

MICHAEL MARTIN AND THE
MORAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

A Thesis

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R. Keith Loftin

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M.A., University of Dallas, 2008

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*To my precious wife Julie,
whose love, support, and patience
are unsurpassed.*

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ABSTRACT

Theism, that is, belief in the existence of God, has, over the last forty or so years, been making a quiet comeback. Whereas for several decades the “death of God” was heralded—culminating, perhaps, with *Time* magazine’s April 8, 1966, title: “Is God Dead?”—philosophers are once again vigorously debating the rationality of theistic belief. Emerging from amid this renaissance is an increasing number of publications treating the various so-called “theistic proofs” or arguments for God’s existence. These arguments are part of the project of natural theology, that is, the project of establishing the rationality of theistic belief apart from appeal to authoritative divine revelation.

One such argument, called the axiological argument or the moral argument, attempts to establish the existence of God *a posteriori* from the existence of objective moral values. It is the aim of this thesis to defend the moral argument from atheist Michael Martin, one of its most distinguished detractors. Not surprisingly, many atheists have attempted to refute the moral argument. Many (if not most) atheists, such as the late J. L. Mackie, simply reject the objectivity of morals, embracing instead moral relativism. Contemporary atheist Richard Dawkins goes so far as to deny the reality of good and evil altogether. What makes Martin’s response particularly interesting, however, is his moral realism or his agreement that objective morals do exist.

The issue, then, is whether Martin’s worldview furnishes him with the metaphysical resources necessary to ground objective morality while denying God’s existence. It is, of course, one thing to *see* that morality is objective and another thing altogether to *ground* that fact. I will argue that Martin’s worldview does not provide him the underpinnings necessary to sustain his position, thus rebutting his attack on the moral argument.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Recent History of Theistic Belief

On April 8, 1966, the title of *Time* magazine ominously asked the question, “Is God Dead?” This marked the culmination of the so-called “death of God” movement, which had steadily gained steam through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The movement derived its name from a passage in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*: “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers!”¹ Given the dominance of theism (we may even say of Christian theism) throughout the Middle Ages—one thinks immediately of St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas—and into the early modern period—with René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, for example—the death of God no doubt came as quite a shock to many. What had happened? Nietzsche goes on to explain: “The greatest recent event—that ‘God is dead,’ that the *belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable*—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe [and America, we might add].”² As Ronald Michener explains, Nietzsche was referring not to some catastrophic event, but to the gradual disappearance of belief in God.³ In other words, theistic belief was increasingly being seen as rationally unacceptable.

The verificationism and logical positivism in vogue from roughly the 1920s to the 1950s allowed this sentiment to really blossom. This school of thought asserted the verifiability principle, which stated: “the meaning of a proposition consists in the method of its verification, that is in whatever observations or experiences show, whether or not it is true.... But any non-

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 125.

² *Ibid.*, 279, emphasis added.

³ Ronald T. Michener, *Engaging Deconstructive Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 32 n92.

tautological proposition, that is in principle unverifiable by any observation, is *ipso facto* devoid of meaning.”⁴ Thus Oxford philosopher A. J. Ayer was able to claim, “If ‘god’ is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exists. For to say that ‘God exists’ is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false.”⁵ Rudolph Carnap similarly claimed, “In its metaphysical use, the word ‘God’ refers to something beyond experience. The word is deliberately divested of its reference to a physical being or to a spiritual being that is immanent in the physical. And as it is not given a new meaning, it becomes meaningless.”⁶ Touting the verifiability criterion of meaning, talk of God was deemed literally meaningless. Regarding the mere question of theistic belief, professor J. J. C. Smart observed, “The greatest danger to theism at the present moment does not come from people who deny the validity of the arguments for the existence of God.... The main danger to theism today comes from people who want to say that ‘God exists’ and ‘God does not exist’ are equally absurd.”⁷ Such was the status of theistic belief midway through the twentieth century.

In those days there were doubtlessly philosophers who were theists, but they were both in the minority and (for the most part) happy to exclude their theistic beliefs from their professional lives. But then something unexpected began to take place during the late 1960s: a renaissance of theism. Whether this renaissance itself caused or contributed to the demise of verificationism or simply coincided with it, shameless philosophical inquiry into theistic belief began anew. The

⁴ Antony Flew, “Logical positivism,” in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Antony Flew (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979).

⁵ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 115. See also Antony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955) and Michael Martin, “The Verificationist Challenge,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 204-212.

⁶ Rudolph Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language,” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), 63.

⁷ J. J. C. Smart, “The Existence of God,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, 35.

publication of American philosopher Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (1967) is widely recognized as the turning point.

Following Plantinga's lead a steady stream of philosophers began to publish and speak out in favor of theism. As a result on December 26, 1969, less than four years after its "Death of God" issue, *Time* magazine's title was, "Is God Coming Back to Life?"

Beginning in the 1970s the stream became a torrent. In addition to scholarly lectures and publications, both the Society of Christian Philosophers and the Evangelical Philosophical Society were formed, each of which publishes a journal: *Faith and Philosophy* and *Philosophia Christi*, respectively.⁸ The philosophy of religion began to receive more and more attention, and by 1980 the tone of *Time* had changed altogether:

In a quiet revolution in thought and argument that hardly anyone could have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers—most of whom never accepted for a moment that he was in any serious trouble—but in the crisp, intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse.⁹

This renaissance has not gone unnoticed by non-theistic philosophers. Thomas Nagel, while admitting that he *wants* atheism to be true, concedes that he is "made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers."¹⁰ More recently, prominent atheist philosopher Quentin Smith, whom I quote here at length, bemoans the "desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s." He writes:

⁸ The firsthand stories of many of these philosophers are contained in two books: *Philosophers Who Believe*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) and *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹ "Modernizing the Case for God," *Time*, 7 April 1980, 65-66.

¹⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

By the second half of the twentieth century, universities and colleges had been become [*sic*] in the main secularized. The standard (if not exceptionless) position in each field, from physics to psychology, assumed or involved arguments for a naturalist world-view; departments of theology or religion aimed to understand the meaning and origins of religious writings, not to develop arguments against naturalism. Analytic philosophers...treated theism as an antirealist or non-cognitivist world-view, requiring the reality, not of a deity, but merely of emotive expressions or certain “forms of life.”

Naturalists [have] passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga’s writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians... [I]n philosophy, it became, almost overnight, “academically respectable” to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia....

God is not “dead” in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.¹¹

This is an astonishing (if a bit generous) assessment of the recent history of theistic belief, from an atheist philosopher no less! In less than a century theism ran the gamut from being thought dead, absolutely nonsensical, and irrational, to being found by many philosophers to be perfectly rational and intellectually fulfilling.

Now, there are a few, like John Searle, who are either oblivious, obtuse, or in denial about the current state of theism. Searle insists that for “the educated members of society, the world has become demystified,” so that the question of God no longer even matters.

“Nowadays,” he derides, “nobody bothers [to attack theism], and it is considered in slightly bad taste to even raise the question of God’s existence. Matters of religion are like matters of sexual preference: they are not to be discussed in public, and even the abstract questions are discussed only by bores.”¹² In light of Searle’s assertion, it is interesting to note that he serves on the

¹¹ Quentin Smith, “The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” *Philo* 4, no. 2 (2001): 3-4.

¹² John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 34. Searle makes similar remarks in his *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 90.

editorial board of the journal *Philo*, a leading philosophy of religion journal that regularly publishes articles on the various theistic proofs. Further, it would be simply unconscionable to label theists with the philosophical acumen of Alvin Plantinga or Richard Swinburne as uneducated and thus ignorable. Searle is, I think, clearly mistaken.

1.2 Natural Theology Generally

As one would expect, this renaissance has seen renewed interest in the traditional arguments for God's existence. These include the ontological arguments, which seek to deduce the existence of God from the very concept of God;¹³ cosmological arguments, which argue for a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the cosmos;¹⁴ teleological arguments, which argue from the apparent order of the universe for an Intelligent Designer;¹⁵ noölogical arguments, which argue that the reality of conscious phenomena entail theism;¹⁶ as well as arguments from religious experience.¹⁷ Of course, there are also the axiological arguments or moral arguments, one version of which I will discuss at length in the next chapter.

¹³ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), 197-221; Alvin Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); Stephen Davis, "The Ontological Argument," in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁴ Donald Burrill, ed., *The Cosmological Arguments: A Spectrum of Opinion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967); William Lane Craig, ed., *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz* (London: Macmillan, 1980); William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ William Dembski, *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance through Small Probabilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Principle* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1986); Robin Collins, "The Teleological Argument," in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Copan and Moser; John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁶ J. P. Moreland, "Noölogical Argument," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); J. P. Moreland, *Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument* (London: Routledge, 2008); Robert Merrihew Adams, "Flavors, Colors, and God," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ Keith E. Yandell, "Religious Experience," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Quinn and Taliaferro, 367-375; Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

What we should like to note at this point is that the arguments for God's existence (or *theistic proofs*, as they are sometimes called), are part of the enterprise called natural theology. William Lane Craig defines natural theology as the enterprise "that seeks to provide warrant for belief in God's existence apart from the resources of authoritative, propositional revelation," that is, by use of natural reason alone.¹⁸ According to Stephen Davis, "natural theology is the attempt to reach sound conclusions about (among other things) the existence and nature of God based on human reasoning alone."¹⁹

Douglas Geivett explains a bit more fully:

[Natural theology is] the systematic formulation of reasons to believe God exists, that he has a particular nature, and that he stands in relation to the world in certain different ways, without relying directly upon sacred texts or any prophetic tradition.²⁰

Though I agree with Geivett that natural theology can lead to certain conclusions about God's nature and relation to the world, we must temper ourselves: taken individually, the arguments do not purport to demonstrate God's existence *in all His greatness*. Taken collectively they attempt rather modest conclusions about God, though of course these conclusions are themselves significant.²¹

For our purposes the important thing to note about natural theology is its dependence upon human reasoning alone; it foregoes appeal to any authoritative revelation. This has traditionally been an attractive characteristic of natural theology because (1) non-theists typically

¹⁸ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3d ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 93.

