never points north but rather jumps all over the place and changes with every generation.

Also if society determines morality, how can one society tell another society what is right or wrong? Most people would agree that the abhorrent actions of the Nazi death camps were morally wrong. But why? Nazi Germany decided as a society that these actions were morally acceptable. What right does our society have to judge their society if morality is simply a societal preference?

Or what about certain radical Muslim groups? Few would agree that blowing up innocent civilians, slaughtering hundreds of people from other religious groups, kidnapping and enslaving young women, or using children as suicide bombers is morally acceptable. Yet if morality is simply a societal preference, what right does our society have to tell *their* society that their actions are wrong and must be stopped?

The consistent atheist or humanist can say nothing if that is the ethic a society has decided is right. In this view, the atheist, based on his arbitrary opinion, might not agree with their ethic, but he has no rationale to say anything or try to put a stop to it. If morality is simply decided by societal preference, it fails to make any sense and becomes arbitrary, subject to change by time and culture.

**Human Reason**

The problem only gets worse when you break it down to a personal level. Some secularists will argue that morality is an individual decision and no one has the right to tell another person what to do (this is called “autonomous human reason”). Of course, the irony of such a statement should be evident. By saying that no one should tell someone else what to do, they have just told someone else what to do!

If secularists really believed this, then they couldn’t say “religion is evil” in the first place since it is not their place to say.

If this view of morality is true, then our justice system cannot exist. After all, why should one judge, legislative assembly, or government body impose their view of morality on another individual? If stealing, killing, raping, or abusing is right for one individual, what gives another individual the right to say that view of morality is wrong?

Now this personal morality or human reasoning view stems from the idea that people are basically good and that, left on our own, humans tend to do right and not wrong (again, who defines right and wrong?). But humans aren’t basically good! Human experience shows that throughout history humans have committed atrocities, even in our supposedly enlightened Western world. The Bible describes the fallen human heart this way:

* “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jer 17:9)
* And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma. Then the Lord said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. (Gen 8:21)
* To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. (Tt 1:15)

Autonomous human reason simply does not provide a sufficient foundation for morality.

**Did Morality Evolve?**

From human experience, we seem to naturally and intuitively know that actions such as murder, stealing, and child abandonment are wrong for all people everywhere. But where does this intuitive sense come from?

Evolutionists, by necessity, believe that morality (along with everything else) is simply the result of evolution. Somehow after billions of years of death, struggle, atrocities, disease, and suffering, man realized that we should strive to do the opposite! Man should oppose survival of the fittest and try to be moral. In their worldview, we are nothing more than highly evolved animals, and our brains are nothing more than chemical reactions.[[4]](#footnote-4) We are simply the product of our DNA.

This view raises the question of how the strictly naturalistic process of evolution leads to the development of an immaterial, absolute moral conscience that somehow applies to all people everywhere? And what happens if this conscience evolves? Does morality change again?

And furthermore, if we are simply animals, why are we held morally accountable? After all, we certainly don’t hold animals accountable for their actions. No lion court exists to punish lions that maul gazelles to death and then eat them. No one jails a female cuckoo for abandoning her babies or forces male rabbits to pay child support. These are simply the things animals in this cursed world do, and no one faults them for doing it. If we are just animals, what makes humans so different?

The problem gets even worse if you argue that our brains are nothing more than random chemical reactions and that we are at the mercy of our DNA. If we are just programmed DNA, then how can we be held accountable for any of our decisions? Because there is no free will in a view such as this, there is no accountability for decisions or actions.

Morality simply cannot be the result of naturalistic processes over millions of years. This view does not hold up to close examination, and really it is the opposite of what we know to be true from human experience and the Bible’s teachings.

**Moral Atheists?**

When faced with their worldview’s inability to provide a foundation for morality, many atheists respond by claiming that you don’t have to be religious to be moral. It’s true that plenty of atheists are moral citizens. But those who argue this way have missed the point.

Atheists certainly can be moral. Actually, starting with a biblical worldview, this is to be expected. God has put His law in all our hearts (Rom 2:15) so even atheists, who claim that they don’t believe in the Creator God, can adhere to this law and be moral. But the point is that they have no foundation for this morality in their own worldview. They have no basis for saying something is right or wrong, moral or immoral.

