



## Modified Divine Commands, Atheistic Moral Realism, and Thomistic Natural Law

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The moral argument for the existence of God is one of the central arguments now being discussed in the burgeoning field of natural theology. The debate is almost exclusively represented by divine command theorists<sup>1</sup> (those who maintain that God alone is locus of moral values) and atheistic moral realists (those who maintain that objective moral truths can exist in the absence of God).<sup>2</sup> The atheists typically appeal to human nature to determine what is objectively moral. But in so doing, they prematurely conclude that there is no need for God to account for moral principles. DC theorists respond by noting that in order to retain moral objectivity, we must act in response to moral values or divine commands which reside above and beyond human nature. Otherwise, they say, we would be left with ethical relativism, subjectivism and nihilism.

Following Thomas Aquinas's formulation of participation metaphysics, I contend that both of these positions have significant insights, and both of them falter in other respects. In agreement with the atheists, natural lawyers maintain that human nature can help individuals know and respond to basic moral norms. But this reference point presupposes the existence of a Divine Lawgiver. Otherwise, it would not make sense for atheists to refer to human *nature* as the basis for morality. In response to DC theorists (and this would include proponents of the newer, modified version of the theory), Thomists insist that human nature is a necessary condition, but definitely not a sufficient condition, for objective morality. Thomistic natural lawyers

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, 'divine command' will be replaced by 'DC'.

<sup>2</sup> For representative texts on the modified divine command theory, see Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); John Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); idem, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997); Paul Helm, *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1981). For texts representing atheistic moral realism, see Kai Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, rev. ed. (Amherst: Prometheus, 1990); Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism* (Amherst, Prometheus, 2008); Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005); Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Amherst, Prometheus, 2003); Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009).

hold that God is necessary as the metaphysical ground of basic moral norms.

Aquinas did not directly offer a ‘moral argument for God’s existence’ anywhere in his corpus. However, his fourth proof in the *Summa Theologiae* (the argument based upon degrees of perfection) might be recast in a way that resolves the tensions in this debate. As it now stands, the debate presents us with a false dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> The representative positions should not be limited to the modified DC theory or atheistic moral realism. The Thomist position might have the philosophical capital that is needed to convince atheistic moral realists over to theism. A more technical version of Aquinas’ Fourth Way will be presented to show how this might be accomplished.

## I. The Challenge of Atheistic Moral Realism

Almost all atheistic moral realists agree that morality is not strictly based on popular opinion or cultural convention.<sup>4</sup> Erik Wielenberg, for instance, contends that there are some acts that are intrinsically good even if they do not lead to anything of value: ‘If there are activities available to us during our lifetimes that are intrinsically valuable, then our lives can have internal meaning even if God does not exist. Even if there is no supernatural commander to assign purposes to our lives... I submit that there are such activities’.<sup>5</sup>

Individuals do not have to believe in the Christian God to know and act in response to objective moral principles. Says Wielenberg: ‘The foundation of morality is a set of axiomatic necessary moral truths. No being, natural or supernatural, is responsible for the truth of or has control over these ethical truths’.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, not only can we know that moral truths exist without belief in God (as revealed in Christ or through some other supernatural disclosure), but we should be able to know and abide by them even if nobody recognizes them as such.<sup>7</sup> Paul Kurtz writes: ‘I would argue that certain moral principles of morality are true regardless of their origin, and generally they are warranted independent of their religious foundations or lack of them’.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> One atheist who repeatedly juxtaposes God (an unlimited reality) and human reason (a limited reality) against one another is Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, pp. 11, 13, 17, 18, 20, 33, 43, 47–49, 53, 55, 61, 70, 72, 73, 77, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, p. 34; idem, ‘In Defense of Non-Natural, Non-Theistic Moral Realism’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 26.1 (January 2009), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 15. Cf. 30, 31.

These basic moral norms are properly basic beliefs. The innate awareness of the ‘first principles’ of morality constitutes the starting points of moral knowledge: ‘Claims about what is intrinsically good are the axioms of ethical theory; they are the starting points, the first principles. As such, they are unlikely to be the sort of things that can be *proved*. Nevertheless, it is perfectly consistent to say that some activities are intrinsically valuable—and that we *know* what some of these are’.<sup>9</sup> Almost all atheistic moral realists agree about this framework for ethics: basic moral truths exist objectively, and they can be known and acted upon by all normally functioning individuals.<sup>10</sup> Like most ethicists, the atheist philosopher Michael Martin is convinced that: ‘Ordinary language and common sense assume that morality is objective’.<sup>11</sup>

Atheistic moral realists depart from one another in the details. Some of them are moral platonists: moral truths reside in some ephemeral world apart from the world of physical stuff. Still others reject the platonic approach and maintain that human nature is sufficient for persons to discover and act upon moral principles. As Kurtz says: ‘Morality and moral behavior do not depend on divine commandments but on the development of an internal moral sense and . . . the capacity for moral reasoning’.<sup>12</sup> In either case, God is not included in the overall picture.

## II. The Response of Divine Command Theorists

For atheistic moral realists, basic moral principles are objective and knowable by all functioning individuals without having to invoke some deeper metaphysical foundation. But, according to proponents of the DC theory, many problems attend to this view. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig argue that a personal being is needed to account for objective morality:

What does it mean to say, for example, that the moral value *justice* just exists? It is hard to know what to make of this. It is clear what is meant when it is said that a person is just; but it is bewildering when it is said that in the absence of any people *justice* itself exists. Moral values seem to exist as properties of persons, not as mere abstractions—or at any rate, it is hard to know what it is for a moral value to exist as a

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>10</sup> Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, pp. 10, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, p. 12. Cf. Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 75, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Kurtz, ‘The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?’, in Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, (eds.), *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 25. Cf. 35.

mere abstraction. Atheistic moral realists seem to lack any adequate foundation in reality for moral values but just leave them floating in an unintelligible way.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the first argument is that atheists need to explain how impersonal moral ‘abstractions’ can exist in the absence of any personal beings. On a theistic account, moral truths reflect the nature of a personal God.

Second, even if moral precepts existed in some ethereal realm beyond the physical world, it is difficult to see how they could have any morally binding power on *persons*. Craig and Moreland continue:

Suppose that values like mercy, justice, love, forbearance, and the like just exist. How does that result in any moral obligations for me? Why would I have a moral duty, say, to be merciful? Who or what lays such an obligation on me? As the ethicist Richard Taylor points out, “A duty is something that is owed . . . . But something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as duty in isolation.” God makes sense of moral obligation because his commands constitute for us our moral duties. Taylor writes, “Our moral obligations can . . . be understood as those that are imposed by God . . . . But what if this higher than human lawgiver is no longer taken into account? Does the concept of a moral obligation still make sense? . . . the concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone.”<sup>14</sup>

If we feel guilty for violating moral rules, then there is probably a person to whom we are responsible to do the right thing. Furthermore, if no human person existed, then objective moral truth would still matter. Thus there must be *someone* who grounds moral truth. Given the traditional definition of what a person is, we might as well conclude that he or she has intellect and will.

