DAVID BAGGETT & JERRY L. WALLS

GOD & COSMOS

Moral Truth and Human Meaning

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To Marybeth Baggett, with profound gratitude and love

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Introduction

THE NOTION OF moral truth today strikes many people—not most, but many much of the time, and a great many some of the time—as off-putting: dogmatic, judgmental, abrasive, pious, presumptuous. Sometimes it is connected and dispensed with superstition, and other times with imperialism and imposition. *Moralistic* is one of the worst terms of disapprobation and derogation nowadays, and this whole notion of morality is often castigated as the deepest source of blame. Ethical relativists, to foster more tolerant attitudes and ostensible openness to those of opposing views, encourage us not to overreach by assuming that our convictions have any purchase on those outside our culture or subculture; postmoderns of various stripes eschew totalizing meta-narratives, assume a hermeneutic of suspicion, and, in the process, leave behind anything like objective moral truth. Some downright celebrate leaving morality and its judgments, condemnations, inconvenient behavioral strictures, suffocating sanctimony, and dire warnings about brimstone and hellfire altogether behind.

We could not disagree more or demur with more adamancy. This book is based rather on the idea that morality matters deeply; that moral truth is real; and that it, in fact, offers us one of the clearest windows and veridical intimations into ultimate reality. This does not mean that we cannot see the ways in which moral language and practice can be perverted, the way people have on occasion imposed their moral convictions in inappropriate ways, the way all manner of evils has been perpetrated under the cloak of morality. We can see that all of those things have happened, but none of them provides any evidence to suggest that moral truth itself is to blame. In fact, most all of the abuses, perversions, corruptions, and various instances of cruelty, inhumanity, and meanness are best identified

for what they are and denounced for being as bad as they are only by holding fast to the category of objective moral truth, without which we lose the resource to renounce them robustly.

When we talk about morality, we wish to begin with clear cases of moral beauty that stir and inspire our hearts and minds. We think of Mother Teresa (and those of her ilk) dedicating herself to a lifetime of helping the poor and helpless, the marginalized and oppressed, the ostracized and disenfranchised; of William Wilberforce finding the moral courage and fortitude to keep fighting for the abolition of slavery in England despite widespread systemic opposition; of Martin Luther King, Jr. selflessly leading the charge against all odds and in the face of horrible persecution against segregation and racism; of warriors of justice battling sex trafficking of helpless girls; of those who have stood against apartheid or the wicked wholesale slaughter of Jews or Armenians or Native Americans; of relief workers who strive assiduously to provide clean water and nutritious food to children of poverty.

Of course, there are also spectacular moral failures to lament. Even Michael Ruse, a naturalistic philosopher, insists that he flatly condemns "as strongly as anyone the rapes in Yugoslavia, the atrocities of Hitler, the ongoing practice of female circumcision."[1] We do not doubt for a moment that Ruse would condemn such practices, but we harbor grave doubts whether he can do so with as much principled conviction as a classical theist. Our point is philosophical, not psychological; Ruse is likely far better than his worldview, even as religious adherents are often worse than theirs. Morality—or so we will argue in this book—simply makes better sense, constitutes a better fit, in a theistic world than an atheistic world.

We are not going to spend time refuting relativists and subjectivists in this book. Nor postmoderns and moral perspectivalists. We are going to take on naturalists and secularists who wish to retain their convictions about objective moral truth. We will both agree and disagree with them. We will profoundly agree with them about the existence of moral truth, but we will also deeply disagree with them that those convictions make best sense in a naturalistic or atheistic world. The moral convictions in question certainly do not provide any evidence in favor of naturalism; arguably they exist in great if not irremediable tension with naturalism.

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1. Michael Ruse, "Evolution and Ethics: The Sociobiological Approach," in *Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis Pojman, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), p. 661.

In contrast, however, the moral truths in question are readily if not easily explained and thus deeply congruent with classical theism generally, and with Christianity in particular.

This book will also not take on the growing chorus of moral anti-realists—skeptics when it comes to morality. As mentioned above, adamant voices from this direction are increasing in numbers and volume, and they need to be answered; in light of the huge problems naturalists encounter making sense of morality, the rise of anti-realists is altogether understandable. We hope to discuss this emerging and troubling trend in a later book. For now our focus will assume that moral truth is real—that those who would embrace such truths, irrespective of their worldview, are right to do so. Torturing babies for fun is both wrong and bad, and indeed unspeakably evil. Those who think presumptuous any book predicated on such an assumption of moral common sense will simply have to indulge us; if we are wrong about that, we are likely wrong about nearly everything. We gladly take the risk. We will argue that theism provides the best explanation of these moral truths that, for present purposes, will function axiomatically, contrary to the assumptions of one like Friedrich Nietzsche.

