Grounding Human Rights:
Naturalism's Failure and Biblical Theism's Success
Paul Copan

Chapter 1

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Introduction: The Language and Reality of Rights

The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights lays out a number of universal human rights, including the freedom of religion. Here is one critical affirmation:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (article 18).

What *is* a right? Human rights scholar John Warwick Montgomery describes rights as *titles*. Yet the very notion of title or entitlement expresses a *source* or *justification* of the title in question. It suggests being

rooted in or *springing from* something—that there is some authority or power that grants such a status. He adds that we cannot *define* rights without the need to *justify* them (Montgomery 1986: 78–80).

In other words, a right is not self-standing; it is a relational title, requiring a ground or justification. Human rights are anchored in the prior status human beings have. Yet this status of dignity and worth is not free-floating; it requires metaphysical grounding to make sense of this entitlement.

Jacques Maritain, who helped craft the language of the Universal Declaration, wrote: "we agree on these rights, providing we are not asked why. With the 'why,' the dispute begins" (Maritain 1951: 77). Secularists and theists alike can concur with the notion of "inalienable rights," but what *grounds* such a claim? It is this dignity, worth, or "sacredness" that the naturalistic moral realist takes for granted rather than justifying or grounding it metaphysically. The strength of biblical theism is that it offers the requisite metaphysical foundation for human sanctity—"the image of God." This divinely bestowed worth is given to all participants in the human race. It is not measured by functionalist standards routinely used by utilitarians—levels of social adeptness, rationality, or self-awareness. Moreover, this divine "image" serves as the ground for universal human rights across all societies.

My argument in this chapter is fourfold. First, biblical theism's emphasis on the image of God furnishes us with the requisite ontological foundation for human dignity and worth (or "sanctity").[1] Secular (and non-theistic) ethical systems invariably suffer from metaphysical incompleteness at one crucial point: they are unable to ground human dignity given a context of valueless, deterministic, unguided material processes; rooting human dignity in features such as free will, reason, or self-awareness begs the question since the emergence of such capacities themselves is difficult to explain naturalistically, which many naturalists themselves acknowledge (see Copan 2013). Second, to reinforce the point about biblical ethics' greater ability to ground human dignity and worth, I comment on the historical fact that biblical theism—not "secular Enlightenment values"—has given rise both to human

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[1] Some distinguish between *worth* or *sanctity* (which is anchored in a human's *nature* or *essence*—with all of its potentialities and capacities) and *dignity* (which is based on *merit* and takes place over time and inspires/commands respect as one's due). *Sanctity* is the ground of *dignity*, and one never outlives his sanctity (see Jackson 2005: 45–51). Here, I use *dignity* and *worth* interchangeably.

rights discourse, not to mention the start of the bioethics movement. Third, I address a cluster of objections springing from Plato's Euthyphro question. Finally, I address the Kantian objection to and misrepresentation of divine commands, particularly that of the command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

In this chapter, I am taking for granted the existence of objective moral values—such as "Kindness is a virtue rather than a vice" or "rape is wrong" or "torturing babies for fun is evil" (see Copan 2008). I would concur with the atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen at this point:

> It is more reasonable to believe such elemental things [wife-beating, 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. (Nielsen 1990: 10–11)

Again, the problem is not *knowing* these moral truths, but more fundamentally how we came to *be* morally responsible, intrinsically valuable, rights-bearing beings.

The Incompleteness of Non-Theistic Ethics and the Success of Theism

Overall, naturalism and various non-theistic worldviews do not lead us to expect the emergence of human dignity—the foundation of human rights—and universal benevolence. Even naturalistic/secular normative ethical systems following Aristotle, Kant, and Mill or advocating an ideal observer theory *assume* the dignity or worth of human beings. Thus, they are necessarily incomplete accounts (on this, see Hare 2007). Yes, such accounts can offer much helpful guidance *epistemologically*, but they routinely fail *metaphysically*. That is, a non-theistic worldview lacks the wherewithal to produce intrinsically valuable, rights-bearing, duty-bound human beings.

For example, the social contractarian John Rawls famously advocated the inviolable rights of individual human beings: "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others" (Rawls 1999: 3–4). But why think human beings have intrinsic moral value given a worldview in which accidental collocations of atoms, as Bertrand Russell put it, are the fundamental metaphysical starting point? By contrast, biblical theism provides the requisite

metaphysical context to ground human dignity and worth. The more *natural*, less-surprising context for the emergence of intrinsic dignity and worth is that of a good personal Creator rather than atoms in motion. The wrongness of rape or torture for fun presupposes the more basic fact of human dignity and worth, which makes excellent sense on theism.

Moreover, secularized "Platonic" or transcendentist approaches to morality falter as well. Atheist Erik Wielenberg claims that objective morality's foundation consists of certain brute ethical facts: they "have no explanation outside of themselves; no further facts make them true" (the ontological claim), and we can know these brute ethical facts immediately without inferring them from other known facts (the epistemological claim). Necessary moral truths didn't evolve with humanity but are "part of the furniture of the universe," he claims. They "constitute the ethical background of every possible universe," creating the framework for assessing the actions of any moral agent (whether human or divine) (Wielenberg 2010: 79; on this view, see also Sinnott-Armstrong 2009).