The third argument exploits the inadequacies of consistently holding to atheism and objective morality. Unlike the first two arguments, the third point is a negative argument. Atheistic moral realists cannot adequately reconcile a naturalistic interpretation of evolution which eventually produces human beings who can act and respond to moral truths.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the fabric of reality must be structured in such a way as to allow organisms to evolve to the point of recognizing these moral truths and acting upon them. Without a structured universe, atheists could never begin to make intelligible statements, let alone

<sup>13</sup> J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), p. 492.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory E. Ganssle, ‘Necessary Moral Truths and the Need for Explanation’, *Philosophia Christi*, 2.1 (2000), pp. 105–112.

intelligible arguments against theism.<sup>16</sup> Structure, it may be added, is another form of teleology. And teleology implies the existence of a Designer. In this way, it is argued, atheistic moral realists must implicitly borrow from a theistic premise to formulate the arguments that they do.

In the same vein, Elizabeth Anscombe once argued in a well known article that modern ethical positions (such as atheistic moral realism) continue to borrow from Christian ethical systems. Such positions, she argued, once made complete sense: It was once recognized by Christian societies for so long that morality was directly rooted in *God's* nature.<sup>17</sup> *No more questions need to be asked about what grounds moral truth!*

To conclude, it is fantastically unlikely that a nonconscious, immaterial, impersonal, valueless, and materialistic process could produce objective moral principles and persons and situate both of them in such a way that the former can be structured and known by valueless persons who can know and act in response to them.<sup>18</sup> Wielenberg sees the implications: 'And if, as I believe, there is no God, then it is in some sense an accident that we have the moral properties that we do'.<sup>19</sup> In what seems like a desperate attempt to justify his response to this third criticism, Wielenberg said that valuable truths can sometimes spring from the greater context of utter valuelessness.<sup>20</sup> But it is difficult to see how value can 'sometimes' arise out of utter valuelessness. If something is valueless it has no potential of producing value. If the universe has the potential to produce something valuable, then the universe is not ultimately valueless.

The fourth and final argument is that there are many atheists who have admitted to the intrinsic connection between objective morality and God. Correlatively, they have admitted that atheism cannot account for objective morality. Bertrand Russell unblushingly claimed to stand on the 'firm foundation of unyielding despair'.<sup>21</sup> He wrote that 'The whole subject of ethics arises from the pressure of the community on the individual'.<sup>22</sup> J.L. Mackie, recognized that objective moral principles would indeed be 'queer' in a naturalistic universe.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Victor Reppert, *C.S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33, (1958).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Copan, 'Hume and the Moral Argument', in James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, (eds.), *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post Humean Assessment*, (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), p. 210.

<sup>19</sup> Wielenberg, 'In Defense of Non-Natural, Non-Theistic Moral Realism', p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin Publishing, 1954), p. 124.

If they exist, then he argued that they would furnish the Christian theist with a defensible argument for God's existence: 'If... there are... objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them. Thus we have... a defensible argument from morality to the existence of a god'.<sup>23</sup> Richard Dawkins adds: 'The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference'.<sup>24</sup> Many more citations could be provided. The point is that many atheists, both past and present, have seen the intrinsic connection between objective morality and the existence of God.

DC theorists contend that moral values, duties and accountability nicely resonate in a personal, theistic universe, not an atheistic one. Conversely, it is unlikely that objective moral principles can exist as traditionally defined in a naturalistic universe. Because objective morality seems undeniable (some actions are good; others are bad), one ought to maintain that God is responsible for these features of morality.

### III. Advantages of Thomistic Natural Law

The debate on the moral argument is usually represented by two extreme viewpoints:<sup>25</sup> DC theorists, or atheists who fall back on human nature alone. Paul Kurtz frames the debate as such: 'There are two opposing approaches to morality and ethics that have been in constant conflict in human culture. The first is best exemplified by Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed, who declared that moral principles are divinely inspired and who enunciated them without any effort at rational definition or justification. The second is typified by Socrates, who sought to use reason to define and justify his ethical ideals and continually subjected them to critical scrutiny'.<sup>26</sup> Atheist philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong adds: 'Two visions of morality compete in contemporary society. On one view, morality consists in obeying God's commands. On the other view, morality is independent of God and religion. Morality instead concerns harms to other people'.<sup>27</sup> Individuals do not have to unconditionally endorse either of these

<sup>23</sup> J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982), pp. 115, 116.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1995), pp. 132, 133.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, p. 88. 'The most common religious account of morality is a divine command theory'.

<sup>26</sup> Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, p. 54.

extreme positions.<sup>28</sup> The notion of participation metaphysics splits the horns of this dilemma, demonstrating that components of both viewpoints are necessary.<sup>29</sup>

DC theorists have had some of the resources to combat atheistic moral realism. Without a transcendent and personal anchor, one cannot have objective moral values, duties and accountability. To be more precise, the argument does not demonstrate the existence of God, but is formulated as a conditional case.<sup>30</sup> Take the following argument as an example:

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.<sup>31</sup>

Craig also seeks to increase the plausibility of premise 1 by arguing that objective morality is unlikely in a naturalistic universe: 'Although the argument as such does not reach the conclusion that God is the basis of objective moral values and duties, such a claim tends to be implicit in premise (1) and emerges in the defense of that premise against objections'.<sup>32</sup> Thus the connection between objective moral values and God's existence is not made explicit in what is otherwise a forceful argument. Thomists may agree with this conditional claim, but for them it can be recast in way that demonstrates the existence of God.<sup>33</sup> This might be important for atheists to recognize, for some atheists have dismissed Craig's argument as an emotional plea instead of providing the requisite arguments needed to tip the scales in favor of theism.

Other atheists have said that his argument begs the issue in favor of theism. Wielenberg, for instance, claims that atheists do not have to explain why there is objective morality because theists beg

<sup>28</sup> Other examples of this false dichotomy can be found in Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 80, argues that *participation* is the key term when understanding Thomistic natural law. Pope John Paul II has made similar contentions, speaking of 'participated theonomy'.

<sup>30</sup> William Lane Craig, 'The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?' in Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (eds.), *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), p. 172.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, p. 172.

