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God, Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality

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French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain helped draft the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which recognizes "the inherent dignity" and "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." Further, it affirms: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." What is missing, though, is any foundation or basis for human dignity and rights. In light of the philosophical discussion behind the drafting of the Declaration, Maritain wrote: "We agree on these rights, providing we are not asked why. With the 'why,' the dispute begins."[1]

The dispute about morality involves a host of questions about whether objective/universal moral values exist and whether humans have dignity and rights—and if so, what their source is. Are moral values emergent properties, supervening upon natural processes and social configurations, or are beliefs about moral values an adaptation hard-wired into human beings who, like other organisms, fight, feed, flee, and reproduce? Does God offer any metaphysical foundation for moral values and human dignity, or can a Platonic, Aristotelian, categorical imperative (Kantian), or Ideal Observer ethic adequately account for them?

This essay argues, *first*, that objective moral values are an inescapable, properly basic bedrock. Moral subjectivism is inadequate to account for our fundamental intuitions, including ones about evil. *Second*, certain

naturalistic moral realists commonly confuse the *order of knowing* with the *order of being*. Since all humans are God's image-bearers, it isn't surprising that they are capable of recognizing or knowing the same sorts of moral values—whether theists or not. The metaphysical question is the more fundamental: How did there come to *be* morally responsible persons in the absence of God and as products of valueless processes? I would maintain that a moral universe is far less likely—indeed extremely difficult to come by—if God does not exist. Naturalism provides a poor context for objective moral values, duties, and human dignity.

Third, in various ways, naturalism undermines objective ethics despite attempts to root it in science. *Fourth*, a naturalistic evolutionary account of morality fails to engage our deepest moral intuitions about right and wrong, and it leaves us skeptical about whether we can have confidence about fundamental epistemic and moral convictions. Any confidence would borrow metaphysical capital from a worldview like theism, as humans have been made in the image of a faithful, truthful, and rational Being. *Finally*, despite the claims of naturalistic moral realists, any appeals to Plato's Euthyphro dilemma fail to render God superfluous in accounting for the source of objective moral values.

A moral universe and human dignity are best explained in the context of a morally excellent, worship-worthy Being as their metaphysical foundation, as opposed to nontheistic alternatives,[2] and naturalism in particular.[3] If objective moral values and human dignity and rights are a reality (and there is very good reason to think they are), then it is extremely likely that some intrinsically valuable Being and Creator exists.

The Proper Basicality of Moral Values

We are wise to assume that our senses, our powers of reasoning, and our most fundamental moral instincts are not systematically deceiving us. We should—and typically do—take for granted their adequate function. Indeed, even the most radical skeptic assumes this as he confidently draws his skeptical conclusions. He appropriates various logical laws to prove his point and, no doubt believing those claiming to have knowledge to be in error, presumes that others ought to share his inferences. Whatever epistemological blunders humans may make, they are not sufficient to justify a deep skepticism. Yes, humans may misperceive or make logical missteps. However, such mistakes hardly call into question the general reliability of our sense or reasoning powers; indeed, they presuppose it. The ability to detect error presumes an awareness of truth.

Likewise, despite flawed moral judgments, there still are certain moral truths that we can't *not* know—unless we suppress our conscience or engage in self-deception.[4] We possess an in-built "yuck factor"—basic moral

intuitions about the wrongness of torturing babies for fun, of raping, murdering, or abusing children. We can also recognize the virtue of kindness or selflessness, the obligation to treat others as we would want to be treated, and the moral difference between Mother Teresa and Josef Stalin. Those not recognizing such truths as properly basic are simply wrong and morally dysfunctional. We need no social contract or established methodology to recognize the rights of all humans before the law as well as the wrongness of racism or ethnocentricism. For instance, blacks had value before any civil rights legislation in the United States or South Africa. We can agree with Nicholas Rescher, who observes that if members of a particular tribe think that sacrificing firstborn children is acceptable, "then their grasp on the conception of morality is somewhere between inadequate and nonexistent."[5]

Morality isn't a superficial feature of our world. Atheist David O. Brink asserts, "Our commitment to the *objectivity of ethics* is a deep one."[6] Kai Nielsen deems such a moral awareness to be "bedrock":

> It is more reasonable to believe such elemental things [as wife-beating and child abuse] to be evil than to believe any skeptical theory that tells us we cannot know or reasonably believe any of these things to be evil. . . . I firmly believe that this is bedrock and right and that anyone who does not believe it cannot have probed deeply enough into the grounds of his moral beliefs.[7]

That is, basic moral principles are *discovered*, not *invented*, and persons with a decently functioning conscience can get a lot of moral things right. As C. S. Lewis has pointed out, law codes across civilizations and throughout history (Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Native American, and so on) reveal a continual resurfacing of the same basic moral standards—do not murder, break promises, take another's property, or defraud.[8] Despite our faulty moral judgments, we would be wrong to abandon the quest for goodness or become moral skeptics: "we cannot always or even usually be totally mistaken about goodness," Robert Adams affirms.[9]

Such an affirmation of human dignity, rights,[10] and duties is something we would readily expect if God exists—but *not* if humans have emerged from valueless, mindless processes (more below). The Jewish-Christian Scriptures assume that humans are morally responsible agents who can generally know what is good and that we ought to do it. The prophet Amos delivers severe divine warnings to surrounding Gentile nations for their atrocities and crimes against humanity—ripping open pregnant women, breaking treaties, acting treacherously, stifling compassion. The underlying assumption is that these nations—even without God's special revelation—should have known better (Amos 1–2). The same perspective

is expressed more explicitly by Paul, who speaks of Gentiles without the Law of Moses who still have a law—a conscience—"written in their hearts" (Rom. 2:14-15).

