

# IN DEFENSE OF NON-NATURAL, NON-THEISTIC MORAL REALISM

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Many believe that objective morality requires a theistic foundation. I maintain that there are *sui generis* objective ethical facts that do not reduce to natural or supernatural facts. On my view, objective morality does not require an external foundation of any kind. After explaining my view, I defend it against a variety of objections posed by William Wainwright, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland.

## 1. Introduction

Of the main kinds of philosophical theistic arguments, the moral argument appears to be among the most popular and psychologically effective. Consider these remarks by William Lane Craig:

I think the moral argument is the most effective [argument for theism] . . . which says that apart from God, there is no absolute foundation for moral values. Therefore, if you're going to affirm the value of things like tolerance, love, fair play, the rights of women, and so forth, you need to have a transcendent anchor point. You need to have God. . . . [T]his argument has tremendous appeal to students. It is one to which they respond.<sup>1</sup>

The moral argument comes in many varieties. As Craig's remarks indicate, he favors a version of the argument based on the idea that theism—and *only* theism—provides an adequate foundation for objective moral truth.<sup>2</sup> To say that a moral truth is 'objective' in the relevant sense is to say that its truth is independent of human mental states in a certain way. Craig explains the concept like this:

[T]o say, for example, that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right and that it would still have been wrong

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<sup>1</sup>John D. Martin, "A Few Minutes with Dr. William Lane Craig," from the *Focus on the Family* website: [www.family.org/faith/A000000729.cfm](http://www.family.org/faith/A000000729.cfm) (accessed 5/22/08).

<sup>2</sup>I use the term 'theism' in what I take to be a fairly standard way: It indicates the doctrine that there exists a unique omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, necessarily existing creator of the universe.



even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everyone who disagreed with them.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I explain and defend a view that might be given the catchy title *non-natural non-theistic moral realism*.<sup>4</sup> It is a version of *moral realism* in that it implies that there exist ethical facts that are objective in the sense just explained. It is *non-natural* in that it implies that ethical facts and properties are not reducible to natural facts and properties. And it is *non-theistic* in that it implies that objective morality does not require a theistic foundation; indeed, the view implies that objective morality does not require an external foundation at all. In calling the view *non-theistic* I do not mean to imply that the view entails atheism; the view is compatible with theism as well as atheism. But it does imply that there are objective ethical facts even if atheism is true.

After explaining the basic elements of this view, I defend it against a variety of objections raised by William Wainwright, William Craig, and J. P. Moreland. Each of these critics favors some version of the view that theism grounds objective morality. I will provide a defense of my view in that I will seek to show that none of the objections to my view raised by these critics that I discuss here yields a good reason to prefer a theism-based approach to objective morality over my own approach. This defense, if successful, contributes to the larger project of showing that theistic moral arguments rooted in the notion that there are objective moral truths only if the traditional God of monotheism exists are philosophically flawed, whatever their popularity.<sup>5</sup>

Because my theistic opponents and I agree that there are objective ethical facts, I will not present any positive arguments for the existence of such facts in this paper. Those who are suspicious of the whole idea of objective ethical truth may nevertheless find the paper of interest in that it touches on issues that are relevant to some of the popular reasons for skepticism about realism in ethics.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Basic View

A fundamental category of existing thing is the category of *states of affairs*. States of affairs are necessarily existing abstract entities that obtain or fail to obtain. *Facts* are obtaining or actual states of affairs; among these, some are contingent, meaning they obtain in some but not all metaphysically possible worlds, whereas others are necessary, meaning they obtain in all

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<sup>3</sup>William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 17. For a more detailed explanation of the sort of objectivity involved here, see Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 2–4.

<sup>4</sup>I should note that throughout the paper I use the terms ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ synonymously.

<sup>5</sup>For additional elements of this larger project, see Erik Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Thanks to Tom Flint and an anonymous reader for *Faith and Philosophy* for assistance in clarifying some of the key claims in this introductory section.

metaphysically possible worlds.<sup>7</sup> The state of affairs in which Alvin Plantinga is a philosopher obtains contingently; the state of affairs in which Alvin Plantinga is not identical to the number two obtains necessarily. Among states of affairs that obtain necessarily, some are relatively uninteresting in that the sentences that express them are devoid of substantive content. The state of affairs in which all bachelors are unmarried may fall into this category. But other necessary states of affairs are not trivial in this way.<sup>8</sup> Many theists maintain that the state of affairs in which God exists is a substantive, interesting state of affairs that holds in all metaphysically possible worlds.<sup>9</sup>

Some facts obtain because of the obtaining of other states of affairs. Consider, for example, the fact that the bottle of water in my office is suspended about four feet from the surface of the earth. This state of affairs obtains because another state of affairs obtains—namely, that the bottle is sitting on the surface of the desk in my office.<sup>10</sup> Some states of affairs that obtain are what we may call *brute facts*; their obtaining is not explained by the obtaining of other states of affairs.<sup>11</sup> Theists typically maintain that the fact that God exists is a brute fact. As Richard Swinburne puts it, “[n]o other agent or natural law or principle or necessity is responsible for the existence of God. His existence is an ultimate brute fact.”<sup>12</sup> Many such theists also maintain that God exists necessarily. There is, therefore, a tradition in monotheism according to which the fact that God exists is a substantive, metaphysically necessary, brute fact. Craig, among others, belongs to this tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Some states of affairs involve ethical properties, properties like moral rightness, moral wrongness, goodness, evil, virtue, vice, and the like. Ethical properties are *sui generis* properties that are not reducible to other kinds of properties, including natural properties that can be studied by the empirical sciences and supernatural properties involving God. The view

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<sup>7</sup>I am working with Alvin Plantinga’s notion of states of affairs and metaphysical necessity (sometimes called “broad logical necessity”) here. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 2, 44–45. For more on this understanding of states of affairs, see Roderick Chisholm, “The Defeat of Good and Evil,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 42 (1968–1969), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup>In the old days, philosophers used the terms ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ to mark out the distinction to which I am alluding here.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, pp. 215–216.