¹⁹ Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), ix.

²⁰ R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God: The Challenge of John Hick's Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 90.

²¹ Craig puts this point nicely: "The theistic arguments need not be taken to be like links in a chain, in which one link follows another so that the chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Rather, they are like links in a coat of mail, in which all the links reinforce one another so that the strength of the whole exceeds that of any single link" (*Reasonable Faith*, 188).

do not recognize the legitimacy of any authoritative revelation (such as sacred texts), and (2) theists disagree over the sources of such revealed authority (e.g., the Qur'an, Bible, Torah, or Book of Mormon).²² The enterprise of natural theology would thus presumably be acceptable to the proponents of all three major theistic religions.

The use of reason alone versus appeal to revealed authority (sometimes called special revelation) indicates a distinction between natural theology and revealed theology. Revealed theology is “the attempt to reach sound conclusions about the existence and nature of God (among other things) based on statements that are said to be revealed by God or events that supposedly reveal something of God.”²³ One might, for example, argue based on the ontological argument that God exists. The Christian belief that Jesus is God incarnate, however, requires appeal to revealed authority—reason alone cannot arrive at that belief.

Although natural theology does not appeal to any revealed authority, it is nonetheless sanctioned in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Psalm 19 declares:

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.
Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
[Where] their voice is not heard.
Their line has gone out through all the earth,
And their utterances to the end of the world.²⁴

²² Being myself a Christian theist, I will not presume to speak on behalf of the adherents of other religions. So, henceforward, any theological references will be limited to those of the Judeo-Christian worldview.

²³ Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs*, ix.

²⁴ Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this thesis are to the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977).

The New Testament similarly declares, “since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Romans 1:20).²⁵ In other words God’s existence and certain things about His nature may (it is claimed) be deduced from the cosmos. St. Paul also says that God “did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). In other words, God supplies signs of His existence. Elsewhere, in discussion with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens, Paul argues that God exists and can be found by those willing, for “he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

1.3 Theistic Proofs Specifically

Given our project of defending a particular theistic proof—namely, the moral argument—from objections, it seems appropriate to say a few words about such arguments. As we have already noted, theistic proofs seek to prove God’s existence. But what do we mean by “prove”? What constitutes a successful theistic proof? What ought our expectations be regarding theistic proofs?

Let’s begin with the second question: what constitutes a successful theistic proof? Obviously, as with all (deductive) arguments, its premises must be both formally and informally valid. In other words the conclusion must follow logically from its premises, and it must commit no informal fallacies (e.g., begging the question, equivocation among terms, or arguing in a circle). Further, Steven Davis suggests adding that the premises must be “known to be more reasonable or plausible than their denials” to our criteria.²⁶ Given the possibility of unsound

²⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q.2, a.2.

²⁶ Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs*, 7.

arguments that are nevertheless both formally and informally valid, this strikes me as a good addition. A successful theistic proof, then, is one that is valid and whose premises are known to be more reasonable or plausible than their denials.

I think our remaining two questions go hand in hand, that is, what one means by “proof” or “prove” largely determines what sort of expectations ought to be had regarding theistic proofs. Now, it is generally acknowledged that relatively few people are converted to theism based upon any of the arguments for God’s existence. But as Plantinga observes,

the natural theologian does not, typically, offer his arguments in order to convince people of God’s existence; and in fact few who accept theistic belief do so because they find such an argument compelling. Instead the typical function of natural theology has been to show that religious belief is rationally acceptable.²⁷

Davis similarly takes a modest position: “the purpose, aim, or goal of a theistic proof is to demonstrate the existence of God and thus the rationality of belief in God. That is, what a theistic proof aims to do is substantiate the theist’s belief in God, give a good reason for it, show that it is credible...”²⁸ This, I take it, is the position of most natural theologians regarding theistic proofs, and it is the tack I will take.

This aim is a far cry from the mathematical certainty atheists or skeptics often demand of theists. Of course, different people are persuaded by different amounts of evidence or different arguments. It may be—for reasons completely beyond the reach of philosophy—that many non-theists *will not* convert to theism without some sort of mathematically certain type of proof (perhaps something like divine writing on the wall or some other supernatural experience). Some likely will refuse to convert *no matter what* (and this crowd is surely irrational). What is certain

²⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 2.

²⁸ Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs*, 6.

is that non-theists—at least the philosophers among them—often label theistic belief as *a priori* rationally unjustified (sometimes even unjustifiable) and treat it accordingly. But as Peter van Inwagen observes, these philosophers are behaving in a queer way as regards the question of theistic belief: they are subscribing to what he calls the “Difference Thesis,” that is, the idea that theistic belief is somehow to be treated differently than other areas of inquiry.²⁹

People disagree on just about every topic imaginable, and by all appearances there are equally intelligent people on both sides of just about every disagreement. These sides come together in discussion and debate, putting forward their best arguments and evidences, and yet they often go home unconvinced by their opponents. Notice: they depart holding their original positions; they neither accept their opponent’s position, nor some skeptical position. The mere fact that seemingly equally intelligent people with good arguments disagree with them does not drive most people into a skeptical position. This, van Inwagen notes, is a regular phenomenon in philosophy, politics, and other domains, yet scarcely anyone reacts by declining to hold philosophical or political positions that are undisputed by reputable authorities. Take abortion for example: people disagree sharply over the legality and morality of abortion. They debate their positions back and forth, yet this causes none (or at least *very* few) of them to decline taking a line on the abortion debate. Clearly people believe themselves to be justified in holding their beliefs *in spite of* equal and opposite arguments.

And that is generally recognized as acceptable—until it comes to the topic of God. Non-theist philosophers frequently hold the “Difference Thesis.” This sentiment undergirds the typical non-theist’s approach to belief in God. As van Inwagen explains, W. K. Clifford’s

²⁹ Peter van Inwagen, “Quam Dilecta,” in *God and the Philosophers*, 41-47. Van Inwagen speaks of religion generally, but I am narrowing the discussion down to theism.

famous essay, “The Ethics of Belief,” is a prime example of the Difference Thesis.³⁰ In his essay Clifford claims, “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Following van Inwagen we will call this “Clifford’s Principle.”

Clifford’s Principle is virtually never applied outside of religious debate. As van Inwagen notes, “practically all philosophers—the literature will immediately demonstrate this to the most casual observer—subscribe to theses an obvious logical consequence of which is that the world abounds in gross violations of Clifford’s Principle that have nothing to do with religion.”³¹ Of course, widespread application of Clifford’s Principle would wreak havoc across the academic disciplines: everyone would have to become agnostics regarding every disputed question! After all, in holding your beliefs, you would—if you are intellectually honest—know in the back of your mind that your opponent could easily appeal to another (equally qualified) authority to counter yours, and round and round and round we would go. Now, if we interpret “evidence” in Clifford’s Principle to mean “concrete evidence,” that is, evidence of the “courtroom and laboratory variety,” then perhaps the principle will succeed. In this case, however, very few philosophical beliefs would enjoy any evidential justification. Besides, as van Inwagen notes, if such evidence *were* able to justify philosophical beliefs, then such beliefs would be much more uniform. This reading of “evidence” simply does not seem capable of supporting the Difference Thesis, yet this is the sort of evidence non-theistic philosophers often demand of theists: “this double standard consists in setting religious belief a test it could not possibly pass, and is

³⁰ W. K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879).

³¹ Van Inwagen, “Quam Dilecta,” 45.

studiously ignoring the fact that almost none of our beliefs on any subject could possibly pass this test.”³²

When we speak of offering a “proof” of or providing “evidence” for God’s existence, then, we speak not in the laboratory or courtroom sense; rather, we intend to offer an argument whose premises are known to be more reasonable or plausible than their denials. Moreover, we acknowledge that different arguments or evidences will persuade different people, that is, proof has a sort of person-relative quality about it. There is no universally accepted argument for God’s existence (there’s probably no universally accepted argument for *anything*), such that whoever hears it converts to theism. Rather than claiming anything of that sort, though, what theistic proofs attempt is to demonstrate the rationality of theism. This may not convince any non-theists to convert to theism (which may be regrettable), but that is no failure on the part of natural theology. After all, people are rarely argued into believing anything. Thus we agree with Austin Farrer: “If belief has been reasonable, it has had a reason, and our only business must be to draw this out and re-state it.”³³

1.4 Natural Atheology and Michael Martin

As we acknowledged above, (most) non-theists are well aware of the renaissance currently being enjoyed by theism—news atheists are not taking sitting down. There are, of course, plenty of atheists of the Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris variety—the so-called New Atheists: long on rhetoric and short on intellectual punch.³⁴ These

³² Ibid., 46.