Philosopher Thomas Reid argued that basic moral principles such as, "treat another as you desire to be treated," are simply commonsensical—obvious to those who have not ignored their conscience. He claimed he did not know by what reasoning—demonstrative or probable—he could convince the epistemic or moral skeptic:

> The sceptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? This belief, sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine. I ever took it upon trust, and without suspicion.[11]

According to Reid, morality begins with certain axioms or first principles, which are self-evident to the properly functioning human being. To reject God's law written on our hearts (the conscience with its fundamental inclinations) is to act unnaturally.[12] Being God's image-bearer, the atheist can recognize the same moral truths as the theist because this "faculty [is] given him by God." If God had not bestowed this faculty upon humans, none of us would be "a moral and accountable being."[13] Although basic moral principles—to be kind, selfless, and compassionate; to avoid torturing for fun, raping, or taking innocent human life—are accessible and knowable to morally sensitive human beings, some improperly functioning individuals may be self-deceived or hard-hearted sophists.

Thus, we should reasonably believe what is apparent or obvious to us unless there are overriding reasons to dismiss it (the credulity principle)—a belief that applies to our *sense* perception, our *reasoning* faculty, and our *moral* intuitions/perceptions. In general, we take for granted the innocence of these capacities until they are proven guilty. We should accept their testimony *unless* we have strong reasons to doubt them. Indeed, the common argument from evil launched against belief in God still takes for granted a fundamental standard of goodness or a design-plan, which is difficult to account for if God does not exist and the material universe is the sum total of reality.

Robert Audi offers a description of how such moral intuitions function. They are (1) *noninferential* or *directly apprehended*; (2) *firm* (they must be believed as propositions); (3) *comprehensible* (intuitions are formed in the light of an adequate understanding of their propositional objects); and (4) *pretheoretical* (not dependent on theories nor themselves theoretical hypotheses). Such moral knowledge emerges not from reflection on abstract principles but from reflecting on particular moral cases. And

however strong, these prima facie intuitions are *not* thereby indefeasible. That is, they may be adjusted or refined in light of other considerations or overriding circumstances. For instance, keeping a promise may be overridden by circumstances preventing me from keeping it, but I still have a duty to explain to my friend why I could not keep the promise.[14]

Consider Daniel Dennett's declaration that, given our evolution, ethical decision-making "holds out scant hope of our ever discovering a formula or an algorithm for doing right." Rather than despairing, he advocates using our "mind-tools" to "design and redesign ourselves" as we continually search for better solutions to the sorts of moral challenges we face.[15] This point is well taken, and the pursuit of universal moral agreement is not going to be achievable. However, the discerning moral realist will take into account circumstances, motives, and conflicting moral duties—not to mention the importance of moral dialogue and the moral lessons learned from history and moral reforms. We can reject a simplistic "algorithm" approach while acknowledging genuine moral duties and the importance of virtuous character. So we can still live wisely and morally despite moral puzzles and challenges.[16] The existence of "gray areas" doesn't mean that we cannot readily recognize basic objective moral values. We must begin with the clear and move to the unclear, not vice versa—and proceed as wisely as we can. Dr. Samuel Johnson reminds us: the fact that there is such a thing as twilight does not mean that we cannot distinguish between day and night.[17]

Knowing versus Being, Metaphysical Contexts, and Choosing the Better Alternative

Knowing versus Being

Certain atheists may question how God's nonexistence would adversely affect the goodness of compassion, mercy, justice, and other virtues. Richard Dawkins—despite his moral subjectivism—maintains that we do not need a God nor must we believe God is constantly policing us in order to be good. In fact, if belief in God would suddenly vanish from the world, people wouldn't become "callous and selfish hedonists, with no kindness, no charity, no generosity."[18]

Likewise, Daniel Dennett (a moral realist) challenges the notion that goodness is opposed to scientific materialism: "There is *no reason at all* why a disbelief in the immateriality or immortality of the soul should make a person less caring, less moral, less committed to the well-being of everybody on Earth than somebody who believes in 'the spirit.'" He adds that a "good scientific materialist" can be concerned about "whether there is

plenty of justice, love, joy, beauty, political freedom, and yes, even religious freedom" as the "deeply spiritual."[19] And he quite rightly observes that those calling themselves spiritual can be "cruel, arrogant, self-centered, and utterly unconcerned about the moral problems of the world."[20]

According to naturalistic moral realists, one can *both* affirm objective moral values (for example, that kindness is a virtue) *and* deny the existence of God—with perfect consistency. David O. Brink insists that "the objectivity of ethics is not hostage to the truth of theism."[21] William Rowe, another atheist, asserts that morality (or logic or mathematics) has the same objective status for atheist and theist alike: "the claim that God is needed for morality to be objective is absurd."[22] Christians will give the same reasons as atheists about, say, the immorality of rape (for example, "rape violates the victim's rights and undermines societal cohesion"). No need to appeal to God's existence![23]

However, theists can readily admit that nonbelievers can *know* moral truths. But *knowing* (epistemology) must be distinguished from *being* (ontology), the latter being the more fundamental. *Epistemologically*, the atheist is right: because *all* humans have been made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27, 9:3; James 3:9)[24] and are thus intrinsically valuable (endowed with dignity, conscience, rights, duties, and the basic capacity to recognize right and wrong), it is no surprise that nontheists of all stripes know the same sorts of moral truths as believers. *Ontologically*, however, a nontheistic metaphysic (that is, the *actual ground* or *basis* that makes moral knowledge possible) is inadequate: Why think impersonal/physical, valueless processes will produce valuable, rights-bearing persons?[25]

Theism has the metaphysical wherewithal to account for such values: there is an intimate connection between (*a*) a good God and Creator (the metaphysical foundation) and (*b*) human dignity/rights, and general moral obligations. God is the necessarily good Source of all finite goods.[26] So anyone can *know* that humans have rights and dignity and obligations. But, more crucially, how did they come to *be* that way—particularly if they are the result of valueless, cause-and-effect physical processes from the big bang until now? Theism offers the requisite foundations.