The German philosopher Nietzsche was well known for his famous refrain that "God is dead." Some take Nietzsche to be affirming atheism. Others interpret the import of his mantra to be that God, even if he exists, has become increasingly irrelevant to the way people live their lives; even many professing theists are functional atheists. Either way, Nietzsche helped inspire the catchy title of a 2014 movie—*God's Not Dead*.

The movie chronicles the story of a young college student who, against great odds and with little moral support, has to defend his faith in a philosophy class. The film garnered its share of both zealous defenders and ardent critics. With the supporters, we concur with its central idea that there are good reasons to believe in the supernatural, that religious belief does not require checking one's brain at the door. The student takes up his professor's challenge to defend his faith by hitting the books and adducing arguments from the realm of natural theology and apologetics, using strategies that, though cursory and rudimentary, remain at least suggestive of fruitful avenues to explore.

Despite such gestures in promising directions, however, the movie is disappointing in many ways, and inclines us to sympathize with many of the detractors of the film. Perhaps the most serious problem the film

manifests is that it strikes an inauthentic note, which is deeply related to why the movie comes up short as a work of art. The characters tend to be one-dimensional; the movie indulges stereotypes of various sorts; much of the dialogue is laughably unrealistic. The net effect of such poor aesthetic choices was a great deal of lost potential. The movie's penchant for caricature, simplistic critique, and pop psychological reduction of atheist convictions resulted in a film that missed its rather ambitious mark.[2]

God's Not Dead is no doubt meant as an encouragement to believers, especially young people whose faith gets assailed in the public square. Although we resonate with such goals, we do not think that a movie that depicts atheists as typically smug, arrogant, irrational, unreasonable, and obnoxious is the way to do it. The atheistic philosophy professor in the movie is so cartoonish, harsh, and dogmatic that it is unlikely that what he does in his class would even be legal; it is certainly not in the spirit of philosophy rightly understood. However much some believers might like to cast themselves as victims of such intellectual snobbery, secular elitism, and atheistic animus, real-life philosophy professors anywhere near the vicinity of this fictional portrayal are, in our experience in the field anyway, relatively rare. There are certainly dogmatic atheists, and even fundamentalist-type obnoxious atheists, just as there are obnoxious religious fundamentalists; but painting either group as a whole with such a broad and uncharitable brush is intellectually dishonest. If believers do not like to be stereotyped, pigeonholed, and summarily dismissed in this fashion, they should refrain from doing it with their interlocutors. It conduces neither to charity nor civil dialogue.

So why mention this movie featuring a smattering of apologetic arguments, a contrived storyline, farfetched caricatures, and a conspicuous absence of subtlety, nuance, and sophistication? We do not count it our job or duty or even prerogative to dictate to people what they like or don't like. However, the positive response to the movie by so many believers is troubling to us for several reasons pertinent to this book. Many defenders of the film seem convinced that the main or perhaps even sole purpose of movies is entertainment—to provoke feelings, make you laugh, or cry. Although entertainment is perfectly legitimate, this movie aimed for more.

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2. With obvious exceptions, most believers in the Western world, imbued as it is with reigning ideals of political freedom, do not experience anything like real persecution. To think otherwise trivializes the actual persecution endured by many Christians in other parts of the world—not usually at the hands of secular humanists, incidentally.

This brings to mind business ethics students who inform their teachers, most soberly, that the purpose of business is to *make money*—which usually is taken to entail that pretty much anything goes. This strikes us as an emaciated picture of the purpose of business—what about a more expansive picture of what business is about? How about serving others, meeting needs, building relationships, following your passion, weaving a fabric of healthy, harmonious relationships—and in the process making a living? A narrow view of movies and the arts, too, strikes us as sadly myopic and theologically deficient. Especially when we are talking about an ostensibly Christian movie, what about conveying truth, provoking deep thought, smartly challenging reigning secular plausibility structures, imbuing wisdom, embodying excellence? And in the process, it can also entertain.

But even from the standpoint of entertainment, there is not much to be said for a movie lacking subtlety, depth, texture, honesty. A modicum of rudimentary apologetics is not enough to salvage a movie replete with simplistic caricatures and contrived narratives.

Believers, of all people, should not be so easily satisfied and mollified into acquiescence with mediocrity. David Bentley Hart writes that what is certain "is that, to this point, most of the unquestionably sublime achievements of the human intellect and imagination have arisen in worlds shaped by some vision of transcendent truth."[3]

Just recently one of us visited the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, an amazing Gothic creation that took 200 years to complete. As my wife and I (Dave) stood speechless and mesmerized before the mammoth, imposing, impressive structure and took it all in, I could not help but think, "No sort of deflationary, arid worldview could motivate something like this." The transportive experience evoked nothing less than a sense of the ineffable.