One problem with this scenario is its gratuitous assumption that objective value has emerged from valuelessness—from accidental collocations of atoms. In Wielenberg's words, "From valuelessness, value sometimes comes" (Wielenberg 2009: 40n). But to *assert* is not to *justify*, and this claim hangs on a mere metaphysical *wish* that maybe value could emerge from valueless matter; the claim is not anchored in ontological realities. Theism does not have to lean on such a thin metaphysical reed: the emergence of value in this world is rooted in a supremely valuable being that endowed finite creatures with value. From value, value comes. Although we cannot do so here, we could rightly challenge other similar naturalistic question-begging maxims: "from non-conscious matter, consciousness sometimes comes"; "from deterministic processes, free will sometimes comes"; and "from non-rational matter, rationality sometimes comes" (see Copan 2012).

A second problem with Wielenberg's perspective is this: belief in the existence of transcendent moral facts is itself a recognition that a strict naturalism fails. One must move into some sort of non-naturalistic, Platonic realm. This position is an implicit acknowledgment that something more than

naturalism is required to ground moral realism. Indeed, it is a move in the direction of theism, which can anchor such moral truths in the character of a good God, as I argue below.

A third problem is this: that moral facts existed prior to the emergence of moral value, say, when humans came on the scene, assumes a massive cosmic coincidence—one that readily dissolves given theism. The non-naturalistic moral realist in this case holds that (a) certain necessary *moral facts* exist and (b) *self-reflective, morally responsible and intrinsically valuable beings* eventually appear on the scene (through unguided, highly contingent evolutionary steps) who both can *recognize* these pre-existing facts and are *duty-bound* to them. This Platonic-like moral realm, it appears, was *anticipating* our emergence, just waiting for us to comply with it—a remarkable cosmic accident! A far simpler, less ad hoc explanation is available, however: a good, personal God—the very locus of objective moral values—created human beings with dignity and worth. Moral fact-hood and moral worth have always existed since both applied to God before his creation of human beings. Theism affords a far more elegant and natural explanation.

The same could be said about other non-theistic views found in eastern religious and philosophical traditions. These impersonal versions of the "Ultimate Reality" (for example, *Brahman*) lack metaphysical grounding to justify both individual human dignity as well as personal moral qualities. Their impersonal or abstract Ultimate Reality—whether monistic or pantheistic—leaves us wondering how human rights or personal virtues such as love, compassion, and kindness could make ontological sense. For example, Buddhism's no-self doctrine (*anatman*) affirms that humans are mere bundles of ever-changing properties rather than enduring selves. Or take Hinduism's Advaita Vendanta's monism. The self (*atman*) is identical to the Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*), resulting in the obliteration of any distinction between the rights of this and that human being. Looking eastward for metaphysical grounding for human dignity and worth does not look promising.

To add to our point, many atheists themselves recognize that God and human dignity and objective morality stand or fall together. To be without God is to be without human dignity as well as objective moral values and duties. Here's a small sampling:

- Jean-Paul Sartre: "It [is] very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him" (Sartre 1957: 22).

- Friedrich Nietzsche: "There are altogether no moral facts"; indeed, morality "has truth only if God is the truth—it stands or falls with faith in God" (Nietzsche 1968: 55, 70).

- J.L. Mackie: "Moral properties constitute so odd a cluster of properties and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events without an all-powerful god to create them" (Mackie 1982: 115).

As Richard Dawkins rightly observes, in a universe of selfish genes and electrons—much like Russell's "accidental collocations of atoms"—"there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference" (Dawkins 1995: 132–3; see Russell 1963: 41).

The naturalistic moral realist might appeal to theistic thinkers such as Richard Swinburne who take the position that moral facts do not depend on the existence of a good God (Swinburne 1977: 204). Such an appeal has its own set of concerns, and at least four replies are in order.

First, recall the astonishing "cosmic coincidence problem" for the atheist, as we saw earlier—that moral facts seemingly anticipate the emergence of duty-bound moral agents. By contrast, the existence of a good God tidily unifies this transcendent moral realm—anchored in the divine nature—and the emergence of intrinsically valuable human beings who are made in his image. Second, Swinburne holds to a very counterintuitive view that God is not a necessary being—one that exists in all possible worlds. According to Swinburne, God happens to exist. So it's no wonder, then, that the moral realm and God are disconnected. But the fact that God is indeed a necessary being dissolves such a dichotomy. Third, even if Swinburne were correct, these objective moral facts still cannot account for the emergence of intrinsically valuable, morally responsible agents. Human worth is a separate metaphysical issue—one for which a personal, good God offers a natural explanation, not so on naturalism. Fourth, the purported necessity of moral truths does not diminish their need for grounding in the character of a personal, necessarily existent God. God, who necessarily exists in all possible worlds, is the source of all necessary moral truths that stand in asymmetrical relation to God's necessity. Consider the necessary truth: "Addition is possible."

This is rooted in a more fundamental necessary truth—namely, the existence of numbers, which have certain essential properties. The latter grounds the former, not vice versa—hence, the asymmetrical metaphysical relationship. Likewise, consider the statement, "Consciousness necessarily exists." This is true only because God—a supremely self-aware being—exists in all possible worlds. So, a good God's necessary existence also means that objective moral facts are necessary—that is, they exist in all possible worlds precisely because a supremely good God exists in all possible worlds. A necessarily good God's existence is explanatorily prior to these moral facts (Craig 2009: 168–73).