<sup>10</sup>Other states of affairs—e.g., states of affairs involving gravity—may also play an explanatory role here.

<sup>11</sup>I should emphasize that bruteness is an ontological rather than epistemological concept; that a given fact is brute does not imply that it cannot be proven or inferred from other things one knows. Also, that a fact is brute is consistent with it being explained *by itself* (if this makes sense); this possibility is briefly explored in section 3 below.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 267.

<sup>13</sup>William Lane Craig, “Reply to Objections,” in *Does God Exist? The Craig-Flew Debate*, ed. Stan Wallace (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 157, 162–163.

I hold is thus best characterized not as naturalism or supernaturalism but rather as *non-naturalism*.<sup>14</sup>

Some ethical states of affairs obtain; indeed, some of them obtain necessarily. Consider, for instance, the state of affairs in which it is morally wrong to torture the innocent just for fun and the state of affairs in which pain is intrinsically bad (that is, bad in its own nature, or in and of itself). These states of affairs obtain not just in the actual world but in all metaphysically possible worlds. Other ethical states of affairs hold contingently. For instance, suppose that by pushing a certain button I would knowingly torture an innocent person just for fun. This means that it is wrong for me to push the button, but this state of affairs holds contingently because there are possible worlds in which my pushing the button would not have such a nefarious result.

Of the ethical states of affairs that obtain necessarily, at least some are brute facts.<sup>15</sup> That pain is intrinsically bad is not explained in terms of other states of affairs that obtain. Moreover, at least some necessarily obtaining brute ethical facts are not trivial but substantive.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, I have an ontological commitment shared by many theists: I am committed to the obtaining of substantive, metaphysically necessary, brute facts. Some ethical facts fall into this category; I call such facts *basic ethical facts*. Such facts are the foundation of (the rest of) objective morality and rest on no foundation themselves. To ask of such facts, “where do they come from?” or “on what foundation do they rest?” is misguided in much the way that, according to many theists, it is misguided to ask of God, “where does He come from?” or “on what foundation does He rest”? The answer is the same in both cases: They come from nowhere, and nothing external to themselves grounds their existence; rather, they are fundamental features of the universe that ground other truths.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>For a useful characterization of the three meta-ethical approaches mentioned here, see David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 22–23. G. E. Moore is perhaps the most well-known defender of the sort of non-naturalism I hold; see his *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). The view has seen something of a resurgence in recent years; see, for example, Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 7–60; Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*. Elsewhere I characterized my view as a version of naturalism, but the label ‘non-naturalism’ is more appropriate given the way these terms are typically used in the field of meta-ethics.

<sup>15</sup>I should emphasize that I do *not* hold that any metaphysically necessary state of affairs *must* also be brute; I agree with Craig’s view that necessary truths can “stand in relations of explanatory priority to one another”; see Craig, “Reply,” in Wallace, *Craig-Flew Debate*, p. 169.

<sup>16</sup>See Moore, *Principia Ethica*, pp. 7 and 143.

<sup>17</sup>Richard Swinburne endorses a similar view; see Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, pp. 183–209. There *may* be an important difference between Swinburne’s view and my own; Swinburne characterizes the basic ethical facts as “analytic,” whereas I maintain that they are synthetic. However, it may be that Swinburne is using ‘analytic’ in a non-standard way so that my basic view in this area is identical to his; see Craig, “Reply,” in Wallace, *Craig-Flew Debate*, p. 186, n. 52.

### 3. Supervenience

It is widely held that if moral properties are exemplified at all, they supervene on non-moral properties.<sup>18</sup> This supervenience thesis entails at least that any two possible entities that are identical with respect to their non-moral properties are identical with respect to their moral properties. William Wainwright explains this idea as follows:

On objectivist accounts . . . rightness supervenes on instances of truth-telling, and goodness supervenes on pleasurable consciousness and certain character types (those exhibited by Marcus Aurelius, for example, or St. Francis). In addition, the connection between the base properties and the supervenient properties is necessary.<sup>19</sup>

J. L. Mackie famously finds this alleged relationship puzzling:

What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty—say, causing pain just for fun—and the moral fact that it is wrong? It cannot be an entailment, a logical or semantic necessity. Yet is it not merely that the two features occur together. The wrongness must somehow be ‘consequential’ or ‘supervenient’; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just *what in the world* is signified by this ‘because’?<sup>20</sup>

The answer, I think, is that ‘because’ here indicates metaphysical necessity. It is true in all metaphysically possible worlds that causing pain just for fun is wrong. This is the sense in which a given action is wrong *because* it is a piece of deliberate cruelty.<sup>21</sup> Mackie assumes without argument that there is no such thing as metaphysical necessity. The argument from queerness, therefore, simply begs the question against the view I hold.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it begs the question against any view that countenances substantive, metaphysically necessary truths, and hence begs the question against much of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

Wainwright maintains that the moral supervenes on the non-moral but suggests that such supervenience is more at home in a theistic universe than in a non-theistic one: “[T]he connection between the base property and the supervenient property can seem mysterious. For, in the absence

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<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, p. 202 and p. 280, n. 7; Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, pp. 77–78; Graham Oppy, *Arguing about Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 353; and Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, p. 185.