We hate to rain on the parade of our fellow believers who are excited by a film like *God's Not Dead*, but the movie gives the impression that serious philosophical argument is far easier than it really is. Take just one example of the apologetics in the movie. The student defender of faith argues that secularists can't make any sense of objective morality, quoting the Dostoevsky line that "everything is permissible without God," as if that establishes the point.

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3. David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 6.

A skeptical philosopher recently wrote a scathing critique of the movie for the online version of *Psychology Today*. This was one of his points: "The 'everything is permissible without God' argument is one of the worst arguments for God. Not only are there many secular ethical theories, but divine command theory—the idea that God grounds all ethical truths—is one of the most discredited positions in all of philosophy. Not only is it subject to the *Euthyphro* problem (which suggests that God determining morality makes morality arbitrary) but it's not clear that divine command theory is any better than a 'God of the gaps' argument: 'What makes a good, good and the bad, bad? I don't know, God did it.'"[4]

As our previous volume *Good God*—of which this book is a sequel of sorts—makes clear, we would dissent from his assessment here; in fact, we think it is based on a number of tired mistakes. The existence of "many secular ethical theories" assuredly does not show that such a list contains the best explanation of objective moral values and duties, or even a plausible one; divine command theory is but one way to try couching the locus of moral obligations in God; most divine command theories worth their salt do not entail that God grounds all ethical truths since most divine command theories are delimited to deontic matters of moral obligation; divine command theory has undergone a major resurgence in recent years, garnering defenses and articulations by some of the brightest philosophers alive today from John Hare to Robert Adams and from C. Stephen Evans to Paul Copan; the *Euthyphro* Dilemma has been, in our estimation and in that of many others, definitively answered in the recent literature; the rejection of theistic ethics based on the *Euthyphro* Dilemma likely assumes the idea of god as Demiurge rather than the God of classical theism; and a whole panoply of reasons has been offered to take theistic ethics and even divine command theory seriously beyond a "God of the gaps" approach.

Such stiff resistance to the apologetics on offer in the movie is implicitly encouraged, though, by the movie itself. Simplicity breeds simplicity; caricature multiplies caricature. This is why the critique of this movie matters.

Despite all of the various efforts to answer the *Euthyphro* Dilemma in the last decade alone, secularists continue relishing pointing to it as

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4. David Kyle Johnson, "God's Not Dead? Neither Is Philosophy." Published March 24, 2014. http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/logical-take/201403/god-s-not-dead-neither-is-philosophy (accessed June 1, 2014).

an efficacious refutation of theistic ethics. In a recent book, *Plato at the Googleplex*, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, protégé of Thomas Nagel, confidently writes:

> Socrates proceeds to formulate a line of reasoning that will prove to be of fundamental importance in the history of secularism, one that will be adapted by freethinkers from Spinoza to Bertrand Russell to the so-called new atheists of today, persuasively arguing that a belief in the gods—or God—cannot provide the philosophical grounding for morality. . . . What is still referred to as "the Euthyphro Dilemma" or "the Euthyphro Argument" remains one of the most frequently utilized arguments against the claim that morality can be grounded only in theology, that it is only the belief in God that stands between us and the moral abyss of nihilism. Dostoevsky may have declared that "without God all is permissible," but Plato's preemptive riposte, sent out to us across the millennia, is that any act morally impermissible with God is morally impermissible without him, making clear how little the addition of God helps to clarify the ethical situation. The argument Plato has Socrates make in the *Euthyphro* is one of the most important in the history of moral philosophy. . . . We humans must reason our way to morality or we will not get there at all. Relying on fiats, even should they emanate from on high, will not allow us to achieve an understanding of virtue.[5]

Answering these objections is eminently possible, but requires that we develop more sophistication in defending theistic convictions, not watering down and simplifying the complex matters at issue. It is remarkable that Goldstein acts as if the capricious pantheon of Greek divinities is on a moral par with the God of Christianity in whom there is no shadow of turning. This mammoth disanalogy makes a great deal of difference when defending an intelligent theistic ethic, yet it is one she dispenses with by a wave of her hand. In fact, no bigger difference in theology can be imagined; one picture envisions capricious, finite, imperfect deities within the universe, the other the Ground of Being on whom everything depends for

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5. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away* (New York: Pantheon, 2014), pp. 306–307.

its existence. This is why no discussion of morality and God is complete without a consideration of the entirety of the world, which helps explain our title. In fact, this recurring issue of God as absolute Creator, as Ground of Being, as locus of value, as should become increasingly clear, will be an integrating motif throughout this entire book. As such it will bear repetition in numerous forms. Its relevance is overlooked on pain of the sort of unwittingly superficial analysis that, unfortunately, motivates claims as diverse as "Atheists believe in just one less god than theists do," to (echoing Goldstein) "Morality is based on reason, not divine commands," to "Science reveals naturalism to be true," to "Since evolution explains morality, the thesis of theism is rendered superfluous."

