

ner. Such is the life of a philosopher. But, as I noted earlier, presuppositions and motives direct the use of reason in a variety of ways,<sup>40</sup> and philosophers are not exempt from such a use. This becomes especially apparent when dealing with God's existence, which has profoundly personal implications. God's existence, if actual, has far-reaching ramifications for how we live. If there is a God, his goal for us is not simply justified true belief that he exists, but that we lovingly embrace him as Lord of our lives. While philosophical precision and reasoned discernment are obviously important, one cannot ignore the personal and moral and volitional entailments of God's existence.<sup>41</sup> God is the sort of Being whose reality requires far more than armchair discussions about his existence—no matter how important they are.

Just as good philosophizing is difficult and challenging, the genuinely moral life (and not merely the *writing about it!*) is arduous as well. I am grateful for the challenges you have raised for my thinking, and I hope that I have clarified the main points.

With all good wishes, Paul Copan ✠

<sup>40</sup>Aldous Huxley said, "I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning, consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption" (*Ends and Means* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1969], 270).

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Nagel exemplifies this attitude when he writes:

"It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God. I don't want a universe like that (*The Last Word*, 130, my emphasis).

<sup>42</sup>Paul C. Vitz speaks of these subterranean factors in his *Faith of the Fatherless* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999).

## *Necessary Moral Truths and the Need for Explanation*

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### *Introduction: Families of Objections to Moral Arguments for God*

Moral arguments for God have taken a back seat in contemporary philosophy of religion. There are two reasons that this is the case. These two reasons provide what we might call families of objections to moral arguments. The first family of objections claims that God's existence and nature do not provide the resources for an adequate explanation of morality. This family often takes the form of challenges to various theistic moral theories and is as old as the *Euthyphro*. If it turns out that theistic explanations of morality are not good explanations, then the phenomenon of morality does not provide a strong reason to think God exists.

The second family of objections challenges the notion that there is something about morality that is best explained by the existence of God. Either there is nothing about morality that is in special need of explanation or whatever needs explaining is adequately explained without any appeal to God. This latter family of objections also can be found throughout the history of philosophy but has become more prevalent over the last two hundred years. Today, I think, it is the received view. Moral phenomena, if any exist, do not point to God. Often, I think, philosophers hold that both kinds of objections are successful.

Those facets of moral reality that seemed, at one time, to require a divine explanation such as objective moral properties or moral truths are thought to be reducible to things that require no such explanation. Some philosophers do not attempt to *reduce* moral properties or truths to other items, they simply deny that there are any such things.<sup>1</sup> John L. Mackie agrees that if there were objective moral properties, these would ground a strong argument for God:

[Objective moral values] 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 intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them.<sup>2</sup>

Mackie claims that these objective values do not fit in the universe if there is no God. He thinks that there are no objective moral values. His book on ethics is appropriately titled *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. To be sure, not all philosophers, theistic or non-theistic, agree with Mackie that there is a tension in holding both that there is no God and that there are objective moral properties.

In this article, I will consider one very different objection that is in the same general family. Unlike, Mackie's objection, however, this one does not deny that there are objective moral truths or obligations. Nor does it claim that objective moral truths or obligations are reducible to some more easily explained items. It claims that objective moral truths are real but that they do not need to be explained by the existence and nature of God. God is not needed, not because moral truths can be explained by a naturalistic metaphysics but because they require no explanation at all. They are analytic. This position is held by Richard Swinburne.

### *Swinburne on Basic Moral Truths*

Richard Swinburne has proposed that basic moral truths are analytic and, therefore, necessary. A particular moral judgement, such as "I ought to give Bill \$10" might be contingent. Such a judgement has its moral punch in virtue of its being a specific instance of a more general, analytic moral truth. The truth is "One ought to pay one's debts." If Swinburne is correct about the analytic status of basic moral truths, some of the most popular moral arguments for the existence of God are undermined. In fact, Swinburne himself makes this point. He says, "Now if the basic moral principles are analytic, the existence of what they describe cannot provide an argument for the existence of God. An argument could only take off from the truth of some or all synthetic moral truths."<sup>3</sup>

Proponents of any moral argument for the existence of God must specify precisely what it is that God's nature, commands or action is called upon to explain. Some, such as Bob Adams, talk in terms of moral properties. Others, such as Richard Swinburne, talk in terms of moral truths. Hereafter, I will cast my discussion in terms of moral truths because I am responding to Swinburne. I will also take it that moral truths ascribe moral properties (such as the property of being morally wrong) to actions or to agents.