<sup>19</sup>William J. Wainwright, *Religion and Morality* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), p. 66.

<sup>20</sup>J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 41.

<sup>21</sup>A bit more precisely, the idea here is that of one property entailing another in the sense that necessarily, anything that has the property of being an instance of causing pain just for fun also has the property of moral wrongness; see Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, p. 65, n. 1.

<sup>22</sup>See Quentin Smith, *Ethical and Religious Thought in Analytic Philosophy of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 173.

of further explanation, the (necessary) connection between these radically different sorts of properties . . . is just an inexplicable brute fact."<sup>23</sup> On my approach, the supervenience relationships under discussion here are logically equivalent to certain basic ethical facts. For example, the claim that the property of intrinsic badness supervenes on the property of pain is logically equivalent to the claim that necessarily, pain is intrinsically bad. So my view does have the feature that worries Wainwright; on my view, at least some of the supervenience relationships between moral and non-moral properties are brute facts. Is this a problem for my view? More precisely, does this aspect of my view constitute a reason to prefer an alternative view according to which the supervenience relationships in question are grounded in a perfect, necessarily existing God?

Wainwright at one point suggests that while trivial necessary truths do not require explanations, non-trivial ones do.<sup>24</sup> If this is true, my approach is unacceptable because it posits brute, non-trivial necessary (ethical) truths. My response is to reject Wainwright's principle. Wainwright supports the principle by offering examples of non-trivial necessary truths that, intuitively, seem to require explanations. But this only shows that some such truths require explanations, not that all do. Are there examples of non-trivial necessary truths that do not require explanations? Ironically, many theists are committed to the existence of just such an example: that God exists. Such theists must join with me in rejecting Wainwright's principle. Without any general principle to guide us, we are left to consider putative non-trivial necessary truths on a case-by-case basis to determine which ones stand in need of further explanation. For what it is worth, the ethical claim that pain is intrinsically bad seems to me not to cry out for further explanation; indeed, I find it *less* in need of explanation than the existence of a perfect person who created the universe.

Interestingly, Wainwright appears ultimately not to accept the general principle upon which the objection of the previous paragraph rests. In his discussion of the objection he asserts that "[b]roadly' necessary truths do [stand in need of explanation]," but a footnote to this sentence reads: "Or at least some of them."<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, he argues that the existence of God does not cry out for explanation but that necessary ethical facts do.<sup>26</sup> If correct, this claim might constitute a reason to prefer a theistic view that grounds objective morality in a necessarily existing God over my view; my view would be *more* mysterious than the theistic alternative.

Wainwright offers two reasons for his claim that God's existence does not cry out for explanation but necessary ethical facts do. The first is that

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<sup>23</sup>Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, p. 66. Also see J. P. Moreland and William Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 493. Interestingly, Mackie also shows some sympathy for this kind of argument; see John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 115–118.

<sup>24</sup>Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66, n. 48.

<sup>26</sup>William J. Wainwright, "Response to Maria Antonaccio," *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 4.2 (November 2006), p. 224.



God is essentially causeless whereas ethical facts are not.<sup>27</sup> That is, there is no possible world in which God is caused to exist whereas, for any (possibly true) ethical state of affairs, there is some world in which it is caused to obtain. But why think this? My view is that at least some ethical facts *are* essentially causeless. For example, it seems to me that there is no possible world in which the state of affairs that pain is intrinsically bad is caused to obtain.

To support his contention that no ethical facts are essentially causeless, Wainwright says that “[a]n indication of this fact is that we can coherently *conceive* that moral facts have causes. Divine command theories, for example, are not obviously incoherent.”<sup>28</sup> Note the weak sense of conceivability Wainwright employs here; he says that divine command theories are *not obviously incoherent*. (Presumably this is compatible with such theories having non-obvious incoherencies). Wainwright also relies here on the idea that there is some connection between conceivability and metaphysical possibility; the fact that a given state of affairs is conceivable is taken to be at least *some* indication that the state of affairs in question is metaphysically possible. Given the weak notion of conceivability he employs here, his claim that all moral facts are possibly caused rests on the principle that if *p* is not obviously incoherent, then *p* is metaphysically possible. The problem for Wainwright is that the very same principle can be used to argue that God does not exist in all possible worlds.<sup>29</sup> It is not obviously incoherent, for example, that there is a stone floating in space with nothing else (including God) in existence. Perhaps there is some sort of incoherence in atheism; however, it is clear enough that this incoherence is *not obvious*. Nevertheless, many theists, and certainly Wainwright, deny that God’s existence is merely contingent, despite the fact that God’s non-existence is conceivable in the weak sense of being not obviously incoherent. I similarly deny that all ethical facts are possibly caused, even if every moral fact having a cause is not obviously incoherent. The epistemic principle upon which Wainwright’s argument depends therefore tells equally against my view and the theistic view and hence favors neither view over the other.

Wainwright’s second reason for the view that God’s existence does not demand an explanation in the way that necessary ethical facts do is that God’s existence is “self-explanatory or intrinsically intelligible” which implies that “if we could grasp [God’s] nature we would see *why* it exists.”<sup>30</sup> The claim here seems to be that there *is* an explanation for God’s existence after all and that the explanation lies in God’s nature. Since we do not have a complete understanding of God’s nature we may not *know* the explanation for God’s existence, but it is there nevertheless. Thus, that God exists is indeed non-trivial and necessary, but it is not brute.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 224–225.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>29</sup>Hume has the character of Cleanthes use the principle in precisely this way; see David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), p. 55.

<sup>30</sup>Wainwright, “Response,” pp. 224–225.