³³ Austin Farrer, *Finite and Infinite: A Philosophical Essay* (London: Dacre Press, 1943), 3.

³⁴ Describing Richard Dawkins’s best-seller *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), Alvin Plantinga says, “[Dawkins’s] forays into philosophy are at best sophomoric, but that would be unfair to sophomores; the fact is (grade inflation aside), many of his arguments would receive a failing grade in a sophomore philosophy class” (“The Dawkins Confusion,” *Books and Culture* 13, no. 2 [March-April 2007]: 21).

come a dime a dozen. On the other hand, there are accomplished and noteworthy atheists, who offer thoughtful and powerful criticisms of theism. These are engaged in what we may call the enterprise of natural *atheology*, that is, the project of presenting arguments for the falsehood of theistic belief. As atheist Richard Gale defines it, “the aim of an atheological argument is to reveal a logical inconsistency in the theist’s concept of God.”³⁵ Prominent among these atheologists is Michael Martin.

After earning his doctorate in philosophy at Harvard, Michael Martin has been a professor of philosophy at Boston University since 1965. An accomplished scholar, Martin’s publications include *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*³⁶ and *The Big Domino in the Sky (and Other Atheistic Tales)*.³⁷ The former is a lengthy and polished defense of atheism; the latter is a popular level book of fictional stories aimed at illustrating the atheistic worldview. Another of Martin’s books will be of considerable interest to our project: *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*.³⁸

While pursuing his graduate studies in philosophy, Martin specialized in the philosophy of science rather than the philosophy of religion. This, he explains, was because it seemed to him “quite clear in the light of the evidence that disbelief in God was more justified than belief.”³⁹ He considered the question of God’s existence “closed.” To his credit, however, Martin has reconsidered this opinion. He explains:

³⁵ Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 15. Gale would probably agree that this is a narrow construal of atheology, for atheologists frequently attempt to reveal logical inconsistencies not just in the concept of God but in the broad theistic worldview.

³⁶ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

³⁷ Michael Martin, *The Big Domino in the Sky (and Other Atheistic Tales)*, (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1996).

³⁸ Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002).

³⁹ Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, xii.

I have changed my mind about [the question of God's existence being "closed"], primarily because of the recent resurgence of interest in the philosophy of religion. Although I have not changed my opinion that disbelief in God is more justified than belief...philosophical arguments for theism make it necessary to reassess and reformulate the case for atheism.⁴⁰

If J. L. Mackie and Kai Nielson were the leading atheists of the previous generation, Martin is likely the most prominent atheist of today. Martin has published widely in the philosophy of religion (including the recent *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, which he edited),⁴¹ and has participated in several debates on God's existence. Though he is a formidable critic of theism, few substantive responses to his works have been forthcoming. This thesis, of course, is not a comprehensive challenge to Martin's atheism (as far as I know, there are none in print). It is my hope, though, given Martin's ability and influence coupled with the relative neglect of the moral argument for God's existence (in comparison to the other theistic proofs) to rebut Martin's attack on the moral argument, thus defending the rationality of theistic belief. It is to that task that we now turn.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Michael Martin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

CHAPTER 2: OBJECTIVE MORAL VALUES

2.1 Introduction

Can a person be good without belief in God? The seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke once wrote:

Those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the Being of a God. Promises, Covenants, and Oaths, which are the bonds of Humane Society, can have no hold upon an Atheist. The taking away of God, tho but even in thought, dissolves all.¹

In 1724 British theologian Richard Bentley similarly wrote that “no atheist, as such, can be a true friend, an affectionate relation, or a loyal subject.”² Underlying these rather arrogant responses is an assumption about the relationship between God and morality such that a non-theist is declared untrustworthy simply in virtue of his rejection of theism. This sentiment is, perhaps, quietly shared among theists or otherwise religious people; it has historically been held by many. Fortunately, however, this misguided sentiment is widely rejected among philosophers today. (Further, I am not aware of a religious person who now holds this opinion).

Though millions of people deny the existence of God, one would be hard-pressed to find a person who genuinely rejected morality. Indeed, non-theists routinely behave in morally praiseworthy ways. This is a point about which Michael Martin is rather exercised:

There is no reason to suppose that people would be less moral if they did not believe in God than if they did. As far as can be determined, atheists do not commit more violent crimes than do nonatheists. Nor are there fewer violent crimes in countries where belief in God is more widespread than in countries where it is less widespread.³

¹ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 51.

² Quoted in Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 12.

³ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 212.

Atheist philosopher Paul Kurtz, in a recent debate with William Lane Craig on the question “Is goodness without God good enough?” described moral non-theists:

Many of these individuals have led exemplary lives of nobility and excellence, and they have contributed greatly to the social good. They were (or are) kind, considerate, altruistic, caring, and interested in improving the human condition. They have a deep sense of responsibility and good will. They live creatively as scientists, philosophers, poets, artists, or as ordinary men and women. They have been able to exercise self-discipline, exemplify self-respect, and act through noble motives.⁴

Echoing Martin and Kurtz I simply say, “Yea and Amen.” I completely agree that a person can be moral without believing in the existence of God. The moral argument for God’s existence is often misconstrued as an argument that non-theists cannot be moral. This is plainly mistaken.⁵ On the other hand, non-theists sometimes retort that belief in God is not sufficient to ensure morality. Quite so; fortunately Christian theists make no such claim.⁶ The old pastor’s adage is apt: “Becoming a Christian does not make you perfect, it makes you forgiven.” My position is that atheists can certainly recognize the objectivity of moral values and even behave morally, yet be completely mistaken about the ontological foundation undergirding morality.

So, the question, “Can we be good without belief in God?” yields an obvious answer: Yes! As we will see, though, this is not quite the right question. As Paul Kurtz puts it, “The central question about moral and ethical questions concerns their ontological foundation.”⁷ The

⁴ Paul Kurtz, “Opening Statement,” in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, ed. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 26.

⁵ Christian theists maintain that non-theists can behave morally because all humans—non-theists and theists alike—are created in the image of God. To wit: Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” and Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

⁶ Sadly, history demonstrates that this has not always been the case. I speak here of true Christian doctrine.

⁷ Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 65.

pertinent question regards not moral epistemology, but the ontological foundation of morality itself.

2.2 The Rejection of Moral Relativism

As Oxford philosopher Robert Merrihew Adams writes,

Moral arguments were the type of theistic argument most characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently they have become one of philosophy's abandoned farms. The fields are still fertile, but they have not been cultivated systematically since the latest methods came in.⁸

The moral argument for God's existence which we will consider can be expressed as a straightforward *modus tollens*:

- (1) If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
- (2) Objective moral values do exist.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.⁹

The moral argument contends for God's existence *a posteriori* from our common experience of morality as objective. Of course, those such as Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins deny such experience:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. 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.¹⁰

⁸ Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 144.

⁹ This version is adapted from William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3d ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 172.

¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 132-133, emphasis added.

As atheist philosopher Michael Martin notes, however, “Ordinary language and common sense assume that morality is objective.”¹¹ Martin therefore sets out to “challenge the view that atheism leads to a nonobjective ethics and the meaninglessness of life.”¹² But what is meant by “objective moral values”? To say that there are objective moral values is to say that some things are good or evil independently of whether any human being believes them to be so.¹³ Some things are morally right, while others are morally wrong—*regardless of anyone’s opinion*; these truths hold regardless of what anyone, anywhere happens to think of them. Their rightness or wrongness does not depend upon individual or cultural preference. For example, the torture of innocent children for mere pleasure is objectively morally wrong. Or consider the Holocaust: to affirm the objectivity of morality is to affirm that the anti-Semitism systematically carried out by the Nazis was morally evil, despite the fact that the Nazis believed it to be morally good. Moreover, it is to affirm that the Nazis’ actions would be morally evil even if the Nazis succeeded in killing or brainwashing every person who disagreed with them. Objective moral values, then, are objective and binding whether they are recognized or not.

The rejection of objective morality is moral relativism. Moral relativism, though available in all shapes and sizes,¹⁴ is the view “that there are no universally valid moral principles, but rather that all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice.”¹⁵ Gilbert Harman says that “morality arises when a group of people reach an implicit agreement or

¹¹ Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 173.

¹⁴ Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson, *Moral Relativism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Louis P. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 4th ed. (New York: Wadsworth, 2002), 26.

come to a tacit understanding about their relations to one another.”¹⁶ Since different individuals or groups could obviously arrive at different understandings, it is perfectly appropriate given relativism to say that contradictory moral views are equally correct. What’s morally right for one person may be morally wrong for another person. With Martin I find the idea that morality is subjective or relative roughly akin to the idea that some people think vanilla desserts taste best, while others think that chocolate desserts taste best—there is no right or wrong about which flavor is better; there is nothing objective about different preferences or tastes among different people. This is the way moral relativists view morality. Moral relativism, however, flies in the face of our shared intuitions about morality, a point to which I will return below.