We have seen that biblical theism, in which a good, rational, supremely aware Creator fashions human beings in his image, makes better sense of human dignity. On naturalism, though, why think morally responsible, valuable beings would be the product of mindless, non-rational, physical, valueless, non-conscious processes? Unlike theism, naturalism's context can't anticipate the emergence of moral value or the existence of moral duty (on naturalism's moral supervenience problem, see Plantinga 2010). Again, if naturalism is true and the universe is inherently meaningless, we simply should not expect the phenomenon of rights, dignity, and intrinsic value to emerge at all. While naturalistic moral realists readily acknowledge that humans are "accidental, evolved, mortal, and relatively short-lived" (Wielenberg 2009: 35), surely, intellectual honesty forces us to admit that human rights and universal benevolence *more naturally or fittingly flow* from a theistic universe than from a naturalistic one (see Smith 2009).

God, Human Rights, and History

While a personal, good God who creates humans with dignity and worth makes far better metaphysical sense of human rights than non-theistic alternatives, a study of modern history reveals an intimate connection between the biblical worldview and the human rights movement in the West. This movement and the emergence of modern science, sociologist Rodney Stark notes, have "rested entirely on religious foundations, and the people who brought it about were devout Christians" (Stark 2005: xi).

Note that this movement was not the product of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Rather, talk of "natural right(s)" emerged in Catholic medieval theology—a language which itself was built on the

biblical understanding of "the image of God" in all humans (see Reed 2007). This, of course, would lead to the language of rights in the Declaration of Independence (1776): "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal [and] endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," which include "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Shortly thereafter the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) affirmed certain fundamental rights "in the presence and under the auspices" of "the Supreme Being." Both of these documents affirm a *theological*—not secular—basis for human dignity. And no wonder: the rights language found in each is indebted to philosopher John Locke himself, who asserted that humans ought not harm another "in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" precisely because humans are the property, workmanship, and servants of "one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker" (2.6) (Locke 1690).

This fact about human equality and rights is not simply the affirmation of Christian theists, but of leading atheist intellectuals as well. Professor Jürgen Habermas, an atheist, is one of Europe's most prominent philosophers. He acknowledges the inescapable historical link between human rights discourse today and the biblical worldview:

> Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and a social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk. (Habermas 2006: 150–51)

In like fashion, none other than the late postmodern thinker Jacques Derrida affirmed the same historical fact about the biblical faith's influence:

> Today the cornerstone of international law is the sacred, what is sacred in humanity. You should not kill. You should not be responsible for a crime against the sacredness, the sacredness of man as your neighbor … made by God or by God made man … in that sense, the concept of crime against humanity is a Christian concept and I think there would be no such thing in the loft today without the Christian heritage, the Abrahamic heritage, the biblical heritage. (Derrida 1999)

This is in keeping with human rights scholar Max Stackhouse's comment: "intellectual honesty demands recognition of the fact that what passes as 'secular,' 'Western' principles of basic human rights developed nowhere else than out of key strands of the biblically rooted religion" (Stackhouse 2004: 25; see Stackhouse 2005). What's more, Harvard's Mary Ann Glendon has documented that the chief movers establishing a Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948 (which speaks of humans being "endowed with reason and conscience") were primarily church coalitions and individual Christian leaders who worked closely with some Jewish rabbis to create a "new world order" of human rights (Glendon 2001).

This mindset is in keeping with the biblical tradition of all humans being made in the divine image and with the Christian tradition in particular of the Christian call to follow a suffering Savior, to be a friend of sinners, to love one's enemies. This means identifying with the less-fortunate, the disempowered, the suffering. In his book on the valuable contribution belief in God has made in Western society, agnostic political scientist Guenther Lewy contrasts the mindset of the naturalist and the theist in this regard:

> adherents of [a naturalistic] ethic are not likely to produce a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa. Many of these people love humanity but not individual human beings with all their failings and shortcomings. They will be found participating in demonstrations for causes such as nuclear disarmament but not sitting at the bedside of a dying person. An ethic of moral autonomy and individual rights, so important to secular liberals, is incapable of sustaining and nourishing values such as altruism and self-sacrifice. (Lewy 1996: 137)

This reminds me of what British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge wrote after spending many years in India and Africa. There he witnessed "much righteous endeavor undertaken by Christians of all denominations." By contrast, however, "I never, as it happens, came across a hospital or orphanage run by the Fabian Society or a Humanist leper colony." Caring for the profoundly needy more readily springs from the worldview of biblical theism than from naturalism.

Furthermore, from the cradle of biblical theism and its emphasis on human rights, the field of bioethics would emerge in the early 1960s. Indeed, the impulse to defend human rights took on greater urgency in the wake of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and the *Roe v. Wade* decision in the early 1970s. Daniel Callahan has been closely associated with the emergence of the modern bioethics

movement and is co-founder of the Hastings Center; he writes of the theological context that first informed this field. "When I first became interested in bioethics in the mid 1960s, the only resources were theological or those drawn from within the traditions of medicine, themselves heavily shaped by religion" (Callahan 1990: 2–4).