It is not at all clear that this notion of a self-explanatory being is coherent.<sup>31</sup> Wainwright himself remarks that the notion is “a bit opaque” but declares that it is “not obvious nonsense.” This is hardly high praise, and in the context of worries about the relative “queerness” of my approach as compared with a theistic approach, the appeal to the obscure notion that God is a self-explanatory being hardly tips the scales in favor of the theistic approach. Even if coherent, the concept of a self-explanatory God is surely at least as mysterious as the bruteness of the ethical facts that it is supposed to help explain.

However, let us suppose that the concept of a self-explanatory being is coherent. Even with this assumption, Wainwright is still committed to the existence of non-trivial, necessary brute facts. The appeal to God’s existence being self-explanatory seems merely to introduce a new non-trivial necessary truth into the picture: That God’s nature has whatever mysterious feature(s) explains His existence. The presence of this remarkable property in the divine nature appears to lack an explanation.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps it will be suggested that the same feature of God that explains His existence also explains His possession of that very feature, in which case this feature explains its own presence in the divine nature. Even if this makes sense, it still implies that the fact that God has the feature in question is a brute fact, since that it is included in the divine nature is not explained by a *distinct* state of affairs. Thus, the theistic approach still includes at least one non-trivial, necessary brute fact, and hence I see no non-question-begging reason to accept Wainwright’s contention that non-trivial, necessary *ethical* facts cannot be brute.

Still, even if not all non-trivial necessary ethical facts *need* external explanations, it might be suggested that a theory that *can* explain such facts is, all else equal, superior to a theory that cannot explain them. This observation points toward another possible reason to prefer a theistic approach to my own. Wainwright suggests that at least some theistic approaches can explain the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral and that this feature of such approaches gives them an advantage over theories (like mine) that cannot offer a deeper explanation for the supervenience. Wainwright points to Robert Adams’s theory in *Finite and Infinite Goods* as an example of a theistic approach that offers a deeper explanation for the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. However, it turns out that Adams’s theory, like mine, entails the existence of brute ethical facts. To see this, we must examine some of the details of Adams’s view.

Adams provides a sophisticated attempt to work out the idea that the Good = God. He proposes that God’s nature is the standard of excellence and that other things are excellent in virtue of resembling the divine nature

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<sup>31</sup>For an argument that it is not, see John Morreall, “God as Self-Explanatory,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (July 1980), pp. 206–214. Some have construed a self-explanatory being simply as one that exists in every possible world (see Laura Garcia, “Can There Be a Self-Explanatory Being?” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 14.4 [1986], pp. 479–488), but Wainwright’s understanding of the concept obviously goes beyond this.

<sup>32</sup>See Morreall, “Self-Explanatory,” p. 209.



(in the right way).<sup>33</sup> This divine nature exists necessarily.<sup>34</sup> The fact that the divine nature exists necessarily allegedly enables Adams's approach to account for the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. Consider one of Wainwright's earlier examples: The supervenience of goodness upon the character of Marcus Aurelius. On Adams's approach, this supervenience is grounded in the resemblance between Marcus Aurelius's character and the necessarily existing divine nature.<sup>35</sup> To keep matters simple, let us suppose that the aspect of Aurelius's character that makes it good is mercifulness. On Adams's account, the supervenience of goodness on Marcus Aurelius's character is explained by the fact that the divine nature is essentially merciful. In any world in which Aurelius's character is merciful, that character resembles the divine nature and hence is (in one respect at any rate) good.<sup>36</sup> In this way, Adams's theory may be able to provide a foundation for some substantive, necessary ethical facts. However, as I noted above, the theory also entails that there are some such facts that are brute, as I will now illustrate.

Adams's claim that the Good = God is modeled after another identity claim: that water = H<sub>2</sub>O. One interesting feature of this second identity claim is that it is not true by definition; the meaning of the word 'water' includes nothing about its chemical composition, as shown by the fact that people used the word 'water' perfectly competently before the rise of modern chemistry. One lesson to be drawn from this example is that *meaning* of a given term does not always reveal the full *nature* of the thing to which the term refers.<sup>37</sup>

Adams argues that, in a somewhat similar fashion, although the meaning of the word 'good' includes nothing about God, it is nevertheless the case that the Good = God. So Adams's claim that the Good is God is a claim about the *nature* of the Good but is not at all a claim about the *meaning* of the word 'good' (or the word 'God'). Adams's account is reductive in that it implies that (at least some) ethical facts and properties *just are* supernatural facts and properties. Facts about finite goodness just are facts about a certain sort of resemblance to God, and facts about moral obligation just are facts about God's commands.<sup>38</sup>

Adams's view commits him to the existence of basic ethical facts in my sense—ethical facts that are substantive, metaphysically necessary, and brute. Among such facts are the following: That the Good exists, that the Good is loving, that the Good is merciful, and that the Good is

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<sup>33</sup>Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 28–38.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 47–49.

<sup>35</sup>Graham Oppy argues that theism in fact *cannot* explain the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral, but his argument seems to overlook an approach like Adams's according to which the supervenience is grounded in God's necessarily existing essential nature; see Oppy, *Gods*, pp. 354–356.

<sup>36</sup>While Wainwright emphasizes this aspect of Adams's view, Adams himself does not. He discusses supervenience only briefly and in passing; see Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 36 and 249–250.

just.<sup>39</sup> It might be thought that Adams's theory does provide a foundation for such ethical facts; doesn't the theory tell us, for instance, that the fact that the Good exists is grounded in the fact that God exists? The answer is no; since the Good *just is* God, the existence of God can hardly explain or ground the existence of the Good. In the context of Adams's view, the claim that God serves as the *foundation* of the Good is no more sensible than the claim that H<sub>2</sub>O serves as the *foundation* of water.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, once we see that, on Adams's view the Good = God, we see that Adams's theory entails that the Good has no external foundation, since God has no external foundation. It is not merely that Adams's view fails to specify where the Good came from; the theory implies that the Good did not come from anywhere.