The Metaphysical Context

The more plausible metaphysical context for grounding human rights and dignity is this: we have been *created* with a *moral constitution* by a supremely valuable being, and we are "hard-wired" to function properly by living moral, deeply relational lives. So if humans have intrinsic, rather than instrumental (or no) value, the deeper, more natural context offering a smoother transition is a personal, supremely valuable God as the source of goodness and creator of morally responsible agents. The naturalist's

context of a series of impersonal, valueless causes and effects producing valuable beings is shocking—an utterly incongruous outcome given the context.

Various naturalist moral realists have claimed that moral properties or objective moral values somehow emerge or supervene upon a sufficiently neurologically complex organism[27]—or once certain complex social configurations arise (what Richard Boyd calls "homeostatic property clusters").[28] For instance, the racial injustice of apartheid would supervene upon certain (natural) social, legal, and economic conditions.[29]

Despite such claims, problems regarding the emergence of dignity and duties remain. If intrinsic value does not exist from the outset, its emergence from nonvaluable processes is difficult to explain. It doesn't matter how many nonpersonal and nonvaluable components we happen to stack up: from valuelessness, valuelessness comes.

Brink suggests a parallel to support his naturalistic moral realism—namely, the supervenience of the *mental* upon a complex *physical* brain and nervous system: "Assuming materialism is true, mental states supervene on physical states, yet few think that mental states are metaphysically queer."[30] Such optimism is exceedingly unwarranted, though, as many naturalists themselves admit. For instance, Ned Block acknowledges that we have "no conception"—"zilch"—that enables us to explain subjective experience or to *begin* to account for conscious life: "Researchers are *stumped*."[31] Jaegwon Kim wonders how "a series of physical events, little particles jostling against one another, electric current rushing to and fro" could blossom into "conscious experience": "Why should *any* experience emerge when these neurons fire?"[32] Consciousness *is* metaphysically queer given naturalism! Colin McGinn avers that the emergence of consciousness "strikes us as miraculous, eerie, even faintly comic."[33] So Brink's confidence is ill placed. By contrast, the theist has no such challenges if a supremely self-aware Being exists—from consciousness, consciousness comes.

The same applies to moral values. Instead of a supervenience model, theists can plausibly argue that a *personal* Creator, who makes human *persons* in the Creator's image, serves as the ontological basis for the existence of objective moral values, moral obligation, human dignity, and rights. Consider: (1) Without the existence of a personal God, there would be no persons at all. (Indeed, God is the sufficient reason for why anything exists at all; for if the universe came into existence a finite time ago, as physicist Paul Davies suggests, the only options appear to be that it was simply uncaused—a metaphysical impossibility—or that something outside the universe caused its existence.)[34] And (2) if no persons would exist, then no moral properties would be instantiated or realized in our world.

Without this personal God and Creator of other persons, it is extraordinarily difficult to account for the instantiation of moral properties. Moral

values—the instantiation of moral properties—and personhood are intertwined: moral properties are instantiated through personhood, which is ontologically rooted in God's personhood.

Now various nontheistic moral realists—not to mention some theists[35]—maintain that statements such as "Murder is wrong" would hold true even if God does not exist. They are simply brute facts and necessary truths. In reply, we could offer the following responses:

1. *Simplicity:* If naturalistic moral realists assume (*a*) a preexistent (Platonic) moral realm of brute facts and the eventual evolution of (*b*) valuable human beings corresponding to it, we have two utterly unconnected moral realities. Theism, however, offers a ready and far simpler connection: humans have been made in the image of a good God—the source of objective moral values.
2. *Asymmetrical Necessity:* Even if "Murder is wrong" is a necessary truth, it, first, need not be analytic (compare "Water is H_2O"), and, second, a necessary truth may require some kind of explanation (for example, "Water is necessarily H_2O" still requires' an explanation for water's existence and structure).[36] In the case of morality, we are still left wondering how value and obligation came to be thrust upon a valueless context of unguided matter in motion to have a context for the truth of "Murder is wrong." Third, certain necessary truths are logically prior to or more metaphysically basic than others, which may derive from or be entailed by them.[37] Likewise, the necessity of moral truths does not diminish their need for grounding in the character of a personal God. God, who necessarily exists in all possible worlds, is the source of all necessary moral (and logical) truths that stand in asymmetrical relation to God's necessity. God's existence and nature are explanatorily prior to any necessary truths, whether moral or logical.[38]
3. *Cosmic Coincidence (or Arbitrariness):* If moral facts are just brute givens and necessarily true, there is left unexplained a huge cosmic coincidence between the existence of these *moral facts* and the eventual emergence of *morally responsible agents* who are obligated to them. That this moral realm appears to be *anticipating* our emergence is a staggering cosmic concurrence that begs an explanation. The naturalistic moral realist may prefer another scenario, however: she may simply argue that certain a priori truths emerge based on the make-up of naturalistically evolved human beings. Dennett appeals to the parallel of certain "a priori" and "timeless" truths about the game of chess; *once* the game is devised, certain fixed truths pertain to it.[39] In response, not only does such a perspective actually imply belief in essentialism (that humans have a fixed *nature*)—something

Dennett and his ilk repudiate. But we are also left with the *arbitrariness* problem: humans could have evolved differently (see below) and thus could have developed different—even opposing—moral "truths" appropriate to them.