This book is our effort to advance a cumulative abductive moral argument for God's existence. Part of the challenge of making this case is considering the relative adequacy and explanatory power of a broad array of secular ethical approaches. We are committed to doing so and, in the process, according them the careful consideration, due diligence, and patient attention they deserve, at least to the extent we logistically can. The book is built on the following guiding assumption: that the logical, semantic, and phenomenological features of morality constitute the desiderata of moral theory that invite reflection and careful scrutiny. They cry out for a solid account. Achieving the best explanation of such moral realities—facts ontological, epistemic, performative, and rational—is the purpose of our investigation. We wish to argue that classical theism and distinctively Christian theology provide the best explanation of morality, and will attempt to do so within the space constraints of one volume. This requires a subsidiary point of emphasis throughout the work, namely, that theology matters—both the tenets of classical theism on the one hand, and those of distinctively Christian theology on the other. Both sources of theological insight are crucial, and ultimately, on our view, integrally related.

In our previous volume, we spent the preponderance of our analysis defending theistic ethics against various objections. Only one chapter was explicitly devoted to a critique of naturalistic ethics. By the time we finished that book, we knew that various naturalistic efforts at explaining morality merited further analysis. So in this book, we intend to invert our earlier foci and spend much of our present effort explicating naturalism and ethical views espoused by naturalists and atheists and reserve most of what we have to say about the case in favor of theistic ethics for our final summative chapter. At that point we will bring to bear many of

the insights gleaned along the way in our assessment of naturalistic and secular ethical theory. Our conclusion will stand in diametric opposition to both interpretations of Nietzsche, for we will argue not just that God exists, but also that God is most certainly relevant in understanding and explaining morality.

Introduction to Part I

Antony Flew, one of the most famous philosophical atheists of the twentieth century, underwent a huge change of mind near the end of his life. Prior to the evolution in his thought that attracted the most press, he had earlier changed his mind on whether or not human beings are free in the libertarian sense; a longtime defender of a compatibilist understanding of human freedom, his perspective shifted and he began affirming a stronger sense of agency. Flew counted that decision as on a par with, if not more significant than, the one that came later, the one that set the blogosphere ablaze and made international news, including such memorable headlines as "Flew the Coop."

Having argued forcefully but respectfully his whole career that the evidence led in the direction of atheism, he came to believe that the preponderance of evidence pointed instead to the existence of God—though more the deity of Aristotle than the God of Abraham. On the strength of scientific arguments for theism, especially biological and fine-tuning ones, Flew left atheism behind, but only to become a deist, not a classical theist.

Interestingly enough, he remained unmoved by the moral argument, C. S. Lewis's variant as the salient example in his mind. Since a deist does not believe in an interventionist God, arguments for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus never quite brought Flew around, despite his having said that, if he became a theist, he would probably become a Christian because of the power of the case for the resurrection. Flew's resistance, it would seem, was primarily rooted in his inability to affirm God's moral attributes, and his difficulty overcoming this challenge explains his resistance to the moral argument for God's existence. Moral arguments have the distinctive advantage of accentuating God's moral attributes: his omnibenevolence, his impeccability, his goodness. If such arguments work, they make sense of a God who does more than merely contemplate himself; indeed, they dovetail and resonate perfectly with a God who pursues, who

would deign to intervene, become involved, stoop to save, die to bring life. Flew could not bring himself to believe this, as far as we know.

Flew was a firm moral realist and, later on, a believer in libertarian free will. Belief in moral regrets, moral responsibilities, moral rights, and moral freedoms, one would have hoped, might have enabled him to see the power of theism to explain such realities. He came to see the inadequacy of a naturalistic perspective when it came to the laws of nature, the existence of something rather than nothing, human consciousness, the efficacy of reason, and the emergence of life. He took all of these to be sound evidential considerations in favor of a divine Mind. Why not moral experience and the existence of a moral law as well?