<sup>33</sup> As James G. Hanink and Gary R. Mar, 'What Euthyphro Couldn't Have Said', *Faith and Philosophy*, 4.3 (1987), p. 254, suggest: 'the best expression of the divine command morality and the best expression of natural law ethics . . . form a structural unity.'



the question: ‘Craig claims that nihilism is false only if there is a single ultimate standard of value. This is mere question begging; my view posits no such single standard and yet is incompatible with nihilism’.<sup>34</sup> This complaint is at the heart of Wielenberg’s case: DC theists unnecessarily demand atheists to explain their ethical foundations without providing arguments:

Craig’s critique of Sinnott-Armstrong’s response has two main elements. First, he questions whether the moral principle to which Sinnott-Armstrong appeals holds in the context of atheism . . . This amounts to a demand that Sinnott-Armstrong provide a foundation for the moral principle that he relied on to explain the wrongness of rape—and that he do so *as an atheist*, that is, without appeal to God or related phenomena. This response reveals an assumption that underlies much of Craig’s criticism of non-theistic approaches to moral realism: Objective morality requires a foundation external to itself. But why accept such an assumption? Another possibility is a view like mine, according to which all (non-brute) ethical facts rest at least in part on a set of basic ethical facts. Such basic ethical facts are the axioms of morality and, as such, do not have an external foundation. Rather, they *are* the foundation of morality.<sup>35</sup>

The Thomist view does not fall prey to Wielenberg’s circumscribed challenges. In the Thomist view, participation metaphysics is seen as the necessary ingredient to tease out an explicit connection between objective moral principles and God. Thomists claim to demonstrate the existence of God *on the basis of objective morality*—a God with all the traditional divine attributes—and not make a conditional claim for an ambiguous conception of deity. As Anthony Lisska writes: ‘One need not know the eternal law prior to gaining knowledge of the natural law, because one need not know that God exists prior to acquiring knowledge of an essence or natural kind. If this were not the case, then in principle an atheist or an agnostic could not acquire knowledge of an essence. Aquinas would find this claim incomprehensible’.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike many atheistic caricatures of the theistic account, contemporary DC theorists have not argued that individuals must believe in God or ascribe to a particular religion to account for objective morality.<sup>37</sup> Natural lawyers gladly welcome this clarification. From

<sup>34</sup> Wielenberg, ‘In Defense of Non-Natural, Non-Theistic Moral Realism’, p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, 37. Cf. Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, pp. 42, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Lisska, *Aquinas’s Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996), p. 126.

<sup>37</sup> Atheists repeatedly make the mistake of assuming that the theistic position is that *belief* in God is necessary for morality. See, e.g., Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, pp. 11–13, 15, 18, 34, 40–46, 61–67, etc.; Nielson, *Ethics*, pp. 10, 18, 19, 52–60, 62, 71, 72, 82, 83, etc.; Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, xi, xiii, 13, 14, 134, 135 etc.; Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, pp. 11, 21, 34, 44, 45, etc.



a historical standpoint, the atheist criticism (namely, DC theorists hold that ‘morality depends on religion’) holds true of the DC theory proposed by Brunner, Barth, and other theologians who were pessimistic about human nature and what can be known about God apart from divine revelation. But newer versions have moved one step closer to Thomas’ view by distinguishing between nature and grace. The traditional account of the theory is commonly associated with fideism. By contrast, on modified versions basic moral principles are known by all normally functioning individuals (e.g., ‘one must do what is good and avoid evil’). Divine revelation brings these basic moral principles to fulfillment by helping individuals to know what is good and right more clearly. In no way does revelation suppress what persons already know about morality, but brings it to completion.<sup>38</sup>

Another strength of the newer DC theory is that it avoids strong versions of divine voluntarism.<sup>39</sup> Far from being arbitrary, advocates of the newer DC theory affirm that moral values flow from God’s essentially unchanging nature. God is, by definition, loving, just, and good. Any special commands given by God throughout salvation history are considered voluntaristic in the weak sense of the term.<sup>40</sup> Thomists would not object to using the DC theorists’ use of the weaker version of voluntarism. Like the clarification made on what can be known about God apart from faith, the shift made by DC theorists to positing the God of traditional theism (instead of holding to a god who can somehow make logical contradictions true) moves yet another step closer to traditional Thomistic versions of natural law. As Craig A. Boyd has rightly observed: ‘But this theory of the good—as a value—smacks of natural law assumptions concerning what we can know and the limits on what God can command’.<sup>41</sup>

DC theorists have successfully argued that individuals cannot consistently hold to objective moral values in the absence of God’s existence. As William Lane Craig puts it: ‘If there is no God, then what’s so special about human beings? They’re just accidental by-products of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust called the planet Earth, lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe, and which are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. On the atheistic view, some action, say rape, may not be socially advantageous and so in the course of human development has become taboo’.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1995), pp. 127, 182.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion, see David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), pp. 34, 35.

<sup>40</sup> David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God*, 104, make this important distinction.

<sup>41</sup> Craig A. Boyd, *A Shared Morality: A Narrative Defense of Natural Law Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, p. 175.

Natural law theorists stand alongside of Craig's vivid contentions: a world without God is a world without objective morality, meaning and purpose.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude, contemporary DC theorists have successfully exposed the problems of atheistic moral platonism, and they have challenged the atheists' dubious contention which says that objective morality can be consistently defended in a world without God.<sup>44</sup> However, one of the principal weaknesses of the modified DC theory is that it does not consider the normative value of human nature in response to atheistic accounts of moral ontology which do not draw inspiration from Plato. Natural lawyers grant to DC theorists that atheistic moral realists want to 'eat their cake and have it too', but a more comprehensive account that includes human nature—and not just positing a speculative being from the start (i.e., the 'personal, transcendent anchor') with conditional argument—might back atheists even further into a corner when human nature is shown to have normative value. In so doing, Thomists can use human nature and formulate an argument for God's existence on that mutually shared basis.

#### IV. Thomistic Natural Law and the 'Fourth Way'

Atheistic moral realists have rightly acknowledged that the human virtues can be attained without believing in the Christian God. Aquinas would not disagree with this contention. All persons have been made in the image of God and are able to attain the human virtues (all persons, according the Angelic Doctor, are endowed with human rights, dignity, conscience, moral responsibility, and the capacity to recognize moral right and wrong). As Ralph McInerney put it: 'The natural law, as St. Paul remarks, is inscribed in our hearts. But knowing natural law does not entail knowing St. Paul'.<sup>45</sup> As a result of this subtle distinction, many moral philosophers have mistakenly argued that there are versions of natural law theory which do not include God.<sup>46</sup> But this contention is clearly mistaken. To repeat:

<sup>43</sup> Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, pp. 189, 190, agrees with this dismal assessment: there is no objective meaning to life on an atheistic premise. Since human life has no objective meaning in an atheistic view of the world, there is only room for subjective meaning.

<sup>44</sup> Even atheists dispute the notion of atheistic moral platonism. See Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, pp. 54, 55. 'Justice, for example, is not a non-natural entity floating in ideal space separate and distinct from the world of men and women; it is a notion applied to human institutions that we have chosen to designate by language.'