4. *Accounting for Human Value:* The naturalist's position still offers no good reason to think that valuable, morally responsible human beings should emerge from valueless processes. Theism offers a far more plausible context for human value.

Deciding between Naturalism and Theism

Let us try to bring a few of these strands together. In deciding which hypothesis—naturalism or theism—presents the most plausible context for objective moral values and human dignity, we should consider at least three guidelines for preferring one over the other: Which is the more natural, the more unifying, and the more basic?

1. *We should prefer the theory that affords the more natural (that is, less ad hoc) transition from the overall theory to the entity in question.* Theism offers a more suitable context for objective moral values, which flow readily from a wise, supremely valuable Being to that Being's valuable image-bearers. Naturalism affords no such smooth transition from a context of undirected valueless processes to objective moral values and human dignity.

2. *We should prefer a worldview that is a kind of grand unifying factor for a wide range of features.* Better explanations are unified and interconnected rather than fragmented and unrelated. The existence of objective moral values and human dignity are only part of the bigger picture that is better explained by God's existence.

How then do we best account for the existence of valuable, morally responsible, self-aware, reasoning, truth-seeking, living human beings who inhabit a finely tuned, beautiful universe that came to exist a finite time ago? Is this best explained naturalistically—namely, the result of disparate valueless, mindless, lifeless physical processes in a universe that came into existence from nothing? Or is the better unifying explanation a supremely valuable, supremely aware, logical, truthful, powerful, intelligent, beautiful Being? This Being serves as a natural unifier and thus the superior explanation and grounding to the naturalistic alternative of a remarkable string of highly contingent features.[40] (As Dennett writes, "just the tiniest amount" of change in the universe's variables would mean life could not have emerged: "we almost didn't make it!")[41] As philosopher of science Del Ratzsch observes, "When a value is produced by a long, tricky, precarious process, when it is generated and preserved by some breathtaking complexity, when it is realized against all odds, then intent—even design—suddenly becomes a live and reasonable question."[42]

3. *We should prefer a hypothesis/worldview whose relevant features are deeper or more basic than those in alternative worldviews.* Any hypothesis will have an explanatory stopping point. The question is: Which hypothesis most adequately furnishes the deepest ontological foundations or more ultimate explanations for its relevant features? For example, is the "miraculous, eerie, even faintly comic"[43] phenomenon of consciousness or the staggering breadth and variety of beauty a mere surd, or is there some deeper, more basic explanation to account for its existence? What if we can go a *step further* to account for it?

We could say the same about human dignity and rights or reason. Naturalism's metaphysic seems inadequate to offer a deep account for such features in our world.[44] A deeper, more stable explanation is available through theism, which "offers suggestions for answers to a wide range of otherwise intractable questions."[45] George Mavrodes rightly observes that moral values and obligations cannot be deep in a world of matter, energy, natural laws, and chance.[46] By contrast, a world created by God has goodness and purpose deeply embedded within it.

Theism has a distinct advantage over gradualistic naturalistic accounts of morality as Dennett, Martin, or Brink might espouse. (We should add that theism need not be viewed as inherently incompatible with an evolutionary process, which God could have initiated; as we note below, Darwin himself believed that God was responsible for getting the evolutionary ball rolling.) Theism offers the more "natural" moral context to move us seamlessly from value to value instead of naturalism's attempt move from valuelessness to value.

The Inadequacy of Various Naturalistic Moral Systems

We should mention the red herring of naturalistic philosophers, who appeal to various objectivistic ethical systems that purportedly can safely overcome the any essential God-morality connection. Again, such confidence is poorly placed.

Consider Aristotle's eudaimonistic virtue ethic. Despite his rich ethical discussion and even his mention of God, critical gaps and shortcomings remain: (*a*) the questionable notion of *intellectual* activity (as opposed to loving relationships) as central to our natural human task (*ergon*) and fulfilling our goal (*telos*); (*b*) the radical evil embedded in human nature that inclines us to self-centeredness and profound evil—what comes "naturally" may often undermine human flourishing; and (*c*) the inability to account for human value and rights. Despite Aristotle's valuable insights, his system is both incomplete and fraught with significant problems.[47]

Neither can naturalists take comfort in Kant's categorical imperative and kingdom of ends. First, the often-misunderstood Kant actually posits

God, freedom, and immortality in order to make sense of morality; his is not a secular ethical system but one that requires God's existence.[48] Second, the more fundamental question for those who take a secularized Kantian position is, "Why should humans be treated as ends rather than means? Why think they should have value given their valueless origins?" Indeed, Kant's system *presupposes* and *posits* human dignity and personal responsibility; naturalism lacks the necessary metaphysical resources to account for them.

Despite the naturalistic appeal of a Rawlsian neocontractarianism with its wide reflective equilibrium[49] or an Ideal Observer theory (a "good" is what an ideal observer would approve under ideal conditions),[50] such theories are long on epistemology but short on ontology: they specify how to *recognize* moral duties and virtues, but equally fail to provide a decent metaphysical account of human dignity and rights or make sense of moral obligation given naturalism's metaphysic. They lack ontological completeness.

