

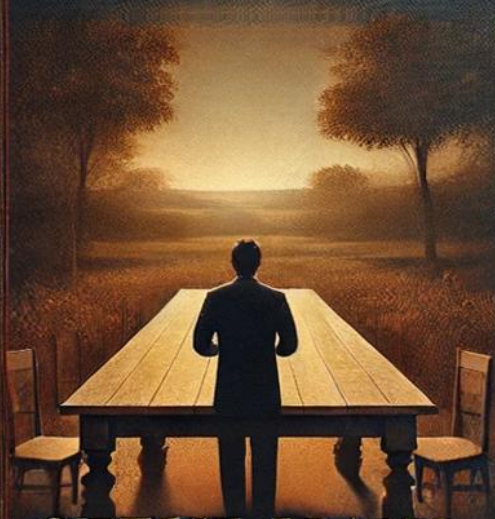
# CHRISTIAN ETHICS



STEVE HAYS

A Rational Foundation for Ethics

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## Christian Ethics

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## Preface

There's some topical overlap between this book and my other book, *The Christian Pilgrimage*. The main difference is that this book covers some of the same topics from a philosophical standpoint while the other book has a more practical or existential emphasis. That doesn't mean this book is impractical. Rather, it provides a rational foundation for the existential emphasis.

# Metaethics

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## Godless morality

Peter Singer and Marc Hauser have written a little brief in defense of secular ethics:

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/200601--.htm>

Let's review their case:

*Is religion necessary for morality?*

Of course, that's a straw man argument. A *Christian* ethicist is not going to argue that Hinduism or Islam is necessary for morality.

Singer and Hauser are trying to position the "religious" argument for an easy defeater by framing the question at an artificially high level of abstraction.

*Yet problems abound for the view that morality comes from God. One problem is that we cannot, without lapsing into tautology, simultaneously say that God is good, and that he gave us our sense of good and bad. For then we are simply saying that God meets God's standards.*

That's an allusion to the Euthyphro dilemma. The implication is that grounding morality in the will of God involves an arbitrary divine fiat. But that's another straw man argument.

God is the Creator. He endows human beings with a specific nature. For example, the fact that human beings reproduce, which involves the mating of males and females, producing children who take years to mature, immediately generates a

set of social obligations which would not obtain if human nature were different. So the Euthyphro dilemma is too simplistic to disqualify Christian ethics.

*A second problem is that there are no moral principles that are shared by all religious people, regardless of their specific beliefs, but by no agnostics and atheists.*

Of course, this phenomenon is by no means inconsistent with Christian ethics. The Bible furnishes a theological explanation for the origin of idolatry and infidelity.

*Indeed, atheists and agnostics do not behave less morally than religious believers, even if their virtuous acts rest on different principles.*

Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. More on that later.

*Non-believers often have as strong and sound a sense of right and wrong as anyone.*

Of course, that's fatally equivocal. Having a *strong* sense of right and wrong doesn't entail a *sound* sense of right and wrong. A Nazi has a strong sense of right and wrong.

And it begs the question to assert that unbelievers have a sound sense of right and wrong. Whether secular ethics can justify that claim is the very point in dispute.

*The opposite is also true. Religion has led people to commit a long litany of horrendous crimes, from God's command to Moses to slaughter the Midianites – men, women, boys, and non-virginal girls – through the Crusades, the Inquisition, innumerable conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and suicide*



*bombers convinced that martyrdom will lead them to paradise.*

**i)** Once again, this begs the question. Singer and Hauser are offering a value-judgment on these actions. This presumes that they are entitled to offer a value-judgment. But, of course, they haven't even begun to establish that presumption.

**ii)** They also insinuate that you can blame one religion for the misdeeds of another religion. But that's a very sloppy inference. Should we also blame utilitarians for the misdeeds of deontologists or existentialists?

If you can blame it on religion in general, then why can't you blame it on ethics in general?

**iii)** Christian ethics can easily account for the crimes of coreligionists. There's a word for that: sin. That is hardly inconsistent with Christian ethics. To the contrary, that's predicted by Christian ethics.

*The third difficulty for the view that morality is rooted in religion is that some elements of morality seem to be universal, despite sharp doctrinal differences among the world's major religions. In fact, these elements extend even to cultures like China, where religion is less significant than philosophical outlooks like Confucianism.*

**i)** Once more, this poses no difficulty for Christian ethics. Have Singer and Hauser never heard of natural law or common grace?

One wonders in reading their caricature of the religious argument whether they are truly that ignorant of Christian

ethics, or whether it simply suits their own political agenda to demagogue the issue.

**ii)** It's also duplicitous for them to appeal to cultural universals when Singer, for one, has made a career of challenging conventional morality.

**iii)** Singer and Hauser are also cherry-picking the best of non-Christian civilizations. But even if we were to grant, for the sake of argument, that China was a morally upright civilization, what about ancient Assyria? Or Japan under the Shogun? Or the Aztecs? Or the Iroquois?

*Perhaps a divine creator handed us these universal elements at the moment of creation. But an alternative explanation, consistent with the facts of biology and geology, is that over millions of years we have evolved a moral faculty that generates intuitions about right and wrong.*

Of course, there are two problems with that alternative:

**i)** It commits the naturalistic fallacy.

**ii)** As soon as we become aware of our evolutionary conditioning, we're in a position to override our evolutionary conditioning.

*For the first time, research in the cognitive sciences, building on theoretical arguments emerging from moral philosophy, has made it possible to resolve the ancient dispute about the origin and nature of morality.*

Grounding morality in cognitive science continues to commit the naturalistic fallacy. Unless nature has a teleological

orientation, which naturalistic evolution denies, you can't look to nature for moral guidance.

*Consider the following three scenarios. For each, fill in the blank space with "obligatory," "permissible," or "forbidden."*

*1. A runaway boxcar is about to run over five people walking on the tracks. A railroad worker is standing next to a switch that can turn the boxcar onto a side track, killing one person, but allowing the five to survive. Flipping the switch is.*

*2. You pass by a small child drowning in a shallow pond, and you are the only one around. If you pick up the child, she will survive and your pants will be ruined. Picking up the child is.*

*3. Five people have just been rushed into a hospital in critical condition, each requiring an organ to survive. There is not enough time to request organs from outside the hospital, but there is a healthy person in the hospital's waiting room. If the surgeon takes this person's organs, he will die, but the five in critical care will survive. Taking the healthy person's organs is.*

*If you judged case 1 as permissible, case 2 as obligatory, and case 3 as forbidden, then you are like the 1,500 subjects around the world who responded to these dilemmas on our web-based moral sense test (<http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu/>). If morality is God's word, atheists should judge these cases differently from religious people, and their responses should rely on different justifications.*

There are three problems with this argument:

**i)** As I already pointed out, Christian ethics can explain the common decency of the unbeliever consistent with Christian

ethical presuppositions (i.e. natural law, common grace).

**ii)** Choices like these fail to present a real challenge to morality since the respondent, projecting himself into a situation like this, has nothing to gain or lose.

The acid test of morality is when doing right would be personally disadvantageous while doing the wrong would be personally advantageous. Ruining a pair of pants is trivial. It doesn't cost you anything of consequence.

**iii)** It's duplicitous of Singer to invoke common sense moral intuition when Singer goes on of his way to question and deny common sense moral intuitions on a number of moral issues:

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/200703--.htm>

*For example, because atheists supposedly lack a moral compass, they should be guided by pure self-interest and walk by the drowning child. But there were no statistically significant differences between subjects with or without religious backgrounds, with approximately 90% of subjects saying that it is permissible to flip the switch on the boxcar, 97% saying that it is obligatory to rescue the baby, and 97% saying that is forbidden to remove the healthy man's organs.*

I've already drawn attention to some of the problems with this straw man argument. Now I'll point out another problem:

There's a difference between what a morally *prereflective* unbeliever might do and what a morally *reflective* unbeliever might do. Singer himself is a

case in point. Take his third scenario. From his utilitarian standpoint, would it not be justifiable to kill one person to save five others? How would he himself answer the question of involuntary organ harvesting? Would he agree with the 97% of respondents, or the 3% of respondents? What is he teaching his students at Princeton?

Likewise, I don't think that public policy in 21C Holland is as virtuous as public policy in 19C Holland. The secularization of Holland (to take one example) has had morally deleterious consequences.

*When asked to justify why some cases are permissible and others forbidden, subjects are either clueless or offer explanations that cannot account for the relevant differences. Importantly, those with a religious background are as clueless or incoherent as atheists.*

Of course, what all this amounts to is that some respondents lack an adequate worldview while other respondents lack the sophistication to articulate their worldview.

*These studies provide empirical support for the idea that, like other psychological faculties of the mind, including language and mathematics, we are endowed with a moral faculty that guides our intuitive judgments of right and wrong. These intuitions reflect the outcome of millions of years in which our ancestors have lived as social mammals, and are part of our common inheritance. Our evolved intuitions do not necessarily give us the right or consistent answers to moral dilemmas. What was good for our ancestors may not be good today.*

So why even bother referring to evolution if evolutionary

ethics is admittedly inadequate?

*But insights into the changing moral landscape, in which issues like animal rights, abortion, euthanasia, and international aid have come to the fore, have not come from religion, but from careful reflection on humanity and what we consider a life well lived.*

Of course, that sidesteps the question of whether the “changing moral landscape” is a change for better or worse. It’s clear that Singer and Hauser are writing for a sympathetic audience. There’s no effort to actually prove a single one of their basic claims. What they do, instead, is to pander to the ethnocentric prejudice of the modern, Western reader. Someone who identifies with contemporary Eurocentric values.

*In this respect, it is important for us to be aware of the universal set of moral intuitions so that we can reflect on them and, if we choose, act contrary to them. We can do this without blasphemy, because it is our own nature, not God, that is the source of our morality.*

But unless our nature is God-given, there’s nothing *normative* about our nature. What’s the *natural* distinction between gang-rape and consensual sex? What’s the natural distinction between murder and self-defense?

## Is the desire to sin sinful?

This raises some interesting issues:

<http://spirited-tech.com/COG/2020/04/07/impeccability-and-temptation/>

**1.** One issue was whether Jesus was impeccable or merely sinless. My own position is that by virtue of the hypostatic union, he was impeccable because the divine nature exerts control over the human nature. In that respect, it isn't possible for Jesus to succumb to sinful temptation.

**2.** However, the post is raising a different, albeit related issue. Not whether it was possible for Jesus to *give into* sinful temptation, but to *feel* sinful temptation.

**3.** I'd add that we don't have to answer the question directly. We can address the question at a more generic level. As a general or universal principle, is it necessarily sinful to desire sin? The question in reference to Jesus will answer itself depending on the general principle. So we can bypass the specific application to Jesus and focus on the question of whether, in principle, it's intrinsically sinful to desire sin?

**4.** I'll explore that momentarily, but before doing so draw two distinctions unique to Jesus:

Whether or not it's always sinful to desire sin, certain desires are intrinsically sinful. For instance, sexual desire for prepubescent children is intrinsically sinful. You must already be morally twisted to have *that* kind of desire.

There has to be a prior moral derangement for some things to be desirable. So I'd say Jesus can't desire intrinsically sinful things. That doesn't follow from the stronger principle of impeccability but the weaker principle of sinlessness.

**5.** In addition, there are second-order desires where committing sin engenders a desire to sin that's contingent on committing sin. For instance, there's a subculture of faux vampirism where people drink each other's blood. To my knowledge, humans have no natural appetite for human blood. But if you experiment, I suppose that could become an acquired taste. I don't know that for a fact. I haven't studied the issue. But it will suffice as a hypothetical illustration.

For the same reason as (4), Jesus can't have a second-order desire to sin. That doesn't follow from the stronger principle of impeccability but the weaker principle of sinlessness.

**6.** Back to the main issue. It may seem like a tautology or truism or self-evident that it's necessarily sinful to desire sin. Perhaps. But I think the plausibility of that intuition relies on keeping it on an abstract plane. When, however, we consider concrete examples, it may lose plausibility. What we find intuitively compelling or plausible is often dependent on paradigm-examples; it may break down in the face of counterexamples. It's not that the examples are necessarily wrong. The fallacy is overgeneralizing from certain kinds of examples.

**7.** Let's begin with a cliché example. A normal man sees a beautiful woman. That automatically triggers sexual desire. Indeed, it may trigger sexual arousal.



Since premarital and extramarital sex are sinful, it might seem self-evident that his desire is sinful. Sexual desire is shorthand for desiring to have sexual relations.

Yet it's hard to see how that can be true. If straight men didn't have a sexual desire for women, they'd lack a sufficient motivation to get married. So you might say the illicit desire is a necessary condition to incentivize the licit outlet of marriage. You must have sexual desire when you're still single to want marriage.

It also seems implausible to think that kind of sexual desire is a result of the Fall. But I won't argue the point.

BTW, I'm not suggesting sex is the only motivation for marriage. But realistically, and in most cases, it's a *sine qua non*.

**8.** Let's consider cases where there's a psychological conflict between altruistic duty and self-preservation. Take a situation where your odds of survival are enhanced if you leave an ailing friend behind but diminished if you stay behind to care for him. Suppose on a camping trip he comes down with a contagious, life-threatening illness. He might die, and even if he survives, he will become incapacitated during the cycle of the disease. And he will certainly not survive if you abandon him when he's incapacitated. His only shot at survival is if you provide for his needs while he's unable to provide for himself.

But the more direct contact and prolonged contact you have with him, the greater the odds that he will infect you, so that you may die in the process. Hence, your altruistic duty is in tension with your instinctive fear of death. A part of you has a hardwired aversion to risking your own life to

save his. You have an inclination to desert him. If it's sinful to desert him, is it sinful to desire to do so?

Yet we could turn around. The fact that moral heroism may conflict with natural desire affords an opportunity or test to do the right thing when it's costly. If the sacrifice didn't cut against the grain, it would be morally cheap. So in situations like that, having a desire to sin seems to be an instrumental good. It draws forth a second-order virtue.

So my provisional conclusion is that it's not inherently sinful to desire sin. Rather, that's context-dependent. And that in turn answers the question about Jesus.

## Life is a game of cards

“The basic premise behind Craig’s argument seems to be that life is meaningless unless it is unending.”

<http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2009/01/atheism-and-meaning-of-life.html>

Of course, that’s a gross oversimplification. Many factors contribute to the meaning of life. The meaning of life is a many-layered thing.

**i)** Immortality is a necessary, but insufficient, condition of a meaningful life.

**ii)** For one thing, you have to be *conscious* of your mortality for your mortality to figure in your outlook on life. A person who knows he has terminal cancer has a different outlook on life than a person who has terminal cancer, but is unaware of his impending demise.

**iii)** One of the things that sets us apart from most animals, or maybe all animals, is our sense of time. Of time’s passage. The past and the future. We’ve been blessed or cursed—as the case may be—with powers of foresight. We can look ahead. Anticipate the outcome.

Our foreknowledge of the future affects our attitude towards the present. And this cuts both ways. We are goal-oriented. And setting a goal can give us something to live for.

On the other hand, if we know we’re doomed, then that will cast a backward shadow on the present. I may enjoy the scenery as I stroll through the park, but if I know that a she-bear is waiting for me at the end of the trail, and I can’t

avoid that fate, then my foreknowledge of the grisly outcome will darken my appreciation of the butterflies and flowers.

Although human beings live in the present, our ability to objectify time, to put some mental distance between ourselves and the momentary instant, means that our experience of the world isn't limited to the present. We can't pretend not to know what's lurking around the bend.

I know, from a secular standpoint, that once I'm dead I won't remember anything I did. So that's always hanging over me, as an unbeliever—if I'm a consistent unbeliever.

**iv)** In addition, mortality is a *process* as well as an outcome. It's not as if we're in the prime of life from the day we're born to the day we die. There is the aging process. We see ourselves dying. We feel ourselves dying. We see our loved ones dying. We see our loved ones die. The generation before us. Parents and grandparents.

It's like an inmate on death row, with a clock and calendar. Tick-tock, tick-tock.

**v)** Apropos (iv), it's not as if life is an undifferentiated continuum. Rather, we see ourselves passing through the lifecycle. Suppose I used to be the star quarterback in high school. Later, I become the football coach at my alma mater. Every year or so, I break in a new quarterback. I see him doing what I was doing, hoping what I was hoping—5, 10, 20 years ago. A relentless turnover. Some day he'll become the next coach.

The nagging sense that my best days are behind me begins to tug on my shoulder. The nagging sense that we are interchangeable parts begins to tug on my shoulder. The

nagging sense that we are replaceable parts that only exist to replace other replaceable parts, that we exist to replace ourselves, begins to tug on my shoulder. Is that all there is to life? A replicator that only exists to replicate another replicator, then self-destruct? Is that it?

**vi)** This goes beyond the question of mere mortality. It goes to the question of why we're here. A question of purpose. In other words, it goes to the question of *morality* as well as *mortality*. If we weren't *designed* to be or think or feel or do anything in particular, then nothing is right or wrong. Nothing is supposed to be any particular way.

And that eats away at the meaning of life. It consumes you from within, like a parasite, embedded in your flesh, that eats you alive, hollows you out. In that case, life ceases to be *good*. There are no goods. Nothing is good—or evil. At that point, it isn't *good* to love your wife or kids or parents or rainbows or lobster or Monet. It may be *pleasant*, but it isn't *good*.

It just *is*, the way *everything* just *is*. The way a dung heap just *is*.

On this view, what's the difference between conjugal love and child molestation? On this view, there is no moral difference. It's just a question of which activity you happen to find enjoyable. Making love to a woman or raping a little girl.

That's not all, but that's a start. For more, let's proceed:

“What the atheist fails to see is why purpose in this cosmic sense is necessary for a life filled with meaning. Why does my, or my species', existence have to have

been intended for me to discover love, beauty, truth, goodness, and all that gives life its deepest meanings?"

Notice that Parsons can't escape his superficiality for long enough to even see the problem. Notice how he's begging the question every step of the way. From a secular standpoint, is there "love, beauty, truth, goodness" out there, waiting to be discovered?

**i)** On a secular view, there is no goodness for us to discover. And unless truths are goods and goods are truths, there is no value, beyond sheer survival value, in discovering the truth.

**ii)** What about beauty? Is a wildflower beautiful? From a secular standpoint, beauty is not an objective property of flowers. Rather, that's a purely subjective or, if you prefer, *projective* property. We *project* our sense of beauty onto natural objects.

It's true that human beings "find" many natural objects beautiful: mountains, flowers, sunsets, &c. But it's not as if the flower feels the same way about me that I feel about the flower. It's not as if the flower was *meant* to be beautiful to you and me. So that's not a *discovery*. It's a *projection*. An *illusion*.

**iii)** Of course, from a Christian standpoint, things are quite different. From a Christian standpoint, there is a sense in which nature was truly *meant* to impress human observers. We were made for the natural world and the natural world was made for us.

**iv)** By the same token, the natural world also has a figural dimension. It was meant to point to something beyond itself, something greater than itself. Nature is an emblem of

nature's God. The Creator of the world.

**v)** So, from a Christian standpoint, we can truly *discover* beauty in nature.

**vi)** And this also applies to fine art. Take opera. Take opera buffs. Opera is a very expensive art form. It's expensive to build an opera house. Expensive to staff an opera house. Not to mention the utilities.

Expensive to pay for a conductor and orchestra. The musicians undertake an expensive education. Play expensive instruments.

The singers train to do unusual things with the human voice, like how to sing a trill or hit a high C.

We dress fat singers in expensive—as well as expansive—consumes. Then we sit back.

What is all this for? To listen to chubby human beings emit certain tonal frequencies.

From a practical or naturalistic point of view, opera is one of the most useless expenditures of human resources that you can imagine.

What about from a Christian point of view? Well, opera is a fallen art form. The libretti are pretty decadent.

But bracketing that for one moment, there's another side to opera. It applies God-given creativity (the composer, violin-maker) to God-given media (the voice).

There's a sense in which fine art is a religious experience. It puts us in touch with God, because we are applying our

divine creativity to divinely created media like light and sound and matter. It isn't by any means redemptive. And it's infected with sin. But it can be a genuine good. A mixture of good and evil, but with an element of natural goodness.

To take one example, there's something distinctively feminine about a fine soprano voice. It projects a feminine ideal. And it's not a purely subjective impression. It's not something that the audience is merely projecting onto the sound. No, it reveals something about womanhood—something that God put there all along.

There is also the mysterious ability of music to create a tonal metaphor of human moods. The power of music both to *invoke* and *evoke* human moods.

That's understandable from a Christian standpoint, where the sensible world is an emblem of the spiritual world. That is not nearly so comprehensible from an evolutionary standpoint.

**vii)** What about love? What do we discover when we discover love?

What is love? From a secular standpoint, love is a feeling which natural selection has programmed into us to make us genetic carriers. And that's it.

I'm reminded of SF stories in which an android doesn't know it's an android. Take an androidal child. It was made for childless couples. There's a company that manufactures androidal children for childless couples. They could have a child the old-fashioned way, but they prefer a designer child, a child that's cobbled together according to their specifications. Sex. IQ. Personality. Appearance.



The android is implanted with false memories. Nostalgic memories. It "remembers" its parents. They put the androidal child to bed for the first time. It's programmed to switch on. When it "wakes" up, it "remembers" its bedroom. It "remembers" having awakened before, having awakened in this very same bed all its "life." It "remembers" its playmates next door.

It's designed to eat and breathe and excrete. To laugh and cry. To feel a pulse. To feel emotion.

Then, one day, it suffers an accident. The accident exposes its circuitry. The android suddenly realizes that it's not a human child after all.

Yet it has genuine feelings. Humanoid feelings. It loves its parents. Loves its friends.

But its feelings are indexed false memories. Implanted memories. A fictitious past. Simulated images.

According to natural selection, that's what "love" really amounts to. Lower animals don't know any better. But we've evolved to the point where we've become aware of our evolutionary conditioning. We've seen our circuitry. And it's circuitry all the way down.

A carrier works best if he doesn't know he's just another, expendable carrier. If he discovers that he's being used, to be disposed of once the mission is accomplished, he will resent the role he's been assigned to perform. He will rebel. That's why he must be kept in the dark. Fooled.

**viii)** Moreover, when you combine love with mortality, that creates a problem. The problem of lost loved ones. What

about the people we used to love, but lost to death? The dearly departed? Parents and grandparents? The friends we outlive? The spouse we outlive?

To some extent you can try to replace people with other people, where a wife and kids take the place of dead parents and grandparents.

But loved ones aren't really irreplaceable, aren't they? Isn't there something unique and unrepeatable about a loved one? And Parsons doesn't have a promise like [Rev 21:8](#) to cling to.

And surely one of the common features of human life is fragility of love. Its mutability. Betrayal. Adultery. Friends that drift apart. Grow apart. Go their own way. Alienation between parent and child. Sibling rivalry.

The pursuit of love is a notorious source of human misery as well as emotional satisfaction. Of alcoholism, homicide, and suicide.

**ix)** From a Christian standpoint, we were also programmed to love each another. But we were *designed* that way. Designed by a wise and benevolent Creator.

In our case, love is good. There is such a thing as good. Love is a natural good.

What is more, human love, while good in its own right, also points to something beyond itself. Something greater than itself. It exemplifies divine love. Divine goodness.

It is not a projection or illusion, but a genuine *discovery*. The discovery of an *objective* property in nature. Mundane

goodness as well as extramundane goodness, of which mundane goodness is a finite instance.

“Can Quentin Smith, or anyone, really expect us to believe that it does not matter for human beings whether or not there is more or less torture, genocide, holocausts, Gulags, or despotism? Again, if it matters for human beings, it matters.”

**i)** First of all, notice that Parsons is bluffing. This is not a refutation of Quentin Smith. Rather, it’s a tendentious denial, cloaked in emotive rhetoric. How dare Quentin say such a thing!

Parsons has offered no counterargument. Rather, he’s feigning indignation to conceal the absence of a counterargument.

**ii)** “Matters” in what sense? Pain matters in the sense that we find pain and suffering unpleasant. But that, of itself, is not a *moral* concern.

And, yes, it matters to us at an emotional level. We dislike it.

But all this sidesteps the question of whether it *ought* to matter.

“Still, shouldn’t I have some choice in the matter? What if I do not care for God’s ‘wonderful’ plan for me? It is no good telling me that God is much wiser than I and that I should trust his plans for my life rather than make my own. I want to make my own plans—and I’ll willingly suffer the consequences of my own mistakes—rather than have a plan given to me, even if it is given by an infinitely wise and loving being. Being allowed to

discover one's own meaning in life and make one's own choices seems to be essential to human dignity."

**i)** To begin with, does an unbeliever really have a choice in the matter? From a secular standpoint, is Parsons really choosing his own destiny? Isn't he the byproduct of physical determinism, genetic determinism, and social conditioning? Aren't his choices the effects of his opportunities and desires? And aren't his opportunities and desires the effects of a causal process concerning which he himself was not the cause, but rather, the end-result?

Naturalism is deterministic, but unplanned. We're captive passengers, but there's no one in the cockpit. Like it or not, Parsons is just along for the ride. There's no escape hatch. And the plane has no destination. It will crash land, killing all the passengers.

**ii)** I suppose there's a genuine sense in which an unbeliever can discover his own meaning in life. After all, Ted Bundy made a meaningful life for himself by murdering coeds and then indulging in necrophilia with the rotten corpses.

That's a meaning we impose on life. A meaning extrinsic to reality. Playacting. Setting artificial goals.

Like a game of cards. We make the rules. Assign a conventional value to the cards. Assign a conventional value to the chips.

Jeffrey Dahmer is another exponent of Parsons' philosophy. Dahmer had a purpose in life. A very enterprising young man. Very goal-oriented. Took the initiative. Didn't wait around for heaven to mail him a wonderful plan for his life. A true hero of humanism. An example to us all.

“But, then, I observe that very many theists don’t really seem to get much meaning out of their religious activities. As Mark Twain observed, even an hour a week sitting in a pew is tedious for many believers. Having formerly been a church-goer myself, I used to notice that many would sigh, fidget, yawn, check their watches, and snooze during the minister’s homily—clearly anxious that church should end so that they could attend to the far more important matters of Sunday dinner and the big game.”

Of course, this says more about Parsons than it does about the Christian faith. And it helps explain why it was so easy for Parsons to walk away from the faith once delivered.

**i)** It’s true that many church services are bland and boring. That doesn’t have to be so. Here I think many evangelicals could learn a thing or two from the high-church tradition. Great art. Great music. Great poetry.

**ii)** But Parsons also suffers from a very compartmentalized view of “religious activities.” A religious activity isn’t limited to the four walls of the church. It doesn’t begin and end on Sunday morning. Just because Parsons is tone-deaf to God doesn’t mean the music of the spheres went silent.

**iii)** At the same time, we can’t expect heaven on earth. Not in this life. A fallen world will disappoint. It cannot be the ultimate source of personal fulfillment.

**iv)** He also confuses meaning with pleasure. There’s a sense in which the damned continue to lead meaningful lives. Retributive justice serves a purpose.

“Atheism is perfectly compatible with purpose in senses 2 and 3. An atheist can certainly feel a sense of

'vocation,' not, of course a literal 'calling' by God, but a sense that there is a confluence between a need that must be addressed, or some good to be done, and one's own talents, values, and personality. For some it might be a sense of calling to be a physician, for others a social worker, or a scientist. For me it was to become a university professor. On many occasions it would have been more convenient for me to have given up on this career and done something else, but my sense of 'calling' was so strong that I persevered, and it paid off."

Not to mention Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer. They, too, had a strong sense of purpose. A goal in life. A reason to get out of bed. Something that got them through the day. The carrot at the end of the stick—although Dahmer was no vegetarian.

Bundy made full use of his talents, values, and personality. He was a talented guy. That came in very handy. He had a charming personality. That came in very handy. And he chose his own value system, which—as Parsons assures us—is essential to human dignity.

True, he suffered the consequences of his own mistakes—like the mistake of getting caught. But that's the price you pay for self-fulfillment.

"Atheists also can endorse purpose in the Aristotelian sense. Aristotle held that, just as nature had fitted various creatures to function well in their particular niches in the economy of nature, so humans are fitted to function best in certain ways. According to Aristotle, humans are, by nature, social and rational beings. Therefore, we function optimally, and experience the most fulfillment and satisfaction, when we are living

lives of reason and virtue in community with other human beings. There is no reason why atheism cannot accept Aristotle's claim that some ways of living are intrinsically and naturally the most fulfilling and valuable for human beings."

Of course, this completely disregards the fact that Aristotelian natural law theory is grounded in Aristotelian natural theology. But once you deny teleological explanation in nature (a la methodological naturalism, not to mention metaphysical naturalism), then Aristotle's teleological system of ethics goes out the window.

In naturalistic evolution, various creatures were never "fitted to function well in their particular niches."

They have no natural *function*. That's an ends/means concept. That smuggles directionality or intentionality into a secular framework which denies teleological categories.

That's a tacit personification of nature. A Christian can get away with that language for there is a person behind the process in Christian theism.

Parsons has been fudging every step of the way.

## A life of intellectual and moral virtue

“A serious and thoughtful objection against metaphysical naturalism is that it cannot provide a basis for some of our deepest and most intuitive moral judgments...The argument is clearly stated by Alvin Plantinga. He first notes that there seem to be instances of real and objectively horrifying evil in the world (Plantinga, **THE SHORTER ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY**, p. 326). The real and objectively horrifying acts that Plantinga means are those that are purposely and maliciously committed, like the hideous tortures and genocidal atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein, Stalin, the Nazis, or the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot.”

<http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2009/01/naturalism-and-objectively-horrifying.html>

And what is Parsons' alternative?

“Nature has designed the human organism to fulfill a characteristic function, just as other organisms are adapted to the performance of their roles in the economy of nature.”

Notice how he personifies the natural process—attributing goal-oriented behavior to the natural process. But from a secular standpoint, this is literal nonsense.

So, if we remove the teleological ascriptions, what, exactly, does his claim amount to? Hard to see what's left, really.



“Humans are naturally adapted to live a life of intellectual and moral virtue in society with other human beings.”

How could he possibly arrive at that conclusion from naturalistic evolution? How does evolution select for a life of intellectual and moral virtue?

Moreover, if his claim is true, then how does that explanation account for the atrocities of Stalin, Hitler, Hussein, Pol Pot, &c.? If human “organisms” are naturally “designed” or naturally “adapted” to live a life of intellectual and moral virtue, then how come so many human “organisms” fail to fulfill that very role that nature has assigned to them?

Put another way, what would count as evidence against his claim? Given the evidence of human barbarity, what evidence does he appeal to prove that this is just an aberration? What natural evidence supplies the norm?

## Darkness Visible

In a season 2 episode (“Darkness Visible”) of *La Femme Nikita*, Michael and Nikita are dispatched to a war-torn area of the Balkans. In the course of their mission they run across a couple orphaned children—a young boy and his younger sister.

Nikita’s maternal instinct kicks in. She tells Michael they can’t leave the children behind to fend for themselves. Nikita functions as Michael’s conscience. He’s the realist, she’s the idealist.

He’s not hard-hearted. But, to survive in Section One, he’s learned to suppress his feelings. He’s more ruthless than Nikita, but less ruthless than Operations or Madeline. Nikita revives and accentuates his emotional and moral conflict.

From both a Christian standpoint and a Darwinian standpoint, how we feel about children is programmed. The feeling is involuntary and irrepressible. We see them as cute, helpless, defenseless. They need us, and we have a felt need to protect them and provide for them.

Yet our feelings, while involuntary, do not compel us to act accordingly. That makes a logical, and sometimes practical, difference, in how we act. A Christian believes that God programmed these feelings. A Darwinian believes that natural selection programmed these feelings.

Should we act on these feelings or not? Believing you know the source of your feelings makes a difference in whether or not you choose to act on your feelings.

There’s a reason Michael is prepared to leave the children

behind, to suffer and die—as the case may be. Left to his own devices, Michael’s survival instinct trump’s Nikita’s maternal instinct.

If he lets his feelings jeopardize the success of the mission, then his superiors (Operations, Madeline) will put him in “abeyance” and have him “canceled.”

From a Darwinian standpoint, Michael can say to himself, “I want to save these children. I can’t help myself. I can’t control how I feel. But I know I was conditioned to feel this way by natural selection. While natural selection can make me feel a certain way, it can’t oblige me to act accordingly. Natural selection is amoral. My paternal instinct is like a phobia: I can’t change it, but I can ignore it. Why should I risk my own skin for their sake? Although it pains me to leave them behind, I must steel myself against the illusion.”

From a Darwinian standpoint, our instincts lack the force of moral imperatives. We can override them. And nothing constrains us to obey our feelings—except the misguided sense that we should care. It’s a trick of the mind. Evolutionary brainwashing.

Now, just as our feelings are predetermined from a Darwinian standpoint, our feelings are predetermined from a Christian standpoint.

Up to a point, Michael, if he were a Christian, could say much the same thing: “I want to save these children. I can’t help myself. I can’t control how I feel. But I know I was conditioned to feel this way by God.”

Yet here is where the two positions part company. Both are deterministic, but they have opposing consequences.

If my protective feelings for children were programmed into me by God, then I should honor my feelings. These feelings are the moral result of a moral agent.

These are feelings I *ought* to have. It's built into the way in which God designed the human race. These feelings have an obligatory force.

Both the Christian and the Darwinian are aware of their preconditioning. For the Darwinian, consciousness of his programming is an opportunity to disaffirm his programming; for the Christian, consciousness of his programming is an opportunity to reaffirm his programming.

Both the Christian and the Darwinian can resist their paternal (or maternal) instincts. But the Christian has no motivation to do so. To the contrary, the realization that his paternal feelings are God-given is a ratification of his feelings. An incentive to embrace his duty—in the confidence that supreme wisdom is the architect of his parental instinct.

For the Darwinian, enlightenment logically leads to amorality. For the Christian, enlightenment logically leads to virtue. For the Darwinian, lucidity is the foe of morality; for the Christian, lucidity is the friend of morality.

In secular ethics, parents sacrifice their children (abortion, infanticide) for the parents' welfare. In Christian ethics, parents sacrifice themselves for their children's welfare.

Nietzsche was right about the respective moral consequences of Christian ethics and secular ethics.



## Evolutionary naturalism

Thomas Nagel is one of the leading philosophers of his generation. He is also an atheist. Here's his candid evaluation of what evolutionary naturalism entails:

"As it is usually understood, evolutionary naturalism is radically antiteleological. This implies that it is not suited to supply any kind of sense to our existence, if it is taken on as the larger perspective from which life is lived. Instead, the evolutionary perspective probably makes human life, like all life, meaningless, since it makes life a more or less accidental consequence of physics," T. Nagel, **SECULAR PHILOSOPHY AND THE RELIGIOUS TEMPERAMENT** (Oxford 2010), 15.

"The profoundly nonteleological character of this modern form of naturalism is concealed by the functional explanations that fill evolutionary accounts of the characteristics of living organisms. But any reference to the function or survival value of an organ or other feature is shorthand for a long story of purposeless mutations followed, because of environmental contingencies, by differential reproductive fitness—survival of offspring or other relatives with the same genetic material. It is in the most straightforward sense false that we have eyes in order to see and a heart to pump the blood," *ibid.* 15.

"That conception, far from offering us a sense of who we are, dissolves any sense of purpose or true nature that we may have begun with. The meaning of organic life vanishes in the meaninglessness of physics, of which it is one peculiar consequence. It is widely thought that, without

knowing the details, we now have every reason to believe that life arose from a lifeless universe, in virtue of the basic laws of particle physics or string theory or something of the kind, which did not have life or us 'in mind,' *ibid.* 16.

"A genealogy of this kind gives us nothing to live by. As Daniel Dennett says, it is 'universal acid: it eats through just about every traditional concept.' To live, we must fall back on our contingently formed desires, reserving the scientific world picture for intellectual and instrumental purposes. If naturalism means that everything reduces to physics, then there is no naturalistic answer to the cosmic question [i.e. 'How can one bring into one's individual life a full recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole?]," *ibid.* 16.

## The Myth of Sisyphus

In his recent collection of essays, Thomas Nagel delineates the stark comparison and contrast between the religious outlook and the irreligious outlook. Nagel is, himself, an atheist. However, unlike some of his militant colleagues, he's not ashamed to take religion seriously or explore the moral implications of atheism.

His exposition of the "religious temperament" suffers somewhat from attempting to employ a generic definition of religiosity. That inevitably leads to a highly diluted definition. Nevertheless, it's instructive to see a prominent secular philosopher attempt a sympathetic exposition of the religious temperament. And it also instructive to see him then use that description as the benchmark against which he describes the atheistic alternative. For he's not afraid to admit the grim consequences of atheism.

"The subject overlaps with that of the meaning of life, but it is not the same. It is a question of making sense not merely of our lives, but of everything. To better identify the question, we should start with the religious response...It is the idea that there is some kind of all-encompassing mind or spiritual principle in addition to the minds of individual human beings and other creatures—and that this mind or spirit is the foundation of the existence of the universe, of the natural order, of value, and of our existence, nature, and purpose. The aspect of religious belief I am talking about is belief in such a conception of the universe, and the incorporation of that belief into one's conception of oneself and one's life," T. Nagel, **SECULAR PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS TEMPERAMENT** (Oxford 2010), 4-5.



“The important thing for the present discussion is that if you have such a belief, you cannot think of yourself as leading a merely human life. Instead, it becomes a life in the sight of God, or an element in the life of the world soul. You must try to bring this conception of the universe and your relation to it into your life, as part of the point of view from which it is led. This is part of the answer to the question of who you are and what you are doing here. It may include a belief in the love of God for his creatures, belief in an afterlife, and other ideas about the connection of earthly existence with the totality of nature or the span of eternity. The details will differ, but in general a divine or universal mind supplies an answer to the question of how a human individual can live in harmony with the universe,” *ibid.* 5.

“The question I have in mind is a general one about the relation of individual human life to the universe as a whole. The question is pointed to by its religious answer: namely, that our lives are in some way expressions or parts of the spiritual sense of the universe as a whole, which is its deepest reality, and that we must try to live them in light of this, and not only from the point of view of our local purely individual nature,” *ibid.* 5.

“Without God, it is unclear what we should aspire to harmony with. But still, the aspiration can remain, to live not merely the life of the creature one is, but in some sense to participate through it in the life of the universe as a whole. To be gripped by this desire is what I mean by the religious temperament. Having, amazingly, burst into existence, one is a representative of existence itself—of the whole of it—not just because one is part of it but because it is present to one’s consciousness,” *ibid.* 6.

“Let me begin by discussing the dismissive response that probably fits most comfortably with the analytic tradition....This is certainly a possible secular stance: Take life as you find it, and try to play the hand you have been dealt by the contingencies of biology, culture, and history. It is possible to go far beyond these boundaries in the pursuit of pure understanding, but all such understanding will be essentially scientific,” *ibid.* 6-7.