<sup>45</sup> Ralph McInerney, 'Thomistic Natural Law and Aristotelian Philosophy', in John Goyette, Mark S. Latcovic, and Richard S. Myers, (eds.), *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2004), p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> Sometimes Thomists have accused other natural law theorists of not including God either. This group is usually dubbed the 'new natural lawyers' (Germain Grisez, John Finnis, Robert George, etc.). These theorists have clearly affirmed that one does not have

one does not have to believe in God (say, the Christian God) to have objective morality, and this is different from saying that God is the ontological ground of objective morality.

Thomists will also admit that atheists can formulate a system of ethics without immediate reference to the Church's moral teachings. Thus, we should not be surprised to see atheists at least state that human life is worthwhile insofar as people perform intrinsically good acts. Not only is it possible to outline such an ethical framework, but our atheist dialogue partners have been able to do it in many cases.

For both atheists and theists, basic moral truths are objective (moral absolutism) and knowable (moral realism). Perhaps the best example of a basic moral truth is what Thomists call the first principle of morality: 'do good and avoid evil'.<sup>47</sup> First principles of morality are good actions to perform in and of themselves. These actions are not good to perform as a mere means to an end. Second, the first principles prescribe behavior; they do not merely describe behavior. Only free agents are accountable to abide by them. Third, first principles are not temporally conditioned truths, but are applicable in all times and places. They also universal, having binding power on every person. These norms are also non-conventional; they are not simply based on mere human apprehension, but obtain whether anybody believes in them or not. Lastly, objective moral norms are discovered—not invented. Atheists would most likely have no problem with these characteristics of moral norms. The 'moral realism' in their system is not in dispute.

Now, the following argument can be formulated by drawing from Thomas's writings on participation (this argument is a more technical version of the fourth way<sup>48</sup>). Major representatives of Thomistic philosophy in the twentieth century have emphasized that participation is the key element to understanding Thomas' metaphysics.<sup>49</sup> First, Thomas notes that all perfections (i.e., proper actions of

to believe in Christ to know and live by the moral precepts of the law. But these basic precepts do not make sense unless individuals have genuine free will, which implies the existence of God. Traditional Thomists do not have to endorse this particular perspective, but it is a mistake to say that God is dispensable to objective morality in the new natural law theory. For an account, see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1979), pp. 371–410; Joseph M. Boyle Jr., Germain Grisez, and Olaf Tollefsen, *Free Will: A Self-Referential Argument* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1976).

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 94.2.

<sup>48</sup> Some of the best commentary on the Fourth Way is found in Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994), pp. 70–74; John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2000), pp. 469–479.

<sup>49</sup> John Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2009), pp. 6–28.

creatures) are not predicated substantially, but only by participation. For example, humans do not have being or goodness by nature, but only by participation.<sup>50</sup> If humans had being by nature, then we would always have to exist.

Secondly, whenever something has a perfection by participation, then ultimately that perfection must come from something that has that perfection by essence. The term 'participation' is a technical term taken from the Neo-Platonics, and it refers to whenever something shares in a perfection that something else has by nature. For example, water is not hot by nature, and hence heating something is not its proper action. Fire is hot by nature, and heating something is its proper action. If water is heated by a fire, then it is able to perform the proper action of the fire: heating something. Water is hot by participation and hence shares in the perfection of the fire. Because water is not hot by nature, if it has heat, then this heat can necessarily be traced back to something that is hot by nature: some type of fire.

Thirdly, the life of virtue (or moral goodness or any other perfection from the moral life) cannot be predicated to humans substantially (lest all humans were moral) but only by participation. The highly virtuous individual participates in the eternal law more than, say, less virtuous persons. Thus there are degrees of participation.<sup>51</sup> Hence, there must be something that is virtuous by nature which is the cause of all other virtue. That which is virtuous by nature is God (using the term virtuous analogically). In Thomas' own words: 'there must be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness and every other perfection'. Thomas adds: 'and this we call God'. This argument does not require any sort of divine command theory and can be applied to any moral law. A law is a perfection because it rationally orders something to its proper end (here we are close to the Fifth Way).

Since law is a dictate of reason, it is not of the substance of humans but a participated perfection. Since it is in humans by participation, it must ultimately come from something that is law by nature: the eternal law (i.e., God). This argument applies whether or not the law is determined by natural law (which participates in the eternal law) or if it is divinely revealed. John Rziha says:

The ability of humans to rationally direct themselves to an end, at first glance, can appear to make humans autonomous in the sense that they are independent from God. However, rationality does not make

<sup>50</sup> For more on participation metaphysics and how it relates to natural law, see David Oderberg, 'The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Law', in Holger Zaborowski, (ed.), *Natural Law in Contemporary Society* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2010), pp. 44–75; Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View on Moral Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University, 2000), pp. 234–256.

<sup>51</sup> Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions*, p. 74, 114, 115.

humans independent from God, but rather allows humans to rationally participate in divine direction. Human reason, like all created realities, is what it is because of its relation to its divine cause. Because all effects participate in their cause, human reason has a divine foundation: it exists by participation in God's own knowledge and grows by greater participation in this knowledge. It is only because humans participate in God's knowledge that they are able to direct themselves as human agents.<sup>52</sup>

Some of the advantages of the Thomist argument can now be further adduced. Unlike the conditional claim mentioned by Craig (that is to say, 'if God exists, then we have a sound basis for objective morality'), Thomists begins with the first principle of morality and demonstrate the existence of God on that basis. A Being whose essence is to exist is shown to be responsible for the existence of morally good persons. As Lisska states: 'Aquinas did not first ask his readers to accept the existence of God before understanding the concept of natural law. Rather, he asked them to consider the possibility of a metaphysics of natural kinds'.<sup>53</sup>

Once it has been shown that a self-subsistent Being exists, it is commonplace for Thomists to show that this Being is the same God as the God of traditional theism.<sup>54</sup> DC theorists are unable to arrive at the same conclusion on the basis of their moral argument.<sup>55</sup> While each of the Five Ways, as arguments *simpliciter*, do not entail all the traditional attributes of God, within their broader philosophical context they lead to nothing else. That metaphysical context is provided in a more immediate sense in one of Aquinas' earlier and more influential tracts, the *De Ente et Essentia*. With regard for each of the Five Ways, Aquinas considered each of them to be distinct and demonstrative proofs for the existence of God: 'There are five ways in which one can prove that there is a God'.<sup>56</sup> Though we cannot discuss how Aquinas is able to arrive at all the divine attributes from each of the Five Ways, we can briefly explain the inner rationale of his arguments.

Since God is a being whose essence is to exist, he has no potentiality, but is pure act. The 'first cause' of moral goodness must

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 184, 185. Cf. 258, 259, 264.

<sup>53</sup> Lisska, Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law, p. 126

<sup>54</sup> The classic example is still found in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. The best secondary source still remains Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and Nature*, 2 vols. (New York: B. Herder, 1934).