So the fact that the human rights and bioethics movements emerged out of a Jewish-Christian worldview context is no accident. It is not the result of "secular Enlightenment values." Indeed, these values of human rights and equality have their metaphysical moorings in a biblical worldview. The Enlightenment created a division between theology and metaphysics, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other (Copleston 1960: 5). All of this has a bearing on how we, say, interpret (as the received narrative asserts) the "religious wars" of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Prior to the rise of modernity in the West, Church and state were bound together. It was modernity that created the sacred-secular dichotomy: the Church's political power came to be replaced by the state's political power, which, the twentieth century showed, can be just as tyrannical. On closer inspection, the boundaries of these alleged "religious" wars were drawn primarily along political lines rather than those of sectarian affiliation (Cavanaugh 2009).

Just as secular critics have wrongly dichotomized the sacred and secular when it comes to political power, so they have done when it comes to human dignity and rights, all the while borrowing from the metaphysical capital of biblical theism. Here secular ethical theories routinely fail to distinguish between the *ordo cognoscendi* (the order of knowing) and the *ordo essendi* (the order of being). While secularists can *know* moral truth and what it is to act virtuously, they lack the resources to account for how we came to *be* morally responsible, intrinsically valuable, rights-bearing beings.

The Irrelevancy of the Euthyphro Critique

Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue raises the question: "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" (10a). In theistic terms, either God's commands are *arbitrary* (something is good *because* God commands it—and he could have commanded the opposite), or there must be some *autonomous moral standard* (which God consults in order to command). Some of theism's

critics raise this purported dilemma in an attempt to show that goodness can exist independently of God, even if it turns out that there is a God. On this account, the existence of God is thus irrelevant to moral matters.

God's Intrinsically Good Character

That said, there is an abundance of literature rebutting the Euthyphro "dilemma" (for example, Morris 1987; Alston 1990; Linville 1990; Copan 2008). So it is no mild shock that atheist philosopher Louise Antony takes the Euthyphro as an "explicit and vivid" dilemma from which there is no escape (Antony 2009: 70).

In fact, the theist easily evades this false dilemma. These are not the only horns to consider: there are alternatives. The chief one is that goodness is non-arbitrarily rooted in God's necessarily good character, not in divine commands. Antony's mistaken assumption that "good = commanded by God" and therefore God could issue entirely opposite commands is strange *in excelsis*. Unlike humans, God does not have duties to follow, nor does he need them. Rather, God naturally does what is good because his character is good, loving, and just. Thus, it would be odd that God would have duties or be obligated to his own divine commands—particularly when God's personhood is the very source of goodness. While God may choose to bind himself to a promise or oath, say, to make Abraham into a great nation, it is *self*-imposed rather than *externally* imposed; God can swear by nothing greater than his own good, faithful character (Hebrews 6:13). No moral standard exists outside himself. Antony incorrectly assumes that William of Ockham's version of the divine command theory is the only game of its kind in town—that God *could* command, say, torturing babies for fun, and this would become obligatory. Antony incorrectly labels divine commands as tautologous—that "goodness" reduces to or is equated with "what God commands," and vice versa; this is a gross distortion. While God's commands are relevant to ethics, they do not define or constitute goodness. For instance, God may give certain commands (say, kosher or planting laws for national Israel) that are not permanently binding, nor is there any reason to think these are inherently good.

Furthermore, this view fails to distinguish between the *good* and the *right*. The good is the broader realm of value (axiology), which includes aesthetics, rationality, and virtues (beneficence, kindness, faithfulness). *Right*, by contrast, has to do with duty, obligation, permission (deontology). Thus, God technically has no duties, but still does what is good by nature. This failure to distinguish between *good* and *right* by many of theism's critics is a common one and has led to many unnecessary philosophical rabbit trails and cul-de-sacs.

And what of God's commanding because he loves us and because he is concerned about maximizing our ultimate well-being (Baggett and Walls 2011: 46)?

Further, because of the critic's common failure to distinguish between the *good* and the *right*, he incorrectly assumes God's character is not intrinsically good and that God could not command what is intrinsically evil. Yet a necessarily good God couldn't command rape or baby-torture. This would be like saying one could make a square circle or be a married bachelor, which is analytically impossible (cf. Jeremiah 19:5 [NASB]: "… nor did it ever enter My mind").

However, as the cosmic moral authority, God may command something difficult, which we fallible humans cannot adequately understand, but something for which God has morally sufficient reasons (on this, see Baggett and Walls 2011).

A wise, all-good God may on rare occasions or in dire conditions command something jarring (for example, for Abraham to offer up Isaac), which means having morally sufficient reasons for doing so (for example, to test Abraham's faith that God will show himself trustworthy to fulfill his promise, even if it means raising Isaac from the dead). That said, we do have certain unshakable intuitions that it is always wrong to rape or torture babies for fun; it would be self-contradictory that a necessarily good God would command such things. Omnipotence is not sheer brute force; rather, God possesses and exercises this quality in conjunction with other great-making properties, including intrinsic goodness. So for the critic to ask "What if God commanded something intrinsically evil?" is to propose the impossible (*contra* Morriston 2009).