Due to its severe problems, moral relativism is usually rejected among philosophers today. In his helpful book *Moral Choices*, ethicist Scott Rae discusses several problems with moral relativism.¹⁷ Two of these are worth mentioning, the first of which is the inability on moral relativism of a group or individual to arbitrate between competing moral claims. If moral relativism is true, one should act according to the moral code of one’s society (never mind the difficulties involved with defining what a society is or with belonging to multiple societies). In the event that *A* performs an act that is right in his society but wrong in *B*’s, on what grounds can *B* criticize *A*? After all, one group’s moral code is as valid as another’s. If no moral absolutes exist that transcend cultures or individuals, to what standard could *B* possibly appeal in order to condemn *A*’s action? He surely couldn’t impose his own moral code on someone who belongs to a different society. Even if *B*’s code says, “this moral code to be imposed on all persons no

¹⁶ Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended,” in Jack Meiland and Michael Krausz, eds., *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1982), 189, quoted in Paul Copan, *True for You, but Not for Me* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 43.

¹⁷ Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 94f. Cf. Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 193f.

matter what,” we need merely to notice that the moral code of *A*’s society says, “resist all codes other than this one.” More importantly, though, in this case *B* can at best say, “*A*’s action is wrong *in the opinion of my society*, but not objectively.” As Smith notes, this concern is brought into startling focus with the increasing cultural diversity in the populations of different countries.¹⁸

Another problem is known as the reformer’s dilemma. History recognizes and celebrates great moral reformers such as Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. We are often encouraged to emulate these figures. Such reformers, however, belong to a society against whose moral code they stand (often alone for some time). But “since the reformer stands against the cultural consensus that is supposed to determine the valid moral values for the relativist, the relativist cannot offer the praise due most moral reformers.”¹⁹ Worse, the reformer is by definition behaving *immorally*, since he or she is violating their society’s moral code by standing at odds with it! Interestingly, this implies that moral codes cannot be *improved*; they can only be *changed*.²⁰ If a moral code changes from viewing the oppression of women as right to viewing such behavior as wrong, on what grounds could a moral relativist deem this an improvement? At best he could say that *from the new code’s perspective*, the old moral code was wrong (but the same thing could be said of the new code from the perspective of the old—and with equal force). For him to declare the new code a genuine moral improvement would require a vantage point outside of and above his society’s code from which to make that judgment—just the thing moral relativism denies. For these and other problems, moral relativism is usually rejected.

¹⁸ A similar problem exists regarding views of truth as relative. See Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). To his credit Michael Martin affirms the objectivity of truth.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁰ J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 411.

Not only does moral relativism seem to me a reprehensible position, it is contrary to our shared intuitions. The well-known story of Martin Heidegger illustrates this point nicely:

In his public remarks during the period when he was a rector, Heidegger tended to make statements of this sort: “Do not let principles and ‘ideas’ be the rules of your existence. The Fuehrer himself, and he alone, is the German reality of today, and of the future, and of its law.” Cited in Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, trans. Paul Burrell [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989], p. 118. After Germany lost World War II, when the French moved into his town and confiscated his property because he was on their list as a known Nazi, he wrote an indignant letter to the commander of the French forces in his area. It begins this way: “What justice there is treating me in this unheard of way is inconceivable to me.” Cited in Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger. Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1988), p. 296.²¹

Clearly Heidegger did not think there was a “German morality” versus a “French morality.” Rather, he affirmed a universal, *objective* morality—one even the French were capable of grasping!

Or again, consider the philosophy student who submitted a research paper the thesis of which was the denial of objective, universal moral principles. Despite the student’s clear prose, argumentation, and documentation—in short, what would normally merit an ‘A’—the professor, with the reddest pen available, marked it “F – I do not like red covers.” Upon receiving her graded paper, the student was (understandably) furious! She stormed into the professor’s office: “What is the meaning of this? This grade is totally unfair! You should grade my paper on the basis of its contents, not the color of its cover!” “Is that the paper in which you argue against the existence of moral principles such as fairness and justice?” the professor asked. “Yes,” came the quick retort, “of course it is!” “Well, I really dislike red covers, so your grade will remain an F.

²¹ Eleanor Stump, “The Mirror of Evil,” in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 245 n. 7.

Have a nice day!” As the story goes, the student quickly realized she not only *did* affirm objective principles, she was appealing to them in conversation with her professor.²²

With Heidegger and the young philosophy student, we *know*—intuitively—that some things are morally right or wrong for everyone. We all possess an innate and ineradicable knowledge of basic moral truths.²³

2.3 Moral Beliefs as Properly Basic

Though the main thrust of this thesis is concerned with moral ontology, questions about our moral epistemology arise at this point. The fact of the matter is that people know, deep down, that certain moral values are objective: rape is wrong; torturing innocent babies for fun is wrong; parents should love their children, not abuse them. As atheist philosopher Michael Ruse claims, “The man who says that it is morally acceptable to rape little children is just as mistaken as the man who says, $2 + 2 = 5$.”²⁴ Atheist Kai Nielson (at times) seems to agree:

It is more reasonable to believe some things to be evil than to believe any skeptical theory that tells us we cannot know or reasonably believe [things like child abuse and wife-beating] 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.²⁵

As Michael Martin put it, “common sense assume[s] that morality is objective.”²⁶ We all intuitively recognize this, but what can be said of these common-sense moral intuitions?²⁷

²² Norman Geisler, “The Collapse of Modern Atheism,” in *Intellectuals Speak Out About God*, ed. Roy Abraham Varghese (New York: Regnery, 1984), 194.

²³ Steven B. Cowan, “The Question of Moral Values,” in *The Big Argument*, eds. Michael J. Westacott and John F. Ashton (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2006), 167.

²⁴ Michael Ruse, *Darwinism Defended* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1982), p. 275, quoted in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 180.

²⁵ Kai Nielson, *Ethics Without God*, rev. ed. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 59, in Copan, “The Moral Argument,” 130.

²⁶ Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, 12.

As philosopher Paul Copan has argued, many of our moral intuitions are *properly basic*.²⁸ Copan is here appropriating the epistemological work of Notre Dame philosopher Alvin Plantinga:

Let us say that a proposition is *basic* for me if I believe it and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions. This relationship is familiar but hard to characterize in a revealing and nontrivial fashion. I believe the word ‘umbrageous’ is spelled u-m-b-r-a-g-e-o-u-s: this belief is based on another belief of mine, the belief that this is how the dictionary says it is spelled. I believe that $72 \times 71 = 5112$. This belief is based upon several other beliefs I hold.... Some of my beliefs, however, I accept but do not accept on the basis of other beliefs. Call these beliefs *basic*.²⁹

Basic beliefs, then, are not based on any other beliefs in a person’s noetic structure; they are assented to immediately.³⁰ The pedigree of basic beliefs goes back at least to the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid, who wrote in his essay titled “On First Principles In General” that “one of the most important distinctions of our judgments is, that some of them are intuitive, others grounded on argument.”³¹ Concerning these intuitive judgments, Reid elaborates:

[They] are no sooner understood than they are believed. The judgment follows the apprehension of them necessarily, and both are equally the work of nature, and the result of our original powers. There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from

²⁷ Christian theists maintain that humans, being created in the *imago dei*, are endowed with moral capacities that permit them to apprehend right and wrong, good and evil. As St. Paul explains, the moral law has been “written on the hearts” of men by God, so that even people who do not know God “do instinctively the things of the law” as “their conscience bears witness to them” (Romans 2:14-15). Christian theists thus maintain moral intuitions are the deliverances of God-given moral capacities.

²⁸ Copan, “The Moral Argument,” 151f.

²⁹ Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 24.

³⁰ As James Beilby notes, “To say that a belief is basic or nonbasic says nothing about the epistemic status of that belief. It describes only its mode of acceptance—that is, whether it is accepted immediately or inferred” (*Epistemology as Theology* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005], 26).

³¹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*. From *The Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. William Hamilton (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart, and Co., 1846), 434.

another; it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another. [These] are called...*principles of common sense, common notions, self-evident truths.*³²

Copan seems to me correct in identifying our moral intuitions as among the basic beliefs described by Plantinga and Reid. These intuitions are not inferred from any other beliefs (e.g., if I discover a person torturing an infant, I need not draw inferences or work through a reasoning process—I *know* innately that an objective moral value is being violated), nor are they held on the basis of any evidence. They are, as James Beilby puts it, “psychologically direct” and “epistemically noninferential.”³³

Not only do Plantinga and Reid share the principle of basicity—the idea that many beliefs which form the foundation of one’s knowledge are not inferred from or based upon any other beliefs (i.e., foundationalism)—they affirm it in similar ways: basic beliefs may not be held willy-nilly. My belief that a centaur lives in my attic is a basic belief, but I am surely not justified or rational in holding this belief. As it turns out, both Reid and Plantinga affirm that one is justified in holding a given basic belief only under appropriate circumstances.³⁴ When a basic belief is held under appropriate circumstances, Plantinga calls it a *properly* basic belief. I agree, and since we all *know* or *intuit* the objectivity of morality, the only circumstances requisite for our being justified in holding these beliefs as basic is that our noetic faculties be functioning properly. This implies, of course, that anyone who denies the objectivity of morality—anyone who claims that rape may not *always* be wrong—is self-deceived, not functioning properly. If the

³² Ibid., 243 (emphasis his).

³³ Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 42.