<sup>55</sup> See Craig's evasion of the issue in 'The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?', p. 37. I submit that if we take moral ontology and the connection between objective morality and God seriously, then God's nature should be a significant concern for pinpointing the ground of morality. Craig does not take that connection seriously enough; nor can he take the nature of God seriously in his moral argument.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 2.3.

be necessary, one, good, eternal, infinite, simple, immutable, and omnipotent. This, says Aquinas, is what *all* people mean when they speak of God. As we have already mentioned, a purely actual being has no potential. Therefore, it cannot change; it is immutable. Moreover, the necessary uncaused cause must be nonspatial (infinite) and atemporal (eternal). Since time and space involve a change of position and time, an actual being cannot exist in space or time. It lies beyond space and time and therefore transcends them. A necessary being must also be simple. If the necessary, unchanging, timeless, and spaceless being were composed of parts, then it would eventually be capable of decomposition. But an actual existent does not have any potential whatsoever. We conclude: a pure, actual being must be utterly simple.

A being that is pure actuality must also be infinite in power. Having the power to keep things in a state of potential change, it can have no limitation in any respect whatsoever. It must be infinite in power. A necessary existent is uncaused; its essence is to exist. All other beings (i.e., potential beings) have existence. They are participating in the existence of the actual being. Without the actual being, all potential beings could not exist and be what they are. Lastly, an actual existent must be good. Nonexistent beings are neither good or evil, for they are not. But if something exists, then it is good. For, goodness and existence are convertible in beings that exist.

But there is more: there can only be *one* purely actual being (a being that also simple, good, eternal, infinite, immutable, and omnipotent). There cannot be two or more actual beings. For if there were more than one, then there would have to be something that distinguishes each of them from the others. But there is no way for one being to differ from another unless there is some potential for differentiation inherent in them. In order to distinguish between two beings, there must be something that is different about them. Otherwise, one could never differentiate between them in order to identify any of them. Because an actual being has no potential for differentiation, there can only be one of them. And on it goes.

Yet another advantage of Thomistic natural law is that it avoids the arbitrariness problem. Both Robert Adams and William Lane Craig have argued that God is necessarily loving and just and that God would not command evil atrocities such as the torture of innocent children. While such arbitrary commands are logically possible, they say, these commands are never actualized. I submit that this argument begs the question, because in order to have an internally consistent position these theorists have to abandon any independently meaningful standard of goodness apart from the assumption of a certain sort of God. When Craig claims 'if theism is true, then we have sound foundation for morality,' he should admit that 'theism' is indeed a



loaded term, at least by those who do not share his Christian theistic perspective.

Norman Kretzmann exposed this problem in one of his writings in defense of natural law. He once argued against ‘theological subjectivism’, a form of the DC theory, by exposing the problem when DC theorists assert that God is the good in the absence of relying on some natural law doctrine:

But do not suppose that the adherent of theological subjectivism can extricate himself from this terminal embarrassment with a pious rejoinder that God is good and can be relied on not to approve of moral evil. The only standard of moral goodness supplied by theological subjectivism is God’s approval; and so say within the context of theological subjectivism that God is good comes to nothing more than that God approves of himself—which is easy to grant but impossible to derive any reassurance from.<sup>57</sup>

Kretzmann’s point is hugely important. For atheists are quick to ask DC theists: how do we know that God is the Good on a DC account? Thus they urge their dialogue partners to think more deeply about what the independent reason is for holding that God is equivalent to the Good.<sup>58</sup> To be sure, God and the Good are formally distinct notions. This independent reason, moreover, must come from a place that atheists already recognize. Why, then, include God in the picture? The atheist presses the DC theorist even further: atheism is a simpler worldview than theism.<sup>59</sup> Atheist philosopher Kai Nielson comments:

It isn’t that man judges God—that is indeed blasphemy—but what is true is that no reality, no force or being or world ground, no matter how powerful or eternal, would be called “God” unless that reality were taken to be good by the agent making that judgment. That is to say, before we can appropriately use the word “God”—given the meaning it has in Jewish, Christian, and Moslem discourse—to characterize that reality—e.g., that being, force, or world ground—we must already have made a judgment about its goodness. This shows that our concept of goodness and our criteria for goodness are prior to and not dependant on our belief in the existence of some “world ground” or “transcendent being.” Since this is so, no one can get one’s exemplar, one’s model for what one ought to be and do, from simply knowing that a totally

<sup>57</sup> Norman Kretzmann, ‘Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality’, in Donald Stump et al., *Harmartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition* (New York: Edwin Mellon, 1983), p. 35.

<sup>58</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 101, 106, 137, 145; Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, pp. 18, 58, 52, 56–61, 63, 65, 68, 74, 75, 77, 79, 80, 91, 110, 188.

<sup>59</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ‘Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality’, in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics*, ed. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 107.



unlimited being exists who created all other beings and was not created himself.<sup>60</sup>

DC theorists should not dodge the issue at this point and simply pass the ball back to the atheist by *asking them* to explain how atheism is compatible with objective morality. Rather, they should take the question seriously and admit that they do not have the philosophical resources needed to answer it. This question cannot be dismissed as a matter of moral epistemology, but is closely linked to the word ‘theism’ (an ontological reality) in the first premise. Sinnott-Armstrong seems to catch onto this problem for the DC theorist: ‘To have a sound foundation for morality, one must believe the right version of traditional theism. Craig’s contention is, then, incorrect if it means, “If *any* theism is true, we have a sound foundation for morality.” To be defensible, Craig’s contention must mean, “If *our* theism is true, we have a sound foundation for morality”’.<sup>61</sup>

Not all theists should be dismayed at this point. Not only are atheists incapable of accounting for objective morality, but Thomists can give a sufficient answer to Nielson’s challenges. The goodness of which the natural lawyer speaks depends on an objective basis of goodness that persons can understand apart from recognizing that a theistic God is ultimately responsible for limited goods. In the natural law view, both God and human nature are needed for morality, not just one of them. As one considers the nature of limited goods, one is led to inevitably conclude that a good God exists. The existence of God emerges as a conclusion to an argument by recognizing that limited moral goods exist. While God’s goodness is different from human goodness, Thomists have long recognized the continuity and similarity between these two.

We must understand the nature of the God who is thought to issue divine commands. But the only way that we can know whether this God is a God who is worthy of worship is if we have a preliminary understanding of limited goods. As Alisdair McIntyre once wrote: ‘Any account of divine commands as foundational to morality, as antecedent to and partially or wholly definitive of justice, such as we are offered in one version by Occam [a traditional account of the DC theory], in another by Adams [modified version of the DC theory], has to fail’.<sup>62</sup> DC theorists do not have the luxury of arguing from the world of experience to a certain sort of God. Our conception of human goodness will determine how we understand the manner in which God is said to be good.

<sup>60</sup> Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, ‘Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality’, p. 102. Cf. 104.

<sup>62</sup> Alasdair McIntyre, ‘Which God Ought We to Obey and Why’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 3.4 (October 1986), p. 364.