Further Responses to the Euthyphro

More can be said in response to the Euthyphro, which I can only here summarize (but see Copan 2013).

First, if the naturalistic (or non-theistic) moral realist is correct about needing to have some standard external to God, then she herself cannot escape a similar dilemma, mutatis mutandis: if two entities are sufficient to establish a relation (here, between God's intrinsic goodness and morally constituted human beings), 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.

Consider atheist Michael Martin's claim that the ideal observer theory (IOT) renders a theistic account of objective morality obsolete. "Good" is what "an ideal observer would approve under ideal condition" (ch. 3 in Martin 2002).

If torturing babies for fun is wrong because an ideal observer says so, then *is torturing babies for fun wrong because the ideal observer says so, or does the ideal observer say so because torturing babies for fun is wrong?* If we use Martin's (and Antony's) logic, we would still have a moral standard independent of the ideal observer—an IIOT!

Second, the naturalist's query becomes pointless: we must eventually arrive at some self-sufficient, self-explanatory stopping point beyond which the discussion cannot go. As we saw with the IOT, why is this "independent moral standard" any less arbitrary a stopping point than God's own intrinsically good personhood?

Third, the necessity of moral truths does not diminish their need for grounding in a necessary personal God, who exists in all possible worlds. "Consciousness necessarily exists" is so precisely because God—a supremely self-aware being—exists in all possible worlds. A necessarily good God's existence also means that objective moral values are necessary—that is, they exist in all possible worlds precisely because a supremely good God exists all possible worlds (Craig 2009: 169–71).

Fourth, God, who is essentially perfect and thus worship-worthy, does not have obligations to some external moral standard; God simply acts, and, naturally, it is good. If there were an evil, but very powerful, creator of human beings, then humans would *not* be obligated to obey or worship such a being. Maximal excellence, not sheer will or power, is sufficient to ground worship-worthiness.

Fifth, though the goodness of God's personhood grounds his commands, commands still play an important role. Divine commands may partially serve as guidance in particular instances where there would otherwise be no moral obligation (for example, certain food laws in the Old Testament to distinguish Israel from surrounding nations). Furthermore, divine commands may strengthen moral motivation (for example, a strong reminder from a loving friend that spurs us into action, though we know the right thing to do) (Zagzebski 2004; Swinburne 2009).

Sixth, the acceptance of objective values assumes a kind of ultimate goal or design plan for human beings. Why think humans have any objective end or *telos*, say, to be intellectually fulfilled or to use their talents to the fullest? On naturalism, we are the products of mindless, valueless, unguided processes. Why *ought* things be different, as this assumes some kind of design plan?

Seventh, even if there were some moral standard independent of God, it still would fail to account for how humans, given their valueless, unguided, deterministic, materialistic origins came to be morally valuable, rights-bearing, morally responsible beings. From valuelessness valuelessness comes. On theism, God, the supremely valuable being, creates finite, morally valuable creatures. Value produces value.

It is worth noting that the true believer is motivated by dedication to a personal being, not to Platonic moral facts. Ultimate happiness is not found in some crass, selfish material or hedonistic reward, as critics commonly charge, but in the enjoyment of the company of the God whom the believer has served and in whose personhood is the very standard of goodness. Thus the believer can and should be good for goodness' sake; after all, Virtue, which is maximally exemplified in God, is its own reward in that the reward for a life pursuing virtue is unselfishly enjoying the company of the One who is Virtue itself.

Kant and Divine Commands

Moral Certainty, Moral Principles, and Divine Commands

Commenting on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, Immanuel Kant called this account a "myth." On what grounds? Because no God worthy of the name could have commanded it. In fact, wrote Kant,

Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: "That I ought not kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven" (Kant 1996a: 203–4). Kant scholar Lewis White Beck sums up Kant's perspective: "Any religion that requires anything of man other than earnest and conscientious morality is mere superstition and idolatry" (Beck 1997: 76; see also ch. 4 in Cliteur 2010).

Atheist philosopher Raymond Bradley asserts that the biblical God violates—or commands humans to violate—basic moral principles. What would otherwise appear to be murder, say, appears to be morally permissible because "God commanded it." Yet, he adds, this is in conflict with our basic moral understanding. For God to, say, strike down Uzzah for touching the ark (2 Samuel 6:7) or to command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac violates a basic moral principle any right-thinking person recognizes to be true. In the latter case, according to Bradley, for Abraham to obey God's command in violation of the principle "it is morally wrong to murder"

> would be to ally oneself with moral monsters like Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot. It would be to abandon all pretense to a belief in objective moral values … [This] would be tantamount to an embrace of moral nihilism. And no theist who believes in the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount could assent to that. (Bradley 2003: 144, 136)

Now, biblical theists will readily acknowledge that the Scriptures record certain difficult divine commands. Bradley, however, is simply wrong in what he claims. First, he insists heeding God's command leads to moral nihilism—that *no* action is morally wrong. Second, he claims that obeying God over against recognized objective moral principles entails that the atrocities of Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot weren't morally wrong. As it turns out, both implications conflict with the moral teachings of Scripture and what right-thinking biblical theists are committed to.