As far as we can tell, the reasons for his resistance to the moral argument(s) were fourfold. One issue was that he was convinced biblical exegesis led to the view that God inexplicably predestines some to an eternal hell for lives they could not have avoided. A second issue was that if morality were to depend on God, God would be its justification, which would lead, at most, to prudential reasons to be moral, based on the prospects of punishment for failure to comply. A third issue was his concern over the equation of goodness and being, originally deriving from the teachings of Plato. One like Gottfried Leibniz, Flew argued, used this equation to derive a system of ethics on theistic foundations that is irremediably arbitrary. Things not at all recognizably good are to be called good anyway. This concern basically sounds like the classical arbitrariness and vacuity problem rooted in Ockhamistic voluntarism.[1] And a fourth

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1. John Hare notes that our use of the language of Ockhamism doesn't bear historical scrutiny. In a review of *Good God*, he wrote in this regard, "Baggett and Walls take as their opponents naturalists on the one side and radical voluntarists, or 'Ockhamists,' on the other. But they have not understood Ockham properly. Their reading of him is, indeed, not unique to them. It is shared by the present pope, as they mention. But they should read the magisterial two-volume work of Marilyn Adams on Ockham, and even more, the work of Lucan Freppert, which she largely endorses. The present review is not the proper place to launch into an account of Ockham. I will say, simply, that I think his view is that the command to not love God, though its content is possible in itself, is pragmatically incoherent (a practical contradiction) because it cannot be disobeyed; this is because to disobey it is already to love God: 'The created will cannot elicit such an act during this time.' (*Quodlibetal Questions* III.14) A content can be non-contradictory in itself but contradictory *as commanded*. This seems to be the view of the preponderance of Ockham's texts on the issue, in which he teaches that to obey God and to love God are the same thing. A content can also be non-contradictory as commanded, but contradictory as commanded *by God*." https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24730-good-god-the-theistic-foundations-of-morality/ (accessed March 17, 2015). We acknowledge this with appreciation and admit we are using the locution of "Ockhamism" more colloquially to communicate radical voluntarism.

issue was perhaps the biggest of all, and in a sense the culmination of all of the above: the problem of evil. Flew's resistance to the moral argument makes good sense thus construed, and it was inevitable that until he thought of God as personal and moral, rather than merely intellectual and impersonal, his resistance to special revelation would remain intact and he would continue to be convinced by the teleological and cosmological arguments but not the moral one. Of course his resistance to the case for the resurrection would persist as well.

Flew's story underscores the need for moral apologetics. In our earlier book, as it happens, we attempted to address all of Flew's worries. We think the historical, biblical, and philosophical evidence weighs heavily against a Calvinistic soteriology, and we pointed out that most recent theistic ethicists, especially since Locke, have focused on the ontological grounding of moral facts in God, not the motivational and prudential incentive for morality provided by divine threats. We explicated and defended a theistic ethic that avoids Ockhamistic voluntarism, and we made the case that moral apologetics and the problem of evil are locked in a zero-sum battle; only one can survive, and we think the evidence for the success of moral apologetics is strong. We obviously can't reiterate all of the arguments from our previous book; our intention instead is to build on that book by extending our argument. We provided some positive reasons to embrace a theistic ethic in our earlier work, and we answered various objections to such a view. In this book we will spend more time offering positive reasons for theistic ethics by showing the weakness of its alternatives and the comparative strength of theistic ethics in explaining moral facts.

It would perhaps be useful to quickly reiterate an important series of distinctions we made in our earlier book by which we defended theistic ethics against various *Euthyphro*-inspired objections. In general, we defended a version of a divine command theory of the right and divine character or nature account of the good, arguing that such a view is philosophically powerful enough to evade the standard criticisms thought to count against theistic ethics. The seven categories of those distinctions are these: scope, semantic, modal, moral, epistemic, metaethical, and ontological. And respectively, the distinctions are *definition versus analysis, univocation versus equivocation, conceivability versus possibility, good versus right, difficulty versus impossibility, knowing versus being,* and *dependence versus control.* This set of distinctions helps answer a variety of objections to theistic ethics, thereby bolstering the case for moral apologetics. Such objections range from vacuity to arbitrariness to epistemic to normativity objections.

By the time we had finished *Good God*, though, we realized the need to expand our analysis of the reasons secular ethical theories ultimately fail. Our contention is not that such theories fail in every conceivable sense or that they offer nothing of value. To the contrary, we think, as classical theists, that we have every reason to expect secular ethics to get us some distance down the road of moral explanation. Exploring the reasons why this is true will be one of the tasks we undertake in the upcoming pages. However, we will contend and try to show that these theories ultimately fail to provide an adequate account of the full range of moral phenomena in need of explanation. Naturalism and ethics are poor dance partners, a bad fit, an odd couple. We in fact had flirted with calling this book *Unequally Yoked* to capture the incongruous pairing of naturalism and objective morality.[2]

Classical theism, in contrast, resonates nicely with objective morality and better explains it. We had pointed in rather cursory fashion at the reasons for this in the first chapter of our previous volume. What became clear by the time we finished that book, though, was that a more thorough, convincing, and decisive demonstration of the inadequacy of secular ethics is called for. In this book we thus set ourselves to just this task: To argue that ethical theories founded on the principles of naturalism and secularism are inevitably inadequate to sustain objective moral values, duties, and other moral realities. This book, unlike its predecessor, features for its dominant motif the claim that naturalism (or secularism more broadly) lacks sufficient resources to undergird moral theory.