“This important outlook, probably dominant among atheists, places physical science at the top of the hierarchy of understanding for the universe as a whole...But the universe revealed by chemistry and physics, however beautiful and awe-inspiring, is meaningless, in the radical sense that it is incapable of meaning. That is, natural science, as most commonly understood, presents the world and our existence as something to which the religious impulse has no application. All we can do, and this is a great deal, is extend our knowledge of what the universe contains and of the laws that govern it,” *ibid.* 7-8.

“This was not the outlook of religious scientists in the past, who saw themselves as uncovering the wonders of God’s creation. And some modern scientists, like Einstein, have taken a quasi-religious attitude toward the natural order and its intelligibility. But the most common secular attitude, I think, is that once we leave the human scale and move to the largest and most general theories, and ultimately perhaps to a theory of everything, we are in the realm of pure description,” *ibid.* 8.

“One major intellectual task is to describe how the universe generated creatures that find themselves with the need to

make some kind of sense of their lives. But this description itself does not have to make sense in the same way. It can be a purely factual account of how sense-seeking creatures—creatures like us, whose lives are capable of significant senselessness—emerged at a certain level of complexity of organization,” *ibid.* 8.

“I want now to turn to less dismissive secular responses to the question. The minimalist response is that the universe has nothing to offer that we can use, and that we are thrown back on our own resources. This differs from hardheaded atheism because it doesn’t reject the question but tells us that we have to come to terms with our inability to answer it. We can’t make sense of our lives from the point of view of our place in the universe, and shouldn’t expect this to change even if we learn much more about the natural order. And that leaves a gap—the failure of a natural aspiration,” *ibid.* 9-10.

“At this point, we may respond with either existentialist despair or existentialist defiance. The latter is particularly well expressed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It consists in making a virtue of the will to go on in spite of the complete indifference of the cosmos—without the kind of sense that religion could give to our lives. Not to be defeated by pointlessness is what gives our lives their point. That is as far as we can go toward living in light of our understanding of everything,” *ibid.* 10.

## Quest for the unholy Grayling

AC Grayling has chimed in on the Japan disaster. Grayling is a militant infidel philosopher. Grayling is everything that a social climber like John Loftus aspires to, but never will be.

*Before commenting on his op-ed, I wish to back up and put his strictures into context by first comparing what he says here with something he wrote elsewhere:*

*Given that human beings have evolved by natural selection (with genetic drift and some other factors perhaps assisting), and are ethical creatures, it follows ab esse ad posse that ethics can be derived from evolution by natural selection.*

*That, though, might not be to answer the purport of the question, which asks: would natural selection be sufficient to produce creatures with a consciousness of ethical principles and a tendency to wish to observe them and see them observed?*

*The idea might be that whereas other social animals have evolved behaviours that subserve the interests of their sociality—dominance orderings, co-operation in hunting and watching for predators—this does not amount to ethics, the idea of which at least premises an awareness of the demands and responsibilities ethics involves, and the possibility of their non-observance, not least deliberately. Among other animals the evolved social behaviours are largely invariant and automatic; a putative “ethics” that is choicelessly a result of hard-wiring could not be ethics.*

*Immediately one says this, one has begged what is possibly the hardest question known to metaphysics and moral philosophy: that of free will. Almost every indication from sociobiology, evolutionary psychology and neurophilosophy supports the deterministic side of the argument, entailing that our sense of being choice-makers, deliberators, option-possessors, who could have done otherwise in most of our actions, is an illusion. On the evidence flooding in from these sources, we are as other social animals, only worse off in that we operate under an enormous error theory about our own nature, falsely thinking that we have free will and that we are therefore genuinely ethical creatures. It was from this error—if it is one—that Spinoza sought to free us by arguing in his Ethics that once we recognise that we live by necessity, we cease to repine, and thus are liberated from unhappiness.*

*For of course the very idea of ethics premises freedom of the will. There is no logic in praising or blaming individuals for what they do unless they could have done otherwise, any more than one would praise a pebble for rolling downhill upon being dislodged by rain. So this month's question becomes, by these selective pressures: could natural selection, resulting in the adaptations otherwise distinctive of human descent, have produced free will?*

*To answer that requires a clearer conception of "free will." Its formal identifier is the "genuinely could have done otherwise" requirement: but not only does that itself require unpacking, we also need to look for the fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) traces*

*that suggest which structures in the brain import novelty into the world's causal chains, making their possessor a true agent, and not merely a patient—a sufferer—of the universe's history. So the question evolves yet again: could finding such a thing even be a possibility?*

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/01/10539-graylingsquestion/>

- i)** He seems to be claiming that libertarian freewill is a prerequisite for moral responsibility.
- ii)** Or perhaps his claim is narrower: that if we are hardwired by natural selection, then our evolved social behaviors aren't truly ethical.
- iii)** On whichever interpretation, he also denies that we have libertarian freewill, rendering morality an illusion. Praise and blame are meaningless.
- iv)** He also says we "operate under an enormous error theory about our own nature."

With that in mind, let's turn to his comments on the Japan disaster:

*Someone told me that there were to be special prayers in their local church for the people of Japan. This well-intentioned and fundamentally kindly proceeding nevertheless shows how absurd, in the literal sense of this term, are religious belief and practice. When I saw the television footage of people going to church in Christchurch after the tragic quake there, the following thoughts pressed.*

*It would be very unkind to think that the churchgoers were going to give thanks that they personally escaped; one would not wish to impute selfishness and personal relief in the midst of a disaster in which many people arbitrarily and suddenly lost their lives through 'an act of God'.*

<http://richarddawkins.net/articles/602215-god-and-disaster>

**i)** It's hard to see how he moves from the premise to the conclusion. A degree of self-interest is not unchristian. The Bible uses warnings and rewards as incentives and disincentives. In addition, Christians, like other human beings, are needy, contingent creatures. We feel vulnerable.

**ii)** What's wrong with expressing personal relief? If my son survived a traffic accident while his best friend died in the accident, I will be both grateful that my son survived, as well as grieve the death of his friend. Where's the inconsistency?

We have an obligation to be thankful to God for the good he has done us regardless of whether someone else has been so favored. If my wife kisses me, should I be thankless unless my neighbor's wife kissed her husband?

**iii)** For that matter, what's wrong with selfishness? Doesn't Grayling discount moral ascriptions? Don't they arise from "an enormous error theory about our own nature?" In that event, why is he assigning praise or blame to the conduct of Christians?

*If they were going to pray for their god to look after the souls of those who had died, why would they think he would do so since he had just caused, or allowed, their bodies to be suddenly and violently crushed or drowned?*

Other issues to one side, that's a non sequitur. What befalls someone in this life is not a necessary, or even probable, indication of what awaits him in the next life. A common theme in Scripture is the suffering of the righteous and the reversal of fortunes.

*Indeed, were they praising and supplicating a deity who designed a world that causes such arbitrary and sudden mass killings? An omniscient being would know all the implications of what it does, so it would know it was arranging matters with these awful outcomes. Were they praising the planner of their sufferings for their sufferings, and also begging his help to escape what he had planned?*

But that argument cuts both ways. Because we, unlike God, are not omniscient, we don't know all the implications of what God does. Consider the law of unintended consequences. What appears to be a worst-case scenario in the short-term may be for the best in the long-term.

*Perhaps they think that their god was not responsible for the earthquake. If they believe that their god designed a world in which such things happen but left the world alone thereafter and does not intervene when it turns lethal on his creatures, then they implicitly question his moral character. If he is not powerful enough to do something about the world's periodic murderous indifference to human beings, then*



*in what sense is he a god? Instead he seems to be a big helpless ghost, useless to pray to and unworthy of praise. For if he is not competent to stop an earthquake or save its victims, he is definitely not competent to create a world.*

That's a fair criticism of open theism and other suchlike.

*And if he is powerful enough to do both, but created a dangerous world that inflicts violent and agonizing sufferings arbitrarily on sentient creatures, then he is vile.*

Yet Grayling, by his own admission, regards ascriptions of praise and blame as meaningless. So he's disqualified himself from rendering value judgments about God's character.

*Either way, what are people thinking who believe in such a being, and who go to church to praise and worship it?*

Yet Grayling, by his own admission, denies the freedom of Christians to do otherwise. They are hardwired to praise and to pray. So his disapprobation makes no more sense than faulting "a pebble for rolling downhill upon being dislodged by rain"?

## Predator

Let's deal first with the simple question. "If Christianity were proven false, and Islam true, would you simply drop your current moral convictions and adopt those of Islam because you found you 'had the wrong God'?" This question is, I think, misphrased. The important question is not what I would do under the envisioned circumstances, but what I should do. What I would do is an autobiographical fact about my personal psychology, which is of little philosophical interest. Moreover, it would be presumptuous for me to make predictions about what I would do under different circumstances (remember the apostle Peter on the night of Jesus' betrayal?). What is of interest rather is what I should do under the envisioned circumstances. So stated, the question's answer is clear: if Islam were proven true and Christianity false, then Islam would be true, and so of course I should believe in it. The same answer would present itself to the atheist: if atheism were proven false and Islam true, then should you obey the commands of Allah? Of course, for then Islam is the truth, and you really do have those moral obligations, however difficult it might be for you to stomach them.

[http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=q\\_and\\_a](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=q_and_a)

i) Craig is half-right. If Christianity were false, that should make a difference in how we view Christianity. It's not like Don Cupitt, DZ Phillips, and John Spong—who continue to practice a Christian creed they no longer believe.

**ii)** However, Craig takes too much for granted. He seems to view epistemic duties as worldview-invariant. That we have a moral obligation to believe the truth and abide by the truth in whatever possible world we find ourselves. But that doesn't make much sense.

Does every possible world have objective moral norms?  
Aren't some possible worlds amoral?

**iii)** Take another example: suppose human beings were created by a race of evil aliens. The evil aliens created us to be prey in a game where we are hunted down by hunters whom the evil aliens also created for that purpose. The aliens enjoy the vicarious spectacle of watching the game play out.

The aliens really exist. This is a true state of affairs. But does that mean the aliens are in a position to obligate us to do their bidding? I don't see how.

The aliens are unworthy of our allegiance. How can immoral beings impose moral obligations on other beings? They don't deserve our obedience.

**iv)** Rather, compliance would be a pragmatic consideration. If Allah were the true God, then it would be foolhardy to defy Allah. You'd lose. You'd suffer. So you go along to get along.

It's like citizens who live under oppressive, despotic regimes. They don't believe in the regime. They hate the regime. But they keep their true feelings to themselves. They make expedient moral compromises just to survive.

## Dawkins debating Dawkins

### **On the one hand:**

But Craig is not just a figure of fun. He has a dark side, and that is putting it kindly. Most churchmen these days wisely disown the horrific genocides ordered by the God of the Old Testament.

Do not plead that I have taken these revolting words out of context. What context could possibly justify them?

Would you shake hands with a man who could write stuff like that? Would you share a platform with him? I wouldn't, and I won't. Even if I were not engaged to be in London on the day in question, I would be proud to leave that chair in Oxford eloquently empty.

And if any of my colleagues find themselves browbeaten or inveigled into a debate with this deplorable apologist for genocide, my advice to them would be to stand up, read aloud Craig's words as quoted above, then walk out and leave him talking not just to an empty chair but, one would hope, to a rapidly emptying hall as well.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/20/richard-dawkins-william-lane-craig>

### **On the other hand:**

But doesn't a truly scientific, mechanistic view of the nervous system make nonsense of the very idea of responsibility, whether diminished or not? Any crime, however heinous, is in principle to be blamed on antecedent conditions acting through the accused's physiology, heredity and environment. Don't judicial hearings to decide questions of blame or diminished responsibility make as little sense for a faulty man as for a faulty car?

Why is it that we humans find it almost impossible to accept such conclusions? Why do we vent such visceral hatred on child murderers, or on thuggish vandals, when we should simply regard them as faulty units that need fixing or replacing? Presumably because mental constructs like blame and responsibility, indeed evil and good, are built into our brains by millennia of Darwinian evolution. Assigning blame and responsibility is an aspect of the useful fiction of intentional agents that we construct in our brains as a means of short-cutting a truer analysis of what is going on in the world in which we have to live. My dangerous idea is that we shall eventually grow out of all this and even learn to laugh at it, just as we laugh at Basil Fawlty when he beats his car. But I fear it is unlikely that I shall ever reach that level of enlightenment.

<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1723345/posts>



## Übermenschen

J.D. Walters asked me to comment on something this Ricky Carvel said:

<http://confessionsofadoubtingthomas.blogspot.com/2011/10/william-lane-craig-vs-stephen-law.html>

Ricky presents himself as a cradle evangelical who's suffering from a crisis of faith:

What is an 'objective' absolute moral? The reasoning (and this was more or less shared by Law) is that there are certain things which are universally morally wrong. Because this wasn't really challenged in this debate, there were no examples given, so it all became a discussion (this became the main issue in the rebuttals, see below) without a well defined subject.

I've thought through this issue a few times recently and am most of the way to convincing myself that there aren't actually any universal, objective, absolute morals. The most commonly cited (at least in the debates and discussions I have heard recently) example of something that is objectively morally wrong is the act of torturing children for fun. So lets take that and think about it. Is it absolutely, objectively, universally, in all times and places, morally wrong? Well, certainly I am against it, but I don't think its universal - there are, after all, many places and times where there are and have been no people, hence no children.

That confuses the universality of the event (torturing children) with the universality of its moral status. An event doesn't have to be universal to have a uniform moral status—be it good or evil. The presupposition of moral absolutism is not that evil events happen everywhere all the time, but that whenever or wherever a certain type of evil occurs, it's evil. That would be counterfactually true as well.

But ignoring that rather trivial objection, is it ever justifiable? Well, no, but does that make it objective? And fundamentally, how does that fact require us to invoke a divine source of morality? As I see it (at the moment, this may change) this sort of morality is a product of society and doesn't actually require a higher level moral agent.

If adults and kids are creatures whom God endowed with certain properties, and if, due to the nature of their divinely created constitution, adults have certain obligations to kids, then those are factors which ground the moral question in a divine source. I could amplify, but that's a start.

That's not to say that there is no God, only that I don't think the moral argument works as a proof of God.

**i)** If you deny objective moral norms, then the argument from morality lacks a key presupposition. But, of course, any argument takes something for granted.

**ii)** Moreover, one function of the argument from morality is to present the unbeliever with a dilemma. If it's a choice between God and amorality, what gives? Many unbelievers feign moral relativism, but they also have a way of instantly relapsing.



Society is greater than the individual...

That's a big claim. And it's ambiguous. Greater in what respect?

**i)** Concerted effort can often achieve greater results than individuals can. Yet even that cuts both ways. Concerted effort has the potential to either do greater good or greater harm than individuals can.

**ii)** Is human worth purely quantitative, so that two people are worth twice as much as one person, and so on? Or does human worth have an irreducibly qualitative aspect? Something you can't just quantify?

**iii)** From a secular standpoint, I can imagine an atheist saying one Richard Feynman is worth a thousand ordinary men. As a Christian I don't share that scale of values. I'm just examining the claim on its own grounds, given atheism.

**iv)** On the face of it, the claim has a Darwinian or Nietzschean ring to it. Where individuals are unimportant. What matters is the survival of the species. Individuals are practically worthless. They only have an additive value. Like pennies. As such, society has the right to squash measly, expendable, or inconvenient individuals underfoot, like an insect.

It reminds me of a film like *Hitman* (2007), where orphans or other children are kidnapped by or sold to a shadowy, extralegal organization that creates a private army of mercenary soldiers or assassins. There's no mercy for the runts or weaklings or losers. If you can't keep up, you die young. Only the fittest of the fit survive. Übermensch. It also reminds me of the *La Femme Nikita* series (1997-

2001), where agents who didn't make the cut were put in "abeyance."

Compare this to the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7), where the shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep behind to go in search of one stray sheep.

Or let's take a different comparison. Take cross-country running. Two competing teams.

Say you're the fastest runner on your team. Your team can't win unless you cross the finish line. Say a runner from the rival team stumbles, falls, and sprains his ankle. His teammates pass him by. Your teammates pass him by.

What should you do? Leave him behind? Or go back for him? If you go back for him, you lose. Your team loses. You let your team down.

Should everybody leave him behind as darkness begins to overtake the field? From a Christian standpoint, you'd forfeit the race to help him out—even though he's not on your team.

Of course, that's what Nietzsche hated about the Christian faith. In his prime, Nietzsche was a brilliant man. But, ironically, he himself became a weakling. A loser. He died of syphilitic dementia. He became utterly dependent on the compassion of others.

...and I think it is entirely reasonable to see morality as an evolved product of an evolving society.

But that equivocates over "morality." Is it just a social code that evolves? Do "evolved" social mores correspond to intrinsic right or wrong?

Why then is torturing children for fun morally wrong? For two primary reasons, firstly it harms the child, who would otherwise grow to be a functioning part of the wider society...

**i)** But why is it good to be a functioning member of society? Why should that be a value?

**ii)** Moreover, on that functional criterion, some individuals are far more valuable than others. So it would presumably be okay to torture the less valuable members of society.

...and secondly because it further corrupts the harmer, further enhancing an anti-societal element in society. I believe this is a highly evolved system, but falls a long way short of requiring a divine moral code.

It only corrupts the torturer if you assume at the outset that torturing little kids for fun is wrong. But that's the very question in dispute, given atheism.

All other 'absolute' morals I can think of also fit the context of hindering or (with regard to good morals) enhancing human society at its highest level.

**i)** Isn't "enhancing human society" itself a normative claim? But Ricky has to establish a standard before he can say what enhances human society.

**ii)** What contribution has Ricky made to enhancing human society at the highest level?

By this line of reasoning, many things we consider to be absolute morals in this day and age were not, and

would not have been considered absolute morals in ages past.

But didn't he tell us that torturing little kids for fun is never justifiable?

One of the newest absolute morals to go was racism. Contemporary society is harmed and hindered by it, but that wasn't the case in ages past.

Needless to say, that's moral *relativism*, not moral *absolutism*.

Similarly with slavery, it is morally wrong in our society, yet was an absolute requirement of the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, the Egyptian Empire, and so on.

Does he mean "morally wrong" as a matter of current social convention?

Thus, by my reckoning, the moral argument only requires a collective society that is considerably greater than the individual, it does not require a divine being that imposes morality on humanity.

Again, that's equivocal. Craig isn't saying you need to invoke God to ground arbitrary social conventions. Rather, he's saying you need to invoke God to ground intrinsic good and evil.

(By the way, why would God impose a morality on humans and not on any other creatures? The human/animal distinction is an artificial one, which even Dr Craig skirted around in one of his rebuttals, see below).

To say the human/animal distinction is artificial is too vague to respond to.

## Secular sentimentality

I'm going to comment on this article:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/good-minus-god/?pagemode=print>

We “moralistic atheists” do not see right and wrong as artifacts of a divine protection racket. Rather, we find moral value to be immanent in the natural world, arising from the vulnerabilities of sentient beings and from the capacities of rational beings to recognize and to respond to those vulnerabilities and capacities in others.

She fails to explain how moral obligations are generated by the vulnerabilities of sentient beings.

For instance, both the serial killer and his victim are vulnerable sentient beings. Do both have equal value? Are both entitled to equal treatment?

This view of the basis of morality is hardly incompatible with religious belief. Indeed, anyone who believes that God made human beings in His image believes something like this — that there is a moral dimension of things, and that it is in our ability to apprehend it that we resemble the divine. Accordingly, many theists, like many atheists, believe that moral value is inherent in morally valuable things. Things don't become morally valuable because God prefers them; God prefers them because they are morally valuable. At least this is what I was taught as a girl, growing up Catholic.

**i)** That's a false dichotomy. Take a da Vinci painting. Because da Vinci was an artistic and scientific genius, his painting is a concrete expression of his genius. The painting has inherent value, but that's because da Vinci transmitted some of his genius to the painting. The value of the painting is still derivative.

**ii)** Creatures aren't valuable merely because God *prefers* them, but because God *made* them. God made morally valuable creatures. That's a design feature of certain creatures.

It is only if morality is independent of God that we can make moral sense out of religious worship. It is only if morality is independent of God that any person can have a moral basis for adhering to God's commands.

Let me explain why. First let's take a cold hard look at the consequences of pinning morality to the existence of God. Consider the following moral judgments — judgments that seem to me to be obviously true:

- It is wrong to drive people from their homes or to kill them because you want their land.
- It is wrong to enslave people.
- It is wrong to torture prisoners of war.
- Anyone who witnesses genocide, or enslavement, or torture, is morally required to try to stop it.

To say that morality depends on the existence of God is to say that none of these specific moral judgments is true unless God exists. That seems to me to be a remarkable claim. If God turned out not to exist — then slavery would be O.K.? There'd be nothing wrong with torture? The pain of another human being would mean nothing?

Notice that she's assuming what she needs to prove. She's hardly entitled to take that as a given, then premise her argument on that gratuitous assumption.

Think now about our personal relations — how we love our parents, our children, our life partners, our friends. To say that the moral worth of these individuals depends on the existence of God is to say that these people are, in themselves, worth nothing — that the concern we feel for their well being has no more ethical significance than the concern some people feel for their boats or their cars. It is to say that the historical connections we value, the traits of character and personality that we love — all count for nothing in themselves. Other people warrant our concern only because they are valued by someone else — in this case, God. (Imagine telling a child: "You are not inherently lovable. I love you only because I love your father, and it is my duty to love anything he loves.")

**i)** But we don't have equal concern for everyone. We don't value everyone equally. Louise Antony surely values her own kids more highly than someone else's kids. She surely has more concern for the wellbeing of her own friends than she has for perfect strangers.

Or, to put it crassly, a mother and a serial killer don't place the same value on the mother's daughter.

**ii)** Abortion proponents don't ascribe inherent worth to their babies.

**iii)** Actually, there is something to be said for valuing someone because they are valued by someone else. Take a son who introduces his friends to his father. Because of what the son means to his father, the father befriends the friends of his sons. He values them because he values his son, and they are valued by his son.



What could make anyone think such things? Ironically, I think the answer is: the same picture of morality that lies behind atheistic nihilism. It's the view that the only kind of "obligation" there could possibly be is the kind that is disciplined by promise of reward or threat of punishment.

But that's a typical atheistic caricature of Christian morality. Threats and rewards function as incentives or disincentives. They're not the basis of morality.

Such a view cannot find or comprehend any value inherent in the nature of things, value that could warrant particular attitudes and behavior on the part of anyone who can apprehend it.

Notice how she keeps begging the question. Yet that's the very issue in dispute.

For someone who thinks that another being's pain is not in itself a reason to give aid, or that the welfare of a loved one is not on its own enough to justify sacrifice, it is only the Divine Sovereign that stands between us and — as Hobbes put it — the war of "all against all."

**i)** She has yet to establish how that in itself is a reason to give aid. Suppose a suicide bomber is hurting. Is that a compelling reason for me to come to his aid?

**ii)** On a secular basis, why is the welfare of a loved one enough to justify sacrifice? That has emotional appeal, but how is that objectively obligatory? For one thing, *your* loved ones aren't *my* loved ones. Why should *I* sacrifice for *your* loved ones? Or is she admitting that it's relative after all?

D.C.T. says that it is God's command that explains why the good acts are "good" — it becomes true merely by definition that God commands "good" actions...This makes for really appalling consequences, from an intuitive, moral point of view. D.C.T. entails that anything at all could be "good" or "right" or "wrong." If God were to command you to eat your children, then it would be "right" to eat your children. The consequences are also appalling from a religious point of view.

**i)** That's a straw man. There's no reason to reduce Christian ethics to voluntarism. To some extent, moral obligations correspond to the nature God gave us. For instance, lions will kill the cubs of a rival lion. That doesn't give me the right to kill the offspring of another man. For I'm not a lion. What's permissible for lions isn't ipso facto permissible for humans, given natural differences. And that, in turn, is grounded in how God designed different creatures.

**ii)** There is also the fact that, in varying degrees, creatures exemplify the goodness of their Creator. Like the relation of a painting to a painter. They reflect the wisdom of their designer.

If "good" is to have normative force, it must be something that we can understand independently of what is commanded by a powerful omnipresent being.

That confuses the ontology of ethics with the epistemology of ethics.

So what about atheism? What I think all this means is that the capacity to be moved by the moral dimension of things has nothing to do with one's theological beliefs. The most reliable allies in any moral struggle will be those who respond to the ethically significant aspects of life, whether or not they conceive these

things in religious terms. You do not lose morality by giving up God; neither do you necessarily find it by finding Him.

She hasn't shown that there are any ethically significant aspects of life to respond to. You'd expect a secular ethicist to begin her article by making a case for secular ethics, then compare and contrast that to Christian ethics (or Jewish ethics, or what have you). But she never does. Instead, she cites some emotionally appealing examples of what she takes to be paradigm-cases of morality or immorality. But that's just sentimental.

## "Permissive theism"

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2012/06/in-effort-to-increase-visibility-of.html>

Jeff Lowder quotes the following statement by Adolf Grünbaum:

One vital lesson of that analysis will be that, contrary to the widespread claims of moral asymmetry between theism and atheism, neither theism nor atheism as such permit the logical deduction of any judgments of moral value or of any ethical rules of conduct. Moral codes turn out to be logically extraneous to each of these competing philosophical theories alike. And if such a code is to be integrated with either of them in a wider system, the ethical component must be imported from elsewhere.

In the case of theism, it will emerge that neither the attribution of omnibenevolence to God nor the invocation of divine commandments enables its theology to give a cogent justification for any particular actionable moral code. Theism, no less than atheism, is itself morally sterile: Concrete ethical codes are autonomous with respect to either of them.

- i)** That's long on assertion and short on argument.
- ii)** It's true that you can't "deduce" rules of conduct from a bare proposition regarding God's "omnibenevolence." But that just means Grünbaum is operating at the wrong level

of abstraction. Even at that level, the existence and nature of God is still a way of grounding moral norms. That's a distinct metaphysical issue from what specific norms are thus grounded.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), divine creation introduces teleology into nature. Atheism banishes teleology from nature.

But the introduction of teleology into nature means that there will be a way in which creatures *ought* to function or *ought* to behave, consistent with their design specifications.

...a suitably articulated form of secular humanism can rule out some modes of conduct while enjoining others, no less than a religious code in which concrete ethical injunctions have been externally adjoined to theism (e.g., "do not covet thy neighbor's wife").

That's an assertion bereft of argument. Many secular philosophers are admitted moral relativists or moral nihilists.

Grünbaum then discusses the moral permissiveness of theism with respect to the problem of evil.

That's funny. Atheists typically slam Christianity for its doctrine of everlasting punishment. That's too harsh, too stern, too unforgiving—we're told. But now we're also told that Christian theism is too permissive!

Quoting Grünbaum again:

It is scandalous that Judaism is sufficiently permissive morally to enable some world-renowned rabbis to offer a Holocaust-theodicy at all with theological impunity: It attests to the moral bankruptcy of the notion of a theological foundation of Jewish ethics.

How does merely *offering* a Holocaust-theodicy attest the moral bankruptcy of theism? Grünbaum gives no reason to grant his contention. If successful, a Holocaust-theodicy would demonstrate the moral resources of theism.

Cain (and other apologists for Judaism) ought to be deeply embarrassed by this situation...

Why?

Clearly, I submit, precisely the statistics on the depth of the cleavage among the moral verdicts of Jewish theologians on so over-arching an occurrence as the Holocaust bespeaks the ethical bankruptcy of their theology.

I don't agree with the particular Holocaust-theodicy offered by Jacobovitz and Schneerson. However, you'd expect Jews to have a variety of different reactions to the theological ramifications of the Holocaust. Judaism is far from monolithic. How does mere "depth of cleavage" on this issue bespeak the moral bankruptcy of their theology? Grünbaum keeps expressing his personal disapproval, as if that's self-evidently true. He isn't reasoning for his conclusions.

Jeff then says:

In other words, if theism requires us to believe that no matter what evils occur in the actual world, God still exists and has some reason for allowing them, this empties all content from a theological foundation of ethics and shows how bankrupt the entire enterprise of theistic ethics really is.

If God has some *reason* for allowing them, then how does that expose the bankrupt of the entire enterprise of theistic ethics really is—much less empties all content from a theological foundation of ethics (whatever that means)? That's an impressive string of words, but where's the argument? How does the conclusion follow from the premise? *Not* having a reason would be morally bankrupt. *Not* having a reason would be morally vacuous.

Grünbaum and Lowder are asserting and emoting rather than reasoning for their position.

## Morality is a human invention

### Massimo Pigliucci

Finally, the problem of morality, which I'm sure we'll have more to say about--oh yeah, I agree with Dr. Craig when he cited Dr. Ruse, a philosopher of science. There is no such a thing as objective morality. We got that straightened out. Morality in human cultures has evolved and is still evolving, and what is moral for you might not be moral for the guy next door and certainly is not moral for the guy across the ocean, the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean, and so on. And what makes you think that your personal morality is the one and everybody else is wrong? Now a better way of putting this is that it is not the same as to say that anything goes; it is not at all the same. What goes is anything that works; there are things that work. Morality has to work. For example, one of the very good reasons we don't go around killing each other is because otherwise the entire society as we know it would collapse and we'd become a bunch of simple isolated animals. There are animals like those.

[http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-the-craig-pigliucci-debate#section\\_2](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-the-craig-pigliucci-debate#section_2)

Let's go back to this thing of objective morality. I think that there's a little bit of twisting and turning around here with terms. Again, it's not a matter of "Is there out there an objective morality?" We know that there isn't. There are some components of your own morality that are not shared by other human beings. So either



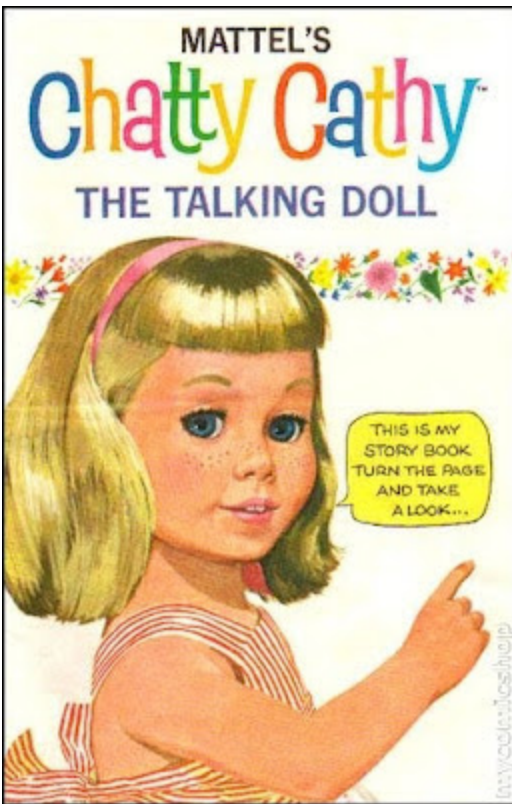
you are pretentious enough to think that your morality for whatever reason is the only correct one, or everybody else in the world is wrong.

I think that that is pretentious. Of course there are some universals that all human beings share. Just today, for example, I told my students in a biology class that there are some things that human beings and society would never approve because of the way human societies are built. One, of course, is homicide; another one, of course, is rape. However, what we call homicide or rape or, in fact, even infanticide is very, very common among different types of animals. Lions, for example, commit infanticide on a regular basis because they want to make sure that the little offspring that is being raised by the lioness is their own and not someone else's. Now, are these kinds of acts to be condoned? I don't even know what that means because the lion doesn't understand what morality is, that's for sure.

Morality is an invention of human beings. It's a very good invention. I'm not suggesting we should abandon morality. I'm not suggesting, more to the point, that we should abandon ethics. Ethics is a perfectly valid way of thinking about things. We can all agree as a society that there are things that are wrong and things that are good. We can act on them, and we can enforce those things, but there is no higher power or no higher reason to tell us that this is right or this is wrong. Unfortunately, we are on our own; that's my humble opinion. I would really like for somebody to come down from the sky and tell me what is right and what is wrong. My life would be much, much easier. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen.

[http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-the-craig-pigliucci-debate#section\\_4](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/does-god-exist-the-craig-pigliucci-debate#section_4)

## Funeral for atheism



What should you do when you come to the end of the argument, but your opponent keeps on arguing? What should you do when you win the argument, but your opponent doesn't know he lost?

This is a problem with atheists. For instance, some atheists get very irate when Christians point out that atheism leads to moral relativism or nihilism. They think that's a malicious Christian caricature.

Yet other atheists candidly admit that atheism leads to moral relativism or even moral nihilism. But having made that admission, they think the debate should proceed as if that didn't mark a turning point in the debate.

They find it irritating that Christians keep harping on this issue. They already conceded that point, so it's high time to move on to other things. They think it was sporting of them

to concede that point, and it's rather unsportsmanlike for Christians to keep dragging that back into every debate. If anything, they should get some credit for their honesty. They think it's just a diversionary tactic for Christians to constantly bring this up.

The point never sinks in that this is something which changes everything. Once you admit that, then there's no going back to where you were before.

If there is no objective morality, then why are they arguing for anything? It's not as if you're supposed to be an atheist. Absent objective moral norms, there's nothing you're supposed believe or disbelieve.

Likewise, atheists not only admit, but insist on the fact that evolution is blind. It has no prevision or purpose. Brains weren't made to think. Yet they still act as if their brains were made to think.

Likewise, they admit that what we value has no intrinsic value. Evolution has programmed us to project value on certain things. But that's an illusion.

We value love. We value our parents, kids, spouse, and friends. Yet there's nothing objectively right or good about loving friends and family. That's just brain chemistry. The indifferent effect of a thoughtless process conditioning us to feel that way.

Pull its string and the doll cries. It doesn't cry because there's something *worth* crying about.

Atheists cry when a loved one dies. Yet they can retrace the process. They can see the pull-string. They can see evolution tugging their string. They don't cry because the death of their loved one actually means anything. They cry because blind evolution pulled their string. A doll's prerecorded cry at the demise of another doll.

They can see evolution take the doll apart. They can see evolution operating on themselves. They dissect themselves. Peel back the layers. Cloth. Metal. Plastic. A pile of parts. The more you look the less you find.

Atheists act as though these are throwaway concessions that don't cost them anything in the long run. That having admitted that atheism has these consequences, it's time to resume the argument. Get back to the issue at hand. Having another beer.

But there's nothing more to say. At that point the atheist is sitting on a pile of spent rounds.

It's like a doctor telling a man he has stage 4 pancreatic cancer. He has 2 weeks to live. Having got that out of the way, let's get back to what he plans to do with the rest of his life.

But there is no "rest of his life" to plan for. At most, he can make funeral arrangements. Pick a coffin. Pick a tombstone. Prepay the florist. Buy a cemetery plot. Choose an epitaph.

Atheism ran out of road miles ago. There's nowhere left to go. That's the end of the line.

## Is atheism worth defending?

After one has accepted the truth of atheism, questions about its value arise. Once you conclude that there probably is no God, then what? Is this fact worth defending? Should atheists even bother to rebut their critics and develop arguments for their positions?

The main reasons why I think that atheism is worth defending are epistemic ones. The first of these reasons is quite simple: atheism is a true or rational belief. As both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable things, truth and rational belief are very important goods; so any belief will be valuable insofar as it is true or rational, and this value constitutes a very good reason to defend it. Other epistemic reasons for defending atheism are constituted by our duties as responsible epistemic agents. As such agents, we have a duty to defend true and rational beliefs for their own sake, as well as a duty to defend true and rational beliefs in order to engender such beliefs in other epistemic agents.

[http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/ryan\\_stringer/value-of-atheism.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/ryan_stringer/value-of-atheism.html)

A perfect illustration of shallow atheism.

What if atheism is nihilistic? Are nihilistic truths valuable?

From a secular standpoint, what makes truth “intrinsically” good? What makes anything intrinsically good from that vantage point?

What if nothing is good? What if true and false beliefs are equally harmful? What if, no matter what you believe, you are doomed?

Why does Stringer assume we even have duties, much less an inalienable duty to defend truth for truth's sake? Why should we be responsible epistemic agents? What if I'd rather be irresponsible? If I lose either way, what's the difference? What if it's more fun to be irresponsible?

Suppose I'm an atheist. Suppose I'm abducted. Suppose my captor gives me a choice. On the one hand, I can continue to cling to my true or rational beliefs. If I exercise that option, I will spend the rest of my life in a concrete cell with a bare light bulb.

On the other hand, I can take an injection which will cause me to forget my true or rational beliefs. If I exercise that option, I will spend the rest of my life in comfort, enjoying every amenity, under the misconception that this is where and how I've always lived.

## Astroethics

There are different secular value theories. One is social contract theory. That imposes a uniform code of conduct. However, it's arbitrary. It varies in time and place. Different societies with different social mores, or even the same society with different social mores at different times.

Another is evolutionary ethics. A problem with that is the even if natural selection could confer moral instincts, this wouldn't make our instinctive predilections objectively right or wrong. Moreover, moral instincts would vary according to the species. Different species with different moral instincts.

Let's consider both these positions from another vantage point. Alien invasion is a common theme in the SF genre. In one variation, earth has a rare natural resource which the aliens need to survive or flourish. In another variation, aliens use humans as experimental test-subjects.

From a secular standpoint, there'd be nothing wrong with a technologically superior alien civilization exploiting us. The alien race has its own social contract, based on alien cultural values. Likewise, the alien race has its own species-variable moral instincts.

There'd be nothing wrong with aliens using humans for involuntary medical research, just as we use animals. We experiment on humans rather than animals because we value humans more highly than animals. Why experiment on humans if an animal will suffice? Better to sacrifice an animal for our benefit.



Likewise, there'd be nothing wrong with aliens exterminating the human race to monopolize our natural resources. They have a different social contract: a social contract by and for aliens.

## Secular terrorists

Nine years ago, Jordan Howard Stobel published what is widely deemed to be the most philosophically rigorous attack on the existence of God. His book was a book by a philosopher for fellow philosophers. A highly technical, logically stringent treatment of various theistic proofs.

However, in the very first chapter, he makes a striking admission:

John Mackie says that there are no objective values (Mackie, 1977, Chapter 1). He says that there are no objective goods or values of universal validity that everyone ought to cherish, whether or not they would be so moved in the end, on fully informed reflection. He holds that there are only subjective values, this or that person's values, where a particular person's goods are the things he would in the end be moved to value.