The biblical theist can readily argue that, yes, there are certain universal moral principles that should never be violated *and* that a good God would *never* command them—say, torturing babies for fun, molesting children, or raping women. Yes, certain actions are always evil, and it would be impossible for God, given his intrinsically good nature, to command them. But recall the distinction between the *difficult*

and the *impossible*: a good God may—under certain conditions and for some morally justifiable reason (though not necessarily apparent to us)—command something that is difficult to square with our moral understanding.

Now, if we assume that God could never command something that challenges our moral understanding, this takes for granted our moral judgments do not ever need revising or refining. As we shall see below, a good God may command something that violates a general prima facie moral principle that is not technically exceptionless. In our own society, we recognize that certain authorities (for example, those working in the police force or penal system) are justified in exerting force that ordinary citizens would not be permitted to do. How much more would this apply to a good God and Creator of all! This exception does not mean that the general prohibition against, say, killing the innocent is no longer binding but that there may be certain unusual circumstances under which such principles can be overruled.

Take the September 11 terrorist attacks. When these terrorists hijacked planes and thus put at risk many more lives on the ground, President Bush gave orders to shoot down the planes—filled with innocent passengers—which had suddenly become weapons of large-scale murder. Again, while tragic, such a command was justified in an attempt to stop the killing of many more innocent persons. Was such an order morally justifiable? One can certainly make a good case for this.

So one can coherently embrace a view in which God commands something under extraordinary circumstances, but that does not commit us to moral nihilism, nor does this exonerate Hitler or Stalin. Unlike Abraham's surrendering of Isaac, which is founded on strong biblical and historical evidence (see Kitchen 2003), we have no good reason to think that God commanded Hitler and Stalin to act as they did. The biblical theist has good theological reason to think that such unusual commands were *sui generis*, uniquely given in the unfolding of salvation-history, which would not carry over beyond that era. This hardly renders morality arbitrary (*contra* Cliteur 2010: 212–14). Again, if God is necessarily perfect in character, then he simply would not command what is intrinsically evil. The claim that it is possible for God to command people to torture others for fun is true only if it is possible for a morally perfect person

to command such an atrocious thing. But, as we have seen, this is analytically *impossible*! The very reason critics cite examples such as torturing people for fun is because these actions are paradigms of conduct that no morally good person could ever entertain or endorse. Indeed, God declares there are things he could never command: "They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind" (Jeremiah 7:31 NASB).

Moreover, let us revisit the distinction between the *good* (axiology) and the *right* (deontology). The common rejoinder by theism's critics is that if some action is wrong because God prohibits it, then God cannot be said to be good in any meaningful sense. The claim "God is good" turns into no more than the claim that "God commands"—a tautology. Now, this distinction between *good* and *right* is important because many critics assume that God, if he exists, has the same duties that human beings do—and that God has the same rights over creatures as they have over one another. For example, if humans have a duty not to take an innocent human's life, then neither can God.

This is incorrect. God doesn't have actual duties; he simply acts, and what he does is good. This also includes his opposition to torturing babies for fun or molesting children. The *good* is not identical to the *right* or *moral*. So it is a confused notion to say that goodness is "what God commands." No, goodness extends beyond morality, and God is not subject to his own commands. Rather, his commands spring from his good character. Again, God does not have actual duties since God's goodness is broader than this. That does not mean that God does not oppose rape or torture for fun.

God's commands do not result in good and evil trading places. Baggett and Walls refer to these as "convictions of the deepest ingression that they are truly non-negotiable, and unable to be relinquished—not just psychologically, but rationally, at least without perverting morality itself" (Baggett and Walls 2011: 135). As we have seen, human beings are fallible in their moral judgments, which regularly need revising. Yet a necessarily good God could not command what is intrinsically evil and thus morally non-negotiable. Imagine a command to kill everyone around you purely for entertainment, or a command involving the permissibility of harming, hurting, and inflicting suffering on people for no reason at all. Or

consider a command to hate God and despise all other human beings. Similarly, one cannot accept a system of divine commands where every duty we believe in is declared false. Nor can we accept a system which suggests that the vast majority of our moral beliefs are mistaken.

The important question to ask is *not* whether our moral beliefs are revisable, but rather whether this or that particular moral belief is non-negotiable. Even certain general moral principles like "It is wrong to kill innocent people" are not non-negotiable. Many ethicists recognize that this can be overridden in rare circumstances of "supreme emergency"—for example, when the alternative to killing non-combatants in war is to tolerate significantly greater evils, and the consequences of refraining from killing are significantly bad (ch. 16 in Walzer 2000; Primoratz 1997). Whatever one thinks of this position, it cannot be dismissed as conceptually incoherent. If a proponent of an absolutist position on killing non-combatants examined the arguments and concluded that, in rare circumstances of supreme emergency, killing non-combatants was not wrong, then it is implausible to suggest that their concept of goodness was so radically at odds with prior beliefs that good and evil would trade places, or that their position consisted of mere word games. This position may be false, but it is not obviously incoherent. Such a principle is prima facie binding, but it is not a non-negotiable principle, as can be seen in highly unusual, extraordinary circumstances—and this could certainly apply to a good God's difficult command in unique circumstances, such as Abraham's sacrificing Isaac.