³⁴ Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 79. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, “Coherentism and the Evidentialist’s Objection to Belief in God,” in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 123. For example, consider my belief that I see a tree. This belief is basic for me in circumstances in which I am being appeared to treely (to use popular epistemological parlance), but it is not basic for me if I am sitting in my living room listening to music with my eyes closed, that is, if I am in inappropriate circumstances.

person truly believes, say, that rape is not *always* wrong or that parents ought to love and not hate their children, the prescription for that person is not a persuasive argument, it is spiritual or psychological help; he or she is rather like a colorblind person who suffers from deficient color perception: they are not functioning properly. As Elizabeth Anscombe, herself a virtue theorist about ethics put it: “[I]f someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration—I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind.”³⁵

2.4 Martin’s Moral Realism

As we have noted, Michael Martin’s initial concern, namely, that it be acknowledged that non-theists can lead perfectly moral lives, can be easily granted: belief in the existence of God is not requisite for behaving morally. Further, I join with Martin in affirming the (ontological) existence of objective moral values. We agree that (epistemologically) common sense tells us as much, that is, we agree that humans *know* intuitively that some things are right or wrong regardless of what anyone, anywhere happens to think of them. Whether Martin would identify our moral intuitions (as I have done) with what Reid and Plantinga call basic beliefs, I don’t know. Moreover, in affirming the objectivity of moral values, I join with Martin in rejecting moral relativism. Morals are not a matter of preference. They are not subjective. So, regarding the second premise of our argument, namely,

(2) Objective moral values do exist

³⁵ “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 23 (January 1957): 16-17. Alvin Plantinga similarly writes, “[T]here are many moral views we don’t think someone of sound mind could nonculpably come to accept. We think a properly functioning human being will find injustice—the sort depicted, for example, in the story the prophet Nathan told King David—despicable and odious” (“Justification in the 20th Century,” *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 2, *Rationality in Epistemology* [1992]: 56).

Martin and I agree completely that it is more reasonable or plausible than its denial (that morality is relative).

Our disagreement, then, comes with the first premise. As Martin explains, “I am not an ethical skeptic.... My position is that objective ethics is compatible with atheism.”³⁶ This claim constitutes a rejection of our first premise, namely,

(1) If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.

If, as Martin claims, he can reconcile objective morality with atheism, one would have a straightforward denial of (1). It is to Martin’s attempt at an atheistic moral realism, then, that we must now turn our attention.

³⁶ Michael Martin (with Peter S. Williams), “Is There a Personal God?” *The Philosophers’ Magazine*, Issue 9 (Autumn 1999): 21, quoted in Paul Copan, “The Moral Dimensions of Michael Martin’s Atheology: A Critical Assessment,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 2000), 4.

CHAPTER 3: THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF MORAL REALISM

3.1 Introduction

The argument before us, you recall, goes as follows:

- (1) If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
- (2) Objective moral values do exist.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.

Michael Martin concedes premise (2), and I agree with him. As we have seen, then, the central question at hand regards the ontological underpinnings of moral values. In other words, what is the foundation of morality or moral values? Where do they come from? How do we account for the presence of morality? More to the point, is there a connection between God and objective morality?

Not surprisingly, history has seen a broad spectrum of answers to such questions. Some, like Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn, insist that such answers cannot be had: “Nature has no concern for good or bad, right or wrong... In any event, we cannot get behind ethics.”¹ As we saw in the previous chapter, some, such as Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins, simply deny the existence of moral values altogether. Theists, on the other hand, have traditionally maintained that God is somehow the foundation for morality, that is, they have affirmed premise (1).²

¹ Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 133.

² Two notable exceptions here are Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne, and University of Wisconsin-Madison philosopher Keith Yandell, who hold that the existence of God is not necessary to ground objective morality because such truths are necessary truths: “These things hold inevitably and necessarily, whether or not there is a God” (*The Existence of God*, 2d ed. [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2001], 213, cf. Keith Yandell, “Theist, Atheism and Cosmology,” in *Does God Exist? The Craig-Flew Debate*, ed. Stan W. Wallace [Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003], 95-114).

Martin, however, denies (1), claiming instead that objective morality can be accounted for on an atheistic ontology.

It is instructive, I think, that many atheists have recognized a connection between objective moral values and the existence of God. The late J. L. Mackie, himself a prominent atheist philosopher of the previous century, confessed that moral properties

constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful god to create them. If, then, there are such [moral] values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them. Thus we have, after all, a defensible...argument from morality to the existence of a god.³

“If we adopted moral objectivism,” Mackie continues, “[moral values] would then be in principle something that a god might conceivably create; and since they would otherwise be a very odd sort of thing, the admitting of them would be an inductive ground for admitting also a god to create them.”⁴ In order to avoid this, Mackie denied the existence of objective morality, claiming instead that moral values must be (subjectively) invented.⁵ But the point remains: he recognized what *would be* a strong connection between God and objective morals (assuming the existence of the latter).

Another prominent atheist philosopher, Kai Nielson of the University of Calgary, has argued for a theory of morality on which we do not (in any sense of the term) discover moral truths—in fact, on his theory there *are* no moral facts—but rather implement our own moral system, as long as it is coherent. Nielson explains:

So you start with considered judgments and then you try to get them into a coherent pattern with everything else you know, with the best theories of the

³ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982), 115-116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

function of morality in society, with the best theories we have about human nature, and so forth and so on. And you get this into a coherent package, and in the famous phrase of Otto Neurath, you rebuild the ship at sea. They are justified by putting them into a coherent pattern.⁶

Ultimately, however, Nielson must acknowledge that without myth or ideology (read “belief in something like God”) he cannot answer the question, “Why be moral?” He writes:

We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view or that all really rational persons, unhoodwinked by myth or ideology, not be individual egoists or classic amoralists. Reason doesn’t decide here. The picture I have painted for you is not a pleasant one. Reflection on it depresses me.... The point is this: pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality.⁷

Another eminent atheist, the late Richard Taylor of the University of Rochester, saw clearly the connection between God and objective moral values. In his book *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* he made the following astonishing claim:

The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, not noticing that in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well.... Thus, even educated persons sometimes declare that such things as war...or the violation of human rights, are ‘morally wrong,’ and they imagine that they have said something true and significant.

Educated people do not need to be told, however, that questions such as these have never been answered outside of religion.⁸

⁶ Kai Nielson, “Ethics Without God,” in *Does God Exist? The Great Debate*, J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielson (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 107. Here the moral point of view must first be *assumed*. Regardless, Nielson’s theory ultimately breaks down in to moral relativism and is thus susceptible to the criticisms found in the previous chapter of this thesis, primarily that there are no objective moral truths according to which competing systems may be adjudicated.

⁷ Kai Nielson, “Why Should I Be Moral? Revisited,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (January 1984), 90, quoted in Paul Copan, “The Moral Dimensions of Michael Martin’s Atheology: A Critical Assessment,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 2000), 118.

⁸ Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985), 2-3. He goes on to say, “Contemporary writers in ethics, who blithely discourse upon moral right and wrong and moral obligation without any reference to religion, are really just weaving intellectual webs from thin air; which amounts to saying that they discourse without meaning” (*op. cit.*, 7). Taylor’s position is discussed in his debate with William Lane Craig, held

Taylor's own view was that morals are mere social conventions—subjective rather than objective. Taylor thus denied the existence of God as well as objective moral values, because the latter, he argued, makes no sense without the former. If, however, God *does* exist:

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? ... [T]he concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain but their meaning is gone.⁹

It is clear, then, that Mackie, Nielsen, and Taylor clearly saw an inescapable connection between objective moral values and the existence of God. The fact that all three chose to deny the objectivity of morality—opting rather for some form of subjective morality or relativism—is of no consequence to that point. Now, it may be that Mackie, Nielsen, Taylor, and I are wrong. In other words, there may in fact be some successful non-theistic grounding for objective moral values—I doubt it, but I leave the possibility open. Michael Martin's work is widely thought to show the most promise. In fact, Professor Emeritus of philosophy at UC Berkeley Wallace Matson, in his glowing endorsement on the first edition of Martin's *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, agrees: "There is scarcely a questionable sentence in the entire enormous work"! Martin himself thinks that "Mackie's arguments are not persuasive and certainly do not represent the views of all atheists."¹⁰ He opts instead to "challenge the view that atheism leads to a nonobjective ethics and the meaninglessness of life."¹¹

at Union College, Schenectady, New York, on 8 October 1993 (transcript available at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5305>).

⁹ Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason*, 83-84. He goes on to explain that "to say that something is wrong...even though no God exists to forbid it, is *not* understandable..." (*op. cit.*, 90).

¹⁰ Michael Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 23 July 1977, available at <http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/rape.html>.

¹¹ Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 12.

Considering every such attempt is obviously far beyond the scope of this thesis. I will, however, offer criticisms of one popular atheistic strategy for grounding morality. I will then consider Martin's position, showing that it ultimately fails to provide a sound foundation for objective morality. Finally, I will argue that theism provides a surer foundation of objective morality.