When we speak of classical theism *explaining* morality, we are speaking of an "inference to the best explanation" ("IBE," for short) case for theistic ethics. IBE is a kind of abductive reasoning identified by Gilbert Harman in 1965, although Harman's definition of abduction did not quite match that of Charles Sanders Peirce's characterization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Peirce, a contemporary of William James and the son of a famous Harvard mathematician, noted that all of us tend to infer explanations; we hypothesize in efforts to explain various phenomena we encounter. Such hypotheses then generate further

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2. Incidentally, "unequally yoked"—besides being a biblical image—is the Internet name for Leah Libresco's blog. She is an interesting and intelligent young lady. An active blogger, she was an outspoken atheist until she converted to Christianity a few years ago, thanks in large part to the power of a moral argument for God's existence. In her case, she came to think that her naturalistic assumptions were the piece of her worldview that simply did not cohere with the rest, including her strong convictions about virtue ethics.

predictions that can be tested. Inferences to the best explanation have gone by various names—the method of hypothesis, hypothetic inference, the method of elimination, retroduction, presumption—but Harman preferred IBE terminology because he thought it avoided most of the misleading suggestions of the alternative characterizations. "In making this inference one infers, from the fact that a certain hypothesis would explain the evidence, to the truth of that hypothesis," and since various hypotheses could explain the evidence, it is important, he argued, to "reject all such alternative hypotheses before one is warranted in making the inference."[3] Abduction is not a form of deduction, where the premises aim at logically guaranteeing the conclusion as formal consequence; it is rather more like induction in this sense, where the conclusion is not guaranteed but still warranted.

IBE is an argumentative and inferential strategy found in history, science, philosophy, artificial intelligence, and other disciplines besides. It sets itself to explain a set of phenomena—Peirce thought it likely the phenomena in question was in some way surprising or complicated—in a way at once plausible, instinctive, and economical. Here is generally how the argument pattern works: We begin with a set of data points—states of affairs or established facts, the aforementioned phenomena in question—and construct a pool of possible explanation candidates. On the basis of a principled set of criteria one winnows the list down to the best explanation among the possibilities, and then hopefully achieves sufficient warrant to infer to it as the likely true explanation. The inference does not settle the matter, but produces new opportunities to subject the explanation to critical scrutiny to assess its effectiveness at providing further explanation of additional observations. Three important components of such an inference pattern, then, are (1) the set of salient facts requiring explanation, (2) the list of explanation candidates, and (3) the criteria by which we reduce the field of candidates down to the one that is best. Let's say a word about each.

Set of Salient Facts Requiring Explanation: An abductive moral argument for God's existence begins with important moral realities. These are an important starting point, and such realities will include ontological matters (moral facts), epistemic matters (moral knowledge), performative

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3. Gilbert Harman, "The Inference to the Best Explanation," *Philosophical Review* (1965) 74:89.

matters (moral transformation), and facts about morality and rationality (including the convergence of happiness and moral virtue). For now let us confine our attention to ontological matters, though subsequent chapters will be devoted to each variant.

The sorts of moral facts requiring explanation are objective, prescriptively binding moral duties, objective moral values, requisite moral freedom, ascriptions of moral responsibility, and other relevantly similar data of that ilk. Moral value pertains to the worth of a person or action, good or bad, whereas moral duties pertain to matters of rightness and wrongness, usually of actions. Goodness and obligations do not precisely overlap. In fact, as counterintuitive as it may seem, goodness is neither necessary nor sufficient for rightness. Cases where one must choose the lesser of two evils and is not just morally permitted but actually obligated to do so illustrate that goodness is not necessary for obligation. More typically, of course, the obligatory is also good in an important sense, but the fact that there can be obligations to do something in an important sense bad (taking life in war, for example) shows that goodness is not a necessary condition for rightness—even if no duty involves the requirement to do something irremediably evil. Nor is goodness sufficient for rightness, for there can presumably be ever so many good things to do that are not required. Helping out at the soup kitchen five days a week would be good, but it is not usually thought of as a duty. Such actions are called "supererogatory": actions praiseworthy to do but not blameworthy not to do. At any rate, among the moral facts in need of explanation are both objective moral values and obligations.

Unlike Aquinas and the Catholic tradition, which finds a doctrine of supererogation in the biblical distinction between counsels and precepts, Protestant theologians, particularly Lutherans and Calvinists, have more commonly tended to oppose such a view. The nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, for example, expressed virulent opposition: "It is . . . the absolutely preposterous doctrine of supererogation which must be admitted if we adopt the creed of the Church of Rome in this matter. The idea is that a man may be more than perfect. . . . It supposes an impossibility. It supposes that a rational creature can be better than he ought to be; i.e. than he is bound to be."[4]

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4. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1871), p. 758.