We come back to Kant. Even if it is coherent for God to issue difficult commands, the question remains: "Is it rational to obey them?" Kant thought that Abraham should have said "No!" to any perceived voice from heaven commanding the sacrifice of Isaac. Kant's argument presupposes that *whenever two conflicting claims differ in epistemic status, the claim with the lower status is to be rejected* (Quinn 2005: 316). His contention that "it is wrong to kill innocent people" is a statement of certainty, but that God commands or forbids a certain action is not—and can never be—apodictically certain. So, however coherent the possibility of difficult divine commands may be, one can never rationally accept such a claim is true.

Philip Quinn points out two problems with Kant. First, "Kant has an extremely optimistic view of our ability to attain epistemic certainty about principles of moral wrongness" (ibid.: 318). Kant thinks we can be *certain* of moral claims *across the board*. This, however, is dubious. Yes, we can be confident that it is wrong to inflict as much pain as we can on another merely for our own entertainment. We are quite certain that killing and lying are prima facie wrong, and they can only be justified if some overriding moral reason applies. However, many moral claims are far from certain. Capital punishment, what counts as justifiable war, and certain end-of-life issues are far less clear. While there are defensible and justified answers to these questions, we doubt that we can claim Kantian *certainty* about answers to these questions. Indeed, we should distinguish between objective ethical principles—which may not be exceptionless (for example, the ethical legitimacy of deceiving Nazis to protect innocent Jews)—and absolute, exceptionless ones (like the wrongness of rape or torturing babies for fun).

Second, Kant claims that we can *never* be certain that God has commanded a certain action:

> That to take a human being's life because of his religious faith is wrong is certain, unless (to allow the most extreme possibility) a divine will, made known to the inquisitor in some extraordinary way, has decreed otherwise. But that God has ever manifested this awful will is a matter of historical documentation and never apodictically certain … it is at least possible that on this point error has prevailed. (Kant 1996b: 283)

Even if this is true, Quinn notes, it "would thus seem to be well within God's power to communicate to us a sign that confers on the claim that God commands [an action] a fairly high epistemic status" (Quinn 2005: 319). It is far from clear that moral claims about the wrongness of specific actions must always have a higher epistemic status than theological claims involving God's commands.

Indeed, this has been challenged by Christopher Eberle, who observes that many skeptical worries raised about belief in God's commands apply with equal force to moral beliefs (Eberle 2002: 234–87). Eberle notes problems such as the lack of public intelligibility, public accessibility, replicability, fallibilism, external criticism, independent confirmability, and proof of reliability leveled against theological beliefs all apply to moral beliefs as well.

What's more, Kant himself had the benefit of the historical influence of biblical theism on Western culture, which has come through (to use Kant's terms) "the intermediary of human beings and their interpretation" (Kant 1996b: 283). Most Westerners' beliefs in liberal ideals, such as, the equality of women, opposition to slavery, human rights, and so on are mediated through human beings and traditions our parents bequeathed to us—indeed, traditions that have been given shape by the biblical tradition (see Schmidt 2004). It's simply not true—indeed is question-begging—that moral beliefs always have a higher epistemic status than beliefs about God's commands. What's more, it has been well argued by Alasdair MacIntyre that Enlightenment thought's inability to ground objective moral values led to the favoring of emotivism by logical positivism and other such modernist positions (ch. 5 in MacIntyre 2007).

We can be quite certain that that, *in normal circumstances*, taking innocent life is wrong. However, that it is *never under any* circumstances permissible is extremely controversial. That there are rare exceptions to rules against killing when there is some greater good involved is widely accepted in contemporary ethics: threshold deontology, act-utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism, and Rossian deontology all accept this conclusion. *It is, at best, controversial that a principle rejected by almost all of the major ethical theories on offer today is more plausible than belief that God on rare occasions commanded the taking of innocent life*. Surely, some argument is needed before the biblical theist is required to accept this controversial claim.

There does not seem any compelling reason why a biblical theist cannot claim that God has on rare occasions, for the sake of a greater good, exempted people from the prohibition to kill by commanding them to do so.

One more matter on Kant: notice how he takes for granted something like the *imago Dei* in all human beings. While philosophers like John Hare consider Kant's argument to require God's existence (see Hare 2007), secularists who make use of him to separate God and morality must still grapple with this point: Kant's purported claim that morality is independent of God *still assumes* intrinsic human worth, but this worth exists precisely because humans have been made in God's likeness. Secularists appropriating Kant's own argumentation are only keeping the discussion at an epistemological level. In

hiding behind Kant, they completely bypass any metaphysical justificatory context for human worth. Such a use of Kant simply presumes human dignity—as though it is ontologically free-floating. That is, such an interpretation of Kant still does not inspire any confidence that naturalism can ground intrinsic human worth and thus human rights. Kant so understood still does not show how morality at the deeper, metaphysical level can be detached from God.