3.2 Martin and Atheistic Groundings of Moral Realism

Perhaps the most popular atheistic strategy for grounding morality is to explain moral values as by-products of socio-biological evolution. Florida State University philosopher of science Michael Ruse articulates this attempt nicely:

The position of the modern evolutionist ... is that humans have an awareness of morality ... because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth...Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that when somebody says 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' they think they are referring above and beyond themselves... Nevertheless, ... such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction, ... and any deeper meaning is illusory.¹²

Given naturalism, that is, roughly, "the philosophy that everything that exists is a part of nature and that there is no reality beyond or outside of nature," Ruse's explanation has some merit.¹³ It takes reality standing up, not cowering away from man's futile situation. After all, on this view there is nothing special about *homo sapiens*; they are merely evolving along with the rest of the universe. As philosopher J. P. Moreland puts it:

On an evolutionary secular scenario...human beings are nothing special. The universe came from a Big Bang. It evolved to us through a blind process of chance and necessity. There is nothing intrinsically valuable about human

¹² Michael Ruse, "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics," in *The Darwinian Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 1989), 262-269. It is safe to assume Ruse is speaking of non-theistic evolutionists.

¹³ Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 6.

beings in terms of having moral non-natural properties. The same processes that coughed up human beings coughed up amoebas; there is nothing special about being human. The view that being human is special is guilty of specieism, an unjustifiable bias toward one's own species.¹⁴

Remarkably, Purdue University philosopher Paul Draper agrees: "Human beings are not special in [this] sense. Our bias towards human beings is unjustified—it is not just bias, but *prejudice*."¹⁵

Atheist philosopher Paul Kurtz of the State University of New York similarly writes that "the discoveries of Copernicus and Darwin...have [undermined] the belief that we are fundamentally different from all the other species."¹⁶ Again, given Ruse's position, this seems to me true: humans simply are not intrinsically special.

So there has (somehow) evolved among humans a sort of "herd morality" that seems to help perpetuate our species in the struggle for survival. It is difficult, though, to see what justification there could be for treating *homo sapiens* as morally special. Why not affirm a bovine morality or a baboon morality? What on this view, for example, is fundamentally different about a lion mating an unwilling lioness on the plain and one human raping another? Few will think the first instance *morally* wrong, yet all rightly identify the second as morally reprehensible. It won't do simply to say, "The latter is morally wrong because it involves humans." That would be obvious question-begging. On the view articulated by Ruse it seems there simply is nothing about *homo sapiens* that makes *their* morality objectively true.

"But," someone may object, "we all believe that humans are intrinsically valuable. We believe we possess this evolved (herd) morality which helps us survive." Yes, that may be.

¹⁴ J. P. Moreland, *Does God Exist? The Great Debate*, 112.

¹⁵ Paul Draper, "Craig's Case for God's Existence," in *Does God Exist? The Craig-Flew Debate*, 147.

¹⁶ Paul Kurtz, *The Courage to Become: the Virtues of Humanism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 5-6, quoted in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3d ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 174.

But notice: that belief is self-referentially incoherent. Evolution does not promise to give us *true* beliefs, it promises to give us resources that help us survive. The oft-quoted Darwinist neurophilosopher Patricia Churchland explains:

The most fundamental point is that the human brain is a product of evolution.... Looked at from an evolutionary point of view, the principal function of nervous systems is to enable the organism to move appropriately. Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing. The principle chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive.... Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous *so long as it...enhances the organism's chances of survival*. Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost.¹⁷

Simply put, according to evolution our cognitive faculties are selected for their ability to help keep us alive and to help us reproduce. As Plantinga observes:

Natural Selection doesn't care what you *believe*; it is interested only in how you *behave*. It selects for certain kinds of behavior: those that enhance fitness, which is a measure of the chances that one's genes will be widely represented in the next and subsequent generations. It doesn't select for belief, except insofar as the latter is appropriately related to behavior.¹⁸

Without an intelligent agent—like God—to guide the formation of our cognitive faculties through the evolutionary process, it is far from clear that they would develop into *reliable* mechanisms, that is, that they would develop so as to produce for us true beliefs and other deliverances.¹⁹ As Churchland says, truth takes a backseat to survival. This means that the

¹⁷ Patricia Churchland, "Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (October 1987): 547f (her emphasis).

¹⁸ Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction," *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism*, ed. James Beilby (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 4.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Darwin himself shared this concern: "With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind? (Charles Darwin, Letter to William Graham Down, 3 July 1881, in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, ed. Francis Darwin [London: John Murray, 1887], 285).

objector's belief that "humans are intrinsically valuable" (or his evolutionary belief that morality is objective) has been delivered by a cognitive mechanism that we have no reason to trust.²⁰

Moreover, what makes the evolved "herd morality" binding? In other words, what's to prevent someone from simply disregarding the status quo? After all, there are times when flouting morality serves our individual personal interests perfectly. Why not just do what we please, regardless of the consequences? Sure, such actions may not be biologically or sociologically beneficial (which is why we have evolved a moral awareness of them), but that says nothing at all about why these actions are really *wrong*. In short, historian Stewart Easton sums it up well when he writes, "There is no objective reason why man should be moral, unless morality 'pays off' in his social life or makes him 'feel good.' There is no objective reason why man should do anything save for the pleasure it affords him."²¹

The above evolutionary strategy makes morality dependent upon what humans believe about morals. We have seen that three of the most prominent atheists of the past century agree that instead making morality objective inexorably demands the existence of God. Michael Martin, however, breaks with his atheist colleagues, insisting that morality is not dependent upon what humans believe (i.e., that it is objective) and that this does not require the existence of God.

When Martin observes that the crucial questions "are not primarily historical and psychological but ontological and epistemological," we agree.²² We have already agreed with Martin that "there is no reason to question the view that atheists can have high moral

²⁰ This argument is developed in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 227-240; C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, 2d. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), chapters 3, 4, and 13); and Angus Menuge, *Agents Under Fire: Materialism and the Rationality of Science* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 149-172.

²¹ Stewart C. Easton, *The Western Heritage*, 2d ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1966), 878, quoted in William Lane Craig, "The Indispensability of Theological Meta-ethical Foundations for Morality," *Foundations* 5 (1997): 9-12.

²² Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, 23.

characters.”²³ Atheists and theists alike are perfectly capable of the same moral epistemology, that is, of recognizing intrinsic moral worth in humans and living according to objective moral values. So, when at the end of his second chapter Martin sketches his two remaining tasks, “the positive job of developing and defending an atheistic metaethics” and “the negative labor of showing the difficulties of a theistic-based ethics,” we are prepared to read his explanation of how it is that there *are* moral truths, that is, “the nonreligious foundation of morality.”²⁴

Unfortunately, one is disappointed to discover no such explanation. Instead, throughout his work Martin confuses the *ordo essendi* with the *ordo cognoscendi*—the order of being with the order of knowing.²⁵ In other words, he confuses moral ontology with moral epistemology. As Copan observes, Martin’s working assumption seems to be this: “If a nontheist can simply recognize or know that objective moral values—and thus universal moral obligations—exist, the job of justification is complete.”²⁶ Of course, simply being *cognizant* of objective moral values does not automatically provide the atheist with an explanation of the source or foundation of those morals.²⁷

²³ Ibid., 30.

²⁴ This is the title of the first part of his *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*.

²⁵ Paul Copan, “The Moral Dimensions of Michael Martin’s Atheology: A Critical Assessment,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 2000), 122.

²⁶ Paul Copan, “Is Michael Martin a Moral Realist? *Sic et non*,” *Philosophia Christi* NS 1 (1999): 49.

²⁷ It is significant that Martin’s position is *not* that objective moral values exist but need no explanation. Martin does not claim such values are brute facts or self-sufficient necessary truths. He admits, rather, that they require some ontological foundation and maintains that foundation does not have to be God. We have every right, therefore, to scrutinize Martin’s (alleged) ontological account here—without anyone complaining that we simply presuppose objective moral values *need* such a grounding. That, at least, is Martin’s position.

Perhaps, however, a brief word of response is in order to those who do so complain. “But,” one of them will insist, “objective morals simply exist; our reason tells us this is the case and no explanation for them is needed.” The claim, then, is that such values are self-sufficient, brute facts of reality that “just exist.” Several things, I think, may be said in response: (1) I must confess I find this objection difficult even to comprehend. What could it possibly mean to say the moral value *mercy* simply exists as a brute fact of reality? I understand perfectly what it is to say, for example, “Ed is merciful” (i.e., such values are properties of persons), but I find the claim that *mercy* itself exists in the absence of people baffling. Matters are further complicated when we consider that, in the absence of people, the abstraction *mercy* is not itself merciful, which seems to reveal that *mercy* (simpliciter) does not actually exist.

Martin begins making his case as follows:

Let us assume for the moment that the Biblical position on rape is clear: God condemns rape. But why? One possibility is that He condemns rape *because* it is wrong. Why is it wrong? It might be supposed that God has various reasons for thinking rape is wrong: it violates the victim's rights, it traumatizes the victim, it undermines the fabric of society, and so on. All of these are bad making properties. However, if these reasons provide objective grounds for God thinking that rape is wrong, then they provide objective grounds for others as well. Moreover, these reasons would hold even if God did not exist. For example, rape would still traumatize the victim and rape would still undermine the fabric of society even.²⁸

Simply put, Martin supposes for the sake of argument that God does exist. According to theists, he says, God knows the difference between right and wrong and condemns morally wrong actions such as rape. But, Martin reasons, if God has reasons for thinking some action like rape objectively wrong, then what prevents the atheist from appealing directly to those same grounds?