Naturalistic Evolutionary Ethics

Though a moral realist, Daniel Dennett maintains that the human fixation on human rights is a misguided, though fortuitous, "rule worship" that contributes to human well-being and social cohesion. The presumption of "natural and imprescriptible rights" is nothing more than (good and useful) "nonsense upon stilts," to use Jeremy Bentham's dismissive phrase.[51]

According to Michael Ruse, a moral subjectivist, we merely *think* morality is objective, but Ruse informs us that isn't so.[52] We believe the *illusion* of moral realism and moral obligation; without this strong impulse, Ruse declares, we would disregard or disobey morality. "If you think about it, you will see that the very essence of an ethical claim, like 'Love little children,' is that, whatever its truth status may be, we think it binding upon us *because we think it has an objective status.*"[53] This is a *corporate illusion* that has been "fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate."[54]

Despite the arguments of naturalistic moral realists, their naturalistically rooted ethic presents two problems: we are faced with the apparent arbitrariness of our moral beliefs, and we appear to be justified in our skepticism or agnosticism concerning moral living. Note also that my argument would be opposed only to *naturalistic* evolution, not evolution per se. In his *Origin of Species*, Darwin himself is not writing as an intellectually fulfilled atheist![55] Besides affirming that God impressed laws upon nature and breathed life into creation, Darwin uses the word "creation" over 100 times and (in the *Origin*'s inscription) approvingly cites Francis Bacon's acknowledgment of both the "book of God's word" (special revelation) and "book of God's works" (divine revelation in nature). Even if naturalists

can furnish (1) a complete gradualistic biological account of evolutionary development and (2) an account of ever-increasing moral awareness in human minds, this need not conflict with God as Creator or the source of objective moral values, Daniel Dennett notwithstanding. As we have argued, value from value is more "natural" than value from valuelessness.

Arbitrary Morality?

Given naturalism, it appears that humans could have evolved differently and inherited rather contrary moral beliefs ("rules") for the "chess game" of survival. Whatever those rules, they would still direct us toward surviving and reproducing. Ruse (with E. O. Wilson) gives an example: instead of evolving from "savannah-dwelling primates," we, like termites, could have evolved needing "to dwell in darkness, eat each other's faeces, and cannibalise the dead." If the latter were the case, we would "extol such acts as beautiful and moral" and "find it morally disgusting to live in the open air, dispose of body waste and bury the dead."[56] So our awareness of morality ("a sense of right and wrong and a feeling of obligation to be thus governed") is of "biological worth," serves as "an aid to survival," and "has no being beyond this."[57] Though rare in human societies, Eskimos permit infanticide in the face of scant resources for the sake of survival. And what of suttee (widow burning), honor killings, or female circumcision? Or should we think of Larry Arnhart's serial monogamy as "natural"—as opposed to lifelong monogamy, which frustrates natural, promiscuous desires in males?[58] Should such practices be prohibited or condemned? It is hard to see how Ruse could protest.

Take another example: *A Natural History of Rape*[59] (coauthored by a biologist and an anthropologist) maintains that rape can be explained biologically: when a male cannot find a mate, his subconscious drive to reproduce his own species pushes him to force himself upon a female. Such acts happen in the animal kingdom (for example, male mallards or scorpion flies). Now the authors do not advocate rape; in fact, they claim that rapists are not excused for their (mis)behavior. To say that rape is good because it is biologically advantageous ("natural") is to commit the naturalistic fallacy (moving from *is* to *ought*).

However, if the rape impulse happens to be embedded into human nature from antiquity and if it confers biological advantage, how can the authors suggest that this behavior *ought* to be ended? Is this not committing the naturalistic fallacy as well? Indeed, the authors' resistance to rape, despite its "naturalness," suggests objective moral values not rooted in nature.

An ethic rooted in nature appears to leave us with arbitrary morality. Theism, on the other hand, *begins* with value; so bridging the is-ought gulf is a nonissue.

Skepticism about Ethics

An ethic rooted in naturalistic evolution ends up being subjectivistic and ultimately reduces to relativism. Ethics is simply illusory, as Ruse argues (and, as Dennett notes, naturalistic evolution doesn't leave room for genuine natural rights). So Westerners may find abhorrent practices such as female circumcision or a widow's self-immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband (outlawed in India under the British Raj). But why presuppose moral duties or human dignity and rights? On what metaphysical basis should one oppose such practices? If ethical beliefs are simply hard-wired into us for our fitness and survival, we have no reason to think these beliefs are *true*; they simply *are*. If, as Francis Crick argues, human identity ("you") is simply "the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules,"[60] then such a perspective is only accidentally correct. After all, this belief itself is the result of "the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules"!

Whether the naturalist holds a realistic or nonrealistic view of morality, one can legitimately ask: *Can we even trust our minds if we are nothing more than the products of naturalistic evolution trying to fight, feed, flee, and reproduce?*[61] Darwin himself was deeply troubled by this:

> With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?[62]

Regarding ethics, Darwin claimed: "Thus at last man comes to feel, through acquired and perhaps inherited habit, that it is best for him to obey his more persistent impulses."[63] The evolutionary process, however, is interested in fitness and survival, not in true belief. The problem with naturalistic evolution is that not only is *objective morality* undermined; so is *rational thought*. Our beliefs—moral or epistemic—may help us *survive*, but we can have no confidence that they are *true*.[64]

So we *may believe* that we have intrinsic value and moral duties and that our free actions make a difference, and these beliefs *could well help* us survive as a species; but they may be *completely false*. If we are blindly hard-wired by nature to accept certain beliefs because of their survival-enhancing value, then we would not have access to the *truth-status* of these beliefs. They may aid our survival, but how could we know whether they are true or false?