**The Bible Provides a Foundation for Morality**

Secular humanism and atheism cannot account for the existence of morality in their worldview. But what about the biblical view?

According to God’s Word, humans were specially created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). We are not animals, nor are our brains simply chemical reactions. As He has from the very beginning, our Creator holds us accountable for our actions (Gen 2:17) and expects us to choose and distinguish between right and wrong.

As Creator, only God has the authority to tell us what is right and what is wrong. And this standard is not arbitrary. It is based on the unchanging character of the righteous, holy, and perfect Judge of the universe. For example, all murder is wrong because God has created us in His own image and forbids the taking of a human life (e.g., Gen 9:6, Ex 20:13; Rom 13:9).

God, the Creator, has given us the Bible, His revealed Word,[[5]](#footnote-5) which clearly lays out what is morally acceptable and what is not. The Creator provides a firm foundation on which we can base our morality.

What is more, God has placed His law in all of our hearts (Rom 2:15). We know right from wrong because of the conscience that God has given all of humanity. And we are held accountable to Him for our actions and decisions (Rom 2:1–16), based on this knowledge of Him that we have.

It should be obvious to anyone who has lived in this world that no one fully obeys God’s law. We all fall short of God’s perfect standard, as Scripture makes abundantly clear (Rom 3:23). We even fall far short of imperfect human standards! Why is this? Genesis gives us the answer.

The first two people, Adam and Eve, were created morally perfect, but they chose to rebel against their Creator (Gen 3). No longer were they morally perfect; now they had a sin nature, which they passed on to each of their children (Rom 5:12–21). All of their descendants—every person on earth—is now a slave to sin ([Jn 8:34](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/John%208.34)) and in rebellion against God.

The Bible provides a firm foundation for morality and provides the answer for why all people have a moral conscience and why we cannot live up to this knowledge of morality. But there’s more.

**The Answer Is the Gospel**

Not only does the Bible explain why there is a universal moral code, why everyone knows it, and why no one can consistently live up to it, but the Bible also provides the solution to our shortcoming. When Adam and Eve sinned, they received the penalty that their rebellion deserved—death (Gen 2:17). We all sinned and continue to sin in Adam, so we all deserve the penalty of death (Rom 5:12). No matter how hard we try, we can never live up to God’s perfect moral standard (Rom 3:23). We certainly are in a dire position, deserving nothing but condemnation and death.

But because of His great love for us and according to His mercy (Eph 2.4), the Creator came to earth as the God-man, a descendant of Adam just like us (1Cor 15.45). But unlike us, He perfectly kept God’s law (Rom 10:4). He then chose to become sin for us (2Cor 5:21), taking the sins of the whole world upon Himself when He died on the Cross (1Jn 2:2).

He took death—the penalty that we all deserve—for us (Rom 4:25, [5:8](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Romans%205.8)). But He didn’t stay dead. He rose victoriously from the grave, defeating death (2Tim 1:10; Heb 2:14). He now offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who will repent (Act 3:19), believe (Jn 3:18), and trust in Him (Rom 10:9).

Only the Bible provides a consistent foundation for morality that applies to all people everywhere. And only the Bible provides the hope that we need through the person of Jesus Christ, our Creator, Savior, and Lord.

<https://answersingenesis.org/morality/do-secularists-have-foundation-morality/>

**Which Came First: Knowledge of God or Morality? (Or Both?)**

by [Frost Smith](https://answersingenesis.org/bios/frost-smith/) on April 26, 2016

*It seems nearly every week a new study or, more likely, opinion piece is printed with some assertion about man’s innate morality. I say innate because nearly everyone acknowledges that there is an innate morality, but opinions differ on the specifics and why and*[*when*](https://answersingenesis.org/age-of-the-earth/how-old-is-the-earth/)*we developed it. This paper will serve as a brief overview of literature from multiple sources to discuss the paucity of real answers available apart from the Word of God.*

**Introduction**

I make no apology for saying this: your opinion[[6]](#footnote-6) on this issue doesn’t matter, nor do the opinions of the authors of any of these studies cited here. Neither does mine, but there is something that does. With so many complexities and differences of opinion on the issue, it should become clear that the answer is not to be found among humans—at least not yet. Where, then, is the answer? Ironically, many have come to the conclusion that the issue is not simple enough even to come to a conclusion. If there were no God, and there were no revelation about Him, it would be reasonable to come to the same conclusion—[if reason could even be said to exist](https://answersingenesis.org/world-religions/atheism/dear-atheists-from-bodie-hodge/).