For what my opinion on recent difficult matters is worth, I think that the ordinary God-talk of both believers and disbelievers does presuppose the possibility of a being objectively worthy of worship and the rest of an objective god. And I think, for Mackiean reasons, that there cannot be an objective god, a being such that there would be a prescription, valid and authoritative for all, that those who believe in its existence must worship this being. I do not believe in the possibility of such prescriptions. **LOGIC AND THEISM: ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST BELIEFS IN GOD** (Cambridge University Press 2004), 25.

This is what he seems to be saying: He doesn't believe in God because he doesn't believe in objective values. He agrees with Mackie's contention that there are no objective values, and he regards the metaphysical status of God as a special case of that general proposition.

If my interpretation is correct, then his subsequent behavior is irrational. For having made that preliminary admission, he acts as if it doesn't make any difference. He continues for another 650+ pages of dense text, chock-full of long dry logical syllogisms. He even has a chapter on the problem of evil.

But if he doesn't believe in objective values, then what's the value of disproving God's existence? Why does he pour so much intellectual effort into that project? Why does he dedicate the only life he has to that project? Why continue playing the game after you lose?

The only motivation I can think of is intellectual pride. Atheists like Sobel take pride in their mental acuity. Argumentation for the sake of argumentation. Intellectual pride becomes a snare for clever atheists. They spend all their time attacking the only thing that lends life objective significance.

But sin is paradoxical in that respect. Notice how self-destructive atheism is becoming. Our culture is becoming increasingly hostile to children—not to mention the elderly and the disabled. Take antinatalism. Take radical environmentalism, which regards humans as a parasite.

And this isn't just ivory-tower theorizing. This is becoming public policy.

Atheism is evolving into a form of mass suicide. Humans turning against humanity. Turning on ourselves.

What would motivate such spiteful behavior? In this case, I think atheists are on a power trip. They love to control their own destiny and the destiny of others, even if that means murdering everyone on board. Power becomes a snare for some atheists. Intoxicated by power, even to their own demise.

## The Bible in the public square

Should Jews and Christians appeal to Biblical norms when debating homosexual marriage?

Some advocates of traditional marriage think we should confine ourselves to natural law arguments. Now, I have no objection to using common ground arguments in the marriage debate. Here's a useful collection of articles that reflect that strategy:

<http://whatismarriagebook.com/articles/#.UWGaJHGkAbU>

However, as Albert Mohler and Denny Burk recently observed, the moral status of homosexuality has suddenly dropped out of the current debate, as if that's irrelevant or out-of-bounds.

Let's consider some stock objections to using the Bible in political discourse:

*i) Only fundamentalist Bible-thumpers resort to Scripture when debating public policies issues*

To begin with, even if that were true, so what?

However, that's not true. For instance, consider Richard Bauckham's **THE BIBLE IN POLITICS: HOW TO READ THE BIBLE POLITICALLY** (WJK, 2nd ed., 2011).

Bauckham is not a fundamentalist. And he's center/left on the political spectrum.

Or take Daniel Carroll's books: **THINKING CHRISTIANLY ABOUT IMMIGRATION; CHRISTIANS AT THE BORDER: IMMIGRATION, THE CHURCH, AND THE BIBLE.**

Since he's using the Bible to promote a position liberals agree with, his appeal to Scripture doesn't generate the same outcry.

*ii) Appealing to Scripture violates separation of church and state*

I'm not a Constitutional scholar, but I've read Constitutional scholars who argue that the purpose of the Establishment Clause was to prevent the Federal government from instituting a national church. That's it.

In fact, it doesn't take a Constitutional scholar to recognize the fact that many modern judges are promulgating very innovative rulings. Discovering things to be unconstitutional which the generation of the Founding Fathers and states which ratified the Constitution and the Bill of Rights never deemed to be unconstitutional. The very notion of a "living Constitution" is a frank admission that many modern judges flagrantly disregard original intent.

*iii) If you allow the Bible to dictate public policy, then theocracy is the logical outcome*

**a)** To begin with, this objection is a double-edged sword. Suppose the Bible *does* obligate Christians to promote a theocratic state. If that's the case, then that's what faithful Christians should work towards, assuming it's politically feasible.

**b)** However, different Christian traditions have different positions how much of OT social ethics carries over into the new covenant, or church/state relations. Take Baptists, Anabaptists, and Lutherans. Take confessional Presbyterians who operate with a “general equity” principle. Take Richard Hooker’s Anglican position in contrast to the Puritans.

**c)** An appeal to Scripture is not ipso facto an appeal to Biblical *law*. When Christians cite Mt 19:4-5, Rom 1:24-27, or 1 Tim 1:10, that’s not an appeal to Biblical *law*. These passages don’t belong to the legal genre. An appeal to these passages doesn’t transplant Biblical *laws* into modern American jurisprudence.

Rather, these involve general *truths* about the nature and moral status of human sexuality. Shouldn’t our civil and criminal law code be based on truths about human nature? Be based on true moral judgments?

*iv) Appealing to Scripture begs the question when debating non-Christians*

**a)** First of all, we can distinguish between defensive and offensive appeals to Scripture. If a Christian is defending his personal view of homosexual marriage, then he’s justified in appealing to Scripture. The fact that his opponent denies the authority of Scripture is irrelevant, for the Christian is giving his own reasons.

**b)** When going on the offensive, appealing to Scripture would only beg the question if the Christian simply took the authority of Scripture for granted. But, of course, his commitment to Scripture is defensible. It’s quite possible to argue for the authority of Scripture. Indeed, that’s a standard topic in Christian apologetics. A Christian can give reasons for why everyone ought to believe the Bible.

**c)** In addition, proponents of homosexual marriage have their own burden of proof. What is their source and standard of social ethics? How do they ground objective moral norms?

**d)** Likewise, if they espouse naturalistic evolution, then what makes human animals property-bearers of human rights or civil rights? Isn't a human being just a fleeting and fortuitous arrangement of matter?



## Sawing off the branch we're perched on

I've quoted part of this before, but now I'm going to include a larger excerpt:

Critics of the morality of the God of the Hebrew Bible rarely ask themselves what the source of the morality from whose perspective they present their criticism is. A few years ago, I watched with great pleasure the HOB production called "Rome." The final disk of the DVD version of "Rome" includes interviews with some of the people involved in the production of the program. In one interview, someone or other was asked in what ways he thought the Romans were like us and unlike us. He replied that they were remarkably like us in most ways, but that there was one way in which they were very different from us: in their extreme brutality—in both their willingness to commit brutal acts and in their indifference to the pervasive, entrenched brutality of their world. When he was asked whether he could explain why we and the Romans were so different in this respect, he did not quite answer by saying "Christianity is what made the difference"—I don't think he could have brought himself to say that—but he did identify "Judaeo-Christian morality" as the source of the difference. And it was a very good answer. The morality of almost everyone in Western Europe and the anglophone countries today (if that person is not a criminal or a sociopath) is either the morality that the Hebrew Bible was tending toward or some revised, edited version of that morality. Almost every atheist (in Western Europe and the anglophone countries), however committed he or she may be to

atheism, accepts some modified version of what Judaeo-Christian morality teaches about how human beings ought to treat other human beings. And even the modifications are generally achieved by using one part of that morality to attack some other part. (For example, by attempting to turn the principle "don't make other people unhappy" against Judaeo-Christian sexual morality.)

The morality to which critics of the moral character of the God of the Bible appeal is a gift to the world from Israel and the Church and is by no means self-evident. I don't think that many missionaries have heard anything resembling the following from those whom they were attempting to convert: "Hey—it says here, 'But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth...thou shalt utterly destroy them.' That's *awful*. How can you expect us to worship such a God?" And the reason they haven't heard that is that most people in most times and at most places would see nothing but good sense in that command. Most people have taken it for granted that when a tribe or nation moves into new territory it will kill those of the previous inhabitants that it does not enslave. That's what people do—the Old Common Morality says—and they'd be crazy to do otherwise. Peter van Inwagen, "Comments on "The God of Abraham," M. Bergmann et al. eds. **DIVINE EVIL? THE MORAL CHARACTER OF THE GOD OF ABRAHAM** (Oxford 2013), 81-82.

## Morality is in the brain

Liberals are very moralistic. They believe social policy ought to reflect their values. This includes homosexual marriage, abortion on demand, and veganism.

Let's consider this from the standpoint of neuropsychology. In general, liberals are physicalists. They believe the brain is the source of the mind.

According to neuropsychology, the frontal lobe is the source of consciousness, emotion, decision-making, and problem solving. The parietal lobe is the source of language. The temporal lobe is the source of long-term memory, while the hippocampus is the source of short-term memory.

I'm oversimplifying. For instance, the temporal lobe is another source of language and emotion.

Admittedly, this is a fairly crude description. My argument doesn't depend on localizing every function in an airtight compartment of the brain. There's a certain amount of redundancy and plasticity.

We can debate where to draw the lines. But in general, neuropsychology does say different parts of the brain generate different aspects of human personality.

In that respect, the human brain is analogous to an android brain. If you were a cyberneticist, you'd add or subtract specific cognitive functions by adding or removing the corresponding hardware. Likewise, a neurosurgeon can subtract specific cognitive functions by removing the corresponding lobe.

Suppose a liberal thinks homosexuals have a right to marry each other. From a neuropsychological standpoint, that just means a part of his brain tells him that homosexuals have a right to marry each other. If a neurosurgeon removed that part of his brain, he'd instantly cease to think homosexuals have a right to marry each other. Conversely, if it was medically feasible, a neurosurgeon could make him think homosexuals have a right to marry each other by adding that missing part to his brain.

On this view, morality is reducible to adding or removing relevant parts of the brain. Like adding or removing a chip from an android brain.

Suppose E.T.s have frontal lobes that are differently configured than ours. Their frontal lobes don't tell them that homosexuals have a right to marry each other. Evolution programmed their frontal lobes with different moral instincts than we have. Their temporal lobes tell them that homosexuals are food.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that neuropsychology is true, what makes it a fact that homosexuals have a right to marry each other? If their values come and go depending on the presence or absence of the corresponding brain part, isn't that an arbitrary combination? Something extrinsic to right and wrong? Like programming a terminator android? Replacing one part with a different part changes morality.

## Life is but a dream

Have you ever had a dream in which you try to write something down to remember it? I don't mean writing down your dream after you wake up. I mean, in the course of a dream, you think of something insightful, or a character says something catchy, and you're afraid you will forget it, so you attempt to record it by writing it down.

The problem, of course, is the piece of paper and the words you write down are part of the very same dream. That's just as unstable, as evanescent, as everything else in the dream. What you write in a dream is just a figment of your imagination. The writing on the paper only exists in your conscious memory. If you start writing in a dream, the sentences begin to fade away before you complete them. The words on the page only exist to the degree that you are thinking about them. The moment your attention shifts, they vanish. And that's the thing about dreams. The scenes constantly change.

In principle, physical reality is more objective. More stable. It has durable objects.

Ironically, though, physicalism is a lot like idealism. They might seem to be polar opposites, but atheism erases the distinction. According to physicalism, logic is all in the brain. Math is all in the brain. Morality is all in the brain.

But when people begin to develop dementia or brain cancer, the logic, math, and morality begin to disappear. It might as well be a dream, or subjective idealism, where something exists for only so long as you are conscious of it. Reality is the awareness of reality.

If there is no God, if matter is all there is, then temporary brains are hard to distinguish from dreams. Grounding logic, math, and morality in the brain is like inscribing a book in a dream. As soon as the brain

begins to deteriorate, the "world" of math, morality, and logic slips away like fleeting scenes in a dream.

## Is this a warning signal to inerrantists?

The fundamental problem with books like this is that they fly in the face of what seems obvious to everyone else who doesn't already hold the a priori belief that everything the Bible says must be true, just because the Bible says it. To paraphrase something Nick Trakakis wrote in another context, "Defenses of genocidal behavior by the OT god turn a blind eye to what seem clear and obvious to everyone else — that such behavior makes a mockery out of what any person would consider morally justifiable behavior." [1]

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2014/09/26/books-like-this-should-be-a-warning-signal-to-inerrantists/>

**i)** I'm happy to concede that we defend things we think are true which we wouldn't defend if we didn't think they were true. I don't regard that as a damning admission.

**ii)** Since Bible writers clearly viewed this behavior as morally justifiable, to say it "makes a mockery out of what any person would consider morally justifiable behavior" preemptively excludes anyone who disagrees with Jeff. Nice circular logic. "Obvious to everyone else" is code language for "anyone who happens to share Jeff's sentiments."

**iii)** As I've explained elsewhere, the commands aren't "genocidal." Jeff is simply parroting what others say rather than thinking for himself.

**iv)** Then there's the standing irony of atheists who ride around on their moral high horse. But Jeff doesn't attempt to show how atheism can justify moral realism.

And even if atheism could justify moral realism, that falls short of showing how ephemeral, fortuitous organizations of matter (i.e. humans) have rights.



## The Nuremberg Defense

**i)** One objection to the OT holy war command I sometimes run across is the assertion that "just following orders" is no excuse. This is sometimes dubbed the Nuremberg Defense. What about that?

**ii)** It's true that *just* following orders is no excuse. However, in that case the adjective does all the work. Surely though there are situations where there's more at stake than *just* following orders. There are situations in which it's *costly* to disobey orders. You pay a steep price for insubordination.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), what about a situation in which a subordinate is acting under duress? "That's a direct command. Do it *or else!*"

In other words, is there an implied threat behind the order? If you disobey the order, what are the consequences for *you*? Suppose we have a dialogue like this:

**Commander:** Shoot the POW.

**Subordinate:** I refuse, sir.

**Commander:** Either you shoot him or I shoot you!

If he complies, that's more than *just* following orders. His action was coerced. He's literally acting at the point of a gun. In that situation, surely he does have *some* excuse for following orders, whether or not we think his action was morally justifiable. At the very least, it's a *mitigating* factor.

In addition, it's trivially easy to make the dilemma more egregious: "Unless you shoot the POW, I will shoot your wife (or mother, or child).

Again, we might still debate whether it's morally permissible to shoot the POW in order to save his wife (or mother, or child). But he's clearly in a bind. That's a very tough call. Even if you think he made the wrong call, would you punish him? If I were a juror, I wouldn't feel it was my place to punish a defendant who had to face that dilemma.

Or would you say the commander is to blame? If so, that's a different argument. That transfers blame from agent who carried out the order to the agent who gave the order.

iv) Of course, I don't think Yahweh is morally equivalent to a commander who issues an abhorrent command which his subordinate is in no realistic position to defy. I'm just responding to a facile, thoughtless objection for the sake of argument.

## Moral opinions

Some atheists believe in right and wrong. That, however, doesn't prevent disagreement over *what* is right or wrong. Take lifeboat ethics. Is it morally permissible to kill a passenger to up your own chances of survival? The food and water will last twice as long with half the passengers.

Suppose two atheists both believe in right and wrong, but disagree on whether it's permissible to kill another human being in that situation. Both have a moral opinion. But they have conflicting moral opinions.

Here's the rub: given atheism, it's hard to see how a moral opinion is anything more than mere opinion.

Take a comparison: suppose there's a disagreement about the best way to treat a cancer patient. The oncologist recommends conventional cancer therapy (or perhaps an experimental treatment) while a "naturopathic physician" recommends alternative medicine. So you have conflicting opinions.

There is, however, something more than conflicting opinions. In principle, there's evidence that one treatment is more effective than another. Some treatments have a higher success rate than others. There are, of course, complications about the sample group, but it's not just a matter of opinion. There's something above and beyond conflicting opinions to underlie or undercut respective medical opinions.

In secular ethics, by contrast, there's really nothing over and above human opinion itself. You have two conflicting

human opinions about what is right or wrong. But there's nothing beyond that. It's just your opinion. There's nothing additional to back it up.

There are objective circumstances and consequences, but both sides can agree on that. The point of contention is what is the right thing to do in that situation, and in secular ethics, it's just one human opinion over against another human opinion. In that case, what makes one opinion correct and the other incorrect? If all we have are human opinions about right and wrong, what makes one moral opinion true and another moral opinion false? In virtue of what is your moral opinion better than mine? Not correspondence to the "facts" of the case, for we may agree on the facts. But what makes your moral opinion a fact?

## Pursuing the good life with Pablo Escobar

Keith Parsons is a moralistic militant atheist. He denounces hell and OT "genocide." But, of course, moralistic atheists face a familiar dilemma: unless secular ethics can underwrite moral realism, they have no basis for their attacks on the morality of Scripture. Parsons has attempted to defend secular ethics:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2014/04/29/morality-and-atheism-an-exchange-with-prof-feser/>

It is important that an ethical theory not be gratuitously at odds with our basic ethical intuitions. For instance, an ethical theory that says that it is acceptable to rape if you can be sure that you will get away with it can hardly be acceptable. The reason that a moral theory, as opposed to a physical theory, has as one purpose the aim to show us how to live well, and to live well means, in part, to be at peace with ourselves and others. We cannot be at peace with ourselves or others if we espouse ethical principles that are in plain conflict with our deepest moral feelings.

**i)** An obvious problem with that appeal is the lack of universal moral intuitions. Indeed, that's a stock argument for moral skepticism. What people find morally intuitive varies from person to person, time, and place. That's why anthropologists typically espouse cultural relativism.

We can only reject that if we have an objective standard, independent of mere intuition, by which to adjudicate competing moral intuitions.

**ii)** To take his own illustration: throughout history, armies rape the women in the countries and cities they invade, occupy, or conquer. Was that in "plain conflict" with their "deepest moral feelings?"

What if Parsons alleges that deep down, they know that's wrong? But what's his evidence that their conduct is "gratuitously at odds with their basic ethical intuitions"? He can't infer that from their actions. And unless they confess that it's contrary to their deepest moral feelings, he has no appreciable evidence to suppose they are suppressing their basic ethical intuitions.

Objection: Facts are different from norms. You cannot derive an "ought" from an "is," as Hume observed long ago. NAEN appeals to the facts of biology to support ethical norms, that is, facts are adduced to justify norms. Yet the facts of biology—or psychology, anthropology, and sociology—can only tell us how we do in fact act. At most, it can only tell us what we do regard as morally worthy or unworthy. What such empirical sciences cannot do is tell us what we should value. Perhaps we do in fact value the well-being of other people, but that fact fails to reveal why it is morally imperative that we do, i.e. why we should do it. Thus, NAEN fails in the most basic requirement of an ethical theory, that is, in providing a basis for moral obligation.

Reply: NAEN does indeed fail to provide a basis for moral obligation if "ought" is required to be based only on a categorical imperative. A categorical imperative is a pure ethical command that defines our duties as universal and necessary and therefore independent of fact or circumstance.

It's unclear to me why he thinks a moral obligation must be independent of fact or circumstance. That may be true of Kantian deontology in particular, but why assume that's a general condition of moral obligation?

For NAEN, ethical norms are hypothetical imperatives that have the form "If you want to actualize good G in situation C, then take steps a, b, c...n." For instance: "If you want people to thrive, then support education." But if moral norms are hypothetical imperatives, then we will have to start with some values that are just given, i.e. all we can say about them is that we do in fact value certain things. As Aristotle observed, I might value x because it leads to y and y because it leads to z, but at some point, unless we have an infinite regress, we have to stop with something that, in fact, is just valued for its own sake and is not made valuable by anything else. For Aristotle, that ultimate value was human well-being. For the neo-Aristotelian, it is the well-being of all sentient creatures.

All we would really have to say is that humans are adapted--by natural selection, of course--to live the lives of rational and social creatures and that we are happiest when we are doing so successfully. A person who makes rational decisions and enjoys fruitful personal relationships will--other things being even roughly equal--be much better off than one who decides irrationally and has dysfunctional personal relations. The intellectual and moral virtues should be inculcated because those are the states of mind and character that are conducive to a good life.

**i)** One problem with his position is that it's a pastiche of Aristotelian ethics, evolutionary ethics, and hedonism. Is there a consistent underlying principle or criterion?

**ii)** His definition of moral obligation reduces to doing whatever makes you happy. But doesn't the concept of moral duty mean we are sometimes obligated to do something that we don't enjoy doing, just because it's the right thing to do? If "morality" is simply the pursuit of personal happiness, why not drop the talk of morality? What does "moral obligation" add to that characterization? We don't pursue happiness because we *ought* to be happy, but because we *like* to be happy. Happiness is an end in itself. Something "we just value for its own sake." So what does duty have to do with it?

Some answer has to be given to Thrasymachus, the character in Plato's Republic who demands to know why we should not just be unjust and enjoy the benefits of lying, cheating, stealing, and deceiving, when it is to our advantage to do so. We need to have some reason for saying that Thrasymachus was wrong when he alleged that the best way to live would be to be perfectly unjust yet to be thought perfectly just. That way we could get the benefit of being totally self-serving, and yet enjoy the honors and respect accorded to those who exhibit morality. There has to be something unreasonable about such an option.

I think Thrasymachus' question is a bit more basic than the one you mention. Thrasymachus challenges the very basis of morality. Why be good if you can get your goodies by appearing just while successfully lying, cheating, and stealing? Unless it is in some sense more rational to be good than to be bad, then morality is for suckers.

If Thrasymachus was right, and the best, most rational, most rewarding way to live is to be like Vito Corleone--



a rich, powerful criminal, with the respect and honor of his community--then morality would be for cynics and chumps. Cynics would deploy moral standards to manipulate the chumps into willingly being exploited and controlled.

I don't see where he refutes cynicism. Take a Latin American drug lord who murders business rivals. Has them tortured to death. Tortures their wives and kids as a deterrent. Even if a brave man is prepared to oppose him, that man won't put his wife and kids at risk. Likewise, the drug lord has his bodyguards kidnap any pretty woman he takes a fancy to, so that he can rape her. And his product (cocaine) destroys individuals and families.

It's unclear why that's wrong on Parsons' construction. That's what the drug lord values. That's what makes him happy.

You can only say that *shouldn't* be what makes him happy if you have an objective standard of morality. Perhaps Parsons would counter that while that benefits the drug lord, it does so at the cost of the common good. If so, that's a different criterion. What makes one person happy or happier may not make another person happy or happier. So where's the universal standard?

Perhaps Parsons would counter that the business of a Latin American drug lord is a high-risk occupation. You make a lot of enemies. You're unlikely to have a normal lifespan. For instance, Pablo Escobar died a violent death at age 44.

But suppose the risk of a shorter life is the tradeoff for a life of unimaginable indulgence. From a secular standpoint, is it better to die of senile dementia at 80 than die younger, but live it up?

## **Jason Thibodeau**

Morality may be for suckers but that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

It seems to me that the proper answer to Thrasymachus is to acknowledge that what morality requires and what self-interests commends often do come apart. Morality, as you suggest, requires impartiality, and this implies that what we are morally obligated to do will at least sometimes conflict with what is in our self-interest. So there really is no problem here once we understand the nature of moral requirements and their connection to impartiality. So, why should we be good? Because we are morally required to.

Of course, that begs the question. Why should an atheist act contrary to his self-interest?

## Rewarding virtue

In a recent interview (Inquisitive Minds podcast, part 2), atheist Hector Avalos says:

It's no virtue in doing good because you're trying to please an invisible being. There's no reward that's going to come to you. That's not really moral action.

That sounds oh-so idealistic. But let's be honest. What reason does an atheist have to be sacrificial? From a secular standpoint, isn't that irrational? Where's the evidence that Avalos practices moral heroism?

It also depends on what you mean by "reward." There's the quid pro quo sense of reward, where you do something in exchange for what you receive in return. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.

But that's not what's meant by eschatological rewards. To begin with, to be a creature is to be dependent. To have physical and emotional needs. Humans aren't robots. There's nothing intrinsically unspiritual about enlightened self-interest when it comes to having your essential needs met. That's actually a pious, humble acknowledgement that you're not God.

"Eternal life" is eternal happiness. Although duty takes precedence over happiness, you can't be depressed all the time and survive emotionally. Without hope, existence becomes unbearable. Hell is everlasting despair.

In addition, the question of whether virtue is "rewarded" and vice is punished goes to the issue of whether there's

any ultimate justice. If doing good is an infallible recipe for getting screwed, it is foolish to keep doing good.

It sounds nice to say we should simply do good for its own sake, come what may, but if the universe was rigged so that do-gooders always lose and always suffer while evil-doers always win and always prosper; if—without fail—evil is rewarded and virtue is punished, it would be irrational to do the right thing. We need *something* to look forward to. We need to get *something* out of life. If not this life, then the afterlife. Interminable misery is nothing to live for. That's damnation.

## Christian ethics is liberating

You've just said a very revealing thing. Are you telling me that the only reason you don't steal and rape and murder is that you're frightened of God? (Richard Dawkins).

That's ill-conceived in many respects:

**i)** The contention is rather contradictory. After all, atheists routinely assert that Biblical ethics is "hateful." If so, how is that a moral restraint on Christians?

**ii)** It begs the question by presuming there are wrong things Christians would do unless their theology restrained them. But, of course, an atheist is not entitled to stipulate moral realism in the first place, then tut-tut Christians.

**iii)** Lack of moral inhibition doesn't mean you want to do anything in particular. Maybe I don't think it's wrong to pirate Barry Manilow recordings. That doesn't mean I'm tempted to pirate Barry Manilow recordings. I've never had the slightest inclination to listen to Manilow. Even if I could do so with impunity, I wouldn't.

**iv)** Christian critics of secular ethics by no means concede that Christians would be more prone to rape, murder, and pillage than unbelievers if they lost their faith. Lifelong atheists have the same evil propensities as apostates.

**v)** But now I'd like to turn to my main point: the contention has it backwards. It treats Christian ethics as a kind of add-on. An artificial code of conduct that's superimposed on

neutral human nature—in contrast to moral intuition or inner direction. But that mischaracterizes Christian ethics.

Oftentimes, Christian ethics *liberates* us to do the right thing. It is sin and society that inhibit us from doing the right thing. Christian ethics isn't so much adding moral norms, but removing impediments to moral norms. For instance, there are situations in which a person instinctively wants to do the right thing, intuitively knows the right thing to do, but his peer group or the legal system deters him.

Take people living under the thumb of a corrupt regime. Might be a police state or a banana republic. They witness widespread injustice. There are times when they'd like to intervene, but it's too dangerous. Likewise, there are times when they may be ordered (at gunpoint) to commit evil.

Or you can have peer pressure in high school or college that discourages people from "getting involved" because there's a social sanction for sticking your neck out.

To take a comparison, suppose a person has sociopathic impulses caused by brain cancer. If the brain cancer is treatable, he will lose his sociopathic impulses. The treatment didn't give him a conscience; rather, the treatment removed a barrier, thereby allowing his conscience to resurface.

To a great extent, Christian ethics gives us the courage to do the right thing, by corroborating our conscience, and by making the cost of bucking the system acceptable. Even if we are persecuted, God will ultimately reward those who obey him.

It isn't just about moral restraint, but moral freedom. To be at liberty to do good or resist pressure to do evil. Christian

ethics is inhibiting with respect to vice, but liberating with respect to virtue.

When I say "instinct" or "intuition," I don't mean that in a naturalistic sense, but in a natural law sense. Absent divine creation, there is no right or wrong.

Moreover, I'm not suggesting that intuition gives us an infallible moral blueprint. Revealed norms can be a corrective. Likewise, revealed norms can resolve moral uncertainty.

But in many cases, Christian ethics isn't so much about giving us new information, but confirming the right course of action, and giving us an incentive to do the right thing. Due to common grace, many atheists retain some remnants of common decency. But that can be smothered by expediency. It isn't worth the risk. Likewise, why deny yourself?

Christian ethics is at least as much about the motivation to do right as the knowledge to do right. You can afford to do the right thing, even if that will cost you dearly, because this life is not all there is.

Only a fool would voluntarily put his head on the chopping block to save another—if there's no payoff. We need to know that God has our back.

## Posner on morality

The Supreme Court vacancy caused by Scalia's death will provoke a moralistic debate about his successor. The liberal establishment will contend that if Republicans are allowed to pick the replacement, that will be a catastrophic setback for social justice, human rights, &c. They will frame the debate in ethical terms.

To my knowledge, Richard Posner may well be the most influential jurist of his generation. He represents the principal alternative to the perspective of Robert Bork, Antonin Scalia, and Robert George. I'm going to quote some statements of his on metaethics. On personal and social morality.

There's a refreshing candor to his position. He doesn't hesitate to embrace the bleak consequences of atheism. Mind you, he can afford to be cavalier. As a member of the ruling class, he is not threatened by his own self-destructive logic.

I should clarify that, in a primary respect, I don't think it's the job of judges to moralize. To substitute their own morality. To impose their own morality. As a rule, the job of a judge is to apply the law, rather than apply his own morality. It's the job of lawmakers to think ethically, and the job of judges to faithfully interpret and impartially apply the law. To be sure, impartiality is a virtue in that situation.

There are exceptions to that rule. Take the cliché of a judge in Nazi Germany. He should either resign or use his position to mitigate the evil of Nazism. Use his position to subvert Nazism as best he can. Likewise, a Muslim judge should cease to be Muslim.



In addition, judges can write articles and give speeches in which they propound their moral vision. They can advise law students and lawmakers. Even if there's a sense in which they ought to check their morality at the courthouse door, they can influence the morality that informs law and policy.

That said, it's instructive to see what Posner's alternative amounts to.

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"Morality," as I shall use the word, is the set of duties to others (not necessarily just other people) that are designed to check our merely self-interested, emotional, or sentimental reactions to serious questions of human conduct. It is about what we owe, rather than what we are owed, except insofar as a sense of entitlement (to happiness, self-fulfillment, an interesting life, the opportunity to exercise our talents, or the opportunity to realize ourselves) might generate a duty on the part of others to help us get what we are entitled to.

First, morality is local. There are no interesting moral universals. There are tautological ones, such as "Murder is wrong," where "murder" means "wrongful killing," and there are a few rudimentary principles of social cooperation - such as "Don't lie all the time" or "Don't break promises without any reason" or "Don't kill your relatives or neighbors indiscriminately" - that may be common to all human societies.<sup>3</sup>

If one wants to call these rudimentary principles the universal moral law, fine; but as a practical matter, no moral code can be criticized by appealing to norms that are valid across cultures, norms to which the code of a particular culture is a better or a worse approximation. Those norms, the rudimentary principles of social cooperation that I have mentioned, are too abstract to serve as standards for moral judgment. Any meaningful moral realism is therefore out, and moral relativism (or rather a form of moral relativism, an important qualification to which I'll return shortly) is in. Relativism suggests an adaptationist conception of morality, in which morality is judged - non-morally, in the way that a hammer might be judged well or poorly adapted to its function of hammering nails - by its contribution to the survival, or other goals, of a society. My analysis also suggests that no useful meaning can be given to the expression "moral progress" and that no such progress can be demonstrated.

Second, many so-called moral phenomena can be explained without reference to moral categories. This point reinforces my thesis that the content of moral codes is local by showing that most moral principles that claim universality are better understood as mere workaday social norms in fancy dress. It also implies that the domain of moral theory is smaller than academic moralists believe. This is not to deny the existence of universal moral sentiments, such as guilt and indignation and certain forms of disgust<sup>4</sup> (as distinct from altruism, which is not primarily a moral sentiment). But these moral sentiments are object-neutral, and hence not really moral. "Moralistic" would be a better word for them. They are instruments rather than ends.

x. Moral Relativism. - If moral relativism means that the criteria for pronouncing a moral claim valid are local, that is,

are relative to the moral code of the particular culture in which the claim is advanced, so that we cannot call another culture "immoral" unless we add "by our lights," then I am a moral relativist.

2. Moral Subjectivism. - Moral subjectivism, as I use the term, is the view that there are no criteria of validity for a moral claim; morality, in this view, is relative to the beliefs of each individual, so that an individual acts immorally only when he acts contrary to whatever morality he has adopted for himself. I am sympathetic to this position. If a person decides to opt out of the morality of his society, the way an Achilles or an Edmund (in King Lear) or a Meursault or a Gauguin or an Anthony Blunt did, or for that matter as the conspirators against Hitler did, there is no way to show that he is morally wrong, provided that he is being consistent with himself. Even if inconsistent, he can be morally wrong only if consistency with oneself, whatever exactly that means, is a tenet of his personal moral code. (I will say more on the confusing concept of being "consistent with oneself" later.) The most that can be said about such a person is that he is acting contrary to the morality of his society and therefore many people will think him wrong.

But the morality that condemns the traitor or the adulterer cannot itself be evaluated in moral terms; that would be possible only if there were reasonably concrete transcultural moral truths. My version of moral subjectivism is consistent with moral relativism in its sense of rejecting transcultural moral truths.

unlike Nagel and the others, I claim that there are no convincing answers to the interesting moral questions. This claim marks me as a moral skeptic in the loose sense of one who doubts the possibility of making objective judgments about the moral claims that moral theorists want to make.

The "wet" (non- dogmatic) moral skeptic and the weak moral realist converge.

My belief that moral theory lacks the necessary resources for resolving moral controversies enables me to reconcile my qualified acceptance of moral subjectivism with my qualified rejection of moral skepticism. A person who murders an infant is acting immorally in our society; a person who sincerely claimed, with or without supporting arguments, that it is right to kill infants would be asserting a private moral position. I might consider him a lunatic, a monster, or a fool, as well as a violator of the prevailing moral code. But I would hesitate to call him immoral, just as I would hesitate to call Jesus Christ immoral for having violated settled norms of Judaism and Roman law, or Pontius Pilate immoral for enforcing that law. Had I been a British colonial official (but with my present values) in nineteenth- century India, I would have outlawed suttee,<sup>8</sup> but because I found it disgusting, not because I found it immoral. We tend to find deviations from our own morality disgusting, but our reactions prove nothing about the soundness of that morality. No doubt Hindu men thought widows who resisted their fate disgusting. It was right to try the Nazi leaders rather than to shoot them out of hand in a paroxysm of disgust. But it was politically right. It created a trustworthy public record of what the Nazis had done. And it exhibited "rule of law" virtues to the German people that made it less likely that Germany would again embrace totalitarianism.<sup>9</sup> But it was not right because a trial could produce proof that the Nazis really were immoralists; they were, but according to our lights, not theirs.

Every society, and every subculture within a society, past or present, has had a moral code, but a code shaped by the exigencies of life in that society or that subculture rather than by a glimpse of some overarching source of moral

obligations. To the extent it is adaptive to those exigencies, the code cannot be criticized convincingly by outsiders. Infanticide is abhorred in our culture, but routine in societies that lack the resources to feed all the children that are born.<sup>13</sup> Slavery is routine when the victors in war cannot afford to feed or free their captives, so that the alternative to slavery is death. Are infanticide and slavery "wrong" in these circumstances? It is provincial to say that "we are right about slavery, for example, and the Greeks wrong,"<sup>14</sup> so different was slavery in the ancient world from racial enslavement, as practiced, for example, in the United States until the end of the Civil War, and so different were the material conditions that nurtured these different forms of slavery<sup>15</sup>. To call infanticide or slavery presumptively bad would be almost as provincial as to condemn them without qualification. The inhabitants of an infanticidal or slave society would say with equal plausibility that infanticide or slavery is presumptively good, though they might allow that the presumption could be rebutted in peaceable, wealthy, technologically complex societies.

I do not shrink from the implication of my analysis that there is no moral progress in any sense flattering to the residents of wealthy modern nations, and that we cannot think of ourselves as being morally more advanced than head-shrinkers and cannibals and mutilators of female genitalia. We are lucky in knowing more about the material world than our predecessors did and some of our contemporaries do. Armed with this knowledge, we can show that certain vanished moral codes were not effective instruments for achieving social goals (in some cases that is why they vanished), and perhaps that some current ones are maladaptive in this sense as well. If a moral code does not further the interests of the dominant groups in a society, or if it weakens the society to the point of making it vulnerable to conquest (even if only by arousing the fear or

hatred of a stronger society), or if it engenders unbearable internal tensions, then either the code or the society will eventually become extinct; the moral code of the antebellum South, the moral code of the Nazis, and the moral code of the Soviet Union are all examples. As we have a different moral code, which naturally we prefer (it is ours), we like to describe the disappearance of the bad old codes as tokens of moral progress;<sup>24</sup> we call their adherents "immoral." But progress and adaptation are not the same thing. If a moral code is adaptive, it may still be alterable, but it will be difficult to criticize. Had Hitler or Stalin succeeded in their projects, our moral beliefs would probably be different (we would go around saying things like "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"); and they failed not because the projects were immoral, but because the projects were unsound.

within each locale it may be possible to evaluate behavior by its conformity to a moral system, even though judgment about the morality of the system itself must be withheld. Indeed, the casuistic approach to moral questions assumes the givenness of the local moral system. It is indeed "startlingly counterintuitive to think there is nothing wrong with genocide or slavery or torturing a baby for fun<sup>127</sup> - in our culture. That's the rub. The moral dictionary is local.

Charities know that the way to get people to give money for the feeding of starving children is to publish a picture of a starving child, not to talk about a moral duty. I think that most Americans would actually be miffed to be told, other than by their own religious advisors, that it was their duty to support the needy.

When we see a person in distress, or even a picture of such a person, our impulse is to help (though it is balanced, and often outweighed, by contrary impulses, such as the

impulse of self-preservation), even though nowadays the person is unlikely to be a relative or other intimate. We react that way, and approve of others who react that way, not because there is a moral law dictating altruism, but because we are social animals. Cats, for example, are not. If a cat sees another cat (unless it is its own kitten) in distress, it reacts with indifference. This is not because cats are stupid, but because the fewer cats there are, the better it is for cats - the hunting is easier. Cats grow up solitary; children grow up in groups; a moral code will develop in children from their interactions with each other and with adults.<sup>39</sup>

Some feminists admire bonobos, a species of monkey in which the female is dominant. It would make as much sense to admire sharks, vultures, or leeches. These creatures are adapted each to its particular environment, which is neither our prehistoric nor our present environment.<sup>40</sup> Admiring bonobos or deploring sharks is like calling a warthog ugly. A shark who had a moral lexicon would pronounce the eating of human swimmers moral, just as a warthog with an aesthetic vocabulary would snort derisively at the Venus de Milo.

All that the moral emotions actually imply, however, is that we are social animals with large brains. The sociality makes desirable, and the large brain makes feasible, the development and enforcement of rules of social cooperation and differentiation, as opposed to the kind of hard-wired role differentiation found in ants. The most important rules of cooperation in a human society are embodied in its moral code, but what is codified is what is useful rather than what idealists might think is good. To be effective, the rules must be obeyed. Many of them are self-enforcing; if you don't

cooperate with other people, they won't cooperate with you, and so you'll lose the benefits of cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Some rules are enforced by law. Some become internalized as duties whose violation engenders the disagreeable feeling that we call guilt. Where there are no sanctions at all, however, not even guilt (and not all people feel guilt if they violate a particular provision of their society's moral code), it is difficult to understand why a person would obey such a rule unless it were consistent with his self-interest. Richard A. Posner, " **THE PROBLEMATICS OF MORAL AND LEGAL THEORY,**" 111 Harvard Law Review 1637 (1997).