Along these lines, Elliott Sober rejects two chief arguments used to argue that ethics must be subjective—the naturalistic (is-ought) fallacy and the genetic fallacy ("ethical beliefs can't be true if they're the product

of evolution").[65] However, all of this seems beside the point if naturalism is true. We *still* can't be confident about which—if any—of our beliefs are true. If they are true, it is by accident rather than through some epistemic virtue. *And* we are still left wondering how a valueless universe should produce objective moral values and rights-bearing moral beings to appreciate them. At best Sober's analysis leaves us agnostic as to the existence of objective moral values.

So, the fact that we do not proceed as (global) skeptics about reason or sense perception or fundamental moral beliefs suggests borrowing from a worldview like theism (in that we have been made in the image of a truthful God). And, again, if one takes the skeptical route, one still relies on the very cognitive faculties whose unreliability is the conclusion of one's skeptical argument.[66] One assumes a trustworthy reasoning process to arrive, ironically, at the conclusion that reasoning cannot be trusted.

The fact that humans can be interested in truth seeking, not merely survival, flies in the face of naturalistic Darwinism. Commenting on the notion of our "increated" orientation toward truth, Richard Rorty calls this as "un-Darwinian" as the notion of humans having "a built-in moral compass" or conscience.[67] Thus, it appears that a naturalistic evolutionary process cannot sufficiently explain—or explain away—certain bedrock moral beliefs or our quest for truth. And if we claim that such basic beliefs should be questioned in the name of our impulse to survive and reproduce, then this skeptical conclusion is itself the result of those same impulses.

Naturalism does not inspire confidence in our belief-forming mechanisms. Indeed, naturalism has the potential to undermine our conviction that rationality and objective moral values exist. If our *beliefs*—moral or epistemic—are survival-enhancing by-products of Darwinistic evolution, why think that we actually *have* dignity, rights, and obligations—or that we are thinking rationally? A theistic worldview, on the other hand, does inspire confidence that we can *know* moral (and rational) truths—even if they do not contribute one whit to our survival.

Naturalism's Undermining of Ethics

Despite its appeal to "science," naturalism's materialist ontology not only fails to produce moral values, but positively undermines them. This becomes apparent as we examine the properties of matter, the nature of scientific description, and the notable representation of naturalists who deny objective goodness (even if they may prefer it). Further, naturalism has embedded within it a number of features that could readily undercut moral motivation.

Moral Values Defy Physical Description

Naturalists seem increasingly to take their worldview to involve a strict materialism. As Kai Nielsen puts it, "[Naturalism] is the view that anything that exists is ultimately composed of physical components."[68] However, material or physical properties such as extension, color, shape, or size are far different from moral values, which are not blue, ten centimeters long, or rough to the touch. No physics textbook will include "moral value" in its attempted description of matter. Michael Martin claims that there is "no a priori reason why objective moral values could not be constituted by matter."[69] But there is. There is a *background* or *contextual* problem for the naturalist who believes in objective moral values: How do we move from a universe that originates from no prior matter into a universe of valueless matter and energy, eventually arriving at moral values, including human rights, human dignity, and moral obligation? It is hard to see how the naturalist could bridge this chasm. Matter just does not have moral properties, let alone mental ones.

Goodness Is Scientifically Superfluous

Some naturalistic moral realists believe that recent developments in the philosophy of science—together with "naturalistic" developments in epistemology and philosophy of language—can help in the articulation and defense of moral realism: "moral realism can be shown to be a more attractive and plausible position if recent developments in realist philosophy of science are brought to bear in its defense."[70] Other naturalists are not so sanguine about naturalism's ability to pull goodness out of the ontological hat. Thomas Nagel puts it candidly: "There is no room for agency in a world of neural impulses, chemical reactions, and bone and muscle movements." Given naturalism, it is hard not to conclude that we're "helpless" and "not responsible" for our actions.[71] Zoologist Richard Dawkins admits, "Science has no methods for deciding what is ethical."[72] Harvard's Marc Hauser, who believes that we come evolutionarily equipped with an "innate moral grammar," claims much the same thing—that science is about making *descriptions*, not moral prescriptions.[73] Though not a naturalist, Derk Pereboom nicely summarizes naturalism's perspective on moral responsibility: "our best scientific theories indeed have the consequence that we are not morally responsible for our actions. . . . [We are] more like machines than we ordinarily suppose."[74]

Contrary to what naturalistic moral realists claim, "scientific explanation" seems to call for rejecting the existence of objective moral values rather than bloating their ontology. A methodologically naturalistic science would require stripping off: Why insert objective moral values (*ought*)

when bare scientific descriptions (*is*) seem to be all that is required? Why not use *non*moral terms and explanations of certain events that naturalistic moral realists typically take as morally weighted? Why not eliminate objective morality in the name of simplicity?

Naturalistic moral realists claim that moral facts help explain certain actions performed by individuals—for example, "Hitler killed millions of Jews because he was morally depraved." But are such moral facts explanatorily *necessary*? Perhaps a "strictly scientific" response should simply stop with a nonmoral description: Hitler, being bitter and angry, held many false beliefs about the Jews (for example, that they were responsible for Germany's defeat in WWI). Hitler sought to destroy the Jews as a way of releasing his hostilities.[75] While moral facts may be *relevant*, they are not necessary to *explain* Hitler's behavior. Thus, in the spirit of Ockham's razor, why multiply entities or explanations unnecessarily? Why can't natural, descriptive facts do the explanatory work? The scientific account suggests that moral facts are dispensable.[76]

It is difficult to see why the naturalist must resort to moral explanations when parsimony suggests another course—the descriptive one. If we are going the route of "facts" and "science," then why get side-tracked by the prescriptive? The is-ought problem still seems difficult for the naturalist to overcome.