The upshot is that while Adams's theory does explain some substantive, metaphysically necessary ethical facts, it does so by appealing to other substantive, metaphysically necessary *brute* ethical facts. I think this is a perfectly reasonable approach; indeed, although I will not argue for it here, I think it is the only sensible approach to ethics. My own view is that any ethical fact that can be explained at all is explained at least in part by other ethical facts. I take it that this is the sort of thing philosophers have in mind when they talk about a "fact/value gap" or the impossibility of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is.'<sup>41</sup>

The important thing to see here, however, is that Adams's theistic approach and my non-theistic approach have the same basic structure: Some ethical claims are taken as substantive, metaphysically necessary, and brute; all other ethical claims are explained, at least in part, by these basic ethical facts. Both approaches imply that there are basic ethical facts. So it is hard to see why my approach should be considered more mysterious or queer than that of Adams.

The conclusion of all of this is as follows. Let us suppose that the two options on the table are the following: (i) objective ethics has as its ultimate foundation some set of objective ethical facts, and (ii) objective ethics has as its ultimate foundation a necessarily existing perfect person. Both approaches ultimately ground objective morality on substantive, necessary brute facts. Indeed, Adams's version of option (ii) grounds objective morality on substantive, necessary brute *ethical* facts. There may be a good reason to prefer one of these views over the other, but, as far as I can see, such a reason is not to be found in the issues of supervenience, explanation, and conceivability that have been considered in the present section.

#### 4. *Mysterious, Floating Values*

Wainwright is not the only theist to suggest that there is something problematic about the sort of approach I favor. William Craig and J. P. Moreland

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<sup>39</sup>Or, allowing for Wainwright's proposal discussed above, that the Good's nature explains its existence.

<sup>40</sup>I take it that the uselessness of answering the question "why is there water?" with "because there is H<sub>2</sub>O" is obvious.

<sup>41</sup>Adams's view shows that these slogans are overly simple. On Adams's view some facts *are* values, and some "ought"s are "is"es.

consider and criticize a view they label “atheistic moral realism.” This view is at least in the same ballpark as my view. They characterize it this way:

Atheistic moral realists affirm that objective moral values and duties do exist and are not dependent on evolution or human opinion, but they also insist that they are not grounded in God. Indeed, moral values have no further foundation. They just exist.<sup>42</sup>

Craig and Moreland criticize this view as follows:

It is difficult, however, even to comprehend this view. What does it mean to say, for example, that the moral value *justice* just exists? It is hard to know what to make of this. It is clear what is meant when it is said that a person is just; but it is bewildering when it is said that in the absence of any people, *justice* itself exists. Moral values seem to exist as properties of persons, not as mere abstractions—or at any rate, it is hard to know what it is for a moral value to exist as a mere abstraction. Atheistic moral realists seem to lack any adequate foundation in reality for moral values but just leave them floating in an unintelligible way.<sup>43</sup>

This passage suggests a number of objections to atheistic moral realism. It should be noted that some of these objections would tell against a view like that of Adams. This is problematic for Craig and Moreland, as they routinely turn to Adams to handle objections to their own theistic version of moral realism.<sup>44</sup> One objection suggested here is based on the principle that all values are properties of persons. Adams’s view violates this principle in identifying the Good with God; the Good, a value, is declared to be not a property of a person but rather an actual person.<sup>45</sup> Another objection suggested by this passage is that all values must have a foundation and cannot simply “float.” If the idea is that values must be anchored in something external to themselves, then Adams’s view also violates this principle. As noted in the previous section, Adams’s view implies that at least one value (the Good) has no external foundation.

Still, the meat of the concern in the passage seems to be about the coherence or intelligibility of atheistic moral realism. Craig and Moreland puzzle over the concept of justice in particular; how can justice “just exist” as a “mere abstraction”? On my view, among the entities that “just exist” are states of affairs and properties, as they are understood by a number of contemporary philosophers, including Alvin Plantinga. With respect to

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<sup>42</sup>Moreland and Craig, *Christian Worldview*, p. 492.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.; also see Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?*, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?*, pp. 68–69; and J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), p. 129.

<sup>45</sup>See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 42. Craig emphasizes that God cannot be both a person and a property in Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 177–180.

justice, my view is that there are various obtaining states of affairs concerning justice, and that when individual people have the property of being just, it is (in part) in virtue of the obtaining of some of these states of affairs. For instance, I hold that *it is just to give people what they deserve*; thus, anyone who gives others what they deserve thereby instantiates the property of justice. The state of affairs that *it is just to give people what they deserve* obtains whether or not any people actually exist, just as various states of affairs about dinosaurs obtain even though there are no longer any dinosaurs. In this way, my approach cashes out the idea of justice “just existing” in terms of facts about justice. This approach is perfectly intelligible and coherent and no more posits mysterious, floating entities than does any view committed to the existence of properties and states of affairs.

My view does violate the principles that (i) all values are properties of persons and (ii) all values have external foundations.<sup>46</sup> I suggest that the lesson to be drawn from this is that (i) and (ii) are false; certainly Craig and Moreland provide no arguments for such principles. Moreover, Adams’s approach, to which Craig and Moreland often appeal, also violates both principles. Finally, the approach that Craig explicitly endorses violates the second principle, as we will see in the following section. It turns out that Adams, Craig, Moreland, and I are all committed to the existence of basic ethical facts. If this is right, then none of us can reasonably criticize the approach of the other on the grounds that it posits values with no external foundation.