When John Wesley formed the Twenty-Five Articles of the Methodist Church, he adapted Article XIV of the Church of England's Articles of 1571, which said this regarding works of supererogation: "Voluntary works besides, over and above, God's commandments which they call Works of Supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety. For by them men do declare that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for His sake than of bounden duty is required: Whereas Christ saith plainly, When ye have done all that are commanded to you, say, We be unprofitable servants."[5]

Claire Brown has usefully delineated the main Protestant objections to supererogation: (1) belief in supererogation is motivated by sin (in particular, pride, arrogance, or sloth); (2) the distinction between commands and counsels fosters immorality; (3) the distinction between commands and counsels is arbitrary; (4) the doctrine of supererogation contradicts scripture; and (5) the doctrine of supererogation leads to the abuse of indulgences. Brown goes on to defend supererogation, and ably so, from the stance of a virtue ethic.[6]

Our conviction that a class of supererogatory actions exists, to be clear, is not in any way connected with indulgences in Roman Catholicism; nor do we in any way affirm salvation by works. We simply mean to affirm the much less ambitious and commonsensical notion that we are not as human beings obligated to do absolutely every good of which we are capable. The insistence to the contrary strikes us as an odd view even for those of a Christian perfectionist bent. The intuitive distinction between the good and the right, at any rate, remains intact irrespective of one's views on supererogation.[7]

"Objective" moral values and duties contrast with subjectivist theories according to which morality is relativized, either to cultures, subcultures, or individuals, on the one hand, and of course any anti-realist moral stance according to which there are no moral facts at all, either objective

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5. https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/book-of-common-prayer/articles-of-religion.aspx#XIV (accessed February 19, 2015).

6. Claire Michelle Brown, *Supererogation for a Virtue Ethicist*, http://etd.nd.edu/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-01172011-121842/unrestricted/BrownC012011D.pdf (accessed June 10, 2014), pp. 12–18.

7. For a humorous illustration of a profound thinker ruminating on supererogation, consider Homer Simpson's words after finding out that he would need to paint the garage to procure entrance to heaven: "I just want to get in, I'm not running for Jesus."

or subjective, on the other. Ethical relativists, moral noncognitivists, and moral anti-realists would all be among those who would reject the moral phenomena in question that we propose to explain best by a theistic account. Their views are certainly worth considering, but we will not do so in this particular volume. We have touched on some such views before, and hope to do so again later, but not here.

Another way to get at the heart of morality is to identify some of its most intuitively plausible features based on our shared moral language and concepts. Scott M. James does just this in a nice analysis in his book introducing evolutionary ethics. For now it will suffice to quote him at length as he summarizes his observations:

> What makes moral creatures moral apparently involves a number of things. The following seem to represent some conceptual truths about the making of moral judgments. (1) Moral creatures understand prohibitions. (2) Moral prohibitions do not appear to depend on our desires, nor (3) do they appear to depend on human conventions, like the law. Instead, they appear to be objective, not subjective. (4) Moral judgments are tightly linked to motivation: sincerely judging that some act is wrong appears to entail at least some desire to refrain from performing that act. (5) Moral judgments imply notions of dessert: doing what you know to be morally prohibited implies that punishment would be justified. (6) Moral creatures, such as ourselves, experience a distinctive affective response to our own wrongdoing, and this response often prompts us to make amends for the wrongdoing.[8]

J. P. Moreland cuts the cookie in yet another way as he explicates what morality involves. He lists seven features of morally relevant intrinsic value and objective moral value as humans commonsensically know them to be. They are as follows: (1) the existence of objective value; (2) the nature of the moral law (violation of which produces guilt and shame); (3) the instantiation of morally relevant value properties (unlike entities knowable by scientific means); (4) the intersection of intrinsic value and human persons; (5) knowledge of intrinsic value and the moral law;

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8. Scott M. James, *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 56.

(6) the nature of moral action (exercises of libertarian freedom in which an enduring self acts teleologically for duty's sake in such a way that the act is autonomous and not heteronomous in Kant's sense); and (7) an adequate answer to the question "Why should I be moral?"[9] It is not our intention at this stage to beg questions by assuming as sacrosanct such a list, but it is one among other useful starting points that we will have occasion to discuss.[10]

List of Explanation Candidates: In order for theistic ethics to work, it needs to show itself capable of defending itself against various objections and it needs to commend itself for our belief. Among positive reasons to take it to be true is its superior explanatory power, specifically with respect to its ability to explain the full range of moral facts in need of explanation, such as objective moral values and duties. In order to make this case, the comparative cases need to be constructed for rival hypotheses, requiring a careful examination of a range of secular and naturalistic ethical theories vying for allegiance. From deontological to consequentialist theories, from evolutionary ethical accounts to social contract theories to secular virtue accounts—these are the pool from which we draw potentially viable alternative explanations of moral facts. This book will take the time to go through various representative theories in enough detail to show how and why such theories, by comparison to classical theism, fail to provide the best explanation of morality. Of course, the breadth and range of such secular theories are such that we inevitably can only initiate this discussion, not offer anything like a final word. In light of the ongoing, unfolding nature of abductive inferences, anyway, final words are hard to come by. But we do strive in our analysis to provide a broader and more cumulative discussion than most analyses currently on offer.