Naturalists Themselves Confess . . .

Science's metaphysical failure to account for goodness is further reinforced by a large portion of naturalists who admit that natural processes without God cannot bring us to moral responsibility and goodness: these don't square well with naturalism. We have already cited Nagel, Dawkins, and Hauser. In addition, Bertrand Russell believed that "the whole subject of ethics arises from the pressure of the community on the individual."[77] E. O. Wilson locates moral feeling in "the hypothalamus and the limbic system"; it is a "device of survival in social organisms."[78] Jonathan Glover considers morality a "human creation" and calls on humans to "re-create ethics."[79]

If humans are simply more developed animals, why think there are moral duties to which they must subscribe—or that they are even morally responsible? John Searle admits that we have an intuition of freedom (that "we could have done something else"), but he rejects libertarian freedom because of his commitment to the "scientific" approach to reality. Otherwise, we would have to postulate a self that could potentially disrupt the "causal order of nature."[80]

Given such a perspective, no wonder Simon Blackburn confesses that he cannot adequately answer the relativist's challenge: "Nature has no

concern for good or bad, right or wrong. . . . We cannot get behind ethics." Questions of moral knowledge and moral progress can only be answered "from within our own moral perspective." Blackburn prefers "dignity" to "humiliation."[81] If, however, we have been created in the image of a good, supremely valuable, and free being and have been endowed with moral value and "certain unalienable rights," then the theist is able to offer a much more plausible context for affirming human dignity, rights, and responsibility than the naturalist who wants to be a realist but doesn't quite know how. Atheist J. L. Mackie had it right when he affirmed that objective goodness, given naturalism, is "odd" and "unlikely"; if it exists, it must be rooted in "an all-powerful god."[82] He opted for the idea that human beings "invent" right and wrong.[83]

Naturalism May Undercut Moral Motivation

The popular writer Michael Shermer affirms that our remote ancestors have genetically passed on to us our sense of moral obligation within, and this is (epigenetically) reinforced by group pressure. Ultimately, to ask, "Why should we be moral?" is like asking, "Why should we be hungry or horny?"[84] C. S. Lewis noted that given such conditions, moral impulses are no more true (or false) "than a vomit or a yawn."[85] Thinking "I ought" is on the same level of "I itch." Indeed, "my impulse to serve posterity is just the same sort of thing as my fondness for cheese" or preferring mild or bitter beer.[86] Naturalism's inability to get beyond descriptions of human behavior and psychology does not inspire confidence for grounding moral obligation. At best, one should remain agnostic about it—which doesn't do much to encourage the pursuit of virtue.

Furthermore, if, as can be argued, humans could have evolved a different set of moral beliefs that might nevertheless enhance survival (for example, rape as biologically beneficial), then this, too, takes the wind out of the sails of moral motivation. If we are simply animals, why refrain from raping or practicing infanticide[87] when this is "natural" or "widespread" in nature? It seems that those who vehemently resist such practices are smuggling in metaphysical capital from another worldview that clearly demarcates valuable, responsible moral agents from environment-bound, instinct-guided animals.

The Euthyphro Problem

In a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon strip,[88] the mischievous imp Calvin is pondering the lyrics of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town": ". . . He knows if you've been bad or good; so be good, for goodness's sake!" Calvin reports

his musings to Hobbes, his striped sidekick and co-conspirator. "This Santa Claus stuff bothers me . . . especially the judge and jury bit." Why, Calvin wonders, does Santa carry such moral authority? "Who appointed Santa? How do we know he's impartial? What criteria does he use for determining bad or good?"

Along these lines, Socrates, in Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue (10a), once asked: "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" Various philosophers of religion have followed up on this question to show that no necessary connection exists between God and objective morality. They present the dilemma in (roughly) this way: either God's commands are *arbitrary* (something is good *because* God commands it—and God could have commanded "You *shall* murder/commit adultery")—or there must be some *autonomous moral standard* (which God consults in order to command). Robin Le Poidevin maintains that "we can, apparently, only make sense of these doctrines [that God is good and wills us to do what is good] if we think of goodness as being defined independently of God."[89] Steven Pinker, who believes that our evolutionary hard-wiring fully accounts for our moral beliefs and sense of moral obligation, claims that Plato made quick work of the idea that God is "in charge of morality" since God's dictates would be "divine whims."[90]

Such claims, though, are misguided. Why think our alternatives are reduced to these two—(a) a moral standard that exists completely independently of God (which God must apparently consult when issuing commands) or (b) divine arbitrariness or capriciousness?