<sup>2</sup> L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115-16.  
<sup>3</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 177.

Swinburne, of course, is a theist. He has no vested interest in counter-arguing a moral argument for the existence of God. He has, however, provided a strategy for an atheist or an agnostic to avoid moral arguments for God.<sup>4</sup> I think this strategy is a good one. In fact, I think it is better than reductionistic strategies or error-theories. It is a challenge, after all, to think that a simple, common moral judgement such as, *It is wrong to torture a baby to death just for fun* could, in some possible world, be false. Other kinds of reductionistic theories of moral truth may be more plausible than Mackie's error-theory but many people would like to find some way to affirm a non-reductionistic account of moral truths.

In following Swinburne, the atheist does not have to make the implausible claim that there are no real objective moral truths. She can, with one hand, affirm the fullest and most robust realism about morality and, with the other, deny that this moral realism points to God. Or, to cook up another metaphor, it looks as though the atheist can have her all-natural cake and eat it morally as well.

As you might expect, I do not think this recipe will go down so smoothly. While it is the case that if moral truths are analytic, they do not need to be explained, there is still something about the nature of morality that requires an explanation. As a result, there is another moral argument for God's existence lurking in the shadows of Swinburne's moral view. In this article I will not argue against the position that moral truths are analytic. I will argue that even if they are analytic, we can develop a good argument from some fact about morality to the existence of God.

Suppose that Swinburne is right. Suppose that the basic moral truths are analytic, necessary truths. That is, they are true in every possible world. What needs to be explained, if this is the case, is nothing about the truth of these truths themselves but something about the *applicability* of these truths to beings in the world. What is striking and requires explanation is that the universe has produced the sort of beings to whom these ready-made moral truths apply. The odds of this event happening purely as a result of chance are pretty small. This oddity is the place at which we can begin the moral argument for God.

Consider one of these analytic moral truths. An example Swinburne gives is *It is wrong to kill people who will certainly not come to life again*.<sup>5</sup> Though this statement is true in every possible world, it is applicable only in worlds that have certain kinds of beings. First, they must have people who, once killed, will not certainly come to life again and, second, there must be beings that are able to kill them. If a world does not contain both of these kinds of beings (or

<sup>4</sup> Paul Draper suggested this strategy to me in a discussion sponsored by the Evangelical Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Religion, November 19, 1998. The other participant in the discussion was R. Douglas Geivert.  
<sup>5</sup> Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 177.

if it does not contain one kind of being that has both of these abilities) it is a world in which the moral truth in question is not applicable. The existence of beings who can kill and who stay dead once they are killed, though, is not enough. The analytic moral truth also ascribes a *moral obligation* to the one who kills another. A moral truth does not apply, then, unless there are the kinds of beings that can bear the moral obligation ascribed by the truth. The sentence, *It is wrong to kill people who will certainly not come to life again*, is applicable only in those worlds in which the kinds of beings that exist can act in a morally wrong manner. If the only things that could kill people were viruses, for example, the moral truth would not apply.

The distinction between these two cases of the applicability of truths is important because there are many examples of truths that are analytic but which require the existence of certain kinds of beings. Take, for example, the sentence, *Frogs are amphibians*. This sentence is true whether or not any frogs exist. It is applicable only in worlds in which frogs do exist. The applicability of moral truths, as we have seen, requires more than the existence of the kinds of beings who can perform and suffer the requisite actions. The beings must also be able to bear the moral responsibility for performing the action. Each necessary moral truth will be true in every possible world but applicable only in some worlds. There will be many possible worlds that have no beings that can perform the actions picked out by the truth. There will be many more worlds in which there are no beings who can bear moral obligations.