Because God is the creator and ruler of human nature, he determines what behaviors will contribute to human flourishing in light of their final, ultimate end. If the basic precepts of the law were to change, then God would have to change human nature. The moral instructions in divine revelation are not arbitrarily given by God, imposed upon persons. Law is not so much about external statutes as much as it is about an interior dimension which exhibits God's ordering of the creation and human nature.<sup>63</sup> The law is not at odds with human nature as it is in Kant and other rule based systems. Divine revelation is disclosed because it helps persons to become who they were meant to be. In other words, God issues revelatory commands on the basis of the way in which the world and human beings are already constituted and made by him.

## V. A Thomistic Response to Atheistic Objectors

Let us now turn to the different criticisms in the atheist literature that seek to challenge theistic ethical positions. Most of these criticisms do not apply to Thomistic natural law and, by extension, Aquinas' fourth proof for God.

(1) *Atheists just as moral as theists.*<sup>64</sup> This contention does not count as a defeater and misses the point of Aquinas' natural law argument. The central issue in this debate has to do with explaining who or what can account for moral ontology, not how moral truth is lived out. Thomists enter the debate and argue that atheists are unable to account for moral ontology in a naturalistic universe, and that objective morality can be used in a starting premise in a demonstrative argument for God's existence. These are the two tenets that need to be disputed by atheists or divine voluntarists when analyzing the nature of objective moral principles.

Perhaps the reason why atheists have thought that the theists' position is that atheists are immoral has to do with the way that traditional proponents of the DC theory have typically formulated their position. Fideism (and religious exclusivism) stood alongside of the older theory. These theorists, moreover, argued that one could not be moral unless they had faith in the Christian God, for the unregenerate were totally depraved outside the context of faith.

Theists acknowledge that the human virtues can be attained without faith. Regardless of whether somebody believes in God or not, all

<sup>63</sup> Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 50, 247.

<sup>64</sup> Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, 15, 101, 102; Kurtz, 'The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?', p. 26. Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 22, 23; Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, p. 28.

persons are able to attain the acquired virtues. According to Aquinas: 'All desire the final end, because all desire their perfection, which is what the final end signifies', even when all 'do not agree about the content of that final end'.<sup>65</sup> Mentioned earlier, Thomists admit that atheists can formulate a system of ethics that closely resembles the conclusions demanded by the natural law, whether they acknowledge the Creator or not.

(2) *Different religions propose contradictory accounts of morality.*<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately for the atheist, this objection has nothing to do with taking moral ontology seriously. As a Catholic natural lawyer, I submit that not all ethical views proposed by the different religionists of the world are correct. And I maintain that God exists as a conclusion to a Thomistic argument. To put this in other words, contradictory views within the different religious traditions would not mean that God does not exist or that God is not necessary to ground the first principles of morality. Again, the debate should be focused on moral ontology and not get sidetracked on religious diversity, applied ethics, moral epistemology, or even moral semantics.

Another way to put this argument is to ask: *How do individuals recognize a divine command?*<sup>67</sup> Similar to the other challenges presented thus far, this argument might hold water against theological voluntarism, but it does not succeed against Aquinas' theory of the natural law. Voluntarists hold that only those who entrust themselves in faith to the Christian God (or read and understand what the Bible says about morality) can know what God commands. But on the natural law view, all persons can know and respond to the basic precepts of the law. Further, this question is a question of moral epistemology, not moral ontology. How we recognize what constitutes a divine command (or special instructions given to humanity from God) is a different issue than the concern of moral ontology.

(3) *Old Testament moral injunctions are contradictory.*<sup>68</sup> Even if this argument is true, it would have nothing to do with explaining what accounts for objective morality. At most it would refute a certain understanding of biblical inerrancy or lopsided understandings of

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 1.17.

<sup>66</sup> Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, pp. 13, 14, 62, 63; Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, p. 100; Kurtz, 'The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?', pp. 27, 34, 39; Paul Kurtz, 'Ethics Without God: Theism versus Secular Humanism,' in Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, (eds.), *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 192. Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, pp. 128, 138.

<sup>67</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 122, 123, 136, 137; idem, 'Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality', in Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, (eds.), *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 108. Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, p. 128; Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 57.

Scripture. But issues of Christian theology are not always related to the preambles of faith, including the moral argument. Closely linked with this objection is that *theistic ethics lead to violence*.<sup>69</sup> Many atheists maintain that the Old Testament can steer believers down the path of violence.<sup>70</sup>

Even if this argument has some validity to it, it would have nothing to do with successfully explaining what accounts for the peculiar properties of moral principles (e.g., they are objective, normative, categorical, authoritative, knowable, and consistent with one another). At most it would count as an undercutting defeater of the holiness of the Church, a restricted understanding of biblical inerrancy, or one-sided interpretations of the Bible. So, admittedly misinterpretations of the Bible can facilitate violent acts committed by otherwise well-meaning believers. This violence can occur when the literalist method is used at the expense of others in looking at certain passages in the Bible that seem to suggest that God wants his people to fight and/or kill others.<sup>71</sup> Through it all, however, none of these theological issues has anything to do with the philosophical debate on the moral argument.<sup>72</sup>

(4) *The DC theory is unable to develop its views on morality*.<sup>73</sup> However, the natural law does not claim to be a comprehensive theory of morality. Instead it must be complemented by other normative systems, such as virtue ethics.<sup>74</sup> This enables the natural law ethicist to assess each moral situation as a unique case that needs careful attention. According to the Christian philosophers Jerry Walls and David Baggett:

Moral obligations by no means constitute the whole structure of morality. Indeed, we will argue that they might more properly be thought of as a small closet right inside the front door of a sprawling castle, leaving the further reaches and loftiest peaks of morality in entirely different areas. Some philosophers, in fact, think that a focus on obligations can largely be eliminated altogether. By shifting the focus away from what we ought to do and instead ask questions about what sort of people we should be, they put the focus on virtues more often than duties. Aristotle, for example, placed little focus on moral obligations, but a tremendous focus on the virtues . . . there's an important sense in which they are in fact more important than duties. However, . . . moral obligations, at least at this stage of our moral development, constitute a vitally important and, indeed, essential aspect

<sup>69</sup> Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 42, 103, 121, 125, 126, 140–143; idem, 'Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality', pp. 110, 111.

<sup>71</sup> Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 36–38.

<sup>72</sup> Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, pp. 136–142.

<sup>73</sup> Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, pp. 33, 45, 53.

<sup>74</sup> Porter, *Nature as Reason*, pp. 17, 142.

of ethics, and that no ethical theory at this stage of the game could hope to be complete without an adequate account of them.<sup>75</sup>

Formally speaking, the first precepts of the moral law are unconditional, universal and unchanging: 'good ought to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided'. However, other features of living the moral life will adjust according to how the good is perceived by individuals. While the natural law prescribes certain actions to be done, virtue ethics is more agent-centered, concentrating on the kind of person one is becoming. These two ethical systems are not in opposition to one another, but are mutually reinforcing and necessary for morality.<sup>76</sup> For Aquinas, it is reasonable (natural law) to be virtuous (virtue ethics). The virtues ought to be pursued and developed, and vices ought to be avoided.