## After God

Peter Singer frankly distinguishes Christian ethics from secular ethics:

Any discussion of the ethics of voluntary euthanasia must begin by considering whether it can ever be right to kill an innocent human being. The view that this can never be right gains its strongest support from religious doctrines that claim that only humans are made in the image of God, or that only humans have an immortal soul, or that God gave us dominion over the animals—meaning that we can kill them if we wish—but reserved to himself dominion over human beings. Reject these ideas, and it is difficult to think of any morally relevant properties that separate human beings with severe brain damage or other major intellectual disabilities from nonhuman animals at a similar mental level. For why should the fact that a being is a member of our species make it worse to kill that being than it is to kill a member of another species, if the two individuals have similar intellectual abilities or if the nonhuman has superior intellectual abilities?

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/200508--.htm>

## All flesh is grass

Peter Singer on altruism:

The possibility of taking the point of view of the universe overcomes the problem of finding meaning in our lives, despite the ephemeral nature of human existence when measured against all the eons of eternity. Suppose that we become involved in a project to help a small community in a developing country to become free of debt and self-sufficient in food. The project is an outstanding success.... Now someone might say: "What good have you done? In a thousand years these people will all be dead, and their children and grandchildren as well, and nothing that you have done will make any difference."

I am not defending the objectivity of ethics in the traditional sense. Ethical truths are not written into the fabric of the universe: to that extent the subjectivist is correct...We cannot expect that this higher ethical consciousness will become universal. There will always be people who don't care for anyone or anything, not even for themselves.

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1995----.htm>

To be fair, in the essay as a whole, Singer labors to argue for altruism despite these bleak concessions. But consider the hand he dealt himself.

## Evolutionary altruism

Darwinians often argue that natural selection fosters altruism. For instance:

In evolutionary biology, an organism is said to behave altruistically when its behaviour benefits other organisms, at a cost to itself. The costs and benefits are measured in terms of reproductive fitness, or expected number of offspring. So by behaving altruistically, an organism reduces the number of offspring it is likely to produce itself, but boosts the number that other organisms are likely to produce.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/altruism-biological/>

On this view, social ethics is based on empathy or compassion, which is based on evolutionary psychology.

On the face of it, there's a problem with that explanation. It's easy to imagine hominids who cooperate out of perceived self-interest rather than altruism. To take a comparison, consider military alliances. Heads-of-state who despise each other, or neighboring countries whose citizens despise each other, may pool their collective resources to combat a common enemy. That doesn't require a capacity for empathy or compassion. Indeed, they can go right back to killing each other once the more pressing threat has been eliminated.

## Magic button

In his debate with Christopher Hitchens, David Berlinski proposed the following thought-experiment:

I have in front of me a rather remarkable button. If you should press it, yours would be untold riches and whatever else you desire. The only consequence to pressing it beyond your happiness is the death of an anonymous Chinese peasant. Who among us would you trust with this button?

That's a provocative way to frame the choice between Christian ethics and secular ethics. Let's tease it out:

**i)** The debate was somewhat paradoxical inasmuch as Hitchens is an atheist while Berlinski is a secular Jew. So you might reasonably predict that they'd be in essential agreement. Why, then, is Berlinski defending the Judeo-Christian faith and attacking atheism?

To begin with, I believe Berlinski is an agnostic rather than an atheist. Perhaps he feels atheism is dangerous in a way that agnosticism is not. In practice, if not in theory, atheism is a social movement.

Just before offering his thought-experiment about the button, he quotes Heinrich Himmler's statement: "After all, what compels us to keep our promises?" And he said earlier that the genocidal secular regimes of the 20C did not believe in any power higher than their own.

So he may feel that atheism is threatening in a way that agnosticism is not, in part because atheists suffer from a dangerous conviction that man's not answerable to anyone

higher than himself, which in turn emboldens them to act with ruthless impunity. They have no external moral restraint.

Moreover, atheism is a cause in a way that agnosticism is not. Atheists are moral crusaders, bent on setting things right. They suffer from indubitable belief in the utter rightness of their perspective. Having deposed God, they now occupy the position God used to occupy. They combine a totalitarian impulse with a utopian agenda. Since their utopian goals require everyone to get on board, they brook no dissent. Everyone must cooperate—or else!

Furthermore, humanitarian ends justify inhumane means. That's the price of perfectionism.

That interpretation would be consistent with Berlinski's historical examples, viz. Stalinism, Maoism, Nazism, the Khmer Rouge. Perhaps he thinks agnosticism is innocuous because it lacks the messiah complex of atheism.

It's possible that Berlinski supports civil religion for pragmatic reasons. Maybe he thinks isolated individuals can be decent without religious morality, but that's exceptional.

Or perhaps he thinks agnosticism is safe so long as agnostics are in the minority. Perhaps he's a reluctant agnostic. Maybe he regrets the fact that he lacks religious faith. And he appreciates the benefits of Judeo-Christian social ethics. That framework makes it possible for agnostics like him to survive and thrive. If so, his position is reminiscent of Bertrand Russell's illustration:

Let us take theft, for example. A community in which everybody steals is inconvenient for everybody, and it is obvious that most people can get more of the sort of

life they desire if they live in a community where theft is rare. But in the absence of laws and morals and religion a difficulty arises: for each individual, the ideal community would be one in which everybody else is honest and he alone is a thief. It follows that a social institution is necessary if the interest of the individual is to be reconciled with that of the community. This is effected more or less successfully by the criminal law and the police. But criminals are not always caught, and the police may be unduly lenient to the powerful. If people can be persuaded that there is a God who will punish theft, even when the police fail, it would seem likely that this belief would promote honesty. Given a population that already believes in God, it will readily believe that God has prohibited theft. The usefulness of religion in this respect is illustrated by the story of Nahoth's vineyard where the thief is the king, who is above earthly justice.

**ii)** An atheist might object on the grounds that a Christian is not immune to temptation. That's true, but when Christians do wrong, there's a standard by which to judge their wrongdoing, whereas atheists have no standard higher than themselves, which is no standard at all. Any rule you make you can break.

Moreover, it's far less tempting for a Christian, because he doesn't think this life is a zero-sum game. He can afford to lose in the short-term. There's a long-term payoff that awaits him in the afterlife.

**iii)** Honestly, if you thought this life was all there is, if you could have untold riches and whatever else you desire by killing a stranger, and get away with it, would it not be irrational for an atheist to resist the temptation? Everything to gain and nothing to lose. Why should he consider the life

of a stranger more valuable than untold riches and whatever else he desires? Let your imagination run free. For that matter, what if the cost is not a stranger but a friend?

**iv)** An atheist might object that this means a Christian would do the same thing were it not for fear of divine punishment. Even if that's true, deterrents like that make the world a safer place.

**v)** There is, however, more to it than that. It's not just about reward and punishment, It's not just about a heavenly incentive or a hellish disincentive. If he's consistent, when a heavenbound Christian sees a hellbound sinner, he thinks to himself, "That could just as well be me! I'm no more deserving than he is."

So he doesn't view a stranger as a rival who vies with him for happiness. Rather, redemption gives him a sense of empathy. Since he was once where they were, he hopes they will be where he is. To take a few related examples, teenage boys have been known to do foolhardy things. Suppose two or three classmates and I trespass on someone's property. There's a fence. It says "Private Property: No Trespassing!" And it has a warning sign: "Beware of quicksand!"

But we climb over the fence, split up, and explore the property. We can't see each other because trees obscure the view. Then I step into quicksand. I call for help. The owner happens to be nearby and pulls me out. He didn't have to. What I did was reckless. And I'm a trespasser. I have no excuse.

Then I hear one of my classmates calling for help. I follow the voice and pull him out of the quicksand. Just as the

owner saved me from drowning in quicksand, I spare my classmate that fate.

Or suppose my classmates and I go boating despite a threatening weather forecast. Our rowboat capsizes. We swim, but we're getting cold and tired. Just in the nick of time someone with a more seaworthy vessel comes by and fishes me out of the water. I then fish my classmates out of the water.

Or suppose I escape from a concentration camp. But I'm expected, if at all possible, to return with reinforcements to liberate the camp and rescue my fellow inmates.

Or suppose I grow up in the Hood. I'm a juvenile delinquent. One day a street evangelist shows up from out of town. He comes everyday for several weeks. Befriends me. Eventually I convert. As a result I turn my life around and get out of the Hood, since that's a bad place to start a family. But I come back to do street evangelism. I come back for those left behind.



## The Euthyphro dilemma ricochets

**I.** A favorite atheist objection to Christianity in general, and the moral argument for God in particular, is the Euthyphro dilemma. For a brief exposition:

**i)** Is an action right (merely) because God wills it?

Or

**ii)** Does God will an action because it is right?

As formulated, if the Christian (or theist) opts for the first horn of the dilemma, then that seems to make morality an arbitrary divine fiat.

Conversely, if the Christian (or theist) opts for the second horn of the dilemma, then that seems to make morality independent of God by grounding morality in a higher standard, apart from and above God. In that case, God's will is superfluous to ground morality.

**II.** Now, I've addressed the Euthyphro dilemma on many occasions, so I won't repeat myself here. Instead, I'd like to flip the objection. For it's easy to generate Euthyphro dilemmas for secular ethics. For instance:

### **1. Evolutionary ethics**

Is an action right because we're hardwired to deem it right, or does the rightness of the action determine the rightness of our hardwiring?

Same conundrum for Neo-Aristotelian naturalism.

## **2. Contractarianism**

Is an action right because the social contract makes it right, or does the rightness of the action determine the rightness of the social contract?

## **3. Consequentialism**

Is an action right because the consequences make it right, or does the rightness of the action determine the rightness of the consequences?

**III.** Finally, atheists object that grounding morality in God is an arbitrary stopping point. But isn't the objection reversible? Why isn't grounding morality in evolutionary psychology, consequences, or the social contract an arbitrary stopping-point?

## Must purported revelation pass a moral test?

I'm going to comment on this essay:

Morrison, W. (2013) The Problem of Apparently Morally Abhorrent Divine Commands, in **THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL** (eds J. P. McBrayer and D. Howard-Snyder), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Oxford, UK.,ch10

Morrison is an atheist.

If God is morally perfect, there must be many things that could not be commanded by him, and it might seem to be quite easy to name some of them. William Lane Craig, for example, says that it is absolutely impossible for God to command rape (Craig et al. 2009, 172) or to command us to eat our children (Craig and Antony 2008). David Baggett and Jerry Walls say that it would be impossible for God to command us to "rape and pillage hapless peasants in a rural village of Africa" (Baggett and Walls 2011, 134).<sup>1</sup>

"Absolutely impossible" may somewhat overstate the case. Circumstances matter, and an imaginative philosopher might perhaps conjure up a world in which God is morally justified in commanding someone to do these things. But even if such a world were genuinely possible, it would bear little resemblance to the actual world. As things actually are, commands like these do not pass moral muster and cannot reasonably be attributed to God. As Robert Adams rightly says, "purported messages from God" must be tested for "coherence with ethical judgments formed in the best ways available to us" (Adams 1999, 284). If someone

were to cite a "message from God" as justification for rape or pillage or eating children, we would rightly conclude that he was a charlatan or a madman.

Should this moral test be applied even to biblical reports of divine commands? This is a serious issue, because the biblical record contains a number of divine commands that are – on the face of it – every bit as morally objectionable as those mentioned in the first paragraph. Among the most worrisome passages are those in which God is represented as mandating the extermination of a large number of people.

Adams (1999, 284) quotes with approval the words of Immanuel Kant: "Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: 'That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down from (visible) heaven.'" On the other hand, Adams also says this: "The command addressed to Abraham in Genesis 22 should not be rejected simply because it challenges prevailing values. . . . Religion would be not only safer than it is, but also less interesting and less rich as a resource for moral and spiritual growth, if it did not hold the potentiality for profound challenges to current moral opinion" (Adams 1999, 285). Despite this qualification, one is left with the strong impression that Adams does not believe that God has ever commanded anyone to sacrifice a human life.

These biblical justifications raise new and troubling questions. Are the reasons stated in the terror texts worthy of a perfectly good and loving God? Would commanding the Israelites to kill large numbers of people be a morally acceptable way to prevent them

from adopting “abhorrent” religious practices? Would it be morally acceptable to punish the Amalekites of Samuel’s day for what a previous generation of Amalekites had done to a previous generation of Israelites?

At the very least, those who deny that there are serious moral errors in the Bible must show that it is not unreasonable to believe that the biblical rationale for each problematic command is consistent with God’s perfect goodness. In making this demand, we are not asking anyone to read the mind of God. But we are asking that everyone read what the terror texts say about God’s actions and about the intentions behind them, and consider whether it is plausible to suppose that they accurately represent the actions and intentions of a God who is perfectly loving and just.

Imagine a pastor who is concerned about a local atheist organization that has lured some young people away from his church. He prays for divine guidance, and comes to believe that God wants his church to be the instrument of divine justice. Fresh from this “discovery,” he tells his congregants that God has a special mission for them: they are to stop this spiritual infection in its tracks by killing those atheists. Many church members are skeptical, but the Pastor reassures them by pointing out that “our life comes as a temporary gift from God,” that God has a right “to take it back when he chooses,” and that God also has a right to commission someone else “take it back for him.”

Such a high degree of skepticism about what God might command is surely excessive. The immoral content of the pastor’s “revelation” is a perfectly good

reason to reject it. This reason is, of course, defeasible, but in the absence of overriding evidence confirming the veridicality of the pastor's "message from God," we should regard it as a matter for the police.<sup>21</sup>

I suggest that we should approach the terror texts in the Bible in somewhat the same way. By our best lights, they are morally subpar, and this gives us a strong prima facie reason for believing that they do not accurately depict the commands of a good and loving God. This reason is defeasible, but unless overriding reasons for accepting the terror texts can be produced, they should be rejected.

This raises a number of issues:

**i)** Morrision's position is paradoxical. On the one hand, Christians have reason to believe that humans sometimes have reliable moral intuitions, although our moral intuitions are fallible. On the other hand, a consistent atheist ought to be, at minimum, a moral skeptic. According to naturalism, our moral opinions are hardwired and/or socially conditioned. But there's no presumption that socially conditioned mores are objectively right or wrong. If, moreover, our moral instincts were programmed into us by a mindless, amoral natural process, then there's no reason to think they correspond to objective moral norms. Indeed, it's hard to fathom how there can even be objective moral norms, given those background conditions.

So even if there could be a moral criterion for assessing particular religious claimants or competing religious claimants, that could never rule out religion in general, for moral realism is parasitic on theism.

**ii)** Since, moreover, it's demonstrable that our moral sensibilities are often arbitrary, given the fact that different cultures frequently have different social mores, it follows, even from a Christian standpoint, that we need to make allowance for the very live possibility that what we take to be moral intuitions or moral certainties simply echo our social conditioning, and if we were raised at a different time or place, our moral sensibilities might be very different.

Although Christians shouldn't be wholesale moral skeptics, unlike atheists, a degree of skepticism regarding our prereflective moral sensibilities is warranted and even necessary. Our moral sensibilities need revelatory correction or confirmation.

**iii)** It's possible to confirm or disconfirm a religious claimant on grounds other than morality. Having confirmed a religious claimant on grounds other than morality, you can use that as a benchmark or moral criterion to evaluate another religious claimant. But for reasons I've given, I seriously doubt you can do that from scratch. I doubt you can jump straight into a moral test. I think we lack independent access to consistently reliable moral intuitions. What we're pleased to call moral intuition is very hit-n-miss.

Indeed, critics who object to OT ethics ironically illustrate that very point. OT writers don't share their outlook. OT writers don't think the allegedly "abhorrent" commands are derogatory to God's goodness. So what's the standard of comparison to referee competing moral opinions?

**iv)** Abraham's situation is different from a messenger. God spoke directly to Abraham. That's disanalogous to a "purported message" from God, which obliges second parties who were not the immediate recipients of the

purported message. It's one thing for me to obey a divine command if I hear it direct from God—quite another to obey a reported divine command.

**v)** In the case of Pentateuchal injunctions, although the divine commands were mediated through a messenger, the Israelites had overwhelming miraculous evidence that God spoke to and through Moses.



## Does skeptical theism entail moral skepticism?

I will comment on this essay:

Maitzen, S. (2013) The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism, in **THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL** (eds J. P. McBrayer and D. Howard-Snyder), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Oxford, UK.,ch30.

A Google search on the term "child torture" retrieves the following case among others: in 2010, four-year-old Dominick Calhoun of Argentine Township, Michigan, died after days of being beaten and burned by his mother's boyfriend. "I've been doing this a long time, and this is the worst case of child abuse I've ever seen," said the local police chief; "in all respects, he was tortured." Dominick's grandmother reported that "burns covered his body" and that his brain was "bashed out of his skull." A neighbor told police he heard Dominick screaming, over and over again, "Mommy, make him stop." Dominick's crime? Wetting his pants.<sup>1</sup>

Where was God while this was going on? Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God stand by and let someone torture Dominick to death? Atheists of course reply, "Nowhere: there is no God in the first place."

**i)** Maitzen's example is truly horrific. That said, it's not as if the existence of horrendous moral evil is a new discovery, like astronomers finding a new planet. Christians inhabit the same world as atheists. So no particular news story,

however horrendous, is a novel reason to reconsider belief in God.

**ii)** Consider the secular alternative. To my knowledge, child abuse is typically committed by the live-in boyfriend rather than the biological father. The evolutionary explanation is that men are hostile to another man's offspring. That's a rival to their own offspring. It's like a lion who kills the cubs of other lions when he takes over the pride.

**iii)** Theism doesn't create natural and moral evils. From a secular standpoint, the same horrendous events would happen whether or not religion exists (apart from uniquely religious violence). In that respect, theism doesn't make the problem any worse.

However wince-inducing the examples of moral evil, and however inscrutable the relationship between moral evil and Christian theism, atheism is incomparably worse. Atheism is just a vanilla euphemism for moral and existential nihilism.

Some theists answer by offering theodicies: attempts to explain why the universe is in some sense better, or at least no worse, if God allows Dominick's torture than it would be if God prevented it (see Part 2 of this volume). In their view, God's letting Dominick suffer must achieve some compensating good (or prevent some evil at least as bad) that not even God could achieve (or prevent) otherwise. Theodicies try to specify those goods (or evils).

Those in the theodicy business face a daunting challenge. On reflection, the only goods we can think of seem to fail, individually and collectively, to provide a sufficient moral justification: either they look too small to offset the disvalue of Dominick's suffering, or else

we cannot see how an omnipotent God would need to allow Dominick's suffering in order to achieve those goods. Even after thinking hard about it, we cannot see how God's permission of that suffering could be justified by (1) a four-year-old child's somehow deserving it, (2) the value (if any) of the boyfriend's libertarian freedom to torture Dominick, (3) the value of someone else's libertarian freedom to do something in light of the torture, or (4) whatever beneficial attention to the problem of child abuse this case may generate. Justification (1) looks preposterous, and (2)-(4) seem, at best, to violate Dominick's autonomy by treating him merely as a means to some good end that even consequentialists must admit does not look good enough.

I agree with him that (1)-(4) are inadequate. But that hardly exhausts the available explanations.

Even if we consider possible benefits of a less mundane kind, such as Dominick's "experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God,"<sup>2</sup> we cannot see how achieving those benefits would force an omnipotent God to permit Dominick's suffering.

Not in isolation, but that can be combined with other reasons.

Or consider instead the prevention of some horrific evil: suppose that Dominick, had he not been killed, would have grown up to commit brutal murders.

As far as that goes, you don't have to commit murder to facilitate murder. In a case-effect world, many human agents unwittingly facilitate murder through entirely innocent transactions that nevertheless contribute to the

eventual action of the killer. Preventing a murderer is not the only way to prevent a murder. There are ever so many variables feeding into that particular outcome.

I'm not offering that as an explanation for God's nonintervention in Dominick's situation. I'm just responding to Maitzen on his own grounds.

Even on that wild supposition his suffering remains unjustified, since his painless death would have prevented that future evil at less cost.

True, but his widely publicized death has many consequences.

Furthermore, such speculation about Dominick's future brutality could provide the justification we seek only if we had some reason to believe it, and we do not. Again, our search for an adequate justification comes up empty.

Yet Maitzen indulges in wild hypotheticals about God as the cosmic deceiver (see below). Yet he doesn't believe in his own hypothetical. And Christians have no reason to believe that God routinely deceives people. So Maitzen has a double standard.

But if deception is ever good, all things considered – imagine deceiving a murderer about the location of a potential victim – then presumably a good God could deceive us, and if we are as clueless about God's true purposes as skeptical theism says we may be, then for all we know radical deception on God's part represents the height of goodness.

**i)** Actually, I think God occasionally deceives certain people. Consider, for instance, how Elisha caused the Syrian army to hallucinate (2 Kgs 6:8-22). That, however, creates no presumption that God generally deceives people.

**ii)** Maitzen's own hypothetical illustration involves God deceiving a murderer about the location of a potential victim. But how can he logically extrapolate from that type of scenario to divine deception in general? That would be to prevent a heinous crime.

But there is another way in which theism threatens our knowledge quite apart from the possibility of divine deception.

How does a purely hypothetical defeater threaten our knowledge? Does he take the same position regarding the brain-in-vat scenario? We can imagine all sorts of ingenious skeptical scenarios, but that, in itself, is not a reason to cast doubt on human knowledge, is it? Absent concrete evidence, the ability to concoct abstract possibilities is not a rational basis for skepticism.

Certainly Maitzen doesn't seem to be a Pyrrhonian skeptic. Indeed, if he were that skeptical, it would disarm his ability to attack Christianity, since, in order to attack Christianity, he must have a standard of comparison which he views as true. Take the news story.

According to theism, something literally magical stands at the foundation of our universe: a nonphysical God who created the universe from nothing at all and via methods that we have no reason to think natural science could ever unravel. God had free rein over which natural laws, if any, to create, and given

science's unavoidable reliance on natural laws there is no reason to think science could dig "underneath" all natural laws to discover the reasons, if any, God had for creating them. If the universe is at bottom magical, then our inescapably nonmagical ways of figuring it out are doomed to fail eventually. According to naturalism, by contrast, nothing magical stands at the foundation of our universe, and so there is no reason in principle why science cannot make our knowledge of the origin and workings of the universe ever deeper.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, insofar as we can explain some fact in natural-scientific terms, to that degree we do not – and, more important, need not – invoke the intentions of agents to explain it. But theism regards God's intentions as fundamental to the universe, in which case we cannot hope to understand the universe ever more deeply by means of our nonmagical scientific methods. Unlike naturalism, theism puts a barrier in the path of our ever-deeper knowledge of the universe, a barrier we must hit sooner or later.

**i)** To characterize God or divine agency as "magical" is tendentious.

**ii)** There are built-in limits on how far we can probe the natural world. Objects too small or too distant to detect. And not just distance in space, but distance in time. It isn't possible to reconstruct the past in detail.

**iii)** Maitzen seems to rule out personal agency and mental causation as fundamental explanatory categories. His reductionistic worldview eliminates humans as well as God.

If worries about our poor grasp of value prevent us from doubting God's goodness on the basis of the suffering we experience or witness, they ought to

prevent us from affirming God's goodness on the basis of the sudden cures, spontaneous recoveries, and averted disasters that we experience or witness.<sup>5</sup>

That assumes those are symmetrical propositions, for which he offers no argument. A parent takes a child to the doctor to be vaccinated. The injection is momentarily painful. The child resents the doctor, and the child resents his parent for subjecting him to the pain. He can't fathom why his parent would make him suffer that ordeal. But while his reaction is understandable from the blinkered viewpoint of a child's mind, is that a good reason to doubt the parent's benevolence?

even if we ourselves can see nothing that would justify allowing E to occur, we should insist that it is not unlikely that there is some . . . reason for a perfect being's not intervening to stop E. Plainly, we should also concede – by parity of reason – that . . . it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognize as a reason for our not intervening to stop the event. . . . But it would be appalling for us to allow this consideration to stop us from intervening. Yet, if we take [sceptical theism] seriously, how can we also maintain that we are morally required to intervene? (Almeida and Oppy 2003, 505–506, first emphasis added)

Is there parity between the two? Does divine nonintervention authorize human nonintervention? That's a false dichotomy. God often works his will through secondary agents. God intervenes indirectly through human intermediaries.

On the standard kantian theory of duty, we can discover duties by rational reflection alone.

**i)** To begin with, I'm not a kantian demonologist.

**ii)** In addition, there's a systematic equivocation running through Maitzen's use of "moral skepticism". Skeptical theism doesn't deny that some actions are intrinsically right or wrong. So it's hardly equivalent to moral skepticism. Rather, skeptical theism simply acknowledges that we may sometimes be in doubt on how to apply moral norms. You can subscribe to moral realism, but be unsure of what is morally licit or illicit in a particular case. That's commonplace, both in philosophical ethics and practical ethics. That's the stuff of moral dilemmas, borderline cases and edge cases.

Some people oppose consequentialism because they say it makes the moral status of our actions unknowable by us, given our inability to know the total consequences of our actions and given that the unforeseeable consequences swamp the foreseeable ones.<sup>6</sup>

But in that event, his objection isn't principally to skeptical theism, but to consequentialism. Yet that's ironic since many atheists are consequentialists.

Skeptical theists persistently claim that only those goods you know of – rather than goods beyond your ken – can justify your inaction in the face of what seems to you to be an obligation to intervene (e.g., Howard-Snyder 1996, 292–293, criticized in Pereboom 2005b, 89). But their claim ignores the fact that, in high-stakes circumstances, recognition of your own ignorance can also justify your inaction.



**i)** Maitzen constantly acts as though these complications are unique to skeptical theism, whereas ethics in general presents us with analogous cases where the best course of action is unclear—assuming there even is a best course of action. Although the consequences of our actions are not a morally sufficient consideration, they are often a morally necessary consideration. Yet that's fraught with variables we can't foreknow or control.

**ii)** Moreover, Christian theism—especially predestinarian varieties like Calvinism—provide a practical solution. In his providence, God supplies a morally licit option. Christians can do God's will without knowing his will.

There is, in addition, a type of belief we can expect theists to possess and nontheists to lack that also undermines the moral obligation to intervene in cases of horrific evil: the belief that someone exists who can make this suffering turn out for the sufferer's best even if I do not intervene. Given the badness of severe suffering, why do we not feel obligated to prevent children from ever undergoing painful rabies vaccinations? Because we are confident that sometimes severe suffering will turn out for the sufferer's best. Suppose we believe, as many theists do, that someone exists who can always make suffering turn out for the sufferer's best (see, e.g., Gellman 2010, 188; Stump 1985, 411–413). We ought, I submit, to feel less obligated (or less clearly obligated, if obligation does not come in degrees) to prevent and relieve suffering than we would feel if we did not believe in such a potential guarantor of a good outcome.

**i)** Only a universalist believes that God will always make suffering benefit the sufferer.

**ii)** More to the point, Maitzen seems to be alluding to the afterlife. But how does belief that things will be better in the future imply that would shouldn't alleviate suffering in the present? That's like saying, why not operate without anesthetic since eventually the pain will go away once the patient heals up.

[T]heists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act. Thus, a sceptical theist will very likely not find it . . . plausible . . . that [skeptical theism] leaves us without an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like [Dominick's].

Taking guidance from God's commands raises the prior question of how to identify what God commands. Some theistic religions claim that God never issued or no longer endorses some of the things regarded as operative divine commands by other theistic religions. Suppose we consider one obvious source of God's commands if any such commands exist: the monotheistic sacred scriptures. Does God command followers to circumcise every male child among them, as Genesis 17:10 reports? Traditional Jews say yes, while many Christians say either that God never commanded circumcision or that the circumcision command has been superseded (see Galatians 5:6). The Qur'an contains no command to circumcise, although most Muslims continue it as a traditional practice. Christians claim that God commands the baptism of all people in the name of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19), a claim that Jews

and Muslims of course reject. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus announces commands that are supposed to supersede Old Testament law concerning divorce, the swearing of oaths, the treatment of enemies, and lex talionis ("an eye for an eye"). Holy writ contains many similar examples of conflicting commands.

**i)** That's a bait-n-switch. Regarding Christianity and Islam, the issue in that case isn't picking out true divine commands but picking the true religion. You don't validate or invalidate individual commands, but the source. If the source is genuine, then the commands are genuine.

**ii)** Regarding Christianity and Judaism, that's asymmetrical. Christians don't regard OT Judaism as a rival to Christianity, whereas Rabbinic Judaism regards Christianity as a rival to Judaism.

**iii)** Yes, we have the hermeneutical issue of how much carryover there is from OT ethics to NT ethics. To say they're "conflicting commands" is ambiguous. They'd only be in conflict if they are commands for the same people-group at the same time. If, however, some commands supersede other commands, then there's no essential conflict.

Since none of these conflicting putative revelations is self-authenticating, followers of theistic religions have to decide which of them to take as genuine. The mode of presentation is the same in each case: the commands appear in ancient texts, such as the Old Testament, that the various religions often agree in revering as God's Word. So nothing about the means of presentation distinguishes them, forcing adherents of

the various religions to rely on their independent moral judgment to tell which of those commands most likely do express the will of a morally perfect God and whether God does intend the later commands to supersede the earlier ones. Consequently, identifying God's genuine commands requires human insight into God's reasons and intentions.

The question at issue is not a distinguishing "mode of presentation" (whatever that means) but distinguishing evidence to differential the true religion from false religions.

Suppose, for example, that a traditional theist announces that he has felt the presence of God commanding him to quit his gambling habit and donate to charity what he would have spent on gambling. We can predict the approval of his clergy and fellow parishioners. But compare that approval with the reaction he would get were he to announce that God had told him to slaughter everyone in the neighboring town. In declaring that God could not possibly have commanded the latter action, his co-religionists would not rest their case on the nature of the alleged communication – "Was it a voice? If so, what did it sound like, and did anyone else hear it?" – for nothing about the means of presentation would in fact quell their doubt that it actually came from God. Instead, they would rule it out as a divine command purely on the basis of its morally objectionable content. The Old Testament reports God as having repeatedly commanded the killing of men, women, and children (see 1 Samuel 15:3, among many examples), so it is not as if a command to kill would be out of character for such a God. Nevertheless, nowadays, anyone's claim that God has commanded him to wipe out the

neighboring town would rightly encounter at least initial disbelief even among his religious group – principally, if not exclusively, on moral grounds. Thus, skeptical theism faces a problem encountered by divine command theories of ethics, and at least as acutely: our very identification “of God’s commands as God’s commands” (to quote Bergmann and Rea) presupposes that we independently understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command.

**i)** There's no need to rule out the revelatory claimant on exclusively or primarily moral grounds. Indeed, moral considerations needn't figure in the consideration at all. To begin with, a parishioner could properly say God didn't tell *him* to do that. And he has no evidence that God spoke to the claimant. The onus is not to disprove a mere possibility that God spoke to the claimant, but whether there's sufficient evidence that God spoke to the claimant.

**ii)** He might also argue that the age of public revelation is over.

**iii)** The command to execute the Canaanites is indexed to temporary geographical cultic holiness. That's confined to a particular place at a particular time for a particular purpose.

According to skeptical theism, we lack what it takes even to estimate the likelihood that some compensating good justifies a perfect being's permitting Dominick to suffer as he did.<sup>10</sup> Skeptical theists grant that none of us can detect that compensating good, but given our limited knowledge of the realm of value, they ask, how could we estimate the likelihood that some compensating good lies

beyond the limit of what we detect? By the same token, however, we cannot estimate the likelihood that some reason lying beyond our ken turns what seems to us a diabolical command into just the thing a perfect being would tell someone to do under the particular circumstances.

If Maitzen is still alluding to the so-called "abhorrent" commands or "terror texts" of the OT, Bible-believing Christians don't have a problem with that comparison. Those commands were morally licit and morally obligatory for the intended audience.

Even when theists concede that God has issued a particular command, they sometimes consciously choose, on what look to be moral grounds, to disobey it. According to leviticus 19–20, God forbids breeding cattle with other livestock (apparently beefalo is an abomination in God's eyes), mixing the kinds of seed sown onto a field, and wearing a garment containing both linen and wool. God also imposes the death penalty for cursing one's parents, adultery, male homosexual conduct (see also Romans 1:27, 32), certain types of incest (which require death for everyone involved, sometimes by burning), bestiality, witchcraft, and blasphemy. Yet it is unlikely that even Orthodox Jewish parents kill their children for parent-cursing or blasphemy, because they reason (if perhaps implicitly) that God couldn't really want them to do that. So theists must be nonskeptical concerning their capacity to discern God's reasons, to tell which of God's commands God really wants us to obey. I wager that Bergmann and Rea don't check the label for divinely prohibited fiber- content before buying a suit of clothes, and not just because they might not know

about the prohibition in leviticus 19:19, but because they assume, if only implicitly, that the Creator of the universe surely does not care about that issue, even though the Bible portrays him as caring about it.<sup>11</sup> Their assumption is as sensible as it is hard to square with their skepticism about our knowledge of God's underlying purposes.

**i)** That's a village atheist objection. Has Maitzen does any serious reading in the literature?

**ii)** This may indeed be a logical pressure point for Orthodox Jews. But Christians aren't using moral criteria. Rather, this is a theological and hermeneutical question of the extent to which the new covenant supersedes the Mosaic covenant.

Mind you, professing Christians range along a theological spectrum, from liberal to conservative. "Progressive Christians" do pick and choose based on their moral opinions.

**iii)** Maitzen equivocates over the word "children". Dominick was a four-year-old. That's not comparable to juvenile delinquents in the Mosaic injunctions.

It does not solve the problem, furthermore, to respond that these embarrassing commands applied only to the ancient Israelites in their specific time and place, because we still must rely on our own judgment – independent of any divine commands – to determine whether any of those ancient commands are meant to apply to us today. Even if scholarly exegesis can explain away the most awkward commands while retaining the rest, such explanations will surely depend on assuming human insight into the relative

importance of particular values in God's grand scheme. Why not say that God cares first and foremost about the composition of our clothing and only secondarily about harm to children? Because we know independently that such an attitude would be unworthy of a morally perfect being, something we could not know without knowing more about the realm of value than skeptical theism says we can know.

The Bible itself, in both Testaments, provides a rationale for particular commands or types of commands. Likewise, the Bible itself, in both Testaments, prioritizes some commands over others. This doesn't involve extrinsic appeal to moral intuition or perfect being theology.

Bergmann and Rea claim that God's commands give even skeptical theists "an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like" the torture of Dominick. While we regard it as likely – again, based on our independent moral judgment – that God (if God exists) wants us to protect innocent children from harm, has God in fact commanded it? Biblical commands are often extremely specific, not simply general principles we must then somehow apply to particular situations. Has God specifically commanded us to prevent child abuse or even specifically commanded us not to abuse children? Not in any scripture I can find. On the contrary, one finds death-penalty offences for children listed in Exodus (21:15, 21:17), leuiticus (20:9), and Deuteronomy (21:18–21), apparently endorsed by Jesus (Matthew 15:4; Mark 7:10), and several apparent endorsements of child-beating in Proverbs (13:24, 20:30, 22:15, 23:13–14, 29:15). Granted, Matthew 18:6 warns us against corrupting those children who believe in Jesus, and



verse 18:10 commands us not to “despise” such children, but it offers such children no specific protection against the kind of abuse Dominick suffered and offers no protection at all for children who do not believe in Jesus.

**i)** Maitzen is repeating his equivocal usage of "child," as if a 4-year-old is morally and intellectually equivalent to teenagers.

**ii)** In addition, it's arguable that some OT offenses were capital crimes to maintain the cultic holiness of the land. Certain crimes defiled the land. Executing the perpetrator eliminated ritual pollution. However, that framework has been superseded by the new covenant.

**iii)** Maitzen classifies corporal punishment as "child-beating". But that's a hyperbolic, indiscriminate characterization.

In sum, had Dominick been beaten to death for parent-cursing or blasphemy, it is not clear that his abuse would have crossed any line drawn by the Bible or that any recognized command would have given us an all-things-considered reason to prevent his death. If you reply that in God's eyes a four-year-old simply cannot commit the crimes of parent-cursing or blasphemy, I would say that you are relying – entirely properly – on your ordinary moral judgment, independently of any divine commands. But Bergmann and Rea's point is that God's commands can guide skeptical theists even after they have stopped relying on their ordinary moral judgment to fathom God's ways.

It's not a moral judgment to conclude that four-year-olds lack the cognitive development of teenagers. We routinely make age-appropriate distinctions regarding curriculum that are unrelated to moral judgments. For instance, we don't teach calculus to four-year-olds unless the child is exceptionally precocious. The Bible itself indicates an age of reason (cf. Isa 7:16).

Furthermore, if we try to extrapolate from God's pronouncements on other topics in order to tease out the principles God wants us to apply to the case of child abuse, we must assume for ourselves a substantial degree of insight into God's purposes. Consider, for instance, the second greatest commandment according to Jesus, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39), which some Christians may offer as a way of dismissing the jumble of conflicting commands I cited earlier. Suppose I hate myself; am I off the hook with regard to loving others, or, indeed, am I then obliged to hate others? "Of course not," one might reply; "the commandment presupposes a healthy degree of self-love on the part of everyone to whom it applies. Moreover, as God's creature, you ought to love yourself and hence ought to love others." Maybe so, but that reply explicitly depends on a claim about what the command presupposes: self-love on the part of those it commands. Thus, it presumes insight into God's assumptions in issuing the command, insight skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess.

His willfully subversive self-hatred interpretation is a transparent ploy to disobey the command.

Moreover, even if we ignore these interpretive problems and grant that the command “love thy neighbor as thyself ” gives us some moral guidance on what to do about Dominick’s suffering – presumably we ought to try to relieve it – it fails to give us enough guidance to answer the moral question that Almeida and Oppy pose in their criticism of skeptical theism: Must we intervene to prevent such suffering if we easily can? Even if the command clearly enough implies that neither his mother’s boyfriend nor anyone else may torture Dominick, the command does not tell us whether, for example, we must use whatever force may be needed to prevent the torture – not, again, unless we make assumptions about the relative importance and overall purpose of the command, assumptions that skeptical theism denies us any confidence in making. In obeying the command to love one another, must we prevent people from behaving in harmful ways, or is it God’s business to prevent them? The command itself does not say, and hence we have to rely on moral assumptions, including assumptions about the command’s context and purpose, to answer this (by no means easy) question.<sup>12</sup> In sum, we simply cannot interpret commands as expressions of God’s will without assuming we know much, independently of those commands, about God’s intentions, just as we cannot interpret a constitution as expressing the will of its framers without assuming we know much about their intentions. But, of course, our knowing enough to identify, interpret, and apply God’s commands ought to increase our confidence in drawing the very “noseum” inferences that skeptical theism denies us the right to draw.