### 5. Rights and Duties without God

The deist Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”<sup>47</sup> Some have suggested that the presence of a divine Creator is an essential component of this equation; without such a Creator, human beings would lack moral rights and duties altogether.

Craig urges this sort of argument on a variety of grounds. In a debate with the atheist Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, he says this:

[I]f there is no God, then what’s so special about human beings? They’re just accidental by-products of nature that have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and that are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. On the atheistic view, some action, say, rape, may not be socially advantageous, and so in the course of human development has become taboo; but that does absolutely nothing to prove that rape is really wrong. On the atheistic view, there’s nothing really *wrong* with your raping someone.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup>I assume here that ‘value’ is construed broadly to include ethical facts.

<sup>47</sup>For Jefferson’s deism, see R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 139–140 and 179.

<sup>48</sup>Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?*, p. 18.

Elsewhere, Craig bluntly asserts that “on atheism, we are just animals, and animals don’t have moral duties.”<sup>49</sup> In earlier writing, he characterizes human life in a godless universe as “not qualitatively different from that of a dog” and man as “a freak of nature . . . a lump of slime that evolved into rationality.”<sup>50</sup>

These arguments take the following form: If God does not exist, then human beings are just Xs, and Xs don’t have moral rights or duties. Let us examine the first premise of this line of reasoning. Spelled out more fully, the claim is that without God, human beings are Xs—and they are *nothing more* than Xs. The second component of this claim is both essential to Craig’s argument and dubious.

Consider the first argument quoted above. It runs as follows: Without God, human beings are accidental, evolved, mortal, short-lived products of nature—and human beings are nothing more than this.<sup>51</sup> This is about as plausible as the claim that according to theism, God is a necessarily existing being—and nothing more than this. While it is true that according to theism, God is a necessarily existing being, theists maintain that there is much more to God than this. Similarly, while contemporary atheists typically maintain that human beings are accidental, evolved, mortal, and relatively short-lived, they also maintain that there is much more to human beings than this. They can reason, suffer, fall in love, set goals for themselves, and so on. Therefore, it is open to the atheist to maintain that it is precisely the sorts of non-moral properties of human beings that Craig implicitly denies in his “nothing more than” characterization of humans in a godless universe that ground human moral rights and obligations.

It may be that Craig means to suggest that human beings can have certain rights-grounding non-moral features only if God exists. C. S. Lewis, for example, maintained that the human capacity to reason requires the existence of an eternal, self-existent, rational being.<sup>52</sup> If this is what is going on, then this aspect of Craig’s moral argument really collapses into another kind of argument altogether. It is one thing to claim that without God, humans can reason but nevertheless lack moral rights; it is something else altogether to claim that without God, humans cannot reason and consequently lack moral rights. Here I will consider only the first sort

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid.; also see Moreland and Craig, *Christian Worldview*, p. 492.

<sup>50</sup>William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, revised edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), pp. 62–63.

<sup>51</sup>It is worth noting here that “accidental” must be understood as synonymous with “not a result of intentional design” but not with “a result of entirely random processes.” According to contemporary evolutionary theory, evolutionary processes are not, contrary to popular mischaracterizations, entirely chance-driven. Rather, they are driven by a combination of chance and necessity; see Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. 119–120.

<sup>52</sup>See C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 43–44. For useful philosophical examinations of this argument, see Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); and Erik Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 93–108.

of argument. This is not because I think that arguments of the second sort are not worth considering, but rather because the focus of this paper is the moral argument, and arguments of the second sort are, at bottom, not moral arguments at all.<sup>53</sup>

Sinnott-Armstrong takes Craig to be giving the first kind of argument and adopts the very strategy I described above. He suggests that the non-moral differences between human beings and other animals ground moral differences between humans and other animals:

[L]ower animals . . . are not moral agents. They do not make free choices. Their actions are not determined by any conception of what is moral or not. That explains why moral rules and principles do not apply to lower animals any more than they apply to avalanches that kill people.<sup>54</sup>

With respect to the wrongness of rape, Sinnott-Armstrong says, “[w]hat makes rape immoral is that it harms *the victim* in terrible ways. The victim feels pain, loses freedom, is subordinated, and so on. These harms are not justified by any benefits to anyone.”<sup>55</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong thus seeks to explain the wrongness of rape by implicitly appealing to a moral principle, a principle along the lines of this one: Any action that involves knowingly inflicting suffering, subordination, and a loss of freedom on another without producing any outweighing benefits is morally wrong. Such a principle strikes me as quite plausible.

Craig’s critique of Sinnott-Armstrong’s response has two main elements. First, he questions whether the moral principle to which Sinnott-Armstrong appeals holds in the context of atheism: “[G]iven atheism, why think that it is true? Why, given atheism, think that inflicting harm on other people would have any moral dimension at all?”<sup>56</sup> This amounts to a demand that Sinnott-Armstrong provide a foundation for the moral principle that he relied on to explain the wrongness of rape—and that he do so *as an atheist*, that is, without an appeal to God or related phenomena. This response reveals an assumption that underlies much of Craig’s criticism of non-theistic approaches to moral realism: Objective morality requires a foundation external to itself.<sup>57</sup> But why accept such an assumption? Another possibility is a view like mine, according to which all (non-brute) ethical facts rest at least in part on a set of basic

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<sup>53</sup>For a sketch of the second kind of argument, see Paul Copan, “The Moral Argument,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 157–160.