Thus the virtuous person will be disposed to abide by the precepts of the moral law; and continuous observance of its precepts will help one to become virtuous. A proponent of virtue ethics still presupposes the validity of moral norms (or, the striving toward the good).<sup>77</sup> For if the virtue ethicist does not presuppose the objectivity of moral norms, then the virtues could *not* be seen as anything other than a mere skill or habit. But this is not how virtue ethicists typically think about the virtues. In this reductive view one could develop the 'skill' of torturing innocent persons and call it virtuous. Intuitively speaking, however, we know that such acts are not virtuous, but are objectively evil and not in need of additional justification to explain why it is evil. Again, even if natural lawyers are unable to develop their views on morality, this would not mean that individuals should not explain the timeless moral truths that do exist.

(5) *The moral absolutism of theological ethics does not take circumstances into consideration for assessing moral dilemmas.*<sup>78</sup> What these objectors have in mind is the Christian endorsement of unconditional imperatives which disallow for exceptional moral cases. This, of course, has led to different forms of intolerance. Influenced

<sup>75</sup> Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, p. 107, 180ff.

<sup>76</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University, 2003), pp. 29, 36, 39; See also Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 453; Porter, *Nature as Reason*, pp. 162, 163, 272, 273; idem, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Nashville: John Knox, 1990), p. 105.

<sup>77</sup> Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), pp. 9, 10. As she keenly observes, 'all ancient theories understand a virtue to be, at least, a disposition to do the morally right thing; but the notion of the morally right thing to do is not defined or justified in terms of (still less reduced to) the disposition to do what will produce or sustain the virtue. We need to grasp in its own right what is the morally right thing to do. Indeed, if we do not do this, we will not have understood what makes this disposition a *virtue*, rather than some disposition which does not involve morality'.

<sup>78</sup> Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, pp. 160, 193, 206. Kurtz, 'The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?', pp. 28, 29; idem, 'Ethics Without God: Theism versus Secular Humanism', p. 196.

by William of Ockham and later flowering in the writings of Immanuel Kant (and secularist accounts of morality), Christian ethicists began to rely almost exclusively on moral obligations at the expense of other sources of morality.<sup>79</sup> As the Dominican theologian Servais Pinckaers reports: ‘Originating in the manuals intended for the education of the clergy, this idea of morality spread to the people during recent centuries through homilies and catechisms. It created an image of the priest as one who taught what we should and should not do, with the accent on sins to be avoided’.<sup>80</sup>

Pinckaers argues that within this intellectual climate ‘justice hardened and assumed two contrary aspects: defense of subjective rights on the one hand and, on the other, societal pressure in the name of the law, with the force of obligation and threat of constraint. These were quickly resented as forms of oppression’.<sup>81</sup> Unlike modernist proponents of the natural law (whether secular or Christian), the scholastic theologians and jurists did not hold that all precepts could be known by all rational persons.<sup>82</sup> While the stress on moral obligations can be pinpointed in modern Christian tradition, it does not authentically represent the thought of Thomas Aquinas (although many Thomists absorbed the nominalist mentality after Kant<sup>83</sup>). Both experience and reason are included in natural law understandings.<sup>84</sup> Pinckaers poignantly explains:

When set forth in terms of precepts, natural law is presented to us externally and communicates to our reason and conscience moral demands that restrict our freedom with the force of obligation. But make no mistake: this law is not the work of a will external and foreign to us. Precisely because it is the expression of our natural inclinations, especially the spiritual ones, this law penetrates to the heart of our freedom and personality to show us the demands of truth and goodness. These guide us in the development of freedom through actions of excellence. Thus natural law is an inner law. It is the direct work of the One who has created us to image him in our spiritual nature and our free, rational will. The exigencies of natural law have their source both in God and in our human nature.<sup>85</sup>

Exceptions to the rule should not be used as an excuse to abrogate the moral absolutes which are foundational to natural law ethics. As Jean Porter of the University of Notre Dame observes: ‘Hence, the natural law more broadly understood does include specific moral norms as

<sup>79</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, pp. 329, 343, 349, 350.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>82</sup> Porter, *Nature as Reason*, pp. 24, 27, 28.

<sup>83</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 352.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

well as a fundamental capacity for moral judgment, although there is considerable room for both legitimate variation and sinful distortion at the level of particular norms'.<sup>86</sup> Be that as it may, even if natural law thinkers did not take circumstances into consideration, this would not have anything to do with explaining and accounting for those timeless facts which obtain.

(6) Likewise, the idea that *theological ethics destroys moral motivation because it is authoritarian*<sup>87</sup> is misplaced because Thomists recognize that, although first principles are insufficient for developing a defensible moral theory (as in the case with the manuals of Catholic moral theology), they must be complemented by secondary precepts of the natural law, the virtues, and a developed interior life. Formally stated, the first principle of morality cannot prescribe any particular, concrete actions.<sup>88</sup> Experience is needed to complement one's search for the good.

Thomas himself distinguishes the first principles of morality and the different ways they are applied to new circumstances and situations.<sup>89</sup> The virtues are needed to make a correct assessment in what are sometimes difficult scenarios to assess. This is Aquinas: 'by way of subtraction, so that what previously was according to the natural law, ceases to be so . . . the natural law is altogether unchangeable in its first principles. But in its secondary principles, which . . . are certain detailed proximate conclusions drawn from the first principles, the natural law is not changed so that what it prescribes be not right in most cases. But it may be changed in some particular cases of rare occurrence, through some special causes hindering the observance of such precepts'.<sup>90</sup> Aquinas has a particular example in mind: the inapplicability of returning a borrowed item when it is known by the recipient that it will be used to harm or kill another.

Natural law theorists have always stressed the need for careful reasoning, assessing each situation as it arises. The law cannot be upset or destroyed, but it can change by new extensions, applications, and human encounters with new situations and circumstances. Thus the unchanging law of nature and its implementation should be carefully distinguished.<sup>91</sup> And, more to the point, even if the first principle of morality is 'authoritarian,' that would not mean that it should

<sup>86</sup> Porter, *Nature as Reason*, p. 14. Cf. 289.

<sup>87</sup> Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 71; Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, pp. 53, 73, 90, 188; Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 110, 119.

<sup>88</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 101.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 94.4.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 94.6.

<sup>91</sup> For a comprehensive account of natural law ethics, see Porter, *Nature as Reason*. See also Pamela Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law: An Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1999).



preclude an explanation, stringent as those demands might seem to atheists.

(7) The atheists continue: *divine rewards and punishments are not good motives for developing morality*.<sup>92</sup> Theists and atheists should both acknowledge that this argument is not a piece of natural theology, but is cast as a philosophical argument which assumes the truth of Christianity. Within that context, the argument runs, the notion of heavenly reward provides an inner-rationale to help motivate individuals live an exceptionally moral life in this lifetime.