Of course, one particular command may not contain all the salient qualifications. But Maitzen artificially and

atomistically isolates one command from another.

At this stage, one might reply that God himself could provide the insight we need in order for us to identify, interpret, and apply his commands – the insight I have said skeptical theism denies us any reason to think we possess. According to this reply, we would find ourselves in a skeptical quandary about God's commands except that God has given us, or at least could give us, the guidance we need to escape the quandary. But the skeptical problem recurs at this stage too. As I argued earlier, if deception is ever good, all things considered, then it is consistent with God's perfection that he deceive us at any time, including when he apparently tells us his intentions and purposes in issuing a command.

**i)** How does it follow that if deception is "ever" good, then it's consistently good to deceive "at any time"? Many ethicists, including some evangelical ethicists, believe deception is permissible or obligatory under special circumstances. But you can't extrapolate from that principle to disanalogous situations where the same justifications are absent.

**ii)** Once again, Maitzen acts as though this poses a unique problem for skepticism theism, making skeptical theism entail moral skepticism—but many moral realists consider deception to be warranted under special circumstances. Does Maitzen himself think deception is always wrong? If not, does he think deception is always right? If not, then he himself must draw the line somewhere.

## Data and Lore

In *TNG*, Data and Lore are identical twin android "brothers." Yet Lore is Data's alter ego. Data is good, while Lore is evil. Data is the Boy Scout to Lore's serial killer.

What makes one good and the other evil? Simply that Lore was wired a little differently than Data. Lore was a failed experiment. A defective model. Noonian Soong was learning by trial and error how to make an artificially intelligent robot.

Another example is *The Terminator* series. In the first film, the Terminator was programmed to neutralize John Connor. In the second film, he was reprogrammed to protect John Connor.

From a secular perspective, that's what morality comes down to. It all depends on adding or removing something from the brain. If natural selection installs a morality chip, that makes you "good." If the chip is removed, that makes you amoral. If the wrong chip is accidentally inserted, that makes you "bad."

Morality is arbitrary. It's all about parts. Reducible to parts of the brain. If you replace one part with another part, you replace one morality with a different morality. Data and Lore are different because their circuitry is a bit different.

## The Psychopath Inside

Most atheists are physicalists. The brain generates the mind. So morality is located in the brain. Consider this example:

James Fallon admits he has a lot in common with serial killer Ted Bundy and Columbine assassin Eric Harris. He is aggressive, lacks empathy and is a risk-taker.

Fallon, a professor of psychiatry and human behavior at the University of California Irvine, accidentally discovered what friends and family have suspected for years -- he has all the genetic traits and brain scan patterns of a psychopath.

"I don't have special emotional bonds with those who are close to me -- I treat everyone the same," he said. "I am involved in a lot of charities and good works, and my intentions are good for the world. But I don't have the sense of romance or love I am supposed to have for my wife. It's not there."

For years Fallon has worked with criminologists and other legal experts to evaluate the brain for abnormalities. But while volunteering with his own family for a study of Alzheimer's disease, Fallon learned on his PET scan that he has all the features of a psychopath.

"The last scan in the pile was strikingly odd," he writes about the 2005 discovery. "In fact it looked exactly like the most abnormal of the scans I had just been writing about, suggesting that the poor individual it belonged

to was a psychopath -- or at least shared an uncomfortable amount of traits with one. ... When I found out who the scan belonged to, I had to believe there was a mistake. ... But there had been no mistake. The scan was mine."

"Looking at my genetics, I had lethal combination, but I just had the happiest childhood growing up," he said. Fallon's mother had four miscarriages before his birth and, as a result, he said he was, "treated well because they didn't think I would be born."

"There were dark periods I went through, but they didn't bring me to a psychiatrist, but they told my sisters and teachers to watch out for me," he said. "My mother instinctively knew there was a problem."

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/scientist-related-killers-learns-psychopaths-brain/story?id=21029246>

Although psychos have abnormal brains, they don't have defective brains, since—according to naturalism—there's no way the brain is supposed to be. And psychopaths can be highly functional.

On this view, morality is arbitrary. Morality is an artifact of brain structures. If you change the wiring, you change morality.

In theory, evolution might have made psychopathic brains normal rather than abnormal. The majority might have psychopathic brains. Empathetic humans would be abnormal. From a naturalistic perspective, that's all there is to morality. Rewire the brain and you get a different moral code. There's no right or wrong way the brain is supposed to be wired. That's the outcome of the blind watchmaker.





## Moral intuition and cultural conditioning

I'm both a moral realist and a moral skeptic. That's because moral realism is a position on moral ontology whereas moral skepticism is a position on moral epistemology, so they're mutually consistent. I have a streak of moral skepticism because "moral intuition" is frequently a euphemism for cultural conditioning. If I were born at another time or place, my personal and social mores might be drastically different. And that's easy to document.

I don't think that's sufficient argument for moral or cultural relativism, but then, that's because I'm a Christian, so I have a standard of comparison. The challenge is how to differentiate culturally conditioning mores from intuitive objective norms.

Orthodox Christians use biblical revelation to evaluate candidates for moral intuition, but some "progressive Christians" like Randal Rauser appeal to alleged moral intuition to evaluate revelation. Yet in that event, he has no independent criterion to distinguish moral intuition from social conditioning.

## Explaining evil, part 3

Wielenberg is a secular ethicist who labors to be a moral realist.

Part of the answer...is that for something to be evil is for there to be a reason to avoid or eliminate a thing (123).

But that's indiscriminate since what people take to be something to avoid or eliminate is so variable from one person to the next.

Whether a person is happy depends on the attitude of someone—namely, the person himself—but it does not depend upon the attitudes of observers towards him (125).

As social creatures, our happiness is typically dependent on the attitudes of others.

Like Chalmers, I endorse the existence of nonphysical properties (128).

- i)** Isn't Chalmers a panpsychic? So that's an appeal to mental properties. But Wielenberg's position seems to be moral platonism rather than panpsychism.
- ii)** Assuming he's a Platonist, he must believe basic ethical facts are abstract objects They exist even if there was no universe.
- iii)** If so, what are they? They're not physical or mental properties. So they have no analogy in human experience.

**iv)** How are they instantiated? What's the mechanism? His nonphysical properties aren't agents and his evolutionary physical processes aren't agents.

**v)** Assuming these impersonal immaterial properties exist, how do they obligate human conduct? They didn't create us. They aren't intelligent entities. They are indifferent to human flourishing. Why are we duty-bound to conform our behavior to these impersonal properties?

**vi)** If human beings are merely physical organisms, how do we gain access to nonempirical moral facts? How do unintelligent evolutionary processes tap into immaterial moral facts in order to instill them in human beings? It can't be a physical causal connection if one relatum of the cause/effect relation is immaterial.

Theists typically maintain that the fact that God exists is a brute fact. As Richard Swinburne puts it, "No other agent or natural law or principle or necessity is responsible for the existence of God. His existence is an ultimate brute fact...Many such theists also maintain that God exists necessarily (129).

I call such facts basic ethical facts. Such facts are the foundation of (the rest of) objective morality and the rest 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 atheists, it is misguided to ask of God, "Where does he come from?"...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. (130).

Such connections are part of the fundamental, bottom level of reality. It might be objected that such a view builds a suspiciously convenience (from a human perspective) degree of order and rationality into the basic structure of the universe (132).

Atheists, for their part, typically hold that there are some basic laws of nature for which there is no deeper explanation (a commitment that theistic critics often argue is problematic). These basic laws of nature are suspiciously amendable to undemanding by the human mind (133).

What is the source of evil in a godless universe? I propose that objective morality has no foundation external to itself but instead ultimately rests on a foundation of basic ethical facts—necessary ethical truths and no external explanation (138).

Apparently, Wielenberg's strategy is to justify his secular moral realism by drawing parallels with theism:

**i)** But since he's an atheist, even if there's a parallel methodology, he thinks it's mistaken for theists to posit God as a brute fact. So where does that leave his analogy?

**ii)** As an atheist, does his position have the metaphysical machinery to accommodate necessary, immaterial properties? As one reviewer observes:

Wielenberg asserts an extremely strong form of ethical realism. Ethical truths are "part of the furniture of the universe". Moreover, they are not only objectively true, but are necessarily true, constituting the "ethical background of every possible universe." (p. 52). Yet it

is not at all clear how most of the forms of naturalism currently on offer could support such universal and necessary ethical truths. Wielenberg announces at the start of the book that he is not the brash materialist kind of naturalist who believes that all facts are scientific facts or reducible to the language of physical science. But he goes on nevertheless to endorse a radically materialistic picture of the cosmos, where everything there is arises "through a combination of necessity and chance" (p. 3) from physical and chemical origins. Could such a picture of the universe allow for irreducible necessary truths of morality?

<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/value-and-virtue-in-a-godless-universe/>

**iii)** If you already have a good prior reason to believe in necessary moral facts, then that might justify the postulation of whatever is necessary to underwrite them, but isn't Wielenberg's basic position that reality is a bottom-up process, beginning with matter, energy, and physical processes? On that view, what reason is there to think necessary moral facts exist? Even if evolutionary psychology could explain moral instincts, yet upon reflection we come to realize that our moral instincts are an illusion fostered by evolutionary conditioning.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), his program is not justifiably analogous to the brute factuality of God, for that appeals to a topdown principle, where mind is prior to matter and energy.

**v)** His position seems to be an opportunistic amalgam of moral platonism and evolutionary ethics. But those are two very different paradigms.

**vi)** Is it possible for there to be absolutely nothing? If there was nothing at all, would it be true that there was nothing at all? But if there was nothing at all, there'd be no logic, no propositions, no minds with true beliefs. So that's a per impossibile counterfactual. Hence, there can't be absolutely nothing. Rather, there must be something, and that something must include logic and propositions. And arguably, that requires a mind.

Why does God strongly willing  $p$  robustly cause the obtaining of  $p$  rather than, say, not- $p$ ? Why does God strongly willing  $p$  robustly cause anything at all?...It might be suggested that God's essential omnipotence explains the existence of these robust causal connections. But that proposal fails because the existence of robust causal connection is itself a component of divine omnipotence. It appears, then, that my view and the theistic view both require the existence of robust causal connections that are rational and make sense (from a human perspective) and yet for which there is no explanation (133).

I don't know what he means. God merely willing something doesn't cause it to be. Rather, God creatively and providentially implements his will. Is Wielenberg's objection that we don't know how that happens?

To take a comparison, if there's evidence that Cartesian dualism is true, then we don't need to know how the mind and body interact to know that they do. But the comparison breaks down with Wielenberg in part because there's no reason, given atheism, to suppose necessary moral facts exist or that evolution is their conduit.

The operations of the adaptive unconscious are fast, automatic, and effortless, whereas the operations of

the conscious mind are slow and effortful..."You round a corner and see a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it...you do not need to conclude that what they are doing is wrong; you do not need to figure anything out; you can see that it is wrong...You do not consciously form the belief: "Those hoodlums are torturing a cat just for fun!" This classification triggers feelings of disgust and outrage in you, and those feelings in turn produce the conscious belief that what the hoodlums are doing is evil...I take it that evolutionary processes have instilled certain moral principles into most human beings (155-57).

**i)** That's confused. It's true that we don't infer that what they are doing is evil. It's a spontaneous reaction. But that doesn't mean we literally see it. Moral properties are unempirical. Rather, we interpret the action as evil. We have a moral framework to evaluate the action.

**ii)** Furthermore, the thugs don't think what they are doing is evil. So what is Wielenberg's standard of comparison? He can't appeal to necessary moral facts, for who's to say the action of the thugs may not correspond to a necessary moral fact? Indeed, cruelty is commonplace in human behavior. Evolutionary processes have instilled sadism in human nature.

In fact, psychopaths figure prominently in his moral analysis. But how does he know that psychopaths don't instantiate necessary moral truths? Is he just taking a headcount?

## Can God be wrong?

**1.** The Bible says God cannot lie. Suppose an atheist challenges you: how do you know *that's* not a lie? How do you know God isn't lying when he says he can't tell a lie?

Likewise, God makes promises to his people: forgiveness and eternal bliss. But the atheist challenges you: how do you know *that* isn't a lie?

**2.** This has its pedigree in the Cartesian demon, as well as Steven Law's recent Evil God knockoff. Suppose Christians can't prove it? Suppose we don't know in advance if God is telling the truth? So what? We'll find out. If it's true, then we had everything to gain and nothing to lose. And if it's false, then there's no advantage in being an atheist. An evil God won't reward an atheist. If you're a dutiful devil-worshiper, that doesn't mean the devil will reciprocate your loyalty.

**3.** However, let's take this a step further. The Cartesian demon knows the difference between truth and falsehood. Although he's a deceiver, he isn't self-deceived.

But is it possible for God to be self-deceived? Is it possible for God to be confused?

This isn't just hypothetical. In open theism, God entertains false beliefs about the future. If you take open theist prooftexts seriously, God has false expectations about the future. Sometimes things turn out contrary to what he anticipated. That's because the God of open theism is dependent on world events for his knowledge of world events.



**4.** However, when we push the question to the limit, it raises the issue of *what* makes something true or false. What is the source and standard for truth and falsehood? Is that independent of God or dependent on God?

There are different kinds of truth: contingent, logical, counterfactual, mathematical, and modal (i.e. possibility, necessity, impossibility) truths. In Calvinism, these can all be grounded in God. Contingent facts refer back to predestination. Counterfactual truths refer back to God's ability to instantiate alternate possibilities. Logical, mathematical, and modal truths inhere in God's mind, aseity, omnipotence, and omniscience.

Unless truths and truthmakers can exist apart from God, then even if (ex hypothesi) God deludes others, God cannot be self-deluded. So that establishes a floor for skepticism. It can't go all the way down.

**5.** Taking it up a level, the question of whether God can deceive may depend on whether divine deception (if that's even possible) is motivated by malice or benevolence. In other words, inseparable from the question of divine goodness.

And that, in turn, raises a parallel with (4). What makes something good? What is the source and standard of goodness? If good is dependent on God, then there can't be an evil God—unless goodness is an illusion. And it's unclear how goodness could be an illusion. How could evil be the ultimate reality if evil is asymmetrically dependent on good to provide the necessary point of contrast?

There are debates about whether lying is intrinsically wrong. If you think it's intrinsically wrong, then it's impossible for God ever to lie. If you don't think lying is

intrinsically wrong, if there are circumstances under which lying is justifiable, then, in principle, God might sometimes lie, but never maliciously.

Even if you think lying is sometimes justifiable for humans, there's the question of whether the considerations which make it justifiable for humans extend to God, since God is not under the same constraints as humans. But in any case, God cannot lie about his promises to his people because that would be the act of an evil God, a malicious deity.

Admittedly, all I've done in this little post is to block out the issues and outline some argumentative strategies. It takes a lot of spadework to turn those into philosophically rigorous arguments. That's a research program for Christian philosophers. I will say that Greg Welty and James Anderson are doing yeoman work in this field, with special reference to modal metaphysics.

## Ethics, atheism, and the Euthyphro dilemma

I'm going to discuss the Euthyphro dilemma by comparing and contrasting two different atheists on morality. Let's begin by outlining the nature of the so-called dilemma.

If, on the one hand, God commands or forbids something because it's right or wrong, then it's right and wrong apart from God. God is not the ultimate source of morality. Rather, God himself is subject to a more ultimate standard.

If, on the other hand, God's bare command or prohibition is what makes something right or wrong, then good and evil are arbitrary and vacuous. Arbitrary because there's no underlying rationale for the command or prohibition. And that, in turn, renders good and evil meaningless, for they are consistent with any command or opposing command.

Here is how a prominent atheist states the alleged dilemma, with special emphasis on one horn of the alleged dilemma:

Translated into contemporary terms, the question Socrates is asking is this: Are morally good actions morally good simply in virtue of God's favoring them? Or does God favor them because they are— independently of his favoring them—morally good?

Divine command theory says that what is good is good only because God has commanded it; there is nothing more to an act's being good than that God command it.

[According to] divine independence theory, the goodness of an action is a feature that is independent of, and antecedent to God's willing it.

The two theories differ on what accounts for this congruence. DCT says that it is God's command that explains why the good acts are good, while DIT says that it is the goodness of the acts that explains why God commanded them.

The way to bring out the difference is to consider a case of an act that we'd all antecedently agree is morally wrong—say, torturing an innocent child. If DCT is correct, then the following counterfactual is true: If God had commanded us to torture innocent children, then it would have been morally right to do so. DIT, however, entails the following: If God had commanded us to torture innocent children, then God would not have been perfectly good.

Only the theorist who believes that right and wrong are independent of God's commands could have any basis for thinking she or he knows in advance what God would or would not command. If, as DCT says, an act's being good just consists in its being chosen by God, then there's nothing about the action in advance of its being chosen or rejected that would enable us to determine what attitude God would take toward it in some other possible world. "Good" for the divine command theorist is synonymous with "commanded by God." ...there is nothing that is inherently good or bad, and thus nothing that explains God's choosing which acts to endorse and which acts to prohibit.

I doubt that there are many people who really believe DCT. If there were, then there would be fewer interpretive difficulties surrounding those stories in the Bible that depict God commanding actions that we would ordinarily take to be moral atrocities.

The Bible is full of accounts of God's killing, displacing, or otherwise seriously smiting presumably innocent people who had the misfortune of belonging to a tribe whose leaders had threatened to impede his ambitions for the Israelites...Sometimes, there's not even a pretext that the doomed people are morally at fault: The only "crime" committed by the Canaanites was living in a land God wanted for his people.

The question can be asked, then, Why ought one to obey God? The fact that this question can be asked, that it's comprehensible, that it makes sense, is sufficient proof that the mere existence of an all-powerful Creator is not enough to generate a realm of moral fact.

Louise Antony, "Atheist as Perfect Piety," R. Garcia & N. King, **IS GOODNESS WITHOUT GOD GOOD ENOUGH?: A DEBATE ON FAITH, SECULARISM, AND ETHICS** (Rowman & Littlefield 2009), 71,72,73,79,80.

Before introducing the second atheist, I'm going to comment on these excerpts:

**i)** She says torturing an innocent child is something "we'd all antecedently agree is morally wrong." But as an atheist, she's in no position to posit that claim. For one thing, it seems to be empirically false. After all, there are people who torture innocent children. Do they think what they are doing is morally wrong?

**ii)** Furthermore, even if we think it's morally wrong, that doesn't make it morally wrong. From an atheistic standpoint, we might say natural selection brainwashed us

into cherishing children because that sentiment promotes the survival of the species. But once you become aware of the fact that you were brainwashed, you no longer feel obliged to comply with your conditioning.

**iii)** In addition, there are secular utilitarians who could propose a scenario in which it's morally permissible or even obligatory to torture a child. Take a variation on the ticking timebomb scenario. A terrorist won't divulge the information needed to prevent nuking Chicago unless we torture, or threaten to torture, his child. The harm done to one child is offset by the harm done to thousands of children unless we torture his child.

**iv)** She also cites biblical commands which she classifies as "moral atrocities." But Bible writers didn't think those were moral atrocities.

**v)** Furthermore, many cultures, both ancient and modern, commit similar "atrocities." Do the perpetrators think they are committing "moral atrocities?"

So it's hard for her to come up with any cases "we'd all antecedently agree is morally wrong."

I'm not being pedantic, here. She's not entitled to systematically beg the question when illustrating her thesis. She needs to discharge her burden of proof.

**vi)** She says no pretext for executing the Canaanites is even given. But that's willfully ignorant. The divine command is not a bare command. It supplies a rationale, implicating the Canaanites in idolatry and immorality.

**vii)** She also says "there's nothing about the action in advance of its being chosen or rejected that would enable

us to determine what attitude God would take toward it in some other possible world.”

But that confuses the epistemology of ethics with the ontology of ethics. Whether something is good or bad, and whether we know ahead of time whether it’s good or bad are separate issues.

**viii)** Finally, she makes the eccentric claim the mere ability to ask why we ought to obey God is sufficient proof that the mere existence of an all-powerful Creator is not enough to generate a realm of moral fact.

But that’s confused. At one level we can simply accept the morality of a divine command on the authority of a wise and benevolent God. That’s sufficient reason for us to accept it.

But that doesn’t make the command itself groundless. God can have good reason for what he commands. And knowing that God has a good reason is distinct from knowing what reason he has.

**ix)** There’s also a difference between moral imperatives and a moral obligation to obey a divine command. We can have a moral obligation to obey a divine command even if the command itself is not a moral imperative.

For instance, God commanding Abraham to leave Ur is not, itself a moral absolute. Rather, God commanded Abraham to leave Ur because Abraham leaving Ur is part of God’s long-range plan to redeem the world. His command is purposeful.

Abraham has a duty to obey God’s command, but not because leaving Ur is intrinsically obligatory. Rather, God has a good reason for command Abraham to leave Ur. And

Abraham ought to trust God's wisdom, even if God didn't reveal his reason to Abraham.

**x)** Apropos (ix), that type of obligation sidesteps the Euthyphro dilemma. God's command to Abraham isn't arbitrary. Rather, God's command is explicable in reference to God's overarching plan (whether or not that explanation is available to Abraham). By the same token, it's not independent of God.

Let's now quote another atheist:

If value is tied to life, its content will depend on particular forms of life, and the most salient reasons it gives us will depend, even in a realist conception, on our own form of life. This is how a realist account can accommodate one of the things that make subjectivism seem most plausible, namely the fact that what we find self-evidently valuable is overwhelmingly contingent on the biological specifics of our form of life. Human good and bad depend in the first instance on our natural appetites, emotions, capacities, and interpersonal bonds. If we were more like bees or lions, what seems good to us would be very different, a point that Street emphasizes.

[Quoting Street]: "Imagine, for instance, that we had evolved more along the lines of lions, so that males in relatively frequent circumstances had a strong unreflective evaluative tendency to experience the killing of offspring that were not his own as "demanded" by the circumstances, and so that females, in turn, experienced no strong unreflective tendency to "hold it against" a male when he killed her



offspring in such circumstances, on the contrary becoming receptive to his advances soon afterwards.”

T. Nagel, **MIND AND COSMOS** (Oxford 2012), 119.

**i)** Now what’s striking about this argument is that it could easily be retrofitted to account for many Biblical commands and prohibitions. Instead of blind evolution, we have a Creator God who designed different types of creatures with corresponding appetites, emotions, capacities, and interpersonal bonds. Human obligations would be keyed to human nature—the nature with which God endowed us. Our duties would be engineered into us.

That sidesteps the Euthyphro dilemma, for commands and prohibitions of this kind aren’t good “only” because they are commanded. There is “more to it” than the bare command. Rather, you have an inherent obligation that’s inherent in the nature of the agent. Good for the creature because that’s how the creature was made.

Conversely, this isn’t good apart from God. Rather, it’s contingent on how God designed us.

**ii)** I’d add that this doesn’t exhaust all types of divine commands. For example, Scripture commands us to be holy because God is holy. What grounds that command is the nested relationship between the divine exemplar and its human exemplification. If God is good—indeed, the summum bonum—then it’s good to be an instance of God’s goodness.

That, too, sidesteps the Euthyphro dilemma. On the one hand this isn’t arbitrary or vacuous. It’s grounded in God’s

own nature. But by the same token, it's not something over and above God himself.

**iii)** Likewise, we have a standing obligation to worship God—because God is intrinsically worthy of our worship. That also sidesteps the Euthyphro dilemma. It's not a good command for the command's sake. Rather, it's imbedded in something ultimately greater. We should love the good because it's good. And God's goodness is exemplary goodness. There is no higher good, be it possible or actual.

## Machine Gun Preacher

**1.** The actions of this Marine are receiving widespread praise:

<https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2017/10/03/marine-vet-steals-truck-and-saves-dozens-in-las-vegas/>

On Facebook, a Christian wondered if we could analogize from his actions to a prolifer "stealing" the car of an abortionist to prevent him from getting to work, or would that violate the Biblical prohibition against theft? That's a very interesting question with many moral complexities. The question could spin off in many directions. I've discussed variations on that question on multiple occasions, so I will try to avoid getting too bogged in response to this question.

**2.** I'll begin with some general preliminary observations: some biblical commands and prohibitions represent intrinsically right or wrong actions. Inherently obligatory or prohibitory.

But other biblical commands and prohibitions represent prima facie duties. These are not an end in themselves, but means to an end. Instrumental rather than intrinsic goods. In case of conflict between higher and lower obligations, the higher obligation temporarily supersedes the lower obligation. A classic example is the Sabbath controversies in the Gospels.

**3.** Apropos (2), there's a pro tanto or prima facie obligation to obey the law (e.g. Rom 13). But under special

circumstances, that can be overridden (e.g. Acts 5:29).

The most general exception is when the state forbids you to do right or commands you to do wrong.

**4.** Apropos (2-3), we must often balance social obligations. In general, social obligations are concentric. We have greater obligations to relatives or fellow believers than we have to neighbors or strangers.

**5.** Apropos (4), some Christians have prior obligations. Take a Christian husband and father. He's not at liberty to take the same risks as a Christian bachelor.

Likewise, if a Christian bachelor is an only child, he may need to avoid taking certain risks in case his parents will need him to care for them in their dotage. If, on the other hand, he has several siblings, then he can assume a greater risk.

**6.** Apropos (4), Christians don't have a duty to, say, buy a ticket to some third world hellhole, purchase a machine gun when when they arrive, and become self-appointed avengers. This is ultimately God's world. In his providence, God has often put us in situations where we can't rectify evil. In many cases, we must commit miscarriages of justice to eschatological judgment to right the scales. God is the ultimate avenger. There's only so much we can and should do on our own, in this life.

**7.** That said, vigilantism is not inherently wrong. If civil authorities are hopelessly corrupt, vigilantism may be necessary to some degree, but that's in dire circumstances. Depends on the availability of legal remedies.

A modern example is Christians who illegally sheltered Jews from Nazis. A secular example is the French and Italian Resistance. And although I disagree with this example, consider sanctuary cities, championed by the liberal establishment (as well as the church of Rome).

**8.** A vigilante action might save a few innocent lives, but it won't change the policy. So there's a cost/benefit analysis. What can we do to do the most good?

**9.** Few Christians are professional ethicists. God doesn't expect garden-variety Christians to have a sophisticated rationale for their actions. For that matter, even Christian ethicists disagree with each other on some issues. Even Christian ethicists are stumped by some ethical dilemmas.

So there are cases where, even if an action is objectively wrong (from God's viewpoint), godly intentions can attenuate or exculpate what would otherwise be blameworthy. We must often make snap decisions. We must often make morally important decisions based on inadequate information. We lack divine wisdom.

In that respect, I think it's possible to do good even when you're not doing right. It's possible for conscientious Christians to make innocent mistakes. There's a margin for error.

**10.** *Machine Gun Preacher* presents an extreme case. Christian reviewers were conflicted:

<http://godawa.com/machine-gun-preacher/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/11/2013-maston-lecture-sin-boldly-christian-ethics->

## for-a-broken-world/

I haven't seen the movie, but to judge by reviews, I'd be rooting for the protagonist. I sympathize with his actions. What he did was admirable. But I don't think that makes it obligatory—or even permissible—although there were powerful mitigating factors.

**11.** Moses was a vigilante (Exod 2:11-15). Most commentators classify his action as murder. But I don't see it that way. I don't assume he intended to kill the assailant. That wasn't his aim. And it was commendable that he intervened to spare the victim from further harm.

If, however, you interpose in a situation like that, you must be prepared to use lethal force, for even though the motivation is to protect a second party from harm, once you insert yourself into that situation, it instantly becomes a matter of self-defense. You've drawn the assailant's fire from the original target to you. Depending on the tenacity of the assailant, that may be a battle to the death. That's why many people don't get involved. They know the risk. You must take the potential for lethal force into consideration, for once you intervene, you're committed to do pretty much whatever it takes. If you're not prepared to do whatever is necessary to protect the victim or protect yourself, once you insert yourself into that situation, then it would be foolhardy to intervene. At that point it's too late to back out.

Admittedly, this example is descriptive rather than prescriptive. So it doesn't prove that vigilantism is ever warranted. But in the larger context of the Mosaic law, where there's an obligation to protect the defenseless (e.g.

orphans, widows), I think the reader is meant to view the action of Moses as brave, honorable and even exemplary.

**12.** Although the Marine may technically be guilty of theft, it isn't theft in the usual sense. He didn't intend to keep the car or use it for recreation (joyriding). He intended to return the car. To be more accurate, he commandeered the car in an emergency situation.

**13.** I doubt biblical prohibitions against theft are absolute. Many biblical commands and prohibitions have an implied context. They were not designed to be universally applicable to every conceivable situation. Rather, they apply to typical situations. And when we apply them today, we should apply them to comparable situations. That's a class apart from the subset of biblical commands or prohibitions that represent moral absolutes.

**14.** However, the issue doesn't turn on that particular example. Suppose we vary the example. Would it be permissible for a prolifer to deflate the tires of the abortionist? I doubt there's anything inherently wrong with that. But, of course, that's not a long-term solution. That's not something he can get away with on a regular basis. After the first two or three times, the abortionists will be on the alert. The prolifer will be arrested. And business as usual will resume.

I don't know the legalities. If this is a misdemeanor offense, and you had a series of proliferers doing it, that would be more disruptive. Still, it's a piecemeal approach.

**15.** Take a more creative example. Suppose a prolife hacktivist infiltrates the computer system of abortion clinic to shut it down. Suppose he can cover his tracks so that his repeated actions are undetectable. Technically, that's

cyberterrorism, but depending on your viewpoint, that's more analogous to actions of the French and Italian Resistance. From what I've read, they used to sabotage power lines and railway tracks. Most of us wouldn't classify them as terrorists. For that matter, liberals don't object to hacktivism in principle.

Do I think it would be morally licit for a prolifer to do that? I think that might be justifiable. Direct, nonviolent action.

**16.** Suppose, though, I don't think that's justifiable. Suppose the hacktivist is my roommate, and I discover what he's up to. Do I have a duty to notify the police? No. Our abortion laws are a miscarriage of justice. I have no obligation to facilitate that injustice by collaborating with the authorities. Moreover, my roommate is doing good even if he's not doing right. So I wouldn't report him to the authorities. And if I happened to know the authorities were on to him, I might warn him.



## Is Christian ethics unnatural?

**1.** Christian ethics has the damaging reputation for being unnatural. For making demands that run contrary to human nature. I expect many men never give the Christian faith serious consideration because they think it's so unnatural. But it's my contention that Christian ethics is natural, rational, and liberating.

**2.** That's not entirely a stereotype. Some Christian ethical traditions are quite unnatural. The pacifist tradition is quite unnatural. Thankfully, that never caught on.

In addition, Catholic moral theology has some unnatural taboos (about lying, masturbation, divorce, artificial contraception). Now, if you're Catholic or Anabaptist, then you have to make a virtue of necessity. You argue for how radical and praiseworthy that is.

Since, however, I disagree with Catholic and Anabaptist ethics in those respects, I don't think Christian ethics is unnatural in that regard. I've discussed those issues in detail, so I won't repeat myself here. If need be, I could give some links.

**3.** But if we discount those examples, is Christian ethics unnatural in other respects? Let's begin with a few general observations:

Psychologically speaking, animals seem to live in the present. By contrast, humans live in the past, present, and future. We remember the past while we anticipate or imagine the future.

In addition, humans have a capacity for abstract thought. That includes a capacity to entertain hypothetical scenarios. This is part of our creativity. And it's essential to moral and rational deliberation, as we compare and contrast the likely consequences of different choices.

At a purely physical or emotional level, delayed gratification is unnatural. But at an intellectual level, delayed gratification is not unnatural. It is natural for human beings to consider the consequences, for good or ill, of certain actions.

Wading in a river on a hot day is a natural impulse. If, however, I see a crocodile sunning itself on the opposite bank, I'd be suicidally foolhardy to prioritize instant gratification over delayed gratification. It's natural to avoid self-destructive behavior.

Unfortunately, human agents frequently fail to take advantage of their capacity for abstract thought. So they often suffer the dire results of impetuous, shortsighted actions. However, the point remains: it's not unnatural for humans to distinguish between short-term and long-term goals.

An athlete who's training for a competition may engage in a certain amount of self-denial to be at peak performance for the competition. In one sense that's unnatural, but in another sense that's consistent with human rationality. We are goal-oriented agents. And we sometimes make short-term sacrifices to achieve the larger objective.

In that regard, Christian ethics doesn't make special demands. It's not different than deferred gratification generally.

**4.** If this life was all there is, then Christian ethics would be unnatural or irrational in some respects. If this life was all there is, then it would be natural to be highly risk-averse. So, for instance, if someone is in danger, you might dearly wish that you could rescue him, but if you must enter the danger zone to do so, you have too much to lose, so you let him die. You watch him die from the safety of the sidelines. You feel bad about it.

If, on the other hand, you believe in the afterlife, then you can afford to risk your life for a good cause. That illustrates how Christian ethics is liberating. It frees you to do something you wanted to do. Something commendable. In that regard, it's the opposite of an unnatural duty.

**5.** Apropos (4), if this life is all there is, then resisting the impulse to get even is unnatural. This is your only chance.

If, however, God is the judge, then you can leave it in God's hands to right certain wrongs. Although that may be emotionally or psychologically unnatural, it's not intellectually unnatural. If you know they will get their comeuppance, then it can be rational to forego personal vengeance. It relieves you of that responsibility. You can move on with your life. The alternative is to be consumed by rage. And that's unhealthy.

**6.** It's my impression that women are more naturally compassionate than men. At least, emotionally speaking. Mind you, women can become very callous, but I'm discussing natural impulses.

However, there's a sense in which it's natural for men to be compassionate. At least, intellectually speaking. What I mean is this: the basis of compassion is projecting yourself into the situation of another. If you wouldn't want that to

happen to you, and if that did happen to you, you'd be grateful to someone to help you out of that predicament, then it's natural for men to be compassionate. It's only psychopaths and sociopaths that lack that vicarious imagination.

Likewise, I think men have a natural instinct to rescue people in distress. They volunteer for jobs like that. And there's an aspect of compassion to that.

**7.** Let's apply these general principles to some specific examples. Let's examine two of the most obvious examples of apparently unnatural Christian duties: forgiveness and sexual monogamy.

On the face of it, delayed sexual gratification is unnatural. That's true at a physical and emotional level.

But as I already noted, there's a certain tension between short-term and long-term goals. If promiscuity has unpleasant consequences, then sexual self-control is reasonable and even necessary. Promiscuity is not a ticket to happiness. Many sexual libertines lead unhappy lives. They leave a trail of emotional destruction.

It's not unnatural for humans to exercise prudence. We often avoid actions that expose us to gratuitous harm. And that applies to the sexual sphere as well.

If a teenage boy is having premarital sexual intercourse with a teenage girl, it would be very unnatural for him to stop in the middle of the process and say to himself, "On second thought, maybe this is a bad idea. Maybe I shouldn't go through with it!" At that stage it will be nearly impossible for him to resist the overwhelming impulse to achieve sexual climax.

But of course there are many steps prior to that irresistible stage in which it's much easier for him to go in a different direction. If you wait until the impulse is overpowering, it's too late to stop. But it's not unnatural to take precautions or avoid a trajectory if the action has detrimental consequences. What is irreversible at a later stage may be easily avoidable at an earlier stage.

**8.** To take a different, but related example, both men and women range along a continuum of sex appeal. Some men have enormous sex appeal for most women; some women have enormous sex appeal for most men. They are rarely turned down. Indeed, they rarely have to ask.

Take two boys in high school. One of them has magnetic sex appeal. Maybe he's the handsome rich kid or the hunky quarterback. All the girls pine for his amorous attention. Let's call him Jake.

Then there's an ordinary boy who doesn't have that magnetic sex appeal. He's not homely. He has average looks. Let's say he has a good heart. He'd make a devoted father and husband. Any girl would be lucky to have him. Let's call him Caleb.

Now Caleb has his heart set on Debbie. She's pretty and vivacious. She's a bit out of his league, but she's not unattainable. She's fond of Caleb. He's a marital candidate in her mind. He's on the short list.

Suppose Jake seduces Debbie. He does it just because he can. She's nothing special to him. Just another conquest.

Yet she wasn't just another girl to Caleb. But because she slept with Jake, Caleb is hurt that she gave herself to Jake.

Even when Jake discards her for the next conquest, Caleb doesn't want her back because it makes him feel like second best. And after having her fling with Jake, she feels like Caleb would be a comedown, too.

Jake had many choices while Caleb had just one. It meant nothing to Jake and everything to Caleb. He took from Caleb the one thing Caleb was counting on. He took what he didn't need from someone who had that particular, irreplaceable need. His promiscuity depleted the available stock of eligible brides for ordinary guys who don't have Jake's drawing power.

So why should Jake care? Obviously he doesn't. It wouldn't occur to him to think in those terms.

That said, it wouldn't be unnatural for him to be more generous. That's because men have a natural capacity for compassion. It may be something they have to cultivate, but the potential is there. Jake's promiscuity is gratuitously harmful to male classmates who don't have his sex appeal.

And it wouldn't be unnatural for him to be a better friend to his male classmates. Male friendship is natural.

How many girlfriends does he need, anyway? While he may desire ever so many, he only needs one. So, in a more thoughtful sense, sexual monogamy isn't unnatural.

Of course, it's unlikely that any guy who's not a Christian (or Orthodox Jew) will give it that much thought. yet if you think about it, Christian sexual morality isn't onerous but rational and compassionate.

**9.** What about forgiveness?

**i)** There's a sense in which forgiveness is unnatural. Emotionally or psychologically unnatural. Forgiving someone we don't feel like forgiving. Forgiving someone we dislike or even detest.

**ii)** But intellectually speaking, forgiveness may be the natural thing to do. For one thing, forgiveness flows from compassion. If compassion is natural, so is forgiveness. That logic is exemplified in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35). The principle is transparently straightforward: those who've been forgiven should be forgiving. We should want for others what we want for ourselves. We should want *for* others what we want *from* others. If I've been forgiven for wronging others, I ought to be forgiving towards those who wrong me. (I'm not claiming that's an unconditional obligation. I'm just discussing what's natural or unnatural.)

There's a sense in which that's natural because it taps into our capacity to relate to the situation of others. While it may cut against the grain emotionally, it's natural in another respect inasmuch as we have the rational aptitude to identify with the plight of other human beings. That's an essential element of what makes us social creatures. So it's natural in a reflective sense.

**iii)** In addition, there's a doctrine of eschatological punishment. Suppose you refrain from exacting retribution to give the wrongdoer a chance to repent. But if he remains defiantly impenitent, that doesn't mean he eludes punishment. If anything, he will face worse judgment than whatever you might mete out. It's not exactly that you forgave him. Rather, you delegated any punishment to God. That's thinking long-term.