Although divine commands may serve as a partial guide to living rightly (for example, God's civil laws to theocratic Israel),[91] God's good character with accompanying "divine motivations"[92] is the more ultimate and underlying reality; God's moral nature is more fundamental to God's worship-worthiness than God's commands—a point nontheistic philosophers seem to ignore.[93] Even divine command theorist Robert Adams points out, "It matters what God's attributes are. . . . It makes a difference if you think of commands as coming from someone who completely understands both us and our situation. It matters not only that God is loving but also that he is just."[94] Elsewhere Adams speaks of God's commands springing from a good design and purpose; such commands are conducive to human flourishing: "It matters to the plausibility of a divine command theory, for example, that we do not believe that God demands cruelty."[95]

Indeed, the ultimate resolution to this Euthyphro dilemma is that *God's good character* or *nature* sufficiently grounds objective morality. So we do not need to look elsewhere for such a standard. We have been made in the divine image; without it we would neither be moral beings (let alone exist) nor have the capacity to recognize objective moral values. The ultimate solution to the Euthyphro dilemma shifts the grounding of morality

from the *commands of God* to something more basic—that is, the *nature* or *character* of God. Thus, we human beings (who have been made to resemble God in certain ways) have the capacity to recognize this, and thus God's commands—far from being arbitrary—are in accordance with that nature and also with how we have been designed. We would not *know* goodness without God's granting us a moral *constitution*. We have rights, dignity, freedom, and responsibility because God has designed us this way. And we can grant Pinker's assumption that fundamental moral convictions that prohibit torturing babies for fun or raping are hard-wired into us evolutionarily while rejecting the notion that this hard-wiring grounds human morality. Such hard-wiring is quite compatible with God's existence, but it runs into trouble if morality is strictly natural, as we noted above.

As an aside, God's designs for us are for our good and well-being, not our harm (Deut. 6:24; 10:13). Contrary to the skeptic's caricatures of God as a divine police officer or cosmic killjoy, God issues commands that are rooted in God's good nature and are in line with the maximal function and flourishing of human beings. Indeed, these commands spring from the love and self-giving nature of God, who is *pro nobis* (for us).

Furthermore, in light of (1) our ability to recognize basic moral values and ideals, as well as (2) our moral failures to live up to these ideals, this "moral gap" suggests the need for (3) divine grace to enable us to live as we ought. So, rather than Kant's "ought implies can," we failing humans may still cast ourselves upon God's mercy and grace; that is, "ought implies can—*with* divine assistance."[96]

There are other points to ponder. What if the naturalistic (or nontheistic) moral realist pushes the Euthyphro dilemma further? What if she calls God's character itself into question? Is the very *character* of God good because it happens to be God's, or is God's character good because it conforms to some external standard of goodness? I briefly respond below.

- If the naturalistic (or nontheistic) moral realist is correct about there needing to be some moral standard external to God, then she herself cannot escape a similar dilemma, *mutatis mutandis*: Are these moral values good simply because they are good, or is there an independent standard of goodness to which *they* conform? Her argument offers her no actual advantage over theism. And if two entities are sufficient to establish a relation (here, God's good character and moral values), inserting yet a third entity—some moral standard independent of God to assess the connection between them—becomes superfluous. The skeptic's demand is unwarranted.
- The naturalist's query is pointless in this regard also: we must eventually arrive at some self-sufficient and self-explanatory stopping point beyond which the discussion cannot go. Why is this

"independent moral standard" any less arbitrary a stopping point than God's nature?

- God, who is essentially perfect, does not have obligations to some external moral standard; God simply acts, and it is good. God naturally does what is good. God does not fulfill moral obligations but simply expresses the goodness of the divine nature. As H. O. Mounce suggests, "God cannot hold anything good unless he *already* values it. But then his valuing cannot *depend* on its being good."[97]
- The idea that God could be evil or command evil is utterly contrary to the very definition of God (who is intrinsically morally excellent, maximally great, and worthy of worship); if we are really talking about "God," then this God cannot be some evil creator of the universe.
- The acceptance of objective values assumes a kind of ultimate goal or design plan for human beings. This would make little sense given naturalism (since we are the products of mindless, unguided processes), but it makes much sense given theism, which presumes a design plan or ideal standard for human beings.
- Even if there were some moral standard independent of God, it still would fail to account for how humans, given their valueless, unguided, materialistic origins came to be morally valuable, rights-bearing, morally responsible beings. There seems to be no reason to think that the Euthyphro dilemma poses a serious threat to a theistically rooted ethic.[98]

For all their huffing and puffing, naturalistic moral realists are mistaken about the "threat" that the Euthyphro dilemma poses for God's being the ground of objective moral values.

Conclusion

Unlike the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which takes human rights and moral obligations for granted, another historic document—the Declaration of Independence—presents the essential grounding for "certain unalienable" human rights and dignity. These are rooted in "our Creator," a personal Being who has uniquely made human beings. Without God, it seems exceedingly difficult to account for objective moral values, obligations, human rights, and human dignity.

John Rist has observed that there is "widely admitted to be a crisis in contemporary Western debate about ethical foundations."[99] It seems that taking seriously a personal God and Creator, who is the infinite Good and source of all finite goods—including human dignity—would go a long way

in providing the needed metaphysical foundation for human rights and objective moral values. Apart from such a move, it seems that the crisis may become only more pronounced.

Maritain argued that God and objective morality cannot plausibly be separated since God, the Creator of valuable, morally responsible human beings, is the very source of value. Ethical systems—and official documents regarding human rights—that ignore this foundation will necessarily be incomplete. To close with Jacques Maritain:

> The truths which I have just recalled were not discovered and formulated by moral philosophy. They spring from a higher source. They correspond, nevertheless, to an aspiration (a trans-natural aspiration) so deeply rooted in man that many philosophers have undergone its attraction, and have tried to transpose it into purely rational terms, an attempt which, lacking the indispensable data, could only be disappointing.[100]

If objective moral values exist, we have good reason for believing in God. Of course, a successful moral argument does not reveal that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus exists—a full-blown and robust theism. The moral argument, however, can be supplemented with other successful theistic arguments and with God's specific revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. That said, the moral argument does point us to a supreme personal moral Being who is worthy of worship, who has made us with dignity and worth, to whom we are personally accountable, and who may reasonably be called "God."