The issue of morality is tied up in many concepts, which doesn’t help make the issue any more comprehensible. Often the idea is presented more as the [evolution of religion](https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2014/10/27/does-religion-make-you-more-moral/) or the evolution of a concept of God (as if it’s fully out of the picture to acknowledge even the possibility of one that’s revealed Himself at all to us)—or even of altruism and social graces, cooperation, society, supernatural phenomena, generosity, and so on. Admittedly, covering all of these topics merit [separate considerations](https://answersingenesis.org/morality/what-is-the-basis-for-morality/), but there is a common thread that will be discussed in this paper.

Inseparable from the consideration of these concepts are the assumptions of the investigator—perhaps more so than any other consideration of humanity. Acknowledging supernatural things and a concept of right and wrong is beyond us scientifically, but we can look at the brain, behavior of individuals, and events today and, to an extent, in the past. Evolutionary scientists also look at animals, because they assume that some rudiments of moral behavior are inherited, since we are just evolved animals.

A biblical creationist doesn’t make that assumption. In fact, quite the opposite in this case: we are entirely distinct from animals in our relationship with God, being created specially and in His image (Gen 1:26), being the apple of His eye (Ps 17:8), being the only created entity with an everlasting spirit (Ec 3:21), and being the form God chose in condescending to live among us and redeem us to be His (Mt 1:23; Tt 2:14).

**Let’s Start at the Very Beginning, Though Naturalists Don’t Have One**

If we did evolve, then our human nature—including a belief in God, morality, altruism, and so on—is indeed something that also had to evolve. There are those that believe that, at some point, [God intervened in the process](https://answersingenesis.org/theistic-evolution/god-and-evolution/couldnt-god-have-used-evolution/) and instilled in us this capacity, but that is wholly unsatisfactory for reasons stated in a previous paper.[[7]](#footnote-7) So we’re back to a naturalistic process.

Animals aside, evolutionary scientists consider our human nature as primarily developing during our [supposed primate and subsequent hominid development](https://answersingenesis.org/human-evolution/ape-man/did-humans-really-evolve-from-apelike-creatures/), and that is what the bulk of the papers on this topic discuss. Answers in Genesis rejects the category of hominids entirely based on the principles briefly laid out above, and, of course, the clear record of the Creation account in Gen 1 and 2.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Delving into the many hypotheses to give a naturalistic explanation for our distinctly human sense of something greater than ourselves (to sum it up as succinctly as possible), we are presented with a few basic ideas once distilled. Note that there does not seem to be a full consensus on the many details of the supposed evolutionary history of human morality and religiosity.[[9]](#footnote-9)

So the greatly simplified story goes, not necessarily in order as some things were supposedly developing contemporaneously:

1. Some lower [animals](https://answersingenesis.org/morality/should-we-look-to-the-animal-world-for-answers/) (even bees!)[[10]](#footnote-10) and primates, in particular, seem to be able to exhibit altruism and/or empathy: an assumed progression of the ability to sense others’ needs/feelings is interpreted as an evolutionary progression toward the human-unique moral sense of obligation to others at a cost to oneself.
2. This sense of “getting into the mind” of another supposedly led to the notion of attributing purpose to inanimate objects, thus developing a supernatural sense.
3. Selfish behavior of some individuals in a community led to the development of rules to punish freeloaders and to give community cohesiveness as an assurance of fairness and some societal benefit via reciprocation for selfless acts. This led to greater fitness of a singular community, not necessarily each individual.
4. Religion and morality blossomed out of a combination of the effects of points two and three and became fixed and passed down in society, with similar results across cultures.[[11]](#footnote-11)
5. Personal feelings of what is good or bad have been added to religious beliefs.