### Anthropic Arguments

With this idea of the applicability of necessary moral truths in mind, we can form an argument from the fact that moral truths are, in fact, applicable to the existence of God. The argument that arises from analytic moral truths is a version of the design argument. Recent discoveries in cosmology have highlighted how improbable it is that our universe would come into existence. It has been shown that the range of value for each of the cosmic constants that is compatible with a universe capable of sustaining life is astronomically small. The possibilities in question have led many philosophers to think that it is more likely that the values of these constants have been set by an intelligent designer than that they have been the result of mere randomness.<sup>6</sup> Rather than recount the details of this evidence here (after all I take it only on authority that the cosmologists have their facts straight), I will simply refer you to some of the relevant literature.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>There are other alternatives. For example, John Leslie embraces Neoplatonism.

<sup>7</sup>See John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989) and Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993) 139-45 for a readable example of the type of argument to which I refer.

I wish to make three observations about the moral version of this sort of argument. The first is that it is that it is extremely unlikely that a universe would emerge by chance that contains the sort of beings to which moral truths apply. The second is the fact that a moral world is highly probable if theism is true and much less probable if theism is false. The third observation is that the convergence of moral truths and the kind of universe we have makes our universe intrinsically surprising in a way that counters one of the popular objections to fine-tuning arguments. I will take each of these observations in turn.

#### *1. Our universe is even more improbable than we thought.*

Let us call a world a *moral world* if it contains beings to which at least one moral truth applies. All other worlds will be *non-moral* worlds. The actual world is a moral world. A world that contains life no more complex than algae is not. What are the minimum requirements a world must have in order to be a moral world? Unless there are beings of a certain level of complexity, moral truths will not be applicable in that world. That a world contains sentient beings is not sufficient for it to be a moral world. Much more is required. There must be a sufficient level of self-determination on the part of some beings in a world for it to be moral.

The common version of the fine-tuning argument shows the vast improbability of the emergence of a universe that could sustain life. What is striking about our universe, on the moral version of the argument, is not only that it *can* sustain life, but it *does* sustain life. Furthermore, it sustains *sentient* life. Beyond this fact, it is striking that it sustains the sort of life to which moral truths apply. Some of the beings that have emerged are exactly the sorts of beings suited for morality. This oddity is the fact that needs to be explained.

If we crunch a few numbers we can see that the probability that our universe arose purely by chance is even smaller than on the original design argument. Suppose that only one in a hundred universes that are capable of sustaining life actually do. Suppose also that only one in a hundred of these produces sentient life. Suppose again that one in a hundred universes with sentient life contain moral agents. Based on all of this supposing, we have a one in a million chance of getting a moral universe given that we begin with one that is capable of sustaining life. I do not want to rest a lot on these numbers since we supposed them into existence, but I would bet that I am being fairly generous with them. The point is that given the improbability that the universe can sustain life at all, it is even more improbable that we would get a moral universe. Yet here we are. It is a bit surprising.

R. Douglas Geivett has suggested to me that the odds of getting our universe by chance is even smaller than we have been supposing.<sup>8</sup> The major

<sup>8</sup>Geivett made this suggestion in an email discussion of these issues.

oddity about our universe that we have been discussing is the match between the kinds of beings in our world and the moral truths. We have been talking as if this match was in the applicability of the moral truths to the kinds of beings in the world. In fact, the match is more amazing than that. Not only do we have beings to which the moral truths apply but we have beings that are made up in such a way that doing what is right (as determined by analytic moral truths) turns out to be good for them. It contributes to their flourishing rather than their languishing. Maybe only one in ten universes that are moral in that they have the right sorts of beings are such that moral goodness and the flourishing of the beings involved converge. Now we are even more surprised.

If the universe came about by chance, then we get a picture of moral reality that is certainly strange. We have a set of necessary moral truths that are, so to speak, waiting around. There is nothing at all to which these truths apply and there is no guarantee that they will ever apply to anything. A chance process set into motion by the totally random initial conditions of the universe continues for fifteen or twenty billion years and at the end, totally by accident, moral creatures emerge—creatures that exactly match the moral truths that have been waiting in the wings throughout the whole show. They bear moral obligations and fulfilling moral obligations tends towards their flourishing. This picture helps us see that it is not quite reasonable to suppose that our universe came about by chance.