<sup>54</sup>Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?*, p. 34. In endorsing Sinnott-Armstrong’s reply to Craig here, I do not mean to suggest that Sinnott-Armstrong would accept the meta-ethical view I am defending in this paper. But Sinnott-Armstrong’s reply is, as far as I can see, compatible with my view.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>57</sup>See, for example, Craig’s concluding remarks in his 1991 debate with Kai Nielsen at: [www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-nielsen7.html](http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-nielsen7.html) (accessed 5/22/08); and Craig, “Reply,” in Wallace, *Craig-Flew Debate*, p. 171.



ethical facts. Such basic ethical facts are the axioms of morality and, as such, do not have an external foundation. Rather, they *are* the foundation of morality.

The second element of Craig's critique of Sinnott-Armstrong's discussion of the wrongness of rape is a charge of circularity: "[A]ren't we presupposing morality in trying to ground morality? We're saying that an action is morally unjustified if it causes harm that is morally unjustified—no duh!"<sup>58</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong tried to account for the truth of one ethical fact (the wrongness of rape) by appealing to another, more general ethical fact. Craig's characterization of this response as *circular* is surely off the mark; if explaining the truth of a given fact of a particular type by appealing to a more general fact of the same type constitutes an objectionable form of circularity, then objectionable circularity is far more widespread than anyone realizes. Craig's characterization of Sinnott-Armstrong's response as "presupposing morality in trying to ground morality" is also inaccurate. Sinnott-Armstrong is not trying to "ground morality" at all; he is trying to account for the moral wrongness of rape. Craig's mischaracterization here is further evidence that what underlies his position is the assumption that objective morality requires a foundation external to itself.

The discussion of this section so far serves to highlight the centrality of the assumption that objective morality requires an external foundation to Craig's overall attack on atheistic moral realism. I have two main criticisms of Craig's reliance on this principle. First, Craig assumes it without argument and hence simply begs the question against a view like mine. Second, and more importantly, Craig's own approach to objective morality violates this very principle, as I will now show.

In the debate with Sinnott-Armstrong, Craig suggests that "our moral duties are grounded in the commands of a holy and loving God . . . His nature expresses itself toward us in the form of moral commands which, issuing from the Good, become moral duties for us."<sup>59</sup> This explanation of the origin of our moral duties depends on an ungrounded ethical fact, something along these lines: If the Good commands you to do something, then you are morally obligated to do it. The atheist might well ask: What is the grounding for *this* ethical claim? Does it simply float mysteriously in an unintelligible way?

When explaining how God provides an adequate foundation for objective morality, Craig and Moreland, like Wainwright, look to the view of Adams.<sup>60</sup> We have already seen that Adams's view rests on a number of substantive, metaphysically necessary brute ethical facts. Here we may also observe that, like Craig's brief account of divine command theory, Adams's much more developed version of divine command theory relies on ethical claims for which no further explanation is provided, including the following: (i) Only good social relationships can generate morally good reasons to obey commands, (ii) the better the character of the commander, the more reason there is to obey his or her commands, and (iii) the better

<sup>58</sup>Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?*, p. 68.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 68–69.

<sup>60</sup>See, for example, *ibid.*; and Moreland, *Secular City*, p. 129.

the command itself, the more reason there is to obey it.<sup>61</sup> My point is not that the ethical claims Adams appeals to are false or implausible but rather that Adams provides no explanation for them. Within his system, they appear to be brute ethical facts. This is not particularly surprising; as Ralph Cudworth pointed out in the seventeenth century,

that we should be obliged to obey . . . must proceed from . . . the right or authority of the commander, which is founded in natural justice and equity, and an antecedent obligation to obedience in the subjects. Which things are not made by laws, but presupposed before all laws to make them valid.<sup>62</sup>

Cudworth's point: God's ability to impose obligations by way of His commands depends on the truth of certain ethical facts that are not themselves grounded in God. At least in the case of the accounts of Craig and Adams, Cudworth is right.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, if Sinnott-Armstrong is guilty of "presupposing morality in trying to ground morality," then Craig and Adams, and consequently Moreland as well, are similarly guilty. Both sides appeal to ethical claims for which they provide no foundation.

This reveals the hollowness of the following complaint raised by Craig against theories of the sort I am defending in this paper:

[M]y experience with such theories is that they inevitably just assume gratuitously that on a naturalistic view of man, some feature of human existence, say, pleasure, is an intrinsic good, and then proceed from there. *But the advocates of such theories are typically at a loss to justify their starting point.* If their approach to meta-ethical theory is to be . . . 'serious metaphysics' rather than just 'a shopping list' approach, whereby one simply helps oneself to the supervenient moral properties needed to do the job, then some sort of explanation is required for why moral properties supervene on certain natural states.<sup>64</sup>

Notice the demand that proponents of non-theistic meta-ethical theories justify their starting points by providing explanations for their foundational ethical claims. This demand is reasonable only if there can be no basic ethical facts. However, not only does Craig fail to provide any good reason to think that there cannot be any basic ethical facts, his own theistic approach to morality depends on such facts. Therefore, both parties to the debate are stuck with a "shopping list" approach; the only difference

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<sup>61</sup>See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, pp. 244–245. It might be suggested that the three ethical claims listed here are analytic, to which I offer a two-fold reply: (i) No they are not, and (ii) even if they are, Adams is nevertheless committed to the existence of non-analytic, necessary brute ethical facts, as I argued in section 3 above.

<sup>62</sup>Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 18. Mackie makes a similar point; see Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, pp. 114–115.

<sup>63</sup>Cudworth's point applies to Swinburne's version of divine command theory as well; see Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, pp. 204–209.