**iv)** Social life would disintegrate if everyone consistently refused to forgive each other. If resentments festered and accumulated. Since human beings are social creatures, forgiveness is necessary in many situations.

**10.** Finally, let's consider one more example: the Jim Crow laws made it hard for Southern whites and blacks to be friends. It penalized venues where social bonding occurs. Striking down the Jim Crow laws didn't impose on blacks and whites an artificial duty to be friendly. Rather, it liberated them to become friends. The potential was there all along. Striking down the Jim Crow laws didn't suppress natural feelings but released natural feelings. Likewise, Christian ethics doesn't generally impose artificial restrictions and obligations on believers. Rather, it frees us to act in our own best interests as well as the best interests of others.



## Involuntary human experimentation

A chilling example of secular medical ethics. Josef Mengele would be proud:

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**PT:** One of the aspects of your philosophy that is most galling to some people is that you don't view human life as sacred. According to you, since a person in a vegetative coma is a being without self-awareness, he or she should be accorded fewer rights than a fully-aware chimpanzee. Needless to say, you've enraged a bunch of religious and disabled folk.

**PS:** But you really have to question human superiority. What justifies the things we do to animals? What justifies keeping a person in a vegetative coma alive? There are two basic views that support cruelty to animals: either you accept the Aristotelian view that the universe has a purpose and the less rational are here to serve the more rational, or you believe the Judeo-Christian view that God has given us dominion over the world. But once you get away from those two worldviews, there just isn't a basis for drawing a sharp moral boundary between us and them.

**PT:** But you are still drawing a boundary. Why draw one at all? Aren't you still guilty of human arrogance in saying apes deserve human rights, when other animals don't? Who are we to decide?

**PS:** That's absolutely true, and what we really have is an infinite range of gradations of awareness. But if you are trying to shape policy, you need to draw lines somewhere.

**PT:** Let's take a specific case. Research on chimpanzees led to the hepatitis B vaccine, which has

saved many human lives. Let's pretend it's the moment before that research is to begin. Would you stop it?

**PS:** I'm not comfortable with any invasive research on chimps. I would ask, Is there no other way? And I think there are other ways. I would say, What about getting the consent of relatives of people in vegetative states?

**PT:** That would cause a riot!

**PS:** Well, if you could really confidently determine that this person will never recover consciousness, it's a lot better to use them than a chimp. I agree, it doesn't go over well, and people throw up their hands in shock and horror. But I'd like them to explain why it's better to lock a fully-conscious, self-aware chimp in a seven-foot cage in solitary confinement than to experiment with someone lying unconscious in a hospital ward.

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/interviews-debates/1999----02.htm>

## Good truths and true goods

There's a cliché that's often spouted by Christian apologists: follow the evidence wherever it leads.

Up to a point that's wise advice although it can suffer from a naive positivism.

Problem is, Christian philosophers and apologists often discuss the true in separation from the good. They argue that we should believe Christianity because it's true, and they discuss how God is the exemplar good and source of finite goods. But this tends to be compartmentalized.

If, however, the true and the good don't converge, then why should anyone care about truth? If the truth isn't good, why should we pursue whatever the cost? You might pursue the truth, but once your pursuit convinces you that it doesn't lead you to the good, what's the point? If life is a cosmic tragedy where there's no happy ending for anyone, why should I follow it over the cliff? Even if I can't avoid it, that's hardly a noble goal.

Don't get me wrong: the truth can be bad in sense that, say, cancer is bad in itself (although it can be a source of good). I mean bad in an ultimate, unredeemable sense of cosmic nihilism. There's no reason anyone should have a commitment to that.

I'm not suggesting that truth is dispensable. There are churchgoers who don't think Christianity is true. They think it's a myth, but a good myth. It gives structure and direction to their lives. They don't have anything better to replace it with, so they continue singing traditional hymns and reciting a traditional liturgy.

On the one hand there are atheists who separate the true from the good, pursuing truth for truth's sake, even if that diverges from the good. Even if there's no good to be found.

On the other hand, there are churchgoers who separate the good from the true, pursuing good for goodness sake, even if that diverges from the truth. Even if there's no truth to be found.

We need to oppose both those extremes. The true and the good must coincide for either to be of ultimate value. If the good isn't true, then the good is illusory. If the true isn't good, then it has no claims on us.

## Decision-making

I'd like to draw some distinctions in decision-making:

**i)** There's a difference between morally wrong decisions and mistaken decisions. You may have one or more morally right options. You may make the wrong decision, not because it was morally wrong, but because you had insufficient information to predict the consequences.

**ii)** Apropos (ii), there's a difference between making the right decision and making a reasonable decision. Because we don't know the future, we must make shortsighted choices. The choices have unforeseen, unintended consequences. That's part of human finitude, as well as the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We didn't choose the situation. The situation generates the options and the available information.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), I mean reasonable at the time we made it. The decision may turn out to be mistaken in retrospect, but we didn't have the benefit of hindsight when we made it. We had to choose based on the information at our disposal at the time. It may be mistaken, but that's an innocent mistake.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), a dilemma in decision-making is that we don't know in advance if we're making a good decision. We can only find out by acting on an option, after which it may be too late to fix it in case we made the wrong decision.

Don't kick yourself if you made a thoughtful, conscientious decision that backfired. Ultimately, everyone is at the mercy of providence.



## Theological networking

The current controversy over eternal submission of the Son raises the issue of how different branches of theology are interrelated. For instance, critics of eternal submission make historical theology the standard of comparison (e.g. creeds, confessions, tradition).

There are different branches of theology. For purposes of this post, I'll discuss the interrelationship between exegetical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and philosophical theology.

### 1. EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

Since Christianity is a revealed religion, revealed truths, revealed propositions, lay the foundation. By the same token, exegetical theology is the starting-point. It attempts to ascertain the meaning of primary source material from which Christian theology derives. When successful, exegetical theology enjoys priority or ultimacy. In principle, if there's a conflict between exegetical theology and historical, philosophical, or systematic theology, exegetical theology trumps the others. In practice, it isn't quite that clear-cut.

### 2. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Some exegetes make a virtue of compartmentalized interpretations. They deliberately isolate their interpretations of a given Bible writer from the Bible in general. If, however, the Bible is inspired, then exegesis should aim for interpretations that are consistent with the overall theology of Scripture. Interpret the part in relation to the whole.

Systematic theology considers the implicit as well as explicit teaching of Scripture. The logical implications of Biblical propositions, both individually and in their relation to other propositions. And with harmonizing the various propositions of Scripture. To some degree, that's something an exegete must consider on a smaller scale when expounding the "theology of Paul", the "theology of John", the "theology of Hebrews", and so on.

### **3. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY**

Ideally, historical theology codifies received interpretations of Scripture that are true interpretations of Scripture. After exegetical theology has done its job, historical theology codifies the conclusions.

There are situations in which creeds and confessions can be treated as settled doctrine. But from a Protestant perspective, that can't be absolute. For one thing, you have a diversity of theological traditions. They can't all be right. So sifting is necessary.

Even if a creedal statement is true, there are still situations in which it's necessary to scrutinize the claim. Although the Christian faith is true, the Christian faith is new to each new generation. Whether you grew up in the church or were unchurched, it is necessary for you to ascertain the truth of Christianity. So at that stage of the process you are treating these truth-claims as open questions. Even if a theological tradition got it right, assent should be more than an accident of birth or coin flip. Creeds and confessions must be intellectually defensible.



That doesn't mean every generation must start from scratch. Theological traditions represent large-scale interpretations of Scripture. That gives the younger generation some preexisting options to consider. We don't have to reinvent the questions and answers. It is, however, still incumbent on us to assess the received answers.

Moreover, tradition may condition us to only ask traditional questions. But sometimes we need to reexamine old issues from a fresh perspective. Otherwise, we may be stuck in a theological rut. The way an issue is framed can prejudice the answers and artificially exclude a larger range of potential answers. But sometimes we need to think outside the box rather than filtering the discussion through a venerable paradigm.

#### 4. PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

There's more to Christian theology than just quoting Scripture. It is necessary to understand what Scripture means. The ability to explain Scriptural propositions in your own words. Define terms. The ability to expound and summarize revealed concepts. Philosophical theology can help to articulate the meaning of Scripture by providing vocabulary and categories.

Exegetes sometimes commit logical fallacies because they lack philosophical training. Exegetes sometimes overlook alternative explanations because they lack conceptual resources. In that respect, philosophical theology can supplement exegetical theology.

Then there's the whole issue of hermeneutics. What is the task of the exegete?

Where is the locus of meaning? Original intent? Should an exegete focus on the original audience or the history of reception? What is the intended audience? Is that the original audience? Or is that the community of faith? Then there's the sense/reference distinction.

These are philosophical questions. In that respect, philosophical theology can supplement exegetical theology.

Philosophical theology can also play a role in defending divine revelation. Likewise, philosophical theology supplies historical and systematic theology with models and metaphors. Traditionally, historical theology borrows distinctions and categories from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. But there's no reason that can't be updated by recourse to more recent philosophical developments.

## Glossary of terminological fallacies

This is a glossary of terminological fallacies that Christian pundits frequently commit. I often see Christian pundits use terms and categories that they clearly don't understand. They just wing it when it comes to ethical analysis. They don't seem to have even a rudimentary grasp of ethical categories and distinctions. They think they can fly by the seat-of-their-pants.

One problem is people using dictionary definitions for philosophical concepts. They fail to distinguish between the ordinary meaning of words and technical terms that designate philosophical positions or idiosyncratic positions. It's like the difference between "home," "run," and "home run," or "slam," "dunk," and "slam-dunk". What these words mean individually is different from what they mean as technical jargon.

Ethics requires precision thought. I've discussed these terms and categories before, but I'd like to collate them in a single post for ready reference.

### 1. LESSER-EVIL PRINCIPLE

Many people are confused about the word "evil" in "the lesser of two evils." But that doesn't mean choosing between a lesser wrong and a greater wrong. Rather, that's choosing between bad and worse.

If I can't saving everyone in a nursing home that's on fire, I have a choice between bad (letting some die) and worse (letting all die). It's not immoral for me to rescue those I can. It's not a lesser "evil" in that sense.

The "lesser evil" doesn't mean a moral evil. It doesn't mean doing wrong. Rather, it's a contrast between a bad outcome and a worse outcome.

Take amputating a gangrenous limb to save a patient. Amputation is a bad solution. Letting the patient die is worse.

Indeed, letting the patient die when you could save his life through radical surgery is morally evil. In a fallen world, we're often confronted with situations where we don't have ideal options. The best we can do is to limit evil.

## 2. CONSEQUENTIALISM

It fails to distinguish between the ordinary sense of "consequences" and "consequentialism"—which is a technical designation for a philosophical position. Here are three academic definitions:

Consequentialism is the view that **morality** is *all* about producing the right kinds of overall consequences.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/conseque/>

Consequentialism, as its name suggests, is the view that normative properties depend *only* on consequences. This general approach can be applied at different levels to different normative properties of different kinds of things, but the most prominent example is consequentialism about the moral rightness of acts, which holds that whether an act is morally right depends *only* on the consequences of that act or

of something related to that act, such as the motive behind the act or a general rule requiring acts of the same kind.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/>

Consequentialism assesses the rightness or wrongness of actions in terms of the value of their consequences. **ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY** (1998), 2:603.

In the ordinary sense of the term, a "consequence" is synonymous with an outcome, effect, end-result, fallout, aftermath. Taking the predictable or foreseeable results of an action into account in decision-making is by no means equivalent to consequentialism, where the morality of an action is "all about" the consequences or "depends only on the consequences."

"Situation ethics" is a label popularized by the late Joseph Fletcher. The fact that he wrote a book by that title doesn't mean he owns situation ethics. Indeed, I daresay most people who use that phrase have never read his book.

### 3. PRAGMATISM

i) It equivocates by failing to distinguish between pragmatic ethics and making pragmatic judgments. Pragmatism is actually difficult to define. It's not that unified. But there's a basic difference between "pragmatism" in the technical sense of a philosophical value system, and "pragmatism" in the informal sense of taking practical consequences into account when we make ethical decisions. It's trivially easy

to illustrate the fact that there are many situations in which it would be immoral not to take practical consequences into consideration when making ethical decisions. The Biblical mandate to love our neighbor requires us to gauge the impact that our actions have on others. Are our actions likely to be beneficial or harmful to others? That's essential to social ethics.

Put another way, in pragmatic ethics, the practical consequences are the *sole* factor that determines right and wrong. Practical consequences dictate the ends as well as the means. By contrast, we can distinguish between means and ends. What's the point of pursuing a goal through ineffective methods? Even if consequences don't select for the goal, it would be counterproductive to have means that work at cross-purposes with the ends.

I can have objectives based on normative principles, but be "pragmatic" about how I achieve my objectives.

**ii)** As a matter of fact, there is such a thing as "extenuating circumstances". To take a stock example, killing is *prima facie* wrong. There are, however, special circumstances under which killing is permissible or even obligatory. Although some actions are intrinsically right or wrong, obligatory or prohibitory, there's a class of actions where the licit or illicit character of the action is context-dependent.

#### **4. SITUATION ETHICS**

"Situation ethics" was the title of a book by Joseph Fletcher. He used that phrase to designate his particular ethical system. It's a brand name.

That hardly implies that if you take the situation into account in decision-making, you are a situation ethicist in Fletcher's idiosyncratic sense. That confuses one man's position with a much broader concept. The fact that Fletcher used the word "situation" doesn't mean his usage defines the concept. The fact that words are used as brand names doesn't mean they only or primarily denote that specialized sense.

This is just a guilt-by-association tactic. "Situation" in "situation ethics" is a technical term for a particular system of ethics. But taking circumstances into account in decision-making is by no means equivalent to "situation ethics" according to Fletcher's position. For a proper definition:

Proponents of situation ethics...reject [Augustine's] stipulation that there are certain things that are always wrong...Situation ethics is thus a movement that protests generally against the imposition of unchanging moral absolutes that prohibit everywhere certain classes of actions. **ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY** (1998), 8:798.

## 5. MORAL RELATIVISM

Radical relativists hold that any morality is as true or justified as any other. **ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY** (1998), 6:540.

Metaethical Moral Relativism (MMR). The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/>

Moral relativism is the view that **moral judgments** are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint (for instance, that of a culture or a historical period) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others.

Ethical non-realism is the view that there is no objective moral order that makes our moral beliefs true or false and our actions right or wrong.

Ethical non-realism is typically presupposed by moral relativists, but it is not the whole of moral relativism... merely denying that morality has an objective foundation of this sort does not make one a relativist; for moral relativism also asserts that moral claims may be true or false relative to some particular standpoint such as that of a specific culture or historical period.

Saying that the truth of a moral claim is relative to some standpoint should not be confused with the idea that it is relative to the *situation* in which it is made. Only the most extreme rigorists would deny that in assessing a moral judgment we should take the particular circumstances into account. Most people would agree that lying in court to avoid a fine is wrong, while lying to a madman to protect his intended victim is justified. The particular circumstances surrounding the action alter its character and hence our appraisal of it.



<http://www.iep.utm.edu/moral-re/>

## 6. THE END DOESN'T JUSTIFY THE MEANS!

It's a false dichotomy to assert that either the end always justifies the means or else the end never justifies the means. That overlooks a third alternative: some ends justify some means.

Take "the end justifies the means". That's ambiguous. As a universal principle, the claim is false. In that respect, it's an unreliable moral yardstick.

However, we all use ends-means justifications all the time. If I have a duty to support my dependents, then I have a duty to get a job. *That* end justifies *that* means.

Normally it's wrong to chop off someone's arm or leg. If, however, he has gangrene and that's the only way to save his life, then *that* end justifies *that* means.

Cancer is life-threatening and some cancer treatments are life-threatening. So it's a calculated risk. If the risk of death by cancer is greater than the risk of death by complications from cancer therapy, then *that* end justifies *that* means.

# Ethics

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# Abortion

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## Betting on God

*A Challenge to the Author and Readers of Triablogue*

*A response:*

*Specifically, to those who adhere, more or less, to the version of Christianity which posits a place of everlasting torment for those who reject or otherwise don't believe in the biblical God (actually, I assume that rejection and non-belief are synonymous in this regard).*

*A Christian couple bears a child. They love her, nurture her, and otherwise provide her with the 'good life'; including an indoctrination into the religious concepts which, if cleaved to, will ultimately secure her a place in God's everlasting Heaven.*

*However, when the child is 15 years old, she becomes enamored of another faith, and leaves the Christian fold. Unfortunately, on her way to the train station to meet up with her 'guru', she is hit by a car and killed.*

*Now, leaving aside your personal regrets and/or righteous condemnations (I TOLD you so!), as well as those of the god you serve, let me ask you- Would it not have been better if the child had never been born as far as the child's welfare is concerned? I think this is a very pertinent question, since any Christian who has a child is taking the risk of something like the above hypothetical situation happening. Moreover, it seems to be a very GREAT risk, since 'narrow is the way, and few there be that find it', and with the stakes being so incredibly high and at someone else's expense, doesn't forbearance seem the wisest- and indeed, the kindest- course? After all, if this life is merely a short episode in which a single wrong decision might possibly damn your child to an eternity of unimaginable suffering with absolutely no hope of surcease, wouldn't it have been better FOR THE CHILD if she had never been born in the first place?*

*I look forward to your participation in this discussion.*

<http://antinatalism.blogspot.com/2011/03/challenge-to-author-and-readers-of.html>

Several issues:

**i)** There's a philosophical distinction between dispositional belief and occurrent belief, as well as a philosophical distinction between implicit belief and explicit belief.

And I think that philosophical distinction dovetails into certain theological distinctions as well. In Calvinism, regeneration is causally prior to faith. It causes a predisposition to exercise saving faith.

Conversely, sin, in the elect or regenerate, can also result in false beliefs or impede the formation of true beliefs.

Likewise, I think many true beliefs involve tacit knowledge. That varies with age, education, and intellectual aptitude.

**ii)** Apropos (i), I don't assume a backslider is damned if she dies before she had an opportunity to repent. Likewise, I don't assume that a Christian's loved one is damned if she died before exercising explicit or occurrent faith in Christ. I make allowance for that possibility, but there's no presumption to that effect.

**iii)** There is also the question of what you mean by "torment." Critics of hell generally invest that word with a heavy payload which they bring to the word, yet fail to exegete. But as I've often said, I don't think hell is the same for all damned. The duration is the same, but I don't assume the specific punishment is the same for one and all. Indeed, I assume that's person-variable.

**iv)** Yes, I think the damned are worse off than if they never lived.

However, a cost/benefit analysis (which is how you've cast the issue) must consider aggregate goods and evils, not isolated goods and evils.

Suppose, ex hypothesi, Christian parents have 12 children, of which 11 are heavenbound, but 1 is hellbound. The damnation of a single child is bad for the child, and tragic for the parents, but how does that outweigh the good of all the other kids?

Which is better: that good never be exemplified if evil is ever exemplified, or that evil be offset by good? Why does the tradeoff only work one way? Should the good be disallowed for fear of allowing any incidental evil?

Why deny the other 11 kids the opportunity to enjoy the goodness of a beatific existence just because one grown child is justly doomed to hell? Why should she be allowed to spoil their opportunity for eternal bliss? Why should she exercise the unilateral veto on their existence?

Why does the "risk" of evil override the "risk" of good? Should I never marry for fear my wife might be a shrew? What about Tennyson's celebrated saying that it's better to love and lose than never love at all?

I'd be happier single than married to a shrew, but I'd be happier married to a wonderful woman than playing it safe. Either way there's a risking of losing something good. But does the potential gain outweigh the potential loss? Great risks over against great rewards.

It's worse for the damned. They'd be better off had they never tasted life. But by the same token, it's worse for the saints had they never been born.

Antinatalism is pathologically risk-adverse. Should I never leave the house lest I'm run over by a bus?

**v)** In terms of risk factors, we're ultimately betting on God. Betting on the wisdom and benevolence of God. And betting on God is always a safe bet—especially in the long run.

Life's a gamble, but God's the dealer, so I like them odds.

vi) Should someone benefit at another's expense? That sounds callous, but it all depends on the details. If a sharpshooter kills a schoolyard sniper, the kids benefit at the expense of the sniper. But I don't have a problem with that outcome. Do you?

**vii)** I also don't assume that only a fraction of humanity will be saved. As I've discussed before, that turns on a rather disputable interpretation:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/10/are-there-few-that-be-saved.html>



## Hard cases

**i)** Not surprisingly, proponents of abortion and infanticide like Peter Singer lead with the hard cases because that's a wedge issue. Is it wrong to bring a child into the world at high risk of a short, painful life?

From a Christian standpoint, this life is not all there is, so the fact that you get off to a bad start in life doesn't mean it stays that way. There's the hope of heaven. But that wouldn't be available if you never existed in the first place.

Antinatalists sometimes counter that the danger of hell offsets the hope of heaven. Not that antinatalists believe in heaven or hell. They just raise that objection for the sake of argument. But there are problems with that objection:

**ii)** That applies to healthy happy kids as well as the case of kids at high risk of a short painful life. So unless you're an antinatalist, that argument proves too much or too little. That's not an argument for abortion or infanticide, but sterilization to forestall procreation.

**iii)** In a cost/benefit analysis, it's not enough to single out one side of the equation, for the potential loss must be considered against the potential gain. The high risk of harm may be offset by the high risk of losing a compensatory good.

**iv)** I'm not suggesting a cost/benefit analysis is an appropriate tool to evaluate abortion or infanticide. I think that can be a legitimate consideration regarding contraception, but once a child is conceived, it's too late for a cost/benefit analysis to pertain. Abortion and infanticide can't be justified by a cost/benefit analysis. However, it's

useful to consider that perspective for discussion purposes, to rule it out even on its own grounds.

**v)** Suppose I'd like to have four kids. Suppose I have counterfactual knowledge that the firstborn will have a short painful life. And it doesn't matter when my wife and I have our first child. I don't think it would be wrong to practice contraception in that event. In the age of contraception, Christian parents do make decisions about how many kids to have, and spacing them. Unless you oppose contraception in principle, it's not wrong to take into consideration whether the woman is at high risk of medical complications (e.g. miscarriage) or fetal abnormalities.

**vi)** But even in that situation, you can go ahead and conceive the child for the child's sake. The gift of life carries with it the potential for eternal bliss.

**vii)** However, my scenario introduces another consideration. I can't have later kids unless I have the first one. If I refuse to have the first child, then that denies the future kids an opportunity to share in the gift of life, because their existence is contingent on the existence of the firstborn. It's a nested relationship in which I can't have more than one child unless I have at least one child. Yet the lead child will suffer a short painful life. Therefore, even if we frame the issue in crass cost/benefit terms, there are tradeoffs. The justification for having the first child can't be isolated from the other children, in that internal relation.

**viii)** A critic might object that this improperly uses the firstborn as a means to an end.

But to begin with, I'm not a Kantian deontologist. And even if I was, the principle is not using people as a means, but using them merely as a means. As I've already discussed,

the existence of the firstborn isn't just for the benefit of his siblings—for he himself is as much a potential beneficiary (in the long run) as they are. And he will be loved during his short painful life.

**ix)** A critic might object that I'm resorting to a consequentialist justification. But even if I was, that doesn't commit me to consequentialism. I'm simply responding to the antinatalist, abortionist, or infanticidalist on his own grounds, for argument's sake.

On consequentialism, aborting the first child would be the logical alternative. A special needs child will be demanding on the parents. And aborting the first child will clear the way for his siblings. But I already ruled that out. Eugenic abortion is evil.

**x)** Finally, a critic might object to my counterfactual calculation on the grounds that hypothetical humans who never exist have nothing to lose or gain.

That's the Epicurean argument. One issue is whether that commits the critic to the symmetry argument, where prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are equivalent. I've argued elsewhere that to be denied the opportunity to exist is the greatest deprivation of all.

This doesn't mean there's a duty to have as many kids as possible. And this doesn't mean we're wronging nonexistent persons by not conceiving them.

But there is a sense in which potential persons have a stake in the lottery of life. They have a personal interest in sharing the same goods as those who exist.

Suppose I have a teenage brother I dislike. Suppose I could step into a time machine, change a variable in the past. I exist in the new timeline, but my brother does not. He never existed in the new timeline. If my brother found out about my plans, would he have reason to feel threatened? Would he have reason to thwart my plans?

## A "Christian" argument for antinatalism

<https://randalrauser.com/2019/03/a-christian-argument-for-antinatalism/>

To begin with, this isn't an original argument. Antinatalists have been using variations on that argument as a pressure point against Christians.

Let's consider the first premise:

(1) The belief that there is a reasonable chance (e.g. more than 20%) that your future child would be born with a horrifying and untreatable disease like Stevens-Johnson syndrome would provide a good reason to avoid having children.

**i)** Really? That's hardly self-evident. That consideration must be counterbalanced by the good of having other children. To avoid having a child with Stevens-Johnson syndrome by avoiding procreation in toto deprives other future children of the opportunity to have a good life. So this is not a question that can be answered in isolation to what may be countervailing considerations. Acting for the sake of more than one party. Rauser oversimplifies the issue.

**ii)** In addition, this life is not all there is. This life is just a nanosecond in relation to everlasting life. So the real choice would be between the nonexistence of a child with Stevens-Johnson syndrome or the existence of a child who temporarily suffers from that disease, but may have the opportunity to enjoy eternal happiness. Suffering at the front end is the only way to find happiness at the back end. So, once more, Rauser oversimplifies the issue.

Since Rauser isn't stupid, he's probably aware of the fact that his formulation is devious. He deliberately suppresses relevant factors. Moving along:

(3) Therefore, if the belief that there is a reasonable chance that your future child would be born with Stevens-Johnson syndrome would provide a good reason to avoid having children, then the belief that there is a reasonable chance that your future child would ultimately experience eternal conscious torment provides a good reason to avoid having children.

In addition to building on a false premise (see above), this seems to operate from the general principle that no one should be allowed to be happy unless everyone is happy. No one should go to heaven if anyone goes to hell. Better for no one to exist than for some to be happy if anyone is miserable.

But why should we accept that principle? And it's not as if the happy group are happy at the expense of the miserable group. Rauser acts like the wicked should be able to deny everyone else a joyful existence. Why should the wicked be granted ultimate power over the fate of everyone else? What kind of perverted logic is Rauser appealing to?

## Trial by ordeal

Some people claim the Bible actually endorses abortion. They allege that Num 5 is a recipe for an abortifacient.

**i)** One hermeneutical challenge is that Num 5 contains some obscure terminology. For that reason alone, it's very precarious to make this a prooftext for abortion.

**ii)** Even apart from the semantic issues, this is not a ritual for pregnant women in particular, but for suspected wives in general. Whether or not the woman happens to be pregnant is incidental to the ritual. The point of the ritual is to establish guilt or innocence, and penalize guilt.

**iii)** In Scripture, barrenness is sometimes (but by no means always) a penalty for sin. It would be consistent with that theme if the punishment in Num 5 is infertility.

**iv)** Some critics will complain that the ritual is sexist or misogynistic. By way of reply:

**a)** In the Mosaic law, adultery was a capital offense for adulterer and adulteress alike (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).

**b)** In Lev 20:20-21, childlessness is a penalty for incest. Apparently, God will curse the incestuous couple with infertility. They will be unable to reproduce. Presumably, they will outlive any children they may already have.

**c)** In traditional cultures, adultery is an offense against the husband. She has shamed him. And it's up to him to restore his honor.

In the OT, by contrast, adultery is primarily a religious offense. A question of how men and women conduct their lives in the sight of God. Whether they lead God-honoring or God-dishonoring lives.

Hence, trial by ordeal (Num 5) takes the case out of the husband's hands. A wife, falsely accused, has been dishonored by the accuser (her husband). If innocent, the rite restores her honor. The efficacy of the rite is contingent on God's will.

**v)** Here's a good discussion of the terminology:

The priest himself holds the vessel which contains the "water of bitterness." There has been much debate regarding the meaning of the term "bitterness" here. The Septuagint translates it as "waters of testing" or "proof," and, of course, that makes good sense in the context. This reading has been supported by G. R. Driver. Snaith, using Arabic cognates, suggests that it may mean to "cause an abortion." There is no support from the Hebrew language for such a reading. Pardee argues that it may mean "curse-bringing," and he bases his translation on an Ugaritic textual parallel. Brichto takes an entirely different approach by saying it means "instruction, revelation."

Sasson has taken a unique approach to the issue. He argues on the basis of an Ugaritic cognate, that the term translated above as "bitterness" actually means "blessing." Thus, in his view, the closing of v18 is really a merismus, which reads, "waters which bless and bring the curse." In other words, the judgment is still in doubt, and the outcome will depend on her guilt or innocence with regard to the test.

In these verses the priest administers an oath-taking ceremony. If she is innocent, then may she "be free"



from a curse...If, on the other hand, she is guilty of committing adultery, may she receive the "oath of the curse." The term for "curse" here is used of an imprecation that is added on to an oath. Thus, the woman is calling down punishment on herself if she is indeed guilty of the crime.

The specific punishment is that Yahweh will cause her "thigh to sag" and her "belly to swell up."

What is meant by these two physical ailments is uncertain...The ailments probably, in a sense of ironic justice, prohibit the act of procreation. The "thigh" is commonly used to refer to sexual organs, particularly in regard to the male (see **Gen 46:26**, KJV).

Distending of the belly is more difficult to interpret.

Frymer-Kensky has offered a reasonable solution. She argues that the verb "to swell up" (of which this is the only occurrence in Hebrew) is related to the Akkadian verb "to flood." And, thus, the woman's uterus is directly flooded by the curse-bearing waters. She is not able to have intercourse, to conceive, or to bear children. J. Currid, **NUMBERS** (EP 2009), 93-96.

## The personhood criterion

One popular argument for abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia is the personhood criterion. In principle, this has the added advantage of demarcating those who enjoy human rights (e.g. women) from those who don't (e.g. babies, the developmentally disabled, the senile).

If you're a feminist, that kills two birds with one stone by conferring rights on women, as persons, while dehumanizing their babies, who (allegedly) lack personhood.

However, this argument either proves too much or too little. Physicalism implies a reductionistic view of human nature. If human beings are simply organized matter, it's hard to embed personhood in that framework. If, therefore, you combine the personhood criterion with physicalism, you end up denying women's rights or human rights generally. For instance:

It also seems to be the case that some forms of Scientific Naturalism are committed to the denial of "*persons* as substantive selves that essentially possess a first-person point of view" (See Dennett 2006, 107). Daniel Dennett, for example, holds that persons will not be part of the ultimately true scientific account of things. Dennett holds that to think of humans as persons is simply to adopt a certain "stance" toward them that he calls the "intentional stance," but it is clear that the kind of picture of humans we get when we think of them in this way does not correspond with their intrinsic metaphysical properties. It is not clear how systems towards which we adopt an "intentional

stance” could be truly autonomous and thus have the kind of value Kant believes human persons have.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god/#ArgHumDigWor>

## The grandparent analogy

I know of grandmothers and grandfathers who are entirely dependent on their families to care for them due to senility and dementia as well as physical frailty. In fact, sometimes one wonders if the lights are still on or if anybody's even home, because their dementia is so advanced. They don't seem like "persons" anymore.

If their families stopped caring for them, they would die. If their families kicked them out of their homes, these grandparents would be lost. They'd wander around in the cold night alone and afraid until they died if no one cared for them.

So does that give families the right to force their grandparents out of their home? Grandparents who have dementia and who no longer seem like "persons"? Of course not. That'd be considered murder. And even euthanasia activists require informed consent before euthanization.

In short, these families have no right to murder their dependent grandparents who don't seem like persons by turning them out of their homes. So why should families have the right to murder their dependent babies who don't seem like persons by turning them out of their wombs? Or are the two disanalogous? How so?

## Keep your hands off my U-boat!

A staple argument for abortion is the appeal to body autonomy: a woman has ownership of her body. She has a right to control her own body. Her body, her choice. You can't justifiably force someone to donate the use of their body, even for a worthy cause.

The argument has some prima facie appeal. Most of us believe adults are entitled to a measure of independence. But by the same token, most of us don't think that's absolute.

But let's play along with the principle for the sake of argument. And let's take a comparison: suppose I own a private jet or perhaps a private submarine. I'm superrich. Submarines are my hobby.

If you're a passenger on my plane or sub, do I have the right to flush you out the airlock? After all, it's *my* plane! It's *my* submarine! As a passenger, you're leeching off the life-support system on my private jet or sub. You can't survive outside that artificial environment. You can't survive at 40 thousand altitude outside the cabin. You can't survive 10 thousand feet deep outside the sub. You can't survive without the food and drink, climate control, oxygen, &c. So you're a freeloader!

If I flush you out the airlock, that's no one's business but my own. To critics I say, Keep your hands off my U-boat!

Perhaps a feminist would object that the passenger is a guest, and that's no way to treat a guest.

To begin with, that would be analogous to pregnancy due to consensual sex. But most people who support abortion don't restrict abortion to the rape exception.

I'd add that even if we grant the rape exception for argument's sake, not all passengers are guests. Sometimes a passenger is a stowaway. But does that mean it's all right to flush a stowaway out the airlock?

In addition, consensual sex without contraception involves implied consent to become pregnant. That's an implicit invitation.

So by that logic, even if the passenger is on my plane or submarine by invitation, I'm still entitled to flush them out the airlock—just as a mother is entitled to an abortion even if she consented to sex without contraception. She knew the "risk" of getting pregnant. Moreover, many feminists would say that even if she intended to become pregnant, she still has a right to change her mind at any time.

## Men have feelings too!

In certain prolife circles, the usual exceptions for abortion are “rape, incest, and the life of the mother.” This has become a stereotypical expression. I say “usual” in the sense that many proliferers make an exception in these cases. For some it’s just the life of the mother. For others it’s the trio.

Actually, I find the distinction between rape and incest somewhat odd. Isn’t incest a type of rape? I assume those who favor abortion in case of incest aren’t alluding to consensual incest between older siblings.

But let’s consider the politically and emotionally explosive example of rape in case of incest. It’s important, in ethics, to confront the hard cases.

One thing that strikes me about this discussion is how it’s always framed in sexist terms. It’s all about how a woman feels in that situation.

But what about pregnancies where a man’s feelings are involved? Why is that never discussed? Why the double standard?

Let’s take an example. Take a good husband. Maybe he’s balding and overweight. But he’s a loving, faithful husband.

Suppose the wife has an affair. She meets a man who excites her. Makes her feel young again. She has a good marriage, but it’s become routine. Rather dull.

Suppose, as a result of the affair, she conceives a child, and her husband finds out about the affair—as well as the child.

Imagine his reaction. He feels a gamut of powerful emotions. His wife has betrayed his trust. He feels violated. Family is where we let our guard down. That leaves us vulnerable. He feels humiliated by the man who stole his wife right out from under him. He's mad and sad at the same time.

He gave his life to his wife, and it's too late to start over again as a teenager in high school.

So what should his attitude be towards the child? The child is the emblem of the adulterous affair. Does he therefore have a right to kill the child?

We can sympathize with the man's outrage. Yet we expect men to exhibit a certain toughness. Life can be very unfair. Life can deliver a gut-punch. But after the initial shock, a man is supposed to suck it up and soldier on. He's entitled to his feelings, but he's not entitled to his actions.

Let's continue this issue from another angle. Many proliferators who oppose abortion in case of rape nonetheless distinguish between saving the child and raising the child. They don't think the rape victim should have to raise the child. They think it's perfectly fine for the mother to put the child up for adoption.

And I'm not taking issue with that. But let's extend that to my comparison. Suppose the cuckold husband takes his wife back. He forgives her. Tries to pick up where they left off.

Suppose, sometime after she gives birth to the child, she abandons the child. Walks out on the marriage. Returns to her adulterous lover. Leaves the illegitimate child with her husband.



What should the husband do with the kid? The kid is a constant reminder of what his wife did to him. A constant reminder of what another man did to him. And the kid isn't even his kid—unlike rape. There is no preexisting bond.

But the fact remains that someone must raise him. Someone must be a father to the kid. The husband didn't ask for this situation, but by the same token, the kid didn't ask for this situation.

Should he put the kid up for adoption? I suppose that's an option.

But haven't circumstances made it the cuckold husband's duty to raise the kid as his own? That's unfair, but duty can obligate us to do things even under unjust circumstances. The child is still entitled to love, provision, and protection.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations we shouldn't be put in. But having been put in that situation, however unfair, we still have certain obligations. Indeed, in God's economy, that's a way in which God forces us to be virtuous. To do the right thing even when we've been wronged.

## Doing right even when it hurts

I'm reposting some additional comments I left over at Joe Carter and Justin Taylor's blog on the rape exception.

steve hays

October 27, 2012 at 5:18 pm

Booth Muller

"Even if we do not agree that it's morally acceptable, I submit that it's foolish to think abortion will ever be legally unacceptable after a rape. And I think Christians should reconcile ourselves to that. There are, after all, many morally unacceptable things that we would not even want to be legally prohibited — e.g. coveting our neighbor's goods, or taking the Lord's name in vain. I believe we Christians should not even try to ban abortion in the case of rape, though we should reserve our right to try to persuade the victim/mother not to abort the child."

Several things wrong with that objection:

**i)** You're conflating two different issues: (a) We shouldn't try to ban abortion in case of rape because that's politically unrealistic; (b) We shouldn't try to ban abortion in case of rape because there ought to be a rape exception. Whether or not it's politically realistic is a separate issue from whether it's right or wrong.

**ii)** Even if the attempt to ban abortion in that situation couldn't succeed politically, that might still be a worthwhile effort if it was a teaching moment. If the attempt to ban

abortion in that situation gave pro-lifers a public platform to explain the ethical issues surrounding abortion in general, then that might be productive. If the pro-life case is never made, people never hear the supporting arguments. Never fighting for the cause becomes a self-defeating exercise. You can't persuade people if you fail to engage the argument in the first place.

**iii)** Even if it's politically unrealistic to ban it at a national level, that doesn't mean it's politically unrealistic to ban it at a local level. For some states are more socially conservative than others.

steve hays  
October 27, 2012 at 5:32 pm

No doubt that's a hardship on the mother. No doubt that's unfair to the mother.

However, the acid test of morality is doing the right thing even when it hurts.

Suppose I have a special-needs brother. Maybe he's autistic. He's a danger to himself. He requires supervision. He will never be able to live on his own.

Maybe our parents care for my autistic brother for as long as they can. But unless he accidentally kills himself, he is likely to outlive our parents. Moreover, long before they die, they may become too enfeebled by the infirmities of old age to look after him.