## 2. *Comparing the probabilities of a moral universe.*

Paul Draper has argued that the fine-tuning argument as it is often presented is not successful.<sup>9</sup> The fact that it is improbable that a universe capable of sustaining life would emerge does not, by itself, raise the probability of an intelligent designer. What is needed, he thinks, is a reason to think that this kind of universe is more probable on theism than it is on atheism. Paul explains, "What is likely on intelligent design depends on what goals an intelligent designer is likely to have."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to claim that it is not obvious that an intelligent designer would want a universe with other intelligent life, or with any life at all. The fine-tuning argument is significantly weakened because we cannot assume that an intelligent designer would want to create intelligent life. As a result, the probability of a universe capable of sustaining intelligent life is not significantly higher on the hypothesis that there is an intelligent designer than it is on the hypothesis of naturalism.

The strength of my moral fine-tuning argument is that it does seem likely that an intelligent designer, if one existed, would have moral aims. A

<sup>9</sup>Paul Draper, [William Lane] "Craig's Case for God's Existence," unpublished. I want to thank Paul for sending me this paper.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 9.

moral universe is more likely on theism than on naturalism. Draper summarized this point in correspondence as follows:

To make the fine-tuning argument work, it is not enough to argue that fine-tuning is very unlikely given naturalism. One must argue that fine-tuning is much more probable on theism than on naturalism. And my biggest worry about the fine-tuning argument has always been that neither life nor even intelligent life—at least of the sort we find in our world—seems all that probable on theism. A moral world is, however, very probable on theism. Thus, your ideas don't just strengthen the fine-tuning argument. To use religious terminology, they save it!<sup>11</sup>

So not only is it the case that our universe is more improbable than we thought, the features of our universe that render it so improbable are much more likely if God exists than if he does not.

## 3. *Our intrinsically interesting universe.*

The third observation about this argument is that it counters effectively one of the standard replies to the fine-tuning kind of argument. That reply is that there is nothing special about the fact that our universe was produced by chance since the odds of any one universe being produced are the same as any other. The analogy that is often used is that the odds of drawing any one hand in five card draw are the same as any other hand. We ought not be surprised at what hand we draw. We only think our universe is interesting because we are in it. If we look at things objectively we will see that there is nothing that makes our universe intrinsically interesting.

I do not think this objection has much force even against the original fine-tuning argument. Our universe is more interesting than the vast majority of possible universes. What my moral fine-tuning argument does is strengthen the claim that there is something interesting about our universe. It is one of the few that resulted in the exact kinds of beings that match up to moral truths. It is intrinsically interesting that it matches these analytic truths. It is as though we hit the moral bull's eye on the cosmic dart board. We did not throw the dart and then paint the bull's eye at the spot where it landed. The bull's eye was "in the same place" in every possible world and we hit it. Is this interesting? Certainly. Improbable? Extremely. We should be quite surprised.

## *Some Preliminary Conclusions*

The atheist or agnostic will want to hold to the robust moral realism that seems to be plainly true and, at the same time, avoid the theistic implications many want to draw from such morality. Swinburne's position that the basic

<sup>11</sup>Paul Draper, e-mail correspondence, October 28, 1999.

moral truths are analytic will not provide the atheist or agnostic such a strategy. If moral truths are analytic, there is a strong fine-tuning argument for God's existence that can be made from the applicability and the fittingness of the moral truths to the beings in our universe. It is extremely improbable that such a fit could be accidental. Furthermore, such a fit is what ought to be expected if God exists. If one is convinced that moral truths are analytic, then, one has good reason to embrace theism.

This argument still leaves open the rejection of the premise. We can, as I think I am inclined to do, reject the idea that moral truths are analytic. While this move relieves the atheist of the force of my argument, it also lands her back in the dilemma of having to choose between embracing, on the one hand, some counter intuitive, reductionistic or error theory of morality and embracing, on the other hand, some kind of moral realism in which moral truths are not analytic and, therefore, seem to point to God. Either way, the atheist's prospects are not bright.<sup>17</sup> ¶

## Book Reviews

<sup>17</sup> I want to thank Doug Geivett and Paul Draper for discussing some of these points and William Lane Craig for encouraging me to work out these ideas.