Narrowing Criteria: Abductive criteria for narrowing the field of explanation candidates down to one can vary, but here is one attempt at it: (1) explanatory power; (2) explanatory scope; (3) plausibility; (4) degree of "ad hoc–ness"; and (5) conformity with other beliefs. The more explanatory power and scope and the more plausibility and conformity with other beliefs an explanation has, the better an explanation it is. The less ad hoc (adjusted, contrived, artificial) the explanation, the better as well. The trick

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9. J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp. 146–156.

10. Ibid.

is to subject all the explanation options to these tests in order to pick the one that is the best—and therefore most likely true—explanation.

Although IBE is a powerful and intuitive argumentative strategy, it is not without its critics. Alvin Plantinga has this to say about abduction:

> We should note that inference to the best explanation isn't really inference; you aren't compelled by some rule of inference to accept a bad explanation of some phenomenon, even if that explanation is the best one you can think of. Suppose there are six candidates; suppose the most probable among them has a probability of .2. Even if that explanation is the best one, you will quite properly refuse to accept it as the truth of the matter.[11]

The problem with inferences to the best explanation, the same problem that can afflict arguments constructed in Bayesian fashion—as Plantinga sees it—is that part of what makes an explanation good or bad is its probability. "So we are back at the antecedent probability of theism: whether theism is a good explanation of the phenomena depends in part on the antecedent probability of theism."[12]

This should serve as a needed reminder of a few important points to bear in mind as we proceed. If we were to conclude that classical theism provides, on examination, the best explanation of morality, and even assuming there is widespread agreement on the salient facts in need of explanation and theism's victory, what we can infer is limited in certain respects. First, perhaps morality increases the likelihood of theism but only by a marginal amount. Second, it should be said in such a case that the probability of theism has increased (by much or a little) *relative to morality*; in theory the probability of atheism could increase or decrease relative to other phenomena. (However, the success of the moral argument would decisively undercut the problem of evil, which tends to be counted as the best evidence against theism.) Third, that theism bests each individual secular ethical theory does not necessarily mean that it beats every combination of them; arguing it does requires additional work. Fourth, too much initial or a priori skepticism about theism (or objective morality for

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11. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 223–224.

12. Ibid., p. 224.

that matter) could function to derail an abductive moral argument from the start. Fifth, all of these points are a useful reminder that the moral argument functions best evidentially in combination with various other pieces of natural theology and historical apologetics. Unlike the problem of evil, which tends to be a one-man show, the moral argument is just the star quarterback on a very talented team.

To accomplish the task before us, allow us to explain the structure of this book. It has three parts. Part I discusses naturalism in broad terms; we lay out what naturalism is, explore where it came from, and describe its salient features. We then highlight three takeaways from the cursory historical overview: a deflationary temptation, diversity among naturalists and secularists, and a third option beyond theism and materialism.

Then we spend time motivating an abductive moral apologetic, arguing that it has several advantages over a prominent example of a deductive variant much discussed of late; the culmination of that discussion will also, as it happens, serve as additional motivation for the second part of the book. We round out our general discussion of naturalism by exploring two important moral issues and their connection to naturalism: free will and a secular variant of the problem of evil. In *Good God*, we explained the way the problem of evil and the moral argument(s) are in diametric opposition, locked in a zero-sum game. We could have included moral and natural evil as data better explained by theism than atheism and put the third chapter into Part II. Instead, in light of their general nature, we use the discussion as a transition into the main argument of book. The mysteries at the heart of the problem of evil serve to make obvious the need for discussing issues of the good, the right, and the like undertaken in Part II.

The structure of Part II will be explained in greater detail later on, but, in brief, it is strategically designed to capture the fourfold moral argument this book advances. The four components are moral facts, moral knowledge, moral transformation, and moral rationality. In chapters 4–8 we take up each of these variants of the moral argument (moral facts are divided into two chapters: one on values, one on duties), underscoring the deficiencies of various secular attempts to explain them. The final chapter, constitutive of Part III, summarizes the positive case in favor of the superior explanatory power of theism generally and Christianity particularly in each area, and the cumulative case that results from combining all the points together.