Devastatingly, each of these is arbitrary. To explain how the empathy developed to begin with is a bit of a Catch-22. Secularists thinking in terms of natural selection would argue that selfishness is a benefit to fitness. A purview in evolutionist literature on the development of morality shows that most now reject the notion that our behavior is just a product of our brain chemistry, but that the growth of our community sense, as described above, combined with the still-important chemistry and brain size is the explanation. The following quote sums up how this cocktail of interaction and intuition led to humans as we are now:

[W]e are evolved creatures, and our psychological capacities, like other complex capacities, are outcomes of evolutionary processes. But this does not by itself settle whether these capacities and tendencies are themselves *adaptations*, having evolved through natural selection because of their adaptive effects. That is the most common view . . . but there are alternatives.

It is possible, for example, that our capacity to make moral judgments is a spin-off (side-effect or by-product) of our non-moral intellectual capacities, which latter are adaptations. On this view, we tend to make moral judgments because we are intellectual and reflective creatures, not because natural selection has specifically given us this moral capacity and tendency as an adaptation; the role of natural selection would be indirect, supplying more general capacities as adaptations, from which specifically moral tendencies spring independently.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**It Is Not Good for Man To Be Alone**

“I fully subscribe to the judgment of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important.”

–Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

Clearly, man’s sense of the supernatural and morality, coupled with the fact that there is organized religion, all point to something special about humankind—something that evolutionists must explain away. While an answer can be conjured for nearly every question regarding the special status of man (including saying that we’re not special at all!), such contortions are unnecessary. Only those who totally deny the existence of anything supernatural need such naturalistic explanations.

If there is a God (or even gods/creators), would they not imbue or at least have impacted us with some essence of themselves?[[13]](#footnote-13) Besides our physical stature and biochemistry, our minds and, yes, souls should bear some consistent imprint and design. And we see a consistent sense of morality among general humanity (ruthless dictators and desperate circumstances notwithstanding). The fact that atheists have a moral code (sometimes, sadly, more than some that claim to be Christians![[14]](#footnote-14)) is an ironic testament to the image of the God that they deny. Why would there be any need to be altruistic or even generous if other humans had no more value than other animals competing for resources? Even if it were for “feel-good” chemicals (see footnote 4), why should it feel good?

The God of the Bible is a consistent, relational, and singular cooperative entity of three persons[[15]](#footnote-15) who desires a people to bear His image and authority (Gen 1:26). His Word is the basis for all moral codes—whether people realize it or not. Despite the lack of respect the Bible—particularly Genesis—often gets, the Ten Commandments and so-called “Golden Rule” (Lu 6:31) are set forward as the standard for interpersonal relations. The first half of the Ten Commandments also gives us information about how God wants us to relate to Him. Clearly God also desires a relationship with us, so much that He revealed Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ and is preparing a place for us (Jn 14:2–3), even though we have rejected and rebelled against Him from our first parents to the present.

Mankind’s continued attempts to deny the God of the Bible—the very source for the basis of what we call morality and humanity[[16]](#footnote-16)—have been unsatisfactory even to those who deny Him, as evidenced by lack of consensus and fully satisfying explanations of what is a complex issue in their eyes.[[17]](#footnote-17) Even the floundering sense of vague religiousness so apparent in the news and social media attests to man’s attempts but inability to fully deny God as He has revealed Himself in His Word.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Not-so-same Difference**

But it’s not a complex issue. Beginning in [Gen 2](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Genesis%202.1), we see an intimate relationship between man and God. God formed man and breathed life into his nostrils, instead of speaking him into existence as He did the other animals (primates included!).

Gen 2 shows God *with man* in the Garden, forming Him, planting a garden, and talking to him. Gen 3:8 shows God walking in the Garden of Eden to find Adam even after he sinned. Continuing through the patriarchs, we see that at least Enoch and Noah “walked with God.” Noah’s son Shem lived until after Abraham was born and perhaps knew or taught him about God.[[19]](#footnote-19)

We do know that God revealed Himself to Abraham and made a covenant with him, revealing Himself multiple times through Abraham’s descendants, then again with Moses and the prophets, until He Himself came to adopt us into His family through His own blood and Resurrection. Since then, we have had His words that reveal to us history, fully accurate prophecy, and His will for us in the form of Scripture.