This argument is, perhaps, initially appealing. But notice: it makes reference only to one's *knowledge* of objective morals, not to their *ontological foundation*. If successful, the argument establishes only that there are objective morals. It offers no positive non-theistic foundation for those morals. Of course rape is wrong because it violates the victim's rights, it traumatizes the victim, and undermines the fabric of society! I couldn't agree more—but this says nothing at all about the ontological basis of the claim. The question is, what is it about

(2) This account seems susceptible to a Euthyphro-type problem: are these abstract moral values, like *mercy*, good because they are good, or is there an independent standard of goodness to which they conform? Neither option seems particularly inviting. (3) Suppose we grant for the sake of argument that such values as *mercy* do simply exist. The problem of moral obligation and duty arises, for how does the mere existence of *mercy* or *justice* result in any moral obligations for me? As William Lane Craig has noted, on this account values such as *greed*, *hatred*, and *selfishness* also exist, but why should I align myself with one set of values and not the other? Indeed, how could we even divide them into sets non-arbitrarily? (4) The objector may at this point throw up his hands and say, "Well, values such as *mercy* and *justice* just are good, and we all know it and that's that." (This is the attitude of atheist philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in his debate with Craig: *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003]). It seems to me, though, that if we resort to pitting this brute-fact against the theist's account, then moral values are much less *ad hoc* and far more at home in a universe created by a good, personal God than in claiming they "just exist."

²⁸ Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 3.

humans that makes them intrinsically valuable? We've already seen that given evolutionary naturalism there is nothing at all special about the human species, so why think they possess "rights" that ought not be violated by actions such as rape? I can certainly agree that we all know violating someone's rights or traumatizing someone by raping them are morally reprehensible actions—what Martin terms "bad making properties." But Martin offers no explanation of his *basis* for thinking humans possess intrinsic dignity or have rights not had by other species; he simply presupposes them.

Martin makes no attempt at proposing his own theory about the foundation of non-theism with ethical systems, opting rather to leave the heavy lifting to others. He simply asserts that "ethical absolutism is compatible with atheism" then passingly refers to a half dozen or so others who's "various attempts to construct a naturalistic foundation of ethics that is both objective and absolute" have, as far as Martin knows, thus far gone unrefuted.²⁹ He is particularly keen on Robert Kirth's version of the Ideal Observer Theory (IOT). Martin spends considerable space discussing IOT, but as we will see this does not help fill his ontological void.

IOT attempts "to explain the meaning of ethical expressions."³⁰ According to IOT, ethical expressions such as "morally obligated" and "morally forbidden" are perfectly understandable without referring to God (that is, without using any theological language). They appeal, rather, to "the ethically significant reactions of an observer who has certain ideal properties such as being fully informed and completely impartial."³¹ On this view, the "good" is that which an ideal

²⁹ Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 214. He employs the same strategy in "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 2 and in Martin, "Comments on the Craig—Flew Debate," *Does God Exist? The Craig—Flew Debate* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 89.

³⁰ Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, 50.

³¹ Ibid. Martin relies heavily on Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," in *Readings in Ethical Theory*, 2d ed., ed. Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), 200-221.

observer would approve under ideal circumstances (e.g., being well informed with respect to the relevant facts). To illustrate, Martin offers a typical example:

For example, to be ethically justified in holding that it is morally wrong for John to lie to Mary, one could become well informed with respect to the relevant facts, be impartial, and so on and determine if one had a feeling of disapproval. The more one approximates to these and other ideal characteristics the more one's reaction would be morally trustworthy.³²

Fine. Even if we grant Martin's claim (which I find dubious), the question remains: *what is the ontological foundation for these claims?* It may be that IOT provides a fine analysis of our ethical judgments or our ability to recognize moral principles (epistemological concerns), but this says nothing at all about the *basis* for moral truths (ontological concerns). Precisely *how* have intrinsically valuable moral agents come to exist? Nor does IOT say anything about why such moral knowledge is even possible—it merely assumes as much. Simply delineating the *conditions* for rightness or even the *conditions for knowledge* of rightness does not do the work of establishing an ontology for morality.³³

Interestingly, I think Martin's position is vulnerable to a further, Euthyphro-type problem. Martin wants to claim that it is certain counterfactual states (e.g., an Ideal Observer *would* react such-and-thus were he to contemplate some morally significant state-of-affairs) that ground our moral claims. If someone asks Martin whether it is morally acceptable for them to suppress women, he responds: "Well, if an Ideal Observer contemplated the question, he would say no." That counterfactual, he says, grounds the belief that suppressing women is morally wrong. But if that is the case, the question arises: is the suppression of women wrong *because* the Ideal Observer reacts in such a way (which would be arbitrary), or does the Ideal Observer

³² Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, 51.

³³ Paul Copan, "Atheistic Goodness Revisited: A Personal Reply to Michael Martin," *Philosophia Christi* NS 2/1 (2000): 92.

react in such a way because the suppression of women is wrong? If the latter, Martin, it seems, still owes us an account of the ontological foundation of the objectivity of morals.

When Martin set himself “the positive job of developing and defending an atheistic metaethics,” that is, what he called “the nonreligious *foundation* [my emphasis] of morality,” we were prepared to read his explanation of how it is that there are moral truths. Not how we know or recognize or verbally employ such truths, but what it is, for example, that gives humans intrinsic dignity (such that their rights ought not be violated by rape). Unfortunately no such account is given; one is merely presupposed. Martin’s presupposition is conspicuous throughout his work. For example,

I see no reason to suppose that if the cultural and intellectual accomplishments of X are worthless, then X’s life is worthless. A mother who has raised intelligent, healthy, morally upright children, a doctor whose life has been devoted to caring for the indigent, a teacher who has spent a lifetime teaching pupils to be just and compassionate—each may have accomplished little from a cultural or intellectual point of view, but each has led a worthwhile life nevertheless.³⁴

However, as Paul Copan claims, “if Martin is going to insist that ‘it has not been shown that all attempts to ground objective morality on a nontheistic basis fail,’ he must do more than repeat the mantra: ‘But humans *do* have dignity.’”

Following his discussion of IOT, Martin claims to have provided “a plausible metaethics that provides an analysis of the meaning of ethical terms and a method of justifying ethical judgments.” He apparently just doesn’t see that such an account is not ontologically satisfying—indeed, it’s not *ontological* at all!

Martin has given us no reason, then, to doubt our first premise, namely,

(4) If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.

³⁴ Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, 23.

He is quite right to (repeatedly) assert that non-theists enjoy the knowledge and benefits of objective morality, but for all that he offers no account of the ontological underpinnings of such a claim. So, since it commits no formal or informal logical fallacies and since Martin has given us no reason to think the denial of (1) more plausible, then all that remains is to see if there is any positive reason to affirm (1).

3.3 Theism as a Superior Ground for Moral Realism

We have seen that Martin's attempt at offering a non-theistic foundation for morality is actually a (dubious) non-theistic moral epistemology. Taking our cue from Martin's passage on the wrongness of rape, we may ask what is the ontological source for the intrinsic goodness of human beings such that they ought not be violated? What is the *foundation of* human dignity and ultimately objective moral values? As we saw, Martin's atheistic worldview does not, at least in my opinion, offer the resources necessary to furnish him with satisfactory answers to these questions (though I again commend him for affirming the objective wrongness of such actions).

Though it is not necessary for my claim that Martin's project fails, let us consider by way of contrast the Christian theist's response: objective moral values are rooted in God.³⁵ God's holy and moral nature is the paradigm of goodness and is thus the ontological foundation of morality. Things are good or bad to the extent that they conform to God's moral nature, which is the absolute standard against which all actions are measured.³⁶ I submit that this is the requisite ontological basis for objective morality absent from Martin's account. Moreover, God's moral

³⁵ It is not my purpose to fully explicate and defend the Christian theist's account in this thesis. Indeed, since my argument is a *conditional* one ("If God does not exist..."), doing so is unnecessary. Having demonstrated that Martin's denial of the first premise of the moral argument for God's existence fails (coupled with his acceptance of the second premise), my purpose at this point is merely to sketch out an alternative to Martin's claim.

³⁶ William Lane Craig, "Opening Statement," in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, eds. Robert Garcia and Nathan King (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 30f.

nature is expressed to us via divine commands, which constitute our moral obligations and duties.³⁷

Not surprisingly, Martin rehearses the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma at this point to rebut the theist's account.³⁸ The objection, originally proposed in Plato's *Euthyphro*, seeks to establish a dilemma: is something good because God wills it, or does God will something because it is good?³⁹ If the former, then what is good seems to be arbitrary since presumably God could have commanded otherwise (e.g., He could have willed that hate be good and commanded us then to hate one another). On the other hand, if God wills something because it is good, then it appears that moral values exist independently of God. Either horn of the dilemma appears detrimental to the theist's position.⁴⁰

It seems to me, though, that not defining the good as simply "whatever God commands," but rather as "what conforms to God's nature" splits the horns of the Euthyphro problem quite nicely. As William Lane Craig explains, on this tack God's commands "are the necessary expressions of his just and loving nature. God is essentially compassionate, fair, kind, impartial, and so forth, and his commandments are reflections of his own character."⁴¹ Thus it is not the case that something is good simply because God commands it (which avoids the first horn of the dilemma), nor is it the case that God commands something because it is good (which avoids the

³⁷ William Lane Craig, "The Indispensability of Theological Meta-ethical Foundations for Morality," 9.