Because human life does not end at the grave in a Christian universe, all persons are held accountable for their actions. In the end the scales of justice will finally be balanced, and righteousness will prevail over evil. Every evil will be transformed for the greater good. In turn every decision that is made by Christians in this lifetime has eternal significance because there is something to hope for in the end.<sup>93</sup> Christian believers can, therefore, make decisions that run against contrarian pressures and embrace acts of extreme self-sacrifice for the greater good. As Catholic philosopher Linda Zagzebski says: ‘the moral life involves more than time and effort. At least some of the time it involves the sacrifice of self-interest. It is not rational, however, to give up a known good unless it is probable that the sacrifice really is for a greater good’.<sup>94</sup>

Again, although this argument might be illuminating within the context of faith, it is irrelevant to whether or not the moral argument constitutes a sound piece of reasoning for the existence of God.

(8) *If an action harms another, the atheists say, then it is wrong and not in need of further justification*.<sup>95</sup> Now, this argument is certainly correct in one sense (i.e., if an action unjustifiably harms another, then it is wrong), but it misses the general thrust of the natural law argument presented here. For one thing, the harm based account is unable to tell us what actions are right, only the ones that are wrong.<sup>96</sup> Surely this makes the harm based account of atheistic moral realism shortsighted at best. Second, this view does not truly square with accounting for moral ontology. Undoubtedly the first principles of morality do not need *justification* on a harm based account, but it doesn’t follow that they do not stand in need of an *explanation*. Indeed, given the metaphysics of Aquinas, it follows logically and

<sup>92</sup> Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, pp. 54, 126; Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 46, 47.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1975), *Gaudium et Spes*, N. 20, 21, 34, 39, 43.

<sup>94</sup> Linda Zagzebski, ‘Does Ethics Need God?’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 4.3, (July 1987), p. 295.

<sup>95</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 57, 68, 74, 117, 128.

<sup>96</sup> William Lane Craig, ‘This Most Gruesome of Guests’, in Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, (eds.), *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), pp. 180, 181.

inescapably that moral principles are explained deductively by the existence of a certain type of God.

Sinnott-Armstrong himself admits that weaker versions of the DC theory which include moral principles that are not expressed in the form of divine commands are compatible with harm based accounts of ethics.<sup>97</sup> Now, these basic precepts still need a theistic God to account for them. What Sinnott-Armstrong glances over in his writings on religion and morality is natural law ethics and how the existence of a theistic God follows as an explanatory ultimate in that tradition.

(9) *Other atheists argue that evolution is all that is needed to account for morality.*<sup>98</sup> Evolution explains how we come to know moral precepts, not that we necessarily invent those precepts. The reasoning of these atheists is a classic example of committing the genetic fallacy; at most it proves that our subjective apprehension of moral precepts has evolved, not that moral precepts are illusory. Moreover, this paper is not concerned about combatting atheists who are subjectivists or relativists, but is directed toward those atheists who recognize the cognitive content of moral truth. Of course, the main thesis of this paper has sought to clarify any ambiguity in what it means to ‘discover objective moral precepts.’ For atheistic moral realists, unlike contemporary DC theorists, have recognized the correlation between human nature and morality. Following a moral precept is closely linked to cooperating with human nature, not discovering a transcendent standard which exclusively resides above and beyond human nature, imposing itself upon us.<sup>99</sup> When somebody freely chooses an action that corresponds with their nature, they end up doing something purposive—something with future direction (because nature is driven toward a final goal).

Atheists themselves recognize that evolution is insufficient for understanding morality. Sinnott-Armstrong says: ‘Morality is like physics and mathematics in this respect (though not in many other respects, of course). What evolves are only moral *beliefs* and *attitudes*, not moral *facts* or *truths*. When T Rex ruled, there were no free agents to rape or be raped, but it was still true that free agents ought not to rape other free agents. This moral principle can be true even at times when it does not apply to anyone because nobody could

<sup>97</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 96, 97.

<sup>98</sup> Wielenberg, ‘In Defense of Non-Natural, Non-Theistic Moral Realism’, p. 40.

<sup>99</sup> By no means is Thomistic natural law incompatible with biological evolution. See Craig A. Boyd, ‘Thomistic Natural Law and the Limits of Evolutionary Psychology’, in Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss (eds.), *Evolution and Ethics: Human Morality in Biological and Religious Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 221–238; Benedict M. Ashley, ‘The Anthropological Foundations of the Natural Law: An Engagement with Modern Science’, in John Goyette, Mark S. Latcovic, and Richard S. Myers, (eds.), *Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law Tradition: Contemporary Perspectives* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2004), pp. 3–16.

break it'.<sup>100</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong makes this argument in response to Christians who think that evolution is incompatible with objective morality. Again, the fundamentalistic viewpoints of theologians and philosophers do nothing but prevent atheists from taking Christian theism seriously.

Mores are distinguishable from morals. Science can only describe human behavior, not prescribe what actions should be done.<sup>101</sup> Mark Murphy adds: 'But while most contemporary moral philosophers are not theists, almost none of them accepts the sociobiological account of morality. And it is obvious why most moral philosophers do not accept this wrongheaded view. If we start only with the facts of evolution—we will never be able to cross the gap simply from a story about how our species in fact evolved to any claims about what we genuinely have reason to favor or promote'.<sup>102</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

A crucial grasp of Aquinas' metaphysics is necessary for understanding his particular views on sub-disciplines in philosophy such as natural law morality and the philosophy of God. Today many ethicists want to speak about morality without having to assume the metaphysical. One immediately thinks of Hillary Putnam's advocacy of 'ethics without ontology' or John Rawls' conception of justice as 'political, not metaphysical'. Nowhere is this omission of the metaphysical more evident than in the writings of contemporary atheist philosophers and their primary competitors, the DC theorists (including proponents of the modified versions of the theory).

Thomistic natural law can bridge the gap between these two opposing camps through its reliance on participation metaphysics. Both sides of the ensuing debate have something to offer to one another, and both sides are shortsighted in other respects. Of course, atheistic moral realists prematurely conclude that God's existence is not necessary for the grounding of moral principles. Instead all that is needed is human nature and careful reasoning. On the other hand, DC theorists have not paid enough attention to human nature. I have argued that Aquinas' Fourth Way can be reformulated in such a way

<sup>100</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality*, pp. 92, 93.

<sup>101</sup> Paul Copan, 'God, Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality', in Robert B. Stewart, (ed.), *The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett in Dialogue* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), pp. 154–157.

<sup>102</sup> Mark C. Murphy, 'Theism, Atheism, and the Explanation of Moral Value', in Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, (eds.), *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 122.

to exploit the necessary connection between human nature, objective morality and the existence of a personal, theistic God.

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