At that point it falls to me. I didn't ask for that. I didn't sign up for that. But it's my fraternal duty to look out for my autistic brother, even though that's a tremendous imposition on me.

And there's no reason why that shouldn't be a legal requirement as well. Why should I be allowed to desert him, and leave it up to strangers to care for him?

steve hays

October 27, 2012 at 6:12 pm

Let's take another hypothetical. Suppose I go on a charter fishing trip with three other tourists. While we're out at sea we're overtaken by a terrible squall. Our fishing boat is blown off course and capsizes. Only two passengers (including me) make it to the lifeboat. The captain and the other two passengers drown.

The rations of food and water on the lifeboat are in short supply. It would up my chances of survival if I pushed my fellow passenger overboard while he slept.

I didn't ask for this predicament. And I barely know my fellow passenger. We just met a few hours ago.

Do I have a responsibility for his welfare, even if it puts my own survival at greater risk?

Suppose he's injured. He needs me to hold the canteen and pour what little fresh water we have into his mouth. What if I just let him die? The rations will go twice as far with half the passengers. I didn't create this situation.

steve hays

October 28, 2012 at 11:15 am

Booth Muller

“Is it just to require her to provide nine months of sustenance to a person whose very existence she finds distasteful, perhaps even revolting or horrifying?”

Suppose I’m the parent of a student who was killed in the Columbine massacre. Never a day goes by that I don’t think about my dead child. Never a day goes by that I don’t miss my dead child.

However, there are times when I can put it in the back of my mind. When there are other things I think about.

Suppose, every now and then, when I go shopping, I bump into the parents of Eric Harris or Dylan Klebod. The moment I see their parents, that brings everything back. Suddenly I’m reliving that horrible day. I can’t look at their parents without remembering what happened to my child. The grief I managed to suppress instantly rises to the surface.

Does the fact that they remind me of a horrifying experience mean they ought to be executed to spare my feelings?

steve hays  
October 28, 2012 at 11:00 am

Booth Muller

“Even if we do not agree that it’s morally acceptable, I submit that it’s foolish to think abortion will ever be legally unacceptable after a rape. And I think Christians should reconcile ourselves to that. There are, after all,

many morally unacceptable things that we would not even want to be legally prohibited — e.g. coveting our neighbor's goods, or taking the Lord's name in vain. I believe we Christians should not even try to ban abortion in the case of rape, though we should reserve our right to try to persuade the victim/mother not to abort the child."

Even if proliferators will never succeed in banning abortion in case of rape, we also can't dodge the issue. We can't get away with not making a case for our position, even if that's hypothetical.

And that's because abortion proponents won't let us remain silent on this issue. Because the issue is so emotionally charged, they use abortion in case of rape as a wedge issue. They taunt proliferators with that scenario. They exploit that issue to make us back down. "Well, if you do make an exception in the case of rape, then where do you draw the line?"

So this debate is unavoidable.

steve hays  
October 28, 2012 at 11:33 am

Booth Muller

"But in the case of rape? Pregnancy is costly to the mother, both emotionally and physically."

We should be extremely sympathetic to the plight of the rape victim. We should be as understanding as possible (our understanding is necessarily limited when it didn't happen to us).

However, there's a danger of patronizing women. Acting as though women are too emotionally fragile to cope with traumatic situations. That's a popular stereotype which many women understandably resent. Are we holding women to a lower standard than men?

I knew a man whose wife developed mental illness. For a time, she was institutionalized. That was too much for him to deal with. He couldn't cope. So he left her for another woman. While she was in the asylum, he divorced her and remarried.

His first wife later recovered, no thanks to him.

Now, he was in a tough situation. He didn't have a functioning marriage. No doubt it was painful to see his wife in that condition. To compare her with what she had been, before mental illness overtook her.

Still, I suspect most of us have contempt for the man. He deserted his wife when she needed him more than ever. When she was most vulnerable.

We expect him to tough it out. That's his duty. Even though she can't be a wife to him, he can still be a husband to her.

Are we in danger of belittling women by treating them as such frail creatures that they can't cope with wrenching situations when we expect men to rise to the occasion? Isn't that attitude demeaning to women? There are some very tough women in the Bible. There are some very tough women in church history.

steve hays  
October 28, 2012 at 11:43 am

Booth Muller

“But in the case of rape? Pregnancy is costly to the mother, both emotionally and physically.”

What about parents who have an autistic child? Their child has no sense of danger. He requires constant supervision. It’s emotionally and physically exhausting to monitor his activities round the clock.

And unlike most kids, who outgrow the need for constant supervision, their autistic kid will make unceasing demands on his parents.

The parents never planned to have an autistic child. They didn’t agree to that ahead of time. It took them by surprise. Perhaps, had they known the outcome, they would have practiced contraception.

Does that mean it’s okay for the beleaguered father to drive his autistic son to a remote location and abandon him by the side of the road? To either leave him to die or shift the burden to someone else?

(Mind you, I think parents of autistic kids are entitled to a support system.)

steve hays  
October 28, 2012 at 2:06 pm

Booth Muller



“But in the case of rape? Pregnancy is costly to the mother, both emotionally and physically.”

True. What about caring for an elderly parent who’s becoming senile? That’s emotionally and physically exhausting, too. And the grown child didn’t choose to be put in that situation.

So would it be okay to euthanize your mother or father under those circumstances? Or do you have a filial duty to them no matter what?

Lou G.

October 27, 2012 at 4:43 PM

With regard to the personal attacks and insults - supposedly in the name of defending Christ! - I think Frank Viola's article is appropriate. (Joe, please do not delete this comment - it needs to be read).  
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/frankviola/jerk/>

steve hays

October 27, 2012 at 5:41 PM

Once again, it's revealing to see some people who are more concerned about imagined slights and hurt feelings (even when their resentment is unjustified) than they are about doing irreparable harm to defenseless little babies. What does that tell you about their moral compass? What does that tell you about their value-system—or lack thereof? That certainly fails to reflect anything resembling a Biblical scale of values. It's wholly self-absorbed rather than showing any real concern for those most in need.

## The Siamese violinist

Here's a famous thought-experiment defending abortion:

But now let me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you--we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it? What if it were not nine months, but nine years? Or longer still? What if the director of the hospital says. "Tough luck. I agree. but now you've got to stay in bed, with the violinist plugged into you, for the rest of your life. Because remember this. All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons. Granted you have a right to decide what happens in and to your body, but a person's right to life outweighs your right to decide what happens in and to your body. So you cannot ever

be unplugged from him." I imagine you would regard this as outrageous, which suggests that something really is wrong with that plausible-sounding argument I mentioned a moment ago.

<http://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/Phil160,Fall02/thomson.htm>

Take Siamese twins (nowadays called conjoined twins). You didn't consent to this. You simply found yourself shackled to your Siamese twin. And it's not for nine months. It's for life.

This is far more invasive than pregnancy. Far more confining than pregnancy. You have absolutely no privacy. Absolutely no autonomy. No control over your own body. You can't go anywhere without taking your Siamese twin along. Can't talk to anyone without having your twin overhear you. Can't have a single moment alone.

I believe there are cases where it's possible to surgically separate conjoined twins, but the procedure will result in one twin surviving while the other twin is killed in the process.

Would it be ethical for a Siamese sibling to have his twin surgically killed to free himself from his conjoint twin? Suppose the twin doesn't consent to the operation. The twin doesn't wish to die.

Still, isn't his fratricidal sibling entitled to do whatever he wants with his own body? Isn't bodily autonomy his inalienable right?

Or suppose his twin consents to die for the sake of his Siamese sibling. Is consensual fratricide ethical? Or is it wrong for one brother to kill another brother, even if his

sibling agrees to be die at his brother's hand (via the surgeon's scalpel)?

Given how ruthless abortion proponents are, I'm not optimistic about how they'd answer these questions.

## How to raise a sociopath

Lately, both Bnonn and I have had some revealing encounters on the issue of abortion. There are commenters who have no sense of social responsibilities. If we bring up the example of a newborn baby left on our doorstep, they don't feel any obligation to the baby in that situation.

They act as if there are absolutely no circumstances under which they should ever be imposed on. They exhibit sociopathic indifference to the needs of others.

There is, of course, a profound contradiction in their position. They think everyone should treat them with utmost deference even though they shouldn't have to defer to anyone else.

How should we evaluate these responses? Should we take them at face value? Assuming they're sincere, what accounts for this degree of moral pathology?

**i)** In some cases, I think people say things they don't really believe. They make outrageous, irresponsible statements as long as the issue is safely abstract. If, however, they actually found themselves in that situation, some of them would come back down to earth in a hurry.

**ii)** However, it's probably the case that many people really are that ruthless. How did we get to this point?

When things go wrong, liberals blame "the system." They don't think humans are innately prone to evil. It must be due to purely external factors. "The system" failed them.

By contrast, Christians think this is ultimately a problem of the heart.

**iii)** However, even though humans have a propensity for evil, that doesn't mean social conditioning is irrelevant. The Bible also lays great emphasis on moral formation in childhood. Conversely, it describes dysfunctional societies. Given the human predisposition to evil, a morally deficient upbringing or other social forces can reinforce that prior disposition. So there's nothing wrong with considering aggravating factors. Here are some possibilities.

**iv)** Traditionally, people grew up in large families. Extended families. Many siblings and relatives under one roof. Likewise, many people were poor.

As a result, you learned to share. You learned to sacrifice. You cared for your own. There was no alternative.

Nowadays, many people grow up in tight little nuclear families. Maybe one or two kids. Likewise, they're often fairly affluent. The parents have their own bedroom. Each kid has his own bedroom. The kids get new clothes every year. No hand-me-downs. There's no need to share. No need to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of others.

**v)** Many teen dramas depict a eugenic utopia where everyone is young, strong, healthy, wealthy, and good-looking. A world of physical, material perfection. I wonder if that doesn't subliminally foster intolerance towards the needy.

**vi)** I wonder if cellphones and emergency services haven't bred a 911 mentality, where our notion of getting involved is limited to making a phone call.

**vii)** Rationalizing abortion has spawned many arguments that dissolve any sense of social responsibilities or parental duties. And this caters to people's natural selfishness.

**viii)** In some cases, I think libertarian politics contributes to this outlook. Libertarians are justly fed up with government intrusion. As a result, they instinctively and viscerally react to any suggesting that gov't should "force" us to do something.

That attitude is understandable and warranted to some extent. But it easily becomes an overreaction.

## A simple prolife argument

Are people valuable because we value them? Or do we value people because they are valuable? Do people have intrinsic value or extrinsic value? Is one person's value relative to the value another person (or society) confers of him?

That's the basic difference between the prolife and proabortion positions. And you will have two radically different societies depending on which principle you consistently carry out.

Now some atheists and/or hardline abortionists are prepared to bite the bullet. They'll admit that human beings have no inherent value. How valuable you are depends on how much or little others value you.

Of course, there's a catch. While this may be how they treat others, that's not how they want others to treat them.

Now, someone might object that, as a matter of fact, we do value some people more than others. We value friends and relatives more than strangers and enemies. So the distinction is artificial.

However, that's not a real exception, for the two positions are asymmetrical. The question is whether there's a baseline below which human value doesn't go.

People can have intrinsic value, while, at the same time, we value some more than others. The floor is not the ceiling. So those are complementary positions.



By the same token, people can commit heinous acts that exclude them from the human community. But that's different than saying there's no least lower threshold on human value. Indeed, it's because of what they did to others that they forfeit their membership in society.

For instance, a friend has greater claims on me than a stranger. So in some respects I'll treat a friend better than a stranger. But that doesn't mean the stranger is worthless. To treat someone less well is not to treat him badly. There are minimal standards for everyone.

This also means there's an upper limit to how well we should treat people. For instance, just because someone is my friend doesn't mean I should excuse everything he does. If he cheats a stranger, justice takes precedence over friendship. In that situation, I have a greater duty to the stranger.

## Olson on abortion

Arminian theologian Roger Olson, that oracle of moral wisdom, has done a post on abortion:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/07/questions-about-both-sides-of-the-abortion-debate/>

Over the years I've had many conversations with "pro-life" activists. When they equate all abortions with murder and advocate banning all abortions I routinely ask them "What about an ectopic pregnancy?" I have never encountered a "pro-life" activist who even knew what I was talking about or acknowledged it as a legitimate question.

Since I assume most "activists" are laymen (or women), who are busy working a full-time job and/or raising kids, why would we expect them to have a sophisticated position on abortion? Should we not commend their instinctive love of babies and instinctive revulsion at abortion? Which is more praiseworthy: an activist in the trenches or a critic in an air-conditioned office taking potshots at the activist?

So here are some questions I would like to pose to what I consider extremists on both sides of the abortion debate:

2) If you believe a fetus is a human person with the "right to life" in the sense you mean it, why don't you hold a funeral after a miscarriage? Sure, some do, but that's a recent response to this question on the part of some "pro-life" activists. But I have never heard of anyone holding a funeral for a miscarried embryo.

**i)** As usual, this is Olson shooting from the hip. He cites no statistical data.

**ii)** Assuming that funerals for miscarried babies are a "recent response," that might be due in part to the fact that in the age of ultrasound, parents have a chance to preview the baby. So they can bond with the unborn child.

In the past, only the mother could feel the baby in the womb—assuming gestation was that far along. Most of the emotional bonding took place between mother and child. It was a very private experience.

**iii)** In the past, I don't know if miscarriage was treated separately from infant mortality in general. There may have been no special ceremony for miscarried babies, because that was already covered by funeral ceremonies for those who died in infancy. That's a rather specialized church historical question. It may also depend on how far along the pregnancy was.

**iv)** Funerals are normally attended by friends and relatives of the decedent. Ideally, the pastor knew the decedent, and can weave some personal anecdotes into the eulogy or sermon. Sometimes friends and relatives are invited to share personal anecdotes. Obviously, the situation is very different for a miscarried baby.

**v)** I think it would be good for the church to have ceremonies in case of miscarriage.

**vi)** Since Olson is attacking "extremists" on both sides of the issue, he evidently thinks that viewing "a fetus as a human person with the 'right to life' in the sense that prolife activists mean it" is an extremist position. So what is his own position on the status of the "fetus"?

5) If you believe that a human embryo/fetus is a full human life for religious reasons (which most “pro-life” activists do), worthy of the full protection of law from conception on (which most “pro-life” activists do), how do you deal with the fact that the Bible says little to nothing about abortion? Under Hebrew law as revealed in the Pentateuch, for example, a man who attacks a pregnant woman and causes her to abort is not guilty of murder. There were methods of abortion in “biblical times,” so how do you deal with the fact that nowhere in the Bible is abortion specifically condemned as murder?

**i)** Who has Roger Olson actually studied on the subject? Take two counterexamples:

[http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/19/19-1/19-1-pp003-014\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/19/19-1/19-1-pp003-014_JETS.pdf)

<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2012/01/10/Lex-Talionis-and-the-Human-Fetus.aspx#Article>

**ii)** The Bible has no prohibition against suicide. Does that mean men, women, and teenagers who commit suicide are subhuman?

Likewise, the Bible has no specific prohibition against child murder. Does that mean a 5-year-old is subhuman?

**iii)** How common was induced abortion in the ANE? One of the technical challenges of induced abortion is how to harm the baby without harming the mother. Modern medical technology has made abortion safer for the mother, yet even then it isn't risk-free. But in the absence of medical technology, I imagine that inducing an abortion would be

very dangerous to the mother. Isn't that why the usual "method" of dealing with unwanted children was to wait until they were born, then expose them?

It seems to me that many, perhaps most, of the most vocal "pro-life" activists fail to realize, fail to take into account, that many pregnant women seek abortions to save their own lives or health. (I have known women who underwent abortions extremely reluctantly only when advised by a doctor that if they attempted to carry the pregnancy to full term their health could forever be destroyed. There are some complications of pregnancy that make the woman so ill that getting through the nine months would very possibly be so deleterious to her physical well being as to shorten her own life or cause her to be disabled in some way.)

**i)** Olson offers no statistical data regarding the percentage of therapeutic abortions. Also, keep in mind that abortion proponents have a rubbery definition of the mother's "health"—which artificially inflates the figures.

**ii)** If a mother undergoes an abortion to avoid dangerous medical complications, I'd expect that to be performed at a hospital rather than an abortion clinic. Once again, does Olson have any statistical data on that?

Everyone wants especially a Christian ethicist to have an absolute answer to the complex issue of abortion—to be either absolutely "pro-life" (anti-all-abortions) or absolutely "pro-choice" (for every woman's right always and under any circumstances to obtain an abortion for any reason). In my opinion, good ethicists, including Christian ethicists, are loath to offer simplistic solutions to complex issues. There is no simplistic solution to this complex issue. There is, however, room

for compromise between the sides; that middle ground is, unfortunately, too little explored and discussed. What I think that middle ground might include is for another post—when I've worked it out in my own mind more consistently and thoroughly.

It's not as if Olson has given us a carefully reasoned analysis of the issue. His post is slipshod.

By "compromise" or "middle ground," he apparently means a position that avoids the "extremes" he just cited.

## Roger Olson on miscarriage

Some of Roger Olson's comments on his abortion post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/07/questions-about-both-sides-of-the-abortion-debate/>

Roger Olson

—

My appeal was to intuition. I have known many, many women who suffered miscarriages. None thought the loss was commensurable with the death of an already born child.

Roger Olson

—

I grew up in churches and around churches and never heard of a memorial Mass or service of any kind for a miscarried embryo until after the pro-life movement really got going.

Roger Olson

—

I never heard anyone say anything like that until the pro-life movement really got going. I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s (pre-Roe vs. Wade) and knew many, many women (in the church my father pastored) who had miscarriages. I never heard that any of them expressed the sentiment that the lost pregnancy (usually just an embryo) was as tragic as losing an already born child. My wife suffered a miscarriage and, while we were very sad about it, it never even entered either of our minds to consider it in the same category

of loss as if our already born daughter had died.  
Roger Olson

—

Second, holding funerals for miscarried embryos, if it ever happens, is a result of some in the pro-life movement thinking through the logical implications of an absolutist position on abortion. I still have never heard of one for a miscarried embryo.

**i)** Notice what Olson is saying. Only a prolife "absolutist" would hold a funeral service for a miscarried baby. And since he opposes prolife "absolutism" (or "extremism"), he evidently thinks it would be *wrong* to hold a funeral service for miscarried babies.

Now, there's a difference between saying church *ought* to hold such a service, and saying a church ought *not* hold such a service. I think that's up to the parents.

**ii)** In addition, Olson is suggesting that because parents don't grieve as deeply for a prenatal child as they do for a postnatal child, the unborn baby had less intrinsic value. But that's obviously fallacious.

Assuming parents grieve less deeply for a miscarried baby, that's because they had less time to form an emotional attachment with the baby. They barely got to know the baby—especially the father.

Take a comparison. Suppose a mother puts her newborn baby up for adoption. Suppose her child dies in a traffic accident at the age of 17. Suppose the birthmother finds out.



Although she might mourn the death of her child, she won't grieve as deeply as she would had she raised the child. She'd be closer to a child she actually raised. All those memories.

Does that mean the 17-year-old was less intrinsically valuable?

It's easy to come up with other examples. Suppose a father loses a custody battle, and his visitation rights are quite restrictive. Or maybe he has to live out of state. That's where his job is.

He may not be as close to his child because he never got the chance to form a close emotional bond. He wasn't allowed to spend much time with his kid.

Does that mean his kid is less intrinsically valuable?

To take another example: suppose, in one case, I grow up with my stepbrother, but in another case I don't grow up with my stepbrother. If he dies, how deeply I feel the loss will depend on whether or not we grew up together. Does that make his death less intrinsically significant?

**iii)** Is Olson suggesting that the value of human life is relative to how much we are valued by others?

## Abortion and organ donors

Peter Singer is arguably the most influential secular bioethicist of his generation. He's a proponent of abortion and infanticide, as well as euthanizing the mentally and physically disabled. And he's the father of the modern animal-rights movement.

One of his arguments is to draw invidious comparisons between the cognitive development of a one-year-old chimp and a one-year-old child. Since humans take longer to mature than chimpanzees, there's a sense in which a one-year-old chimp is more mature, more developed, than its human counterpart. Of course, that's not a fair comparison. You should compare a one-year-old chimp with what would be the equivalent for a child.

But in any event, many people who support abortion appreciate Singer's arguments. However, there's a catch.

He's a utilitarian. The common good trumps individual rights. In principle, a utilitarian will support involuntary organ harvesting. At present, the human body has the following reusable organs: kidneys, heart, liver, pancreas, intestines, lungs, skin, bones, and corneas.

There are patients in desperate need of organ transplants. There are more patients than donated organs to go around.

But in principle, one healthy donor could supply several desperate patients. Of course, if you remove one or more vital organs from a healthy donor, he won't survive.

In utilitarianism, it would be justifiable, perhaps even obligatory, to kill a healthy patient to save several ailing

patients. The common good trumps consent.

And this is more than just hypothetical. To the extent that society abandons Christian ethics, anything goes. It becomes a question of what you can persuade judges or lawmakers to accept. The rules are whatever rules we make.

I doubt those who sign onto Singer because they like what he says about abortion would like to be on the receiving end of his value system when they are strapped to a table to donate vital organs (or corneas) against their will. They may not think that's a realistic danger, but if they have their way, that's the future.

## Physicalism and abortion

A stock argument for abortion is that the "fetus" is cognitively undeveloped compared to a child or adult. Indeed, this argument is increasingly extended to infants, to justify "afterbirth abortion."

This argument generally presupposes physicalism. Personhood is tied to brain development.

Therefore, the mother has rights which the fetus does not. Indeed, the fetus has no rights.

But there's a catch. Physicalism is inconsistent with consciousness. Many secular philosopher admit this. It's the hard problem of consciousness.

Some secular philosophers simply accept the dilemma. They think physicalism is true and consciousness is real. They despair of resolving the problem.

However, some philosophers relieve the dilemma by reaffirming physicalism, but rejecting consciousness:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/materialism-eliminative/>

For them, there is no dilemma. Many secular philosophers reject eliminative materialism because they think consciousness is undeniable and eliminative materialism is self-contradictory.

Given their presuppositions, both sides are half-right. It's true that consciousness is undeniable. To deny consciousness is absurd and incoherent.

However, that's because eliminative materialism is a reductio ad absurdum of physicalism. Given physicalism, that's a logical consequence of physicalism. Valid, but absurd. Taking a false premise to a logical extreme. Physicalism commits them to that conclusion, even if its self-refuting.

The only proper way to relieve the dilemma is to reject the other horn of the dilemma: physicalism.

But this also poses a dilemma for defending abortion on the grounds of physicalism. Because it proves too much.

It's true that according to physicalism, the fetus is not a person. Problem is, according to physicalism, the mother is not a person either. Just as the fetus lacks consciousness, so does the mother. That's consistent physicalism.

If rights are indexed to personhood or consciousness, then not only does the fetus have no rights, the mother has no rights.

If no one has rights, then raw power is the broker. And in that scenario, men dominate. Women have power to the degree that men defer to women.

## Abortion and beheading

Emily Letts is now infamous for filming her abortion. It was due to an "unplanned pregnancy." It doesn't occur to her that this makes her look too intellectually immature to realize the link between sex and sexual reproduction. You'd think a counselor at an abortion clinic might have figured that out by now.

In one sense, what she did was logical. If you're going to do wrong, you might as well be proud of it.

Filming her abortion reminds me of jihadis who film beheadings. The jihadis are proud of what they do. Beheading the infidel is something to celebrate. Something to post on the Internet, like catching a prize salmon.

Emily Letts and Muslim terrorists both share the same moral blindness. Evil is something to celebrate. Evil is something to take pride in.

That's because both groups live and move in social circles which affirm their moral depravity.

## **Against abortion? Don't have one**

This is an actual bumper sticker. You can buy one at Amazon.com

It has a certain libertarian appeal. And there are libertarians who support the legality of abortion on libertarian grounds.

Mind you, one could just as well oppose abortion on libertarian grounds. After all, this justification is only appealing to libertarian adults, not libertarian babies.

But many abortion advocates are the polar opposite of libertarians. Many abortion advocates are social engineers. They believe in banning activities they disapprove of. Do they apply their logic to other issues? Try these slogans:

**Against assault rifles? Don't buy one**

**Against whale hunting? Don't kill one**

**Against animal testing? Don't test one**

**Against meat? Don't eat it**

We could easily extend the list:

**Against segregation? Don't segregate**

**Against genocide? Don't do it**

**Against date rape? Don't do it**

**Against child prostitution? Don't do it**

**Against trophy hunting? Don't hunt**

And so on and so forth.



## The violinist

Judith Jarvis Thomson went in for her routine quarterly checkup. Next thing she knew, she woke up in the operating room, as the anesthesiologist was prepping her surgery.

**Thomson:** What am I doing here? (looking confused and afraid)

**Surgeon:** We're prepping you for your organ transplant.

**Thomson:** No one told me I needed an organ transplant.

**Surgeon:** Oh, it's not for *you*. It's for *him* (gesturing to a patient on the operating table beside her)

**Thomson:** Who's that?

**Surgeon:** Don't you recognize him? That's Jascha Heifetz. The world-renown virtuoso violinist. He needs a new heart. And you're the lucky donor!

**Thomson:** That's outrageous. I didn't consent to this!

**Surgeon:** It's for the common good.

**Thomson:** I'm a famous bioethicist. The hospital ethics committee would never agree to this.

**Surgeon:** Actually, the ethics committee was convinced that the life of a great violinist outweighed the life of a philosophy prof. With all due respect, philosophy profs. are a dime a dozen, but Heifetz is unique and irreplaceable. Speaking for myself, I'm much rather hear him play the Brahms violin concerto than read one of your essays.

**Thomson:** That's subjective.

**Surgeon:** Well, there's a fringe benefit: your liver, lungs, kidneys, and pancreas will be parceled out to other needy patients. That's five for the price of one. Quite a deal, if you ask me.



## My Vat, Myself

Wendy Sanford, feminist coauthor of *Our Body, Ourselves*, was driving on the freeway when a car a few lanes ahead of her abruptly changed lanes, causing a pile up. Next thing she knew, she woke up on a beach. She had no idea how she got there. She walked up and down the beach, which circled a small island. It was a nice sandy beach with palm trees. Odd thing, the sun never went down. It's like she was living inside a loop tape. It was pleasant, but boring. She lost track of time. This continued for however long until someone broke in:

**Technician:** Hello, Wendy.

**Wendy:** Who are you?

**Technician:** I'm a medical technician.

**Wendy:** What are you doing on my beach?

**Technician:** Strictly speaking, you're in a hospital.

**Wendy:** What do you mean?

**Technician:** You remember the traffic accident?

**Wendy:** It's coming back to me.

**Technician:** You were wheeled into the E.R. with multiple organ failure. The only way they could save you was to transfer your brain into a vat.

**Wendy:** A vat?

**Technician:** Yes. The beach is just a simulation. Piped into your brain via the neurointerface.

**Wendy:** I don't believe you!

Technician: You can see for yourself. This is you...or what's *left* of you (pointing the camera at the vat).

**Wendy:** How long have I been here?

**Technician:** 23 years.

**Wendy:** *That* long? What's the life expectancy of a brain-in-a-vat.

**Technician:** Barring accidents, longer than the average lifespan.

**Wendy:** What kind of accidents?

**Technician:** Sometimes vats spring a leak. We call that Vatileaks (laughing).

**Wendy:** I don't get it.

**Technician:** Sorry—it's a pun on the Vatican leaks scandal. I guess you don't have a neuro-news feed.

**Wendy:** What else.

**Technician:** There was the time one of our interns got a little confused about the difference between Fahrenheit and Celsius, inadvertently boiling a patient's brain alive. Then there was the time a nurse accidentally dropped a crash cart paddle into a vat, electrocuting another patient's brain. But in general, it's pretty safe—barring the occasional prank.

**Wendy:** What kind of pranks?

**Technician:** Well, there was the time an intern put a lab rat in one of the vats. It gnawed on the parietal lobe until an orderly fished it out. Some interns have a mischievous sense of humor, you know.

**Wendy:** Now that you've shattered the illusion, the least you can do is change the scenario. Can't you simulate Venice or Paris?

**Technician:** We've done that for some patients in your situation.

**Wendy:** Why did you break in to speak with me, anyway?

**Technician:** I'm afraid I have a bit of bad news for you.

**Wendy:** What's that.

**Technician:** Due to a budget shortfall, the hospital will be closing this wing.

**Wendy:** What does that mean?

**Technician:** It means we're pulling the plug on the vats.

**Wendy:** You mean you're terminating us?

**Technician:** That's a rather tactless way of putting it.

**Wendy:** You can't do that to me!

**Technician:** Why not?

**Wendy:** It's my body! I take full ownership of my body. You have no right to violate my bodily integrity.

**Technician:** My dear, I think you've forgotten something: you don't have a body anymore. That's long gone. I know it's a hard feeling to shake. But you're just a disembodied brain swimming in a puddle of nutritious, oxygenated blood.

**Wendy:** Well, it's *my* vat!

**Technician:** Actually, the vat is hospital property.

**Wendy:** You have a duty to keep me alive!

**Technician:** That would be imposing on *my* autonomy.

**Wendy:** What will happen to me?

**Technician:** It's a painless procedure. After we disconnect the vat, we put the brains in ziplock bags and toss them in the dumpster. You'll never know what hit you.

## Ectopic pregnancies

I take a pretty hard line on abortion. I reject the "rape/incest/life of the mother exceptions." However, I am inclined to make allowance for tubal ectopic pregnancies. Even among staunch proliferers, that's pretty standard exception. The basic rationale is that if you can't save both mother and child, and both are at high risk of death absent intervention, it's permissible to save one at the expense of the other, rather than letting both die.

It's usually justified by the double effect principle. If you don't know what that is, here's a detailed exposition and analysis:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-effect/>

By contrast, Lydia McGrew is critical of this exception:

[http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double\\_trouble\\_or\\_double\\_effect.html#comment-159796](http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double_trouble_or_double_effect.html#comment-159796)

[http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double\\_trouble\\_or\\_double\\_effect.html#comment-159871](http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double_trouble_or_double_effect.html#comment-159871)

I mention this because it seems to figure in her criticism of Biblical commands to execute the Canaanites. It's my impression that Lydia begins with an a priori position on abortion, then minimizes or trivializes the dangers of ectopic pregnancies. And it isn't clear to me that she has an accurate grasp of the medical issues. For a possible corrective:

<http://rockingwithhawking.blogspot.com/2014/08/ectopic-pregnancy.html>



## Down babies

Richard Dawkins has issued an unapologetic apology. It's one of those defensive "apologies" that's just a pretext to double down on the original claim:

<https://richarddawkins.net/2014/08/abortion-down-syndrome-an-apology-for-letting-slip-the-dogs-of-twitterwar/>

I'll venture a few comments:

I personally would go further and say that, if your morality is based, as mine is, on a desire to increase the sum of happiness and reduce suffering, the decision to deliberately give birth to a Down baby, when you have the choice to abort it early in the pregnancy, might actually be immoral from the point of view of the child's own welfare.

Even if we accept his utilitarian yardstick, there's no evidence that giving birth to a Down baby increases suffering or reduces the sum of happiness. In fact, the evidence is very much to the contrary.

In addition, it's sophistical to say you're acting in the child's own welfare by killing it. The child's own welfare presupposes the child's existence. It takes it from there.



My position, which I would guess is shared by most people reading this, is that a woman has a right to early abortion, and I personally would not condemn her for choosing it.

Dawkins is half right. Given atheism, Down babies have no right to live.

But like many atheists, Dawkins fails to carry his position to its logical conclusion. Given atheism, *women* have no rights. *Humans* have no rights. It comes down to raw power.

If you disagree, fair enough; many do, often on religious grounds. But then your quarrel is not just with me but with prevailing medical opinion and with the decision actually taken by most people who are faced with the choice.

Unless a Down baby pregnancy is significantly riskier than a normal pregnancy, in what sense is there a *medical* opinion on the preferability of aborting Down babies? Dawkins is hiding behind medical authority to lend respectability to a *moral* evaluation rather than a *medical* evaluation.

## Trial by ordeal

Some people claim the Bible actually endorses abortion. They allege that Num 5 is a recipe for an abortifacient.

**i)** One hermeneutical challenge is that Num 5 contains some obscure terminology. For that reason alone, it's very precarious to make this a prooftext for abortion.

**ii)** Even apart from the semantic issues, this is not a ritual for pregnant women in particular, but for suspected wives in general. Whether or not the woman happens to be pregnant is incidental to the ritual. The point of the ritual is to establish guilt or innocence, and penalize guilt.

**iii)** In Scripture, barrenness is sometimes (but by no means always) a penalty for sin. It would be consistent with that theme if the punishment in Num 5 is infertility.

**iv)** Some critics will complain that the ritual is sexist or misogynistic. By way of reply:

**a)** In the Mosaic law, adultery was a capital offense for adulterer and adulteress alike (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).

**b)** In Lev 20:20-21, childlessness is a penalty for incest. Apparently, God will curse the incestuous couple with infertility. They will be unable to reproduce. Presumably, they will outlive any children they may already have.

**c)** In traditional cultures, adultery is an offense against the husband. She has shamed him. And it's up to him to restore his honor.

In the OT, by contrast, adultery is primarily a religious offense. A question of how men and women conduct their lives in the sight of God. Whether they lead God-honoring or God-dishonoring lives.

Hence, trial by ordeal (Num 5) takes the case out of the husband's hands. A wife, falsely accused, has been dishonored by the accuser (her husband). If innocent, the rite restores her honor. The efficacy of the rite is contingent on God's will.

**v)** Here's a good discussion of the terminology:

The priest himself holds the vessel which contains the "water of bitterness." There has been much debate regarding the meaning of the term "bitterness" here. The Septuagint translates it as "waters of testing" or "proof," and, of course, that makes good sense in the context. This reading has been supported by G. R. Driver. Snaitch, using Arabic cognates, suggests that it may mean to "cause an abortion." There is no support from the Hebrew language for such a reading. Pardee argues that it may mean "curse-bringing," and he bases his translation on an Ugaritic textual parallel. Brichto takes an entirely different approach by saying it means "instruction, revelation."

Sasson has taken a unique approach to the issue. He argues on the basis of an Ugaritic cognate, that the term translated above as "bitterness" actually means "blessing." Thus, in his view, the closing of v18 is really a merismus, which reads, "waters which bless and bring the curse." In other words, the judgment is still in doubt, and the outcome will depend on her guilt or innocence with regard to the test.

In these verses the priest administers an oath-taking ceremony. If she is innocent, then may she "be free"

from a curse...If, on the other hand, she is guilty of committing adultery, may she receive the "oath of the curse." The term for "curse" here is used of an imprecation that is added on to an oath. Thus, the woman is calling down punishment on herself if she is indeed guilty of the crime.

The specific punishment is that Yahweh will cause her "thigh to sag" and her "belly to swell up."

What is meant by these two physical ailments is uncertain...The ailments probably, in a sense of ironic justice, prohibit the act of procreation. The "thigh" is commonly used to refer to sexual organs, particularly in regard to the male (see **Gen 46:26, KJV**).

Distending of the belly is more difficult to interpret.

Frymer-Kensky has offered a reasonable solution. She argues that the verb "to swell up" (of which this is the only occurrence in Hebrew) is related to the Akkadian verb "to flood." And, thus, the woman's uterus is directly flooded by the curse-bearing waters. She is not able to have intercourse, to conceive, or to bear children. J. Currid, **NUMBERS** (EP 2009), 93-96.

## Abortion and the lex talionis

Exod 21:22-25 is the only Biblical passage that deals fairly directly with the ethics of abortion. Of course, many passages indirectly address that issue. Here's what some commentators have to say:

If two men in a scuffle inadvertently strike a pregnant woman, causing by the trauma of the blow the premature birth of her children, if there is no harm, presumably either to the mother or the newborn child or children, the man who actually inflicted the blow is to pay compensation...If, however, there is a permanent injury, either to the woman or, presumably, to the child or the children she was carrying, equal injury is to be inflicted upon the one who caused it. J. Durham, **WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY 3: EXODUS** (Word 1987), 325.

[v22] The scene described here is a brawl that results in the unintentional hitting of a pregnant bystander. The blow results in a premature birth. If, however, there is no "harm," then a fine is set upon the offender. It should be noted that there is no dative added to the term "harm," such as "to the woman" or "to the child." The reason is because both mother and child are covered by this law.

[vv23-25] If, however, harm comes to the mother or child then the concept of lex talionis comes into effect. It literally means "law of retaliation," and it prescribes that the punishment for the crime must fit the crime,

measure for measure. J. Currid, **EXODUS: CHAPTERS 19-40** (EP 2001), 79.

Even if that [“serious damage”] is the best English equivalent, do we understand the verses to refer to life-threatening or life-ending damage (1) to the fetus or (2) to the pregnant woman? If it is view 2, then v22 refers to some nonserious, nonfatal injury to the pregnant woman, while v23 refers to some serious, fatal blow to her that either severely harms her or ends her life. If it is view 1, then v22 refers to premature parturition, while v23 refers to miscarriage. Is the text deliberately vague so as to be multi-interpretational at this point? Can it be “both...and” rather than “either...or”? V. Hamilton, **EXODUS** (Baker 2011), 387.

Probably there is deliberate ambiguity in the text about the nature of the delivery and of any death that might follow in order to allow juries latitude in dealing with the varieties of cases that might arise. D. Garrett, **A COMMENTARY ON EXODUS** (Kregel 2014), 501.

How does this apply to the debate over abortion?

i) I’ve quoted from three major commentaries on Exodus. All three commentators offer the same basic interpretation.

What’s more, despite their agreement, the commenters range along the theological spectrum. Currid and Garrett are conservative, Hamilton is moderately conservative, while Durham is liberal.

So I think it's reasonable to conclude that this is a very reasonable interpretation of the text. It's not a theologically partisan interpretation. And it's backed up by solid scholarship.

**ii)** Indeed, it would make sense to include both mother and child under the same law. The value of mothers and children is correlative. If you didn't value children, you wouldn't value motherhood, or vice versa.

Incidentally, Stuart, in his commentary on Exodus (pp491-92), thinks the nonfatal injury to the mother involves an injury which renders her infertile. And that makes contextual sense.

**iii)** On this interpretation, the text doesn't have to single out the baby (to the exclusion of the mother) as the injured party. As long as the baby is covered by the law, this is still a prolife text.

**iv)** This is a case of manslaughter. Ordinarily, the Mosaic law doesn't treat manslaughter as capital murder (unless there was negligence). The fact that it does so in this case reveals the high value which the law places on the life of the mother and child alike.

Of course, the brawl itself constitutes an aggravating factor, so the injury isn't purely accidental or innocent.