God never left us without a witness or direction. God and the one true religious worship of Him are no mystery. We need no hypotheses to determine how man came to be conscious of himself and others, when we began to acknowledge God, or when we began to practice worship. *There is a book[[20]](#footnote-20)* that tells us these things, and even tells us why humanity rejects and refuses to acknowledge Him and His revelation to us (Rom 1:19-21; 1Cor 2). And most importantly, there is a book that still tells us also how we can [know and walk with our Creator again](https://answersingenesis.org/gospel/salvation/what-does-it-mean-to-be-saved/) (Rom 6:4; Rev 3:4–5). *That* is what matters.

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<https://answersingenesis.org/morality/which-came-first-knowledge-god-or-morality-or-both/>

1. Opinions are arbitrary and thus fallacious. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Clearly they mean Christianity. They do not argue that their religion of atheism or humanism is evil. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Opinions are not a measure of truth in the least. Consider if someone was of the opinion that 2+2=-9. Such an opinion is worthless. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Recall that in the atheistic or humanistic worldview, all things are *natural* and *material*. Nothing immaterial really exists. So the mind cannot exist. But neither can logic, truth, knowledge, *morality*, and so on. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. God’s Word is absolute and not arbitrary like the opinions of man. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Opinions are arbitrary and carry no weight in an argument. The only opinion that could carry weight is one that is absolute in authority. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Frost Smith, “Image of God, Part 1: Evolution and What the Image of God Is Not,” Answers in Genesis, August 8, 2015, <https://answersingenesis.org/are-humans-animals/evolution-and-what-image-god-is-not/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Hominids,” Answers in Genesis, <https://answersingenesis.org/human-evolution/hominids/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For example, others have posited that altruism makes one more attractive to potential mates, increasing reproductive fitness and that we get a rush of “feel good” chemicals when helping others. See Steve Stewart-Williams, “Did Morality Evolve?,” *Psychology Today*, May 2, 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-nature-nurture-nietzsche-blog/201005/did-morality-evolve>; and Patricia Churchland, “Did the Evolution of the Brain . . . Evolve Our Morality?,” Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, October 18, 2015, <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/te20150531>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Morality and Evolutionary Biology,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, July 23, 2014, [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-biology/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-biology/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Darwin said, “The same high mental faculties which first led man to believe in unseen spiritual agencies, then in fetishism, polytheism, and ultimately in monotheism, would infallibly lead him, as long as his reasoning powers remained poorly developed, to various strange superstitions and customs.” Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*(February 24, 1871, [www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-descent-of-man/chapter-03.html](http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-descent-of-man/chapter-03.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Morality and Evolutionary Biology.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Most common representations of gods and even aliens have at least animalistic characteristics, such as bilateral symmetry, and often have “anthropomorphic” emotions and a personality, i.e., they take human qualities and try to make the gods/aliens in our image. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Note that a recent study comparing children of differing religions and cultures suggests that religious children are less altruistic. It should be noted that Christianity is not something one is born into. It is a personal decision of a cognitive individual to have a personal relationship with the God of the Bible. That said, naturally parents in any household could do a better job at instilling generosity in their children. But again, where did the idea of this “Golden Rule” to share and help others come from? See Is 58:7 and Lu 3:11 for starters. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mark Bird, “The Trinity,” *Answers in Depth*, July 30, 2008, <https://answersingenesis.org/who-is-god/the-trinity/the-trinity/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Georgia Purdom and Jason Lisle, “Morality and the Irrationality of an Evolutionary Worldview,” *Answers in Depth*, May 13, 2009, <https://answersingenesis.org/morality/morality-and-the-irrationality-of-an-evolutionary-worldview/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Note the number of times *complexity* is mentioned in “Morality and Evolutionary Biology,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-biology/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John Inazu, “America’s Dividing Line: Thoughts, Prayers and Belief in a Transcendent God,” CNN, December 4, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/04/opinions/inazu-thoughts-and-prayers-transcendence-line/index.html>; and Michael F. Haverluck, “And America’s Most, Least Bible-Minded City Is . . .,” January 24, 2016, <http://www.onenewsnow.com/church/2016/01/24/and-america-s-most-least-bible-minded-city-is>. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bodie Hodge, “Ancient Patriarchs in Genesis,” Answers in Genesis, January 20, 2009, <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/ancient-patriarchs-in-genesis/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Steve Golden, “Bill, There Is a Book Out There,” Answers in Genesis, February 5, 2014, <https://answersingenesis.org/creation-vs-evolution/bill-there-is-a-book-out-there/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)