<sup>64</sup>Craig, "Reply," in Wallace, *Craig-Flew Debate*, p. 171, emphasis added.

between them is the contents of their respective lists. Craig at one point seems at least implicitly to acknowledge this:

The question might be pressed as to why God's nature should be taken to be definitive of goodness. But, unless, we are nihilists, we have to recognize some ultimate standard of value, and God seems to be the least arbitrary stopping point.<sup>65</sup>

Once we get past all the talk of unintelligible floating values, circularity, gratuitousness, and shopping lists, it turns out that Craig's position is simply that the brute ethical facts posited by theistic approaches like his own are less arbitrary than the brute ethical facts posited by non-theistic approaches to ethics. Let us, therefore, put to rest once and for all the demand that non-theists ground all of their ethical claims. Neither a theist like Craig nor an adherent of my version of non-theistic moral realism can satisfy this demand.

In the passage just quoted Craig claims that nihilism is false only if there is a single ultimate standard of value. This is mere question-begging; my view posits no such single standard and yet is incompatible with nihilism. What may be true is that nihilism is false only if there are basic ethical facts. But this principle makes no trouble for my view. Craig goes on to say this:

God's nature is singularly appropriate to serve as [an ultimate standard of value] because, by definition, He is a being *worthy of worship*. And only a being which is the locus and source of all value is worthy of worship.<sup>66</sup>

The claim here appears to be that part of the *meaning* of the word 'God' is 'a being worthy of worship.' From this it follows that the central brute fact of traditional monotheism—that God exists—*includes* the fact that there is a being worthy of worship, thereby rendering this fact brute as well. But that there is a being *worthy of worship* is an ethical fact; in the passage just quoted, Craig thus commits himself once more to the existence of substantive, metaphysically necessary brute ethical facts.

It is somewhat misleading to characterize theorists like Adams and Craig as providing a theistic *foundation* for objective morality. This characterization can easily give the impression that, on their approaches, *all* objective ethical facts are *explained* by God. But this is not at all the case. What is really going on is that *some* objective ethical facts are explained by appeal to *other* basic ethical facts (*some* of which are *also* supernatural facts). Adams, Craig, and I all agree, then, that objective morality is somehow built into reality. We all posit a moral foundation of substantive, metaphysically necessary brute ethical facts. They *also* see divinity as built into reality, whereas I do not. But it is a mistake to think that on their approaches, the divinity that is built into reality provides a complete external

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid. Also see Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?*, p. 69.

foundation for objective morality. On both types of views, the bottom floor of objective morality rests ultimately on nothing.

The ethical shopping list of Adams, Craig, and Moreland contains items like this: (a) there is a being that is worthy of worship, (b) if the Good commands you to do something, then you are morally obligated to do it, and (c) the better the character of the commander, the more reason there is to obey his or her commands. My ethical shopping list contains items like this: (d) pain is intrinsically bad, (e) inflicting pain just for fun is morally wrong, and (f) it is just to give people what they deserve. None of us can provide an external foundation for every item on our list; each of our lists contains some brute ethical facts.

In light of this, one can perhaps forgive the non-theistic moral realist for being somewhat underwhelmed by the argument that endorsing *that there is a being worthy of worship* as a basic ethical fact is *less arbitrary* than, say, endorsing *that pleasure is an intrinsic good* as a basic ethical fact. If Craig and Moreland's support for the premise that the existence of objective ethical facts requires the existence of God boils down to the claim that (a)–(c) are less arbitrary than (d)–(f), then their moral argument for the existence of God is on shaky ground indeed.

With these points firmly in mind, let us return to the issue that launched this discussion: the source of human moral rights and obligations. What is it? I propose the following answer: Necessarily, any being that can reason, suffer, experience happiness, tell the difference between right and wrong, choose between right and wrong, and set goals for itself has certain rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and certain obligations, including the duty to refrain from rape (in typical circumstances).<sup>67</sup> Evolutionary processes have produced human beings that can reason, suffer, experience happiness, tell the difference between right and wrong, choose between right and wrong, and set goals for themselves. In this way, evolutionary processes have endowed us with certain unalienable rights and duties. Evolution has given us these moral properties by giving us the non-moral properties upon which they supervene. And if, as I believe, there is no God, then it is in some sense an accident that we have the moral properties that we do. But that they are accidental in origin does not make these moral properties unreal or unimportant.<sup>68</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Atheism and amorality are often linked in popular thought. I believe this is a mistake. In this paper I have sought to present a plausible version of non-theistic moral realism and defend it against a variety of objections. The arguments of this paper, if successful, should cast doubt on the view that atheism and moral realism are at odds with each other—or should at

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<sup>67</sup>Note that this principle specifies only a *sufficient* condition for the possession of certain rights and duties, not a necessary condition.

<sup>68</sup>Against this sort of approach, Copan offers the slogan: "From valuelessness, valuelessness comes" (Copan, "Moral Argument," in Copan and Moser, *Rationality of Theism*, p. 159). This slogan is catchy, but terribly question-begging. I offer my own slogan in its place: From valuelessness, value sometimes comes.

least provoke further thought on the part of defenders of theistic moral arguments. My sense is that much of the skepticism about the prospect of objective ethical truth in a godless universe stems from the under-examined assumption that all ethical truths must ultimately rest on a non-ethical foundation. As I have emphasized, I believe that this assumption should not only be examined but rejected. Indeed, as I have shown, many theistic critics of views like mine are committed to the rejection of this assumption. With this assumption out of the way, one of the main obstacles to non-natural non-theistic moral realism has been removed.<sup>69</sup>

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