The Narrative of Abraham and Isaac

As the Abraham story is Kant's particular focus, let us say a few words about the biblical account here (for more on this, see Copan 2011). From the outset, God had guaranteed Abraham that his offspring would bring blessing to the nations of the world (Genesis 12:1–3). Thus, this *promise* to become a great people and to bless the nations of the earth cannot be separated from God's later *command* in Genesis 22 regarding Isaac. In fact, God had already brought about a miracle by giving Abraham and Sarah the child of promise, Isaac, in their old age. Isaac and Isaac alone was the child through whom the blessing would come. Second, God had already given Abraham an earlier test, commanding Abraham to let his son Ishmael—the *non*-promise child—go into the wilderness, but only after reassuring Abraham that God would also make Ishmael a great nation (Genesis 17:20).

Given this historical backdrop, Abraham had confidence that *even if the child of promise died*, *God would somehow accomplish his purposes through that very child*. Abraham believed *God could even raise Isaac from the dead*. That's why Abraham told his servants before he headed to Mount Moriah with Isaac, "*We* will worship and then *we* will come back to you" (Genesis 22:5, NIV). Commenting on this passage, the author of Hebrews observed that since Abraham "had received the promises," he "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:17–19, NASB).

Philosopher John Hare provides this thought experiment: what if God rearranged the world so that it had different features and thus different ways to apply moral principles? Say that God willed that at the age of 18, humans should kill each other, but that *God would immediately bring them back to life and in robust health*. In that case, killing people at this age would not be a big deal (Hare 2001: 68–9). Yes, in *the world that we know*, 18-year-olds—and non-18-year-olds—die because of blunt traumas, cancer, auto

accidents, and a myriad of other killers. Because of this, killing innocent people in the actual world is wrong. That is just a fact about the world.

As we consider the Abraham story with Isaac's miraculous birth, the divine promise to make him a blessing to the nations, and the promise that Ishmael would not die but would become a great nation as well, Abraham truly knew that Isaac would live to adulthood and have offspring in fulfillment of God's promise; so, if necessary, Abraham reasoned, God would bring Isaac back from the dead: "*we* will return," Abraham promised his servants. So if Abraham *knew* God would fulfill his covenant promise, *then Abraham's taking innocent human life in this case—according to God's command—was morally permissible*.

As we've seen, our ethical understanding is partly shaped by certain facts about the world. If we lived in a world in which hitting people in the head helped improve their health rather than caused them harm and pain, then such actions would be encouraged. Yes, in the actual world, hitting people in the head typically causes harm. However, this shows that the command "Don't hit people in the head" depends on certain givens about the world. However, we know that if these facts about the world were different, then the prohibition would be irrelevant.

So, what if the facts about the world include a good God who specifically reveals himself to certain persons in salvation-history and may issue extraordinary commands in these specific, unique contexts but with morally sufficient reasons? It seems that the critic's task is to show why someone like Abraham, given all he had come to know through God's previous dealings with him, shouldn't obey God's command. After all, Abraham knew the outcome based on his previous experience with God and that taking innocent Isaac's life would only mean that God would resuscitate him so that God's covenant promise would be fulfilled. Yes, without the historical context of God's call to Abraham and the promise of blessing as well as the miraculous birth of Isaac, Abraham would have been murdering his son, but that's not what we have in the book of Genesis (material here adapted from Flannagan and Copan 2013; and Copan 2011).

If our ethical understanding is shaped by certain facts about the world, how would our thinking be different if a maximally great supernatural being who reveals himself in history and is capable of raising the dead is part of that world's set of facts? This point would undermine, say, the criticisms of Kant's reading of Genesis 22 since Kant was operating with an incomplete understanding of the facts. God's command was not intrinsically evil since Isaac, like the 18-year-olds who instantly come back to life when killed, would have come back from the dead if necessary.

Conclusion

We have seen that human rights are best grounded in the metaphysic of biblical theism, in which a good personal being makes human beings in his image. A naturalistic worldview of selfish genes and electrons simply lacks ontological grounding for the emergence of intrinsic human dignity and worth. While naturalists can *know* moral truths, the more relevant question for our discussion on human rights is how intrinsically valuable *beings* could exist at all.

Those who attempt to utilize the Euthyphro argument to argue for objective morality without God still do not account for how beings of intrinsic worth could arise from valueless matter. Secondly, history has shown that both the human rights and bioethics movements were inspired by the biblical faith—not the secular Enlightenment. Thirdly, the Euthyphro argument is more epistemological than ontological and does not touch on the strangeness of human worth and rights given a context of valueless, unguided, non-conscious material processes. Further, critics of even a nuanced divine command ethic often fail to make proper distinctions (for example, between the good and the right), and they wrongly assume that God is not necessarily good in their claim that God "could just command the opposite morality" (that is, what is intrinsically evil). Such confusions must be addressed properly in order to more fully secure the connection between divine goodness and human rights. Finally, regarding the claim by some of Kant's interpreters that morality is theologically autonomous, this view utterly disregards the metaphysical context for how intrinsic human worth could emerge from valueless matter; such an approach keeps the discussion at the epistemological level but fails to show how an affirmation of human dignity is metaphysically justified. Moreover, the claim that God could not have commanded Abraham to sacrifice

his son Isaac—in the name of Kantian moral certainty—is itself grounded in a number of philosophical and theological confusions and overstatements.

Biblical theism offers us the best hope for metaphysically grounding intrinsic human worth and thus human rights. Non-theistic alternatives, however morally insightful they may be in constructing ethical systems, necessarily remain ontologically incomplete.[2]

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