³⁸ Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 3.

³⁹ Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 1-16.

⁴⁰ At least to the position of most theists. There have been a few theists who embrace what may be called Strong Divine Command Theory, the thesis that God could literally will *anything* to be good (even murder or rape). These include William of Ockham and Martin Luther (see Marie Idziak, "Divine Command Ethics," in *Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Phillip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997], 453-459).

⁴¹ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 182.

second). Rather, the divine nature is the basis of God's issuing commands to us in one way rather than another.⁴²

Martin, however, is persistent. He asks,

Is God's character the way it is because it is good or is God's character good simply because it is God's character? Is there an independent standard of good or does God's character set the standard? If God's standard is the way it is *because* it is good, then there is an independent standard of goodness by which to evaluate God's character.⁴³

He thus cleverly pushes the same problem, the Euthyphro problem, back a step to apply to God's very nature. Consider, though, that God is by definition the greatest conceivable being, and a being whose nature is the very paradigm of goodness is greater than one who merely exemplifies goodness.⁴⁴ It is worth noting that "greatest conceivable being" and "being among all beings who happens to be the greatest of them all" are not equivalent. The former is necessarily unique, while the latter is only contingently so. If God were merely the "greatest of all beings that there are," then we may well ask for some standard external to God by which we know God is good (and by which God judges things as good). God, however, is not merely the "greatest (or 'goodest') of all beings that there are." Rather, God is the "greatest conceivable being," which is tantamount to the being whose very nature defines what good is (is the very paradigm of goodness). So it is due to God's *sui generis* ontological position that the Euthyphro dilemma is really no dilemma at all.⁴⁵

⁴² William Alston's discussion of this point is helpful. See his "What Euthyphro Should Have Said," in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 283-298.

⁴³ Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 4.

⁴⁴ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 182.

⁴⁵ Thanks to Professor Edward Henderson for helping me articulate this point.

Interestingly, Martin seems to anticipate such a theistic response: “But could not one reply that God could not be cruel and unjust since by necessity God must be good?”⁴⁶ After conceding that God is necessarily good, Martin claims that “unless we have some independent standard of goodness then whatever attributes God has would by definition be good: God's character would define what good is.”⁴⁷

Two things strike me about this modified objection. The first is that it applies to both theist and atheist alike. We might ask Martin, “Are your moral values good simply because they are good, or is there some independent standard of good to which they conform?”⁴⁸ The one theory is as susceptible to the objection as is the other. Martin would, no doubt, respond that at the end of the day a stopping point must be reached. Indeed, as William Lane Craig explains, unless one is a nihilist, one must eventually recognize an ultimate standard of value. The question becomes, then, which stopping point—Martin’s or the theist’s—is the least arbitrary. The nature of a necessarily good personal agent, God, seems to me the least arbitrary foundation for objective morality.

The second is that Martin is correct when he observes that the theist’s claims add up to God’s nature defining what good is! God’s essential nature *does* define what good is, but not in some capricious way. God is not, you recall, merely the greatest of all existing beings, another being among beings. God’s ontological status is *sui generis*. So, God commands as he does because God *is* goodness (similar to the way H₂O *is* water). The good God knows is, simply put,

⁴⁶ Martin, “Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape,” 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ This is pointed out by Paul Copan, “The Moral Argument,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, eds. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser (New York: Routledge, 2003), 166.

“Godself.” Therefore, to ask whether something is good because God commands it, or whether God commands something because it is good is seen to be non-sense.

3.4 The Moral Argument Vindicated

The renaissance currently being enjoyed by theism has generated renewed interest in the so-called theistic proofs or arguments for God’s existence, including the moral argument we have been discussing. Such arguments, you recall, are not typically offered in order to convince people of God’s existence but rather to demonstrate the rationality of theistic belief.⁴⁹ This has been the tone of my claim in this thesis.

Over the course of history, some, like John Locke, have insisted that non-theists are by consequence of their rejection of theism immoral (or, at least, not virtuous). Michael Martin is understandably not happy about such sentiment, making frequent allusions to it throughout his writings. The majority of theists, including myself, however, emphatically reject Locke’s claim. That is to say, I completely agree that a person can be moral without believing in the existence of God. The moral argument for God’s existence is often misconstrued as an argument that non-theists cannot be moral. To think this is to misunderstand the moral argument.

The moral argument contends for God’s existence *a posteriori* from our common experience of morality as objective. As we have seen, there is good reason to affirm the objectivity of morality and thus reject moral relativism. Martin agrees: “Ordinary language and common sense assume that morality is objective.”⁵⁰ Further, the deliverances of our common sense—our intuitions of objective morals—may, in the tradition of Thomas Reid and Alvin Plantinga, be considered properly basic. Since we all *know* or *intuit* the objectivity of morality,

⁴⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and, Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 2.

⁵⁰ Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, 12.

the only circumstances requisite for our being justified in holding these beliefs as basic is that our noetic faculties be functioning properly. This implies that anyone who denies the objectivity of morality—anyone who claims that rape or torturing the innocent may not *always* be wrong—is self-deceived, not functioning properly. Whether Martin would join me in invoking the notion of the proper basicity of beliefs, I do not know. What is clear, however, is that Martin agrees with me in accepting the second premise of the moral argument:

(2) Objective moral values do exist.

Though most atheist philosophers, including J. L. Mackie, Kai Nielson, and Richard Taylor, have recognized an inescapable connection between objective moral values and the existence of God, Martin does not. As we have seen, however, Martin's account lacks the requisite ontological foundation demanded by objective moral values. He does a brilliant job of laying out a moral epistemology in the form of Ideal Observer Theory, but this does nothing to ground objective morals. Besides, we conceded early on that theists and non-theists alike can *apprehend* or *know* and act upon objective morals. This is because theists and non-theists alike bear the image of God our Creator (Gen. 1:26-27). Unfortunately, Martin confuses the *ordo essendi* with the *ordo cognoscendi*—the order of being with the order of knowing. He fails to offer any ontological ground for objective morality, instead presupposing such a foundation.

By way of contrast, we saw that the theist's account does provide an ontological foundation for morality: God's very nature. God's holy and moral nature is the paradigm of goodness and is thus the ontological foundation of morality. Things are good or bad to the extent that they conform to God's moral nature, which is the absolute standard against which all actions are measured. By rooting morality in God's own nature, the theist neatly splits the horns of Martin's Euthyphro attack. Of course, as Martin shows, the attack can (always, I suspect) be

pushed back a step. Interestingly, though, this is a problem for both theists and atheists alike. An explanatory stopping point must ultimately be reached.

The question becomes, then, which is the least arbitrary account of the grounding of objective moral values: theism or Martin's atheism? In other words, is our first premise, namely,

(1) If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist

more plausible than Martin's denial of it? In my estimation objective moral values are far more at home in a theistic rather than in an atheistic universe. We have seen that Martin fails to offer an ontological foundation for morality, and given my worries about morality on Michael Ruse's account, I'm not sure how Martin *could* ground objective values. Martin is to be commended for steadfastly affirming objective moral values, but I'm afraid he shares a leaking boat with the late attorney Arthur Allen Leff. Leff, an atheist, wrote about morality in the absence of God:

[I]t looks as if we are all we have. Given what we know about ourselves and each other, this is an extraordinarily unappetizing prospect; looking around us it appears that if all men are brothers, the ruling model is Cain and Abel. Neither reason, nor love, nor even terror, seems to have worked to make us "good," and worse than that, there is no reason why anything should. Only if ethics were something unspeakable by us, could law be unnatural, and therefore unchallengeable. As things now stand, everything is up for grabs.

Nevertheless:

Starving the poor is wicked.

Buying and selling each other is depraved.

Those who stood up to and died resisting Hitler, Stalin, Amin, and Pol Pot and General Custer too—have earned salvation.

Those who acquiesced deserve to be damned.

There is in the world such a thing as evil.

[All together now:] Sez who?

God help us.⁵¹

⁵¹ Arthur Allen Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law," *Duke Law Journal* 6 (December 1979): 1249, quoted in Copan, "The Moral Dimensions of Michael Martin's Atheology," 76.

Premise (1) seems—indeed, has been shown to be—more plausible than Martin’s denial. Thus, Martin has not provided sufficient reason for us to reject the moral argument for God’s existence and the rationality of theistic belief is preserved.

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VITA

R. Keith Loftin is a native of Dry Creek, Louisiana. After obtaining his Bachelor of Arts degree in Biblical Studies from Southeastern Bible College (Birmingham, Alabama), Keith earned a Master of Arts in Humanities at the University of Dallas, focusing on the history of philosophy. Returning to Louisiana, he earned a second Master of Arts degree at Louisiana State University (in philosophy). His primary philosophical interests lie in the philosophy of religion and metaphysics. Keith has, for several years now, worked for the Apologetics Resource Center (Birmingham, Alabama), a Christian apologetics ministry. He is an Associate Editor for the *Areopagus Journal* and an active member of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. Beginning in the Spring term of 2009, Keith will return to his *alma mater* as an instructor of philosophy and apologetics. Keith lives with his wife, Julie, in Calera, Alabama.