Another commentator makes an additional observation:

The Hittite laws, alone, take into account the age of the fetus in estimating the fine imposed on the assailant. N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (JPS 1991), 125.

So there was precedent in ANE law to prorate the value of the unborn baby according to its prenatal stage of development. The fact that the Mosaic law doesn't draw that distinction is significant. Killing a 1st trimester baby merits the same punishment (execution) as killing a 3rd trimester baby.



## Mother and child

Exod 21:22-23 is a popular prooftext for Christian proliferers. It's the only Biblical passage that speaks directly to the issue of abortion—although many Biblical passages have a general bearing on that issue. However, appeal to that passage is complicated by the ambiguous syntax. Does the injury and penalty have reference to the mother or the baby?

That question probably poses a false dichotomy. Case law is flexible. It's meant to give OT judges guidance on how to adjudicate certain kinds of situations. Similar situations. If this law doesn't single out the mother or child, the syntactical ambiguity is likely intentional. The law is meant to cover both parties—depending on what happens in real life. Case laws present hypothetical examples that have rough, real-world analogues. So proliferers are right to quote this passage. Even if it doesn't specify the baby, it does include the baby.

After exegeting the passage, Garrett helpfully makes that additional point:

This law envisages a scene in an Israelite village in which two men are fighting and the wife of one runs out to assist her husband. The wife happens to be pregnant, and in the ensuing melee the woman is struck and goes into labor. If there is no fatal injury, the adversary of the husband might only have to pay a fine as determined by a jury, after it had considered the aggrieved husband's demands in light of what they know of the situation. If there is a fatal injury, the punishment could be as severe as execution ("life for life"; 21:23b). Unfortunately, an important detail about

the law is unclear: it is impossible to tell whether the "fatal injury" is to the mother or the child.

Probably there is deliberate ambiguity in the text to allow juries latitude in dealing with the varieties of cases that might arise.

Why does the Bible mention the fight, a detail that seems altogether unnecessary and even somewhat contrived, and why does it not speak more directly of striking a pregnant woman (that is, of striking her deliberately), as these other [ANE] codes do?

I believe that the reason is that a woman who behaved in this way, diving into a brawl while pregnant, might be considered to have brought her troubles on herself. Such behavior would be foolish in the extreme; it practically invites serious medical complications. But this is the whole intent of the law: it is meant to drive home the lesson that a man must be very careful about violence in the presence of a pregnant woman, even when the woman herself is behaving irresponsibly. He would do better to flee the scene than to carry on with the fight knowing that he might cause serious injury to the woman and child. It is also significant that the law assumes that the other man, not the woman's husband, is responsible for the injury.

...special protection is afforded to a pregnant woman and her unborn child in this legislation; no other kind of bystander at a village quarrel (an old person, a woman who is not pregnant, or a young child) is given such considerations. If nothing else, therefore, the law indicates that a strong instinct for protecting the unborn is appropriate. D. Garrett, **A COMMENTARY ON EXODUS** (Kregel 2014), 500-503.

## Hating babies

DAN SAVAGE: Population control. There's too many goddamn people on the planet...Sometimes in my darker moments I am anti-choice. I think abortion should be mandatory for about 30 years.

<http://jkdinale.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/QA-TRanscript-episode-40-Nov-4-2013.pdf>

There's a certain logic in the fact that homosexual activists like Savage hate babies. Babies represent a normal family life. Represent normal couples. Represent the future. Babies are a distraction. Homosexuals live for the moment. They care about *their* generation. They don't care about future generations, since they are not a part of that.

Kids are demanding. They become the center of attention. Enormous resources are devoted to child-rearing. This must be intolerable to homosexuals like Savage, who believe all things homosexual ought to be the center of attention.

Of course, some homosexuals have a suppressed, unrequited maternal or paternal instinct. Some of them miss a normal family life.

But in their "darker moments," when they are consistent—and the darker moments are becoming chronic—they hate babies. They hate everything that babies represent—even

though that's how they started. Abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality are all interlinked in a common ideology.

## Moratorium on kids

DAN SAVAGE: Population control. There's too many goddamn people on the planet...Sometimes in my darker moments I am anti-choice. I think abortion should be mandatory for about 30 years.

<http://jkdinale.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/QA-TRanscript-episode-40-Nov-4-2013.pdf>

I've quoted this before, but it's so sublimely inane that one post can't do it justice.

**i)** To begin with, the Western world is generally suffering from reproduction below replacement rate. That's masked by immigration.

**ii)** Also, imagine the social consequences of no new children for 30 years. Just imagine a 30-year-gap between the current generation and the next generation. The extreme graying of the population. It would lead to the collapse of the infrastructure. Crucial jobs could not be filled.

Of course, Savage doesn't care because that will never happen in his lifetime. It's a throwaway line.

He's used to saying anything for effect. Saying anything to advance his political agenda. It's all about the present.

I doubt it's coincidental that Savage is an aging homosexual activist. No wonder he's so angry. It's all about sodomy all the time. He lives for sex.

Problem is: male vitality declines with age. No amount of viagra will make you feel like 20 again.

Most straight men regress the loss of sexual vitality, but most straight men do have other things to live for. They adjust. They have varied interests. They have people to live for.

Which raises another indelicate question: How do aging sodomites attract fresh meat? What's in it for the buff young men they crave? Even if they appeal to aging sodomites, what makes aging sodomites appealing to them? Not to mention homosexuals who play the receptive role. Once again, what's in it for them? What do they get out of that transaction? It can't be pleasant.

Offhand, it's hard to think of any bait beyond a financial inducement. Like rich spinsters with paid "escorts."

## The bitter fruit of fruits

DAN SAVAGE: Population control. There's too many goddamn people on the planet...Sometimes in my darker moments I am anti-choice. I think abortion should be mandatory for about 30 years.

<http://jkdinale.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/QA-TRanscript-episode-40-Nov-4-2013.pdf>

This will be the third time I comment on his statement. Like some B movies, it's so bad that it's good (in a terrible way):

**i)** Even on his own terms, his position is counterproductive. If there were a 30-year moratorium on having babies, aging sodomites would lose their supply of buff young men to service them. They'd be stuck with other aging sodomites.

**ii)** Many people, when they hit middle age, wax nostalgic about their youth. And when they see young people, it triggers wistful memories.

They may envy the young. But older folks don't normally resent the young for being young. They usually assume a generous attitude: "I had my turn, now it's your turn. Hope you have as much fun as I had at your age."

But not for people like Savage. Here we see how aggravated sin erodes common grace. He duplicates the jaundiced view of the antinatalist: "Unless I'm happy, no one should be happy!"

His best years (such as they were) are behind him, and that makes him begrudge the younger generation. They have what he lost—what he can never reclaim.



## Lost opportunities

I'm reposting two comments I left on this post:

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2015/07/19/how-to-make-a-pro-life-argument-in-2-minutes-or-less/>

The commenter I replied to instantly retreated in response to my comments.

steve hays says:

July 22, 2015 at 12:40 pm

**i)** It's true that even if the baby were not a person, killing it could still be wrong. The example of the dog makes that point.

That said, Philmonomer's argument turns on the assumption that personhood is a necessary presupposition of according the baby all the same protections as an adult. He doesn't defend that assumption. Let's consider some problems with that assumption:

Does personhood range along the same continuum as intelligence? Are there degrees of personhood, matching degrees of reason?

If so, does that mean a universal genius like Da Vinci is more of a person than Philmonomer? Is Da Vinci entitled to fuller protections than Philmonomer?

**ii)** What about an adult who begins to lose their mind due to dementia or brain cancer? It's in the early stages. They haven't lost their mind. But their cognitive faculties are now

diminished. And they've become more forgetful. Does that makes them less of a person? If they were killed by a mugger or houseburglar, would that be less than murder?

**iii)** Does someone cease to be a person when they are anesthetized or put in a medical coma?

**iv)** Philmonomer seems to view the baby as a potential person. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that's true. There's more than one kind of potentiality.

For instance, dating and engagement are both behaviors which carry the potential for marriage. As a rule, there's nothing wrong with not becoming engaged. However, there are situations in which breaking off an engagement is wrong. That can be very harmful. Even though engagement is merely a potential marriage, it can be emotionally destructive to break off an engagement without due cause, in a way that's not the case if the couple was never engaged in the first place.

So we need to distinguish between at least two kinds of potentiality:

**a)** A hypothetical or counterfactual that never got started

**b)** The initiation of a trend or process that will eventuate unless it's disrupted

These are not morally equivalent. Once something is underway, it can be wrong to halt it. Depends on what we're talking about.

To take another illustration, suppose a young athlete is counting on a sports scholarship to pay for college. If he's cheated out of that, he was wronged—even though at this

stage it was just a potential outcome. Robbing people of future opportunities can sometimes be gravely wrong, even if those were just potential futures.

v) There are parents who grieve over a miscarriage. They grieve a lost future, both for themselves and their child.

Same thing with parents who grieve the death of a child who dies from leukemia or cystic fibrosis. They lament what will never happen.

There are different kinds of deprivations. There's losing what you had, then there's losing what might have been. A missed opportunity can be as great a deprivation as losing something you actually had.

Suppose your heart is set on wedding a particular woman, but she's killed by a drunk driver. You lost a potential lifetime of happiness.

vi) Let's go back to the personhood argument. Philmonomer doesn't explain why he denies personhood to unborn babies. Perhaps his unspoken argument is that the brain produces the mind. Personhood is dependent on brain development. That presumes physicalism.

But suppose dualism is true. Suppose the mind is grounded in the soul. The soul uses the brain. The brain is like a receiver.

The soul has some innate character traits. Some innate tacit knowledge. In addition, the soul acquires knowledge through experience.

Its ability to learn or express itself is dependent on the condition of the receiver. It can do more with a more

developed receiver. A damaged receiver will impair its ability to express itself.

Should we risk murdering a person based on a physicalist theory of mind? What if that's mistaken?

**vii)** Philmonomer refers to "a woman's right to her own bodily autonomy." But in context, we're not talking about women in general, but a mother in particular. A pregnant woman is a mother. It's not like a relationship between two perfect strangers. Rather, family members have social obligations.

**viii)** Moreover, we have duties to perfect strangers. If a child falls into a river, do I not have an obligation to dive in and attempt to rescue the child, even if it's not my own child, and I risk drowning in the process?

steve hays says:

July 22, 2015 at 1:24 pm

There's also the question of how you ground women's rights or abortion rights. If women are just animals, if women are simply the byproduct of naturalistic evolution, then what makes a women entitled to bodily autonomy?

How is a fleeting and fortuitous organization of matter a property-bearer of rights? According to naturalism, women come into existence and pass over of existence all the time—like all other temporary organisms. There's a 100% turnover rate. Every human being is essentially replaceable and interchangeable in the cosmic junkyard.

## Abortion and infant salvation

Some Christians espouse two positions: (i) they oppose abortion; (ii) they espouse universal infant salvation.

Some proabortionists recast this as a dilemma for Christians: if you espouse universal infant salvation, then you ought to support abortion, for abortion ensures their salvation.

Obviously, this is not a dilemma for Christians who espouse (i) but don't espouse (ii). But what about Christians who espouse both?

To even begin to make this a true dilemma, we need to add a missing premise. A Christian would also have to believe the following: If the same person who died in childhood died later, he'd be damned.

In other words, if you die in childhood, you go to heaven. But if you die later, you may wind up in hell. Once you pass the age of discretion or age of accountability, you are suddenly at risk of damnation. You lose your chronological immunity to damnation. You acquire that fearful liability.

And there may, indeed, be Christians who think this way. Of course, that may be because they haven't thought it through.

I'd simply point out that that's not a necessary implication of universal infant salvation. Universal infant salvation doesn't entail that if everyone who died in childhood died later, some of them would go to hell. Universal infant salvation doesn't imply that there's a subset of infants who, if they hadn't died in infancy, would be damned.

Although that's logically consistent with universal infant salvation, it's also logically consistent with universal infant salvation that only those who actually die in infancy are automatically heavenbound.

Put another way, a Christian who espouses universal infant salvation could, in principle, believe that anyone who is heavenbound as an infant is heavenbound as an adult. Anyone who would have gone to heaven had he died in infancy would likewise go to heaven had he died later.

Of course, that's speculative, but then, the alternative is speculative. And we shouldn't kill people based on unverifiable conjectures.

Thus far I haven't said anything that turns on the Arminian/Calvinist debate. But I'd add that, from a Reformed perspective, salvation or damnation doesn't turn on lucky or unlucky timing. From a Reformed perspective, your eternal fate was sealed before you ever came into existence. Dying young or old doesn't ipso facto change that.

At most, it would be a question of whether, in his providence, God takes some of the elect to himself sooner rather than later because, counterfactually speaking, had they lived longer, they'd suffer a crisis of faith.

There are, of course, Christians who think a born-again believer can lose his salvation. If they also believe in universal infant salvation, then they may believe that some people lose their salvation when they grow up. And that's a pressure point when it comes to abortion.

Mind you, they could still take the position that it's not our prerogative to take life absent divine authorization. The ends don't justify murder.



## Abortion, election, and apostasy

Abortionists sometimes cite popular belief in universal infant salvation as a wedge tactic to taunt Christians: If you believe all babies are heavenbound, why do you oppose abortion? This is meant to generate a dilemma: logically, you should either support both or oppose both.

John Piper recently posted on this subject:

<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/if-babies-go-to-heaven-why-oppose-abortion>

Given the cards he dealt himself, I think he played his hand fairly well. That said:

**i)** Speaking for myself, I'm dubious about universal infant salvation. All the world's worst people used to be cute little kids. I can't help mentally rewinding the clock. Go back in time from what they are to what they were.

Seems arbitrary to say that if you die at seven you fly to heaven, but if you die at nine you fry.

We see children as they are, not as they will be. At least initially. Sometimes we live long enough to see how they turn out—for better or worse.

So I doubt a key premise of the argument. But even if I didn't, I don't think the argument goes through.

**ii)** If this poses a dilemma *at all*, it only poses a dilemma for freewill theists rather than Calvinists. The unstated premise of the argument is that people can lose their salvation. Hence, if somebody is *now* saved, killing



him *now* is the way to seal his salvation. If salvation can be lost, it is risky to live another day. To play it safe, die when you are saved. The longer you wait, the greater the risk that you will die unsaved.

Incidentally, the logic of that argument is hardly confined to infants. It would apply just as well to born-again adults.

**iii)** But, of course, Calvinism rejects the operating premise. What ensures your salvation is not when you die, but election—which is unalterable. Not, in the first instance, what happened in time, but what happened in eternity. The elect can't lose their salvation. You either have it or you don't.

From a Reformed standpoint, nothing you do can change the number of the elect. In the classic formulation of the Westminster Confession: "These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished" (WCF 3:4).

**iv)** But it might be argued that this misses the point. The claim is not that we retroactively cause God to elect more people if more babies die in the womb. The claim, rather, is that if more (elect) babies die in the womb, then that's how God predestined the end-result all along. Our alternate course of action (i.e. aborting elect babies) is the consequence of God's foreordination, rather than God's foreordination as the consequence of our alternate course of action.

**v)** There is, however, a basic problem with that argument. It's a counterfactual scenario. As such, it doesn't refer to

the world in which you and I actually live, but to an alternate timeline.

But even if you believe in universal infant salvation vis-a-vis the actual world, you can't just switch to an alternate timeline, yet assume everything else remains the same. Even if your thought-experiment only changes on variable, that's just a thought-experiment. You can conjecture that God might do it that way, but it's not as if you have given God a blueprint which he must follow.

Suppose there's a possible world in which some people kill their children in the superstitious belief that doing so will ensure their salvation. It doesn't follow that in fact raises the number of the elect. For in that alternate timeline, God may not elect all dying infants, even if he does so in this world.

**vi)** Furthermore, even if you subscribe to predestinarian universal infant salvation, that doesn't imply that more people are ultimately elect. It may simply mean a greater percentage of the elect die in infancy, and fewer in adulthood—even though the overall number is exactly the same. The sum is the same. All that's different is how the elect are distributed by time of death. Whether more die younger or older.

## PP and freedom of the press

Abortion rights groups say threats against abortion providers rose sharply this summer in the wake of the undercover "sting" operation that produced the controversial videos.

<http://www.dailykos.com/stories/2015/11/28/1454918/-Vigils-to-be-held-for-victims-of-Planned-Parenthood-shooting-authorities-search-for-motive>

A predictable response from the liberal establishment. To begin with, it's too soon to know what motivated Robert Lewis Dear.

However, the logic of this objection is that we should suspend freedom of the press if news stories that expose wrongdoing might ever be linked to violence against the target of the news stories. We should outlaw undercover reportage, outlaw investigative reportage, outlaw sting operations, that might create a public backlash against the perpetrators.

We should outlaw criticism of politicians, because that might create a public backlash, thereby putting them at risk.

We should outlaw undercover reportage that shows a business dumping toxic waste into a river, because that might create a public backlash, thereby putting the CEO at risk.

We should outlaw undercover reportage that exposes unsanitary practices in the meat packing industry, because that might create a publish backlash, thereby putting the CEO at risk.

We should repeal the Freedom of Information Act, because that might create a publish backlash, thereby putting gov't officials at risk.

Gov't agencies should never warn the public of a probable terrorist attack, because that might create a backlash, thereby putting the associated group at risk.

Fact is, the PP videos simply documented, in their own words and actions, what PP does behind closed doors. Keep in mind that PP is massively subsidized by taxpayers. So we have every right to know what is done with our tax dollars.

Don't blame the facts. We have nothing to apologize for when it comes to finding out what a business does with our tax dollars. It is not entitled to operate in secrecy.

## Kill at your own risk

On the internet, I see Christians praising Garrett Swasey, the policeman who was shot and killed by Robert Dear. In one respect, that makes sense. People who hate Christians are blaming the attack on Christian extremism—although, from what I've read, there's no evidence that Robert Dear was theologically motivated. So the counter is that a prolife Christian (full-time policeman and volunteer copastor) died attempting to save the lives of others from the crazed gunman.

That's a good counter in the sense that it answers the critics on their own terms. It does, however, raise ethical questions. I suppose a policeman has a professional duty to go wherever the dispatcher tells him to go.

However, this is the larger issue: Is there a moral duty to intervene to save the life of a killer? Suppose Pablo Escobar is wheeled into the ER with a pulmonary embolism. Do the physicians have a moral obligation to save his life? You see, by saving his life, they ensure that he will kill even more innocent people. You patch him up on Friday and he goes back to ordering hits on Monday.

Refusing medical intervention in that case isn't the same as killing him. The doctor didn't cause his pulmonary embolism. The doctor didn't inject him with potassium chloride. The doctor simply let nature take its course.

Sometimes letting person die is equivalent to killing him, and sometimes not. That depends on the circumstances.

But there's no moral obligation to save the life of a contract

killer. People in the business of taking innocent lives should kill at their own risk. They are not entitled to protection. You can't obligate others to rescue you in that situation.

## Pity both sides can't lose

Guy Williams

Thank you from this pro-life mainliner for the reminder that many of you sectarians are pretty okay with lawlessness when the law in question doesn't strike your fancy. Echoes of Kim Davis.

And for the record, yes, a physician has the moral/ethical/legal obligation to save even Pablo Escobar needing an embolization. Anyone with a cursory understanding of medical ethics or law knows that.

That's in response to this post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/11/kill-at-your-own-risk.html>

Let's peel the layers of the onion:

- 1.** He doesn't explain what he means by calling me a "sectarian."
- 2.** I don't concede that Kim Davis was lawless.
- 3.** Only a fanatic like Hobbes is an absolutist about the rule of law. The law exists for the sake of morality, not vice versa. Sometimes it's permissible or obligatory to break the law. I commend the Jewish midwives for defying Pharaoh's edict (Exod 1). I commend Christians who illegally sheltered Jews during WWII. I commend businesses that broke Jim Crow laws.
- 4.** He doesn't bother to identify what lawlessness I'm "okay" with. What law did my post advocate breaking? None.

For instance, my final paragraph said: But there's no moral obligation to save the life of a contract killer. People in the business of taking innocent lives should kill at their own risk. They are not entitled to protection. You can't obligate others to rescue you in that situation.

That, however, is hardly an incitement to lawlessness. There's no legal mandate for me to get involved in that situation. Supposed I happen to be walking by an abortion clinic when gunfire breaks out. There's no legal mandate for a private citizen to step into that situation. There's no legal mandate for me to call the cops. So it's unclear what Guy imagines he's referring to.

**5.** Suppose there's a turf war between the Cali cartel and the Medellin cartel. Drug cartels don't like competition.

I don't take sides in that conflict because there's no side to root for. As Kissinger would say, it's a pity both sides can't lose.

I'd say the same thing about Scott Roeder and George Tiller. They deserve each other.

If Scott Roeder were on the lam, I'd have no moral or legal obligation to either cover for him or report him to the authorities. Both sides kill at their own risk. I disapprove of each.

**6.** Although I've given my reasons for opposing anti-abortion violence on several occasions, let's briefly review:

**i)** If a person has dependents, he has a prior obligation to care for his dependents. As a rule, he doesn't have a right to take actions that would jeopardize his ability to fulfill his



prior obligations. An exception might be a member of the armed services. We could discuss the permutations of that exception.

Likewise, this can apply to the future as well as the present. If I'm an only child, my parents may need me to care for them in their old age. That's something I should make allowance for.

**ii)** Nowhere does Scripture indicate that Christians have a general obligation to be vigilantes, even though the Roman Empire was rife with injustice. If that was a Christian duty, we'd expect the NT to say so somewhere or another.

In the OT, there's the avenger of blood. Even aside from the question of whether that carries over into the new covenant, the avenger of blood is confined to avenging the wrongful death of relatives. Moreover, that's not so much a command, but a custom that Scripture permits and regulates.

**iii)** In his providence, God often puts us in situations where we have limited ability to rectify injustice.

**7.** That said, there are situations in which I think vigilantism is justifiable. For instance, the Obama administration has repeatedly demonstrated that it will not protect Americans from Chinese cyberterrorism. Suppose Chinese hackers attempt to penetrate Microsoft's firewall. Suppose Microsoft has the wherewithal to retaliate by planting a worm or virus in Chinese military computers. Since the Federal gov't has abdicated its duty to defend Americans against foreign aggression, I think Microsoft would be justified in acting in self-defense, even if that's technically vigilantism.

**8.** Guy asserts that a physician has the moral/ethical/legal obligation to save even Pablo Escobar needing an embolization. "Anyone with a cursory understanding of medical ethics or law knows that."

**i)** He offers no supporting argument. Legality and morality are hardly interchangeable. An action can be legal but immoral, or moral but illegal.

**ii)** Here's an overview of Escobar's illustrious career:

Escobar's ruthlessness was legendary. His rise was opposed by many honest politicians, judges and policemen, who did not like the growing influence of this street thug. Escobar had a way of dealing with his enemies: he called it "plata o plomo," literally, silver or lead. Usually, if a politician, judge or policeman got in his way, he would first attempt to bribe them, and if that didn't work, he would order them killed, occasionally including their family in the hit. The exact number of honest men and women killed by Escobar is unknown, but it definitely goes well into the hundreds and perhaps into the thousands.

Even being important or high-profile did not protect you from Escobar if he wanted you out of the way. He ordered the assassination of presidential candidates and was even rumored to be behind the 1985 attack on the Supreme Court, carried out by the 19th of April insurrectionist movement in which several Supreme Court Justices were killed. On November 27, 1989, Escobar's Medellín cartel planted a bomb on Avianca flight 203, killing 110 people. The target, a presidential candidate, was not actually on board. In addition to these high-profile assassinations, Escobar and his organization were responsible for the deaths of

countless magistrates, journalists, policemen and even criminals inside his own organization.

By the mid- 1980's, Pablo Escobar was one of the most powerful men in the world. Forbes magazine listed him as the seventh-richest man in the world. His empire included an army of soldiers and criminals, a private zoo, mansions and apartments all over Colombia, private airstrips and planes for drug transport and personal wealth reported to be in the neighborhood of \$24 billion. He could order the murder of anyone, anywhere, anytime.

<http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/20thcenturylatinamerica/a/bioescobar.htm>

But according to Guy, a physician has a moral/ethical obligation to save his life, even though Escobar will use his renewed lease on life to order the deaths of hundreds or thousands of additional innocents, including entire families. Not surprisingly, Guy doesn't bother to explain how that's morally obligatory.

Let's take another example, if Himmler was wheeled into the ER with a pulmonary embolism, would Guy say a Jewish physician has a moral/ethical obligation to save his life—knowing that will ensure genocide?

**iii)** You can't just stipulate ethical obligations. An argument from human authority can't leverage moral norms. You can appeal to natural law or revealed moral norms.

**iv)** In fact, I'd take it a step further. Suppose jihadists shoot up a synagogue full of worshipers. Suppose the synagogue has security guards who return fire. Both jihadists and security guards are wounded in the melee. The security

guards have irreparable damage to their liver and kidneys. They need organ transplants to survive.

In that situation, I think physicians would have a right to euthanize the jihadists and harvest their organs to save the lives of the security guards they shot.

## The world's dumbest mugger

I'd like to make a view additional comments on anti-abortion violence. To some degree, this is a follow-up to my "Kill at your own risk" post.

From what I've read, the only organized anti-abortion violence was sponsored by the Army of God, a domestic terrorist cult. In addition, some figures, like Eric Rudolph, aren't focussed on abortion, per se.

Whenever there's an incident of anti-abortion violence, which is increasingly rare, there are the usual demands to denounce it and "tone down" the rhetoric.

A few quick points:

**i)** I'm the wrong person to ask. If someone demands that I denounce anti-abortion violence, they will get a twofer. I'll simultaneously condemn violence both inside and outside the clinic. I'm more than willing to condemn anti-abortion violence, but that's not all I'll condemn. So they may be getting more than they bargained for.

**ii)** It's possible that some anti-abortion rhetoric is over-the-top. I don't move in those circles.

Often, though, this is just a matter of using accurate terminology rather than euphemisms.

Likewise, gruesome posters of aborted babies are no different than news footage of corpses at Auschwitz, or pictures of piled skulls in the Killing Fields of Cambodia.

Finally, I'd like to expand on a previous point. Let's take a comparison:

A hapless thief is hoping Mafia don Vincent (The Chin) Gigante will let bygones be bygones. Willie King yesterday kissed up to the reputed head of the Genovese crime family and humbly apologized for mugging his 94-year-old mother. King had second thoughts about trying to beat the rap at a trial and decided it might be safer to spend some time behind bars. He pleaded guilty in Manhattan Supreme Court to grand larceny and will be slapped with a jail term of 11/2 to 3 years when he is sentenced Aug. 19. "His motivation was to apologize to the Gigante family and Mrs. Gigante," said King's attorney, Steven Warshaw. "In this way, he is trying to put this behind him, and he also hopes the Gigante family puts this behind them.

"King, 37, of St. Nicholas Ave. in Manhattan, became the unluckiest mugger in town July 21. He snatched Yolanda Gigante's wallet outside her Greenwich Village apartment as she returned home from a shopping trip with her son the Rev. Louis Gigante. Witnesses who trailed the fleeing thief flagged down Lt. Robert McKenna, who arrested King, recovered Yolanda Gigante's wallet and her \$90 and then revealed to the mugger the identity of his victim. McKenna said King slumped in the patrol car's seat and rolled his eyes.

<http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/mugger-hoping-gigante-gentle-article-1.742741>

Now, it wouldn't be my duty to exact revenge on the mugger. For one thing, she wasn't my mother.

But imagine if Vincent's men caught up with King before the police did. Imagine King walking by the newsstand the next day and reading about the crime. For him, life would get very interesting very fast.

Suppose I was present when Vincent's men show up, with baseball bats in hand. Is it my duty to interpose myself between the mugger and the avengers? Hardly.

He mugs little old ladies at his own risk. This time he picked the wrong victim. Big mistake.

But that's his problem, not mine. Even if I disapprove of vigilantism, I'm not going to get that worked up over what happens to the mugger. I'll keep on walking.

## Prolife strategy

Trump blundered into the abortion this week by remarking on the need to punish women who have abortions. Of course, Trump doesn't really believe that. It did, however, make an old issue resurface, and I see some confusion on the part of Christians in responding to Trump.

**i)** Certainly there are women who have uncoerced abortions. There are women who have abortions for convenience. There are men and women who have no compunction about killing somebody who's an obstacle to their ambitions, so long as they can get away with it.

**ii)** That said, laws have more than one function. Some laws are designed to exact justice. Conversely, some laws are designed to deter certain kinds of social behavior. And many laws attempt to do both.

**iii)** As a practical matter, it isn't politically feasible to pass laws that punish women who have abortions. Not only do such laws have no possibility of passage, but the very effort to sponsor bills to that effect would backfire. It would play right into the hands of the abortion lobby.

That isn't fair, but in a just world, we wouldn't have abortion on demand in the first place.

**iv)** In addition, the dispensation of justice is ultimately up to God. Up to a point, it's good to have laws that punish wrongdoing, but at the end of the day, no one will elude justice. That's what the final judgment is about.



**v)** In the meantime, the primary goal of the prolife movement is to prevent as many abortions as possible, given the political realities. With that in mind, we focus on deterrence rather than retribution. The priority is to save lives, not exact justice.

Moreover, given the political climate, these are competing values. Ideally, it's good to have laws that deter wrongdoing and punish wrongdoing alike. But if you can't do both, then you should prioritize saving babies, and leave it to God to right the scales of justice. We have no duty to engage in futile, counterproductive tactics.

## Abortion and bodily autonomy

A stock argument for abortion rights is that outlawing abortion violates a woman's bodily integrity. There are, however, problems with that argument:

**i)** By that logic, an abortion violates the bodily integrity of the baby. So the argument is self-refuting.

**ii)** Is bodily autonomy absolute? If a depressed teenager is about to commit suicide, and I'm in a position to stop it, should I intervene, or does that violate his (or her) freedom to do whatever he wants with his own body?

**iii)** Do I have a right to get high or get drunk, then get behind the wheel of a car? That's what I want to do with my body. Is it wrong for government to infringe on my bodily integrity in that situation?

**iv)** Historically, governments haven't hesitated to draft men to fight wars. What about the bodily autonomy of men? What if they don't want their bodies to be used in war? Tough luck!

Suppose you oppose conscription. But what if it's a war of national survival, like England was facing in WWII?

**v)** Traditionally, women were exempt from the draft. So the charge of sexism backfires. In this case, men were having to assume a burden that women were not. The risk of death or injury in battle. The risk of capture and torture by the enemy.

## Keep your hands off my body!

This is a follow-up to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/06/abortion-and-bodily-autonomy.html>

A commenter left the following question:

I've talked to some pro-choicers recently who have relied very heavily on the inside-the-mother's-body argument. They dismiss all counter-examples to bodily autonomy because they don't involve another human being being *\*inside\** of the other person. How would you respond a person who kept pushing the fact that a fetus is inside of another human and says that in no other instances would we allow another person to remain inside of someone else against their will?

The answer deserves a separate post, so I'll respond here:

**i)** Let's begin with a preliminary observation. Many abortionists are fanatics. There's no example you can give that will make them blink.

However, that can be useful to expose their fanaticism and misanthropy. When they take a totally selfish position, they reveal the fact that they don't have what it takes to be a good friend. They're not friendship material. They can't be trusted. They will always put themselves first.

Now let's consider some examples:

**ii)** We could begin by asking them how the fact that a person or baby is inside the body rather than outside the body a morally relevant difference. What's the principle? Is the principle that no one ever has the right to depend on us for their survival?

**iii)** Does the abortionist take the position that we never have a duty to hazard our own life or health to protect another?

Most pregnancies aren't hazardous. I'm just using a more extreme example to establish a principle. If we sometimes have a duty to endanger our own life or health to protect another, surely we sometimes have a duty to provide for the needs of another in less extreme cases.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), suppose a mother and her teenage son are at home when a violent intruder breaks into the home. Does the son have a duty to fight the intruder to protect his mother, or should the son try to escape, leaving his mother in the hands of the intruder?

Suppose, in this scenario, the teenager and the intruder are fairly evenly matched. Or maybe the intruder is physically stronger. There's a high risk that the son may be killed if he tries to defend his mother. Does he have a duty to assume that risk, or should he save his own skin at the expense of his mother?

**v)** Consider a variation on the same scenario: instead of a mother and son, it's a husband and wife. Does the husband have a duty to protect his wife, perhaps if only to buy her time to get away, or should he throw her into the arms of the intruder to buy himself time to get away?

**vi)** Suppose a superbug kindles a raging pandemic that threatens to kill 90% of the world's population. Suppose there's a man who due to a genetic mutation, carries an antibody in his bloodstream that can be used to produce an effective antibiotic.

Suppose he refuses to donate his blood. He himself is immune to the superbug. He doesn't care about the fate of the human race in general.

Should he be forced to donate his blood, to save the human race?

**vii)** Suppose a man wakes up in a strange motel room. He doesn't remember how he got there. He has a bandaid on his arm.

A cellphone rings. He is told that a computer chip was implanted in his arm. It contains a recipe for producing an antidote to a catastrophic bioweapon. He is instructed to board a plane to the USA. Once he arrives, he will be taken into custody, and the computer chip will be removed. His patriotic action will prevent the human race from exposure to a catastrophic bioweapon.

Should he comply? He was kidnapped. His body was commandeered. He didn't agree to this. But now that he finds himself in this situation, does he have a duty to cooperate?

**viii)** Suppose a man and wife are trapped in a dystopian society. Suppose the husband has a chance to smuggle his wife to freedom. Does he have a duty to do so?

Assuming the answer is yes, let's give the scenario a science fiction twist. Suppose the husband can smuggle his

wife to freedom by digitizing his wife, uploading his digitized wife onto a computer chip, which he implants in his arm. If he makes it to the other side, he will reverse the process.

His wife is now in his body. Does that change his duty?

## "A modest proposal"

I will comment on this article:

<http://blog.perspectivesjournal.org/2016/10/03/a-modest-proposal-to-conservative-evangelicals/>

For the record, I know you from the inside out. I'm not only a historian of evangelicalism, I'm also a child of it: born and raised, and then born again. I "asked Jesus into my heart" when I was a kid. I memorized large portions of the Bible. I spent time as a homeschooler, and in the 1990s I had a life-sized photograph of Ronald Reagan on my dorm wall at Bible school.

Since that doesn't correspond to my own background, it would be best for Gloege to avoid stereotyping his target audience. It's presumptuous and often inaccurate.

So, here's my question, and I want you to answer it honestly. What matters more to you: making abortion illegal or reducing the number of procedures that occur each year?

**i)** Beware of giving "honest" answers to loaded questions. Questions that oversimplify the issues. Questions that pose false dichotomies.

**ii)** It's not as if Christians currently have a viable choice between reducing the number of abortions per year and outlawing abortion. At present, it isn't politically feasible to ban abortion across the board. And that seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. So we're attempting to

restrict abortion in various ways. Gloege's alternatives are artificial. That's not even in the cards.

**iii)** To set this up as a choice between reducing abortions and restricting abortions is prejudicial. Those are not opposing strategies. Legal restrictions on abortion reduce abortions.

Or let me put it another way. Which is the better society: one in which abortions are illegal and punished when they occur (because they will), or one in which the surgical procedure is legal, but largely unnecessary?

**i)** That's ambiguous. If push comes to shove, the priority is saving babies rather than punishing wrongdoers. In a sense, that's "better".

**ii)** However, a society that refuses to punish wrongdoers is an unjust society. In another sense, that's worse.

We already know how to decrease the abortion rate: make contraception easy to access.

We already have easy access to contraception.

Several studies have noted that the majority of women seeking abortions earn less than the poverty level (that's about \$16,000 annually for a family of two). In fact, while the abortion rate has dropped at other income levels, it has increased among those in poverty.

That evades the question of why they are poor. To my knowledge, that's because they tend to be single moms and high school dropouts.



We could easily go further. Why not advocate for a basic income (something arch-conservative economist Milton Friedman suggested years ago)?

Isn't that just a euphemism for welfare queens?

And throw in a few condoms.

How does Gloege propose to make men use condoms if they don't want to?

Are we afraid anti-poverty programs will create dependent people? Afraid it will be too expensive? Afraid free birth control will lead to increased sexual activity outside of a committed relationship? We can argue about all that if you want. But let's hold off. Just remember: we are talking about reducing abortions. And abortion, you regularly tell me, is no different from murdering innocent children. Think about that for a second.

**i)** I don't need Gloege to tell me to "think about that for a second," as if that's a brand-new thought. He needs to avoid patronizing his target audience.

**ii)** A culture of dependence is a hotbed for murder. Consider the homicide rates in Chicago. Welfare contributes to the disintegration of the black family. Women don't need to marry. Women don't need a male breadwinner. And it lets fathers off the hook. The taxpayer picks up the tab.

Fatherless boys are at much higher risk of juvenile delinquency, including murder. Gloege's "modest proposal" reinforces a vicious cycle.

Shouldn't we be willing to pay any price?

Actually, no. Policies that bankrupt the country hurt everyone—except the ruling class—including children. Likewise, we shouldn't create a totalitarian state. That's bad for everyone—except the ruling class.

Now tell me: do you really believe what you say? If so, isn't preventing a holocaust worth a compromise in social or economic policy?

**i)** That begs the question of whether his "modest proposal" would prevent a holocaust.

**ii)** His proposal amounts to extortion. It's like a bank heist gone bad. The robber takes hostages. Threatens to kill them unless \$10 million is wired to a Cayman account in his name and he is flown by private jet to a country without an extradition treaty. Obviously, we can't give in to extortion. Not because we don't value the lives of the hostages, but because rewarding extortion fuels ever more extortion.

**iii)** Likewise, if women figure out that they can use the threat of abortion as a bargaining chip to demand goodies, where does that end? What if they demand that the gov't build them a McMansion? Domestic servants? A Mercedes?

Our last pro-life president launched a war because of a hunch about some aluminum tubes. It cost trillions of dollars and thousands of lives. Why not spend something to fight poverty and perhaps reduce abortion in the process?

That's a brainless liberal trope. To begin with, using bad examples doesn't prove anything.

National defense is a necessity, not a luxury. You spend what it takes. We can debate how much we need to spend on national defense. We can debate military priorities. We can debate foreign policy. But military spending isn't optional. You have to allocate adequate funds for national defense. So it isn't comparable to the welfare state.

I also ask because the pro-life movement has been working on outlawing abortion for, what, thirty-five or forty years now? How's that going?

**i)** That's circular. It would be going better were it not for people like Gloege.

**ii)** The "war on poverty" has been going on for fifty years now. Ever since LBJ's Great Society programs. How's that going?

Look, I know you are suspicious of Planned Parenthood. You think it's a business (it's not) whose "profitability" relies on abortion services (it's actually only a small part of what they do).

Like the sting videos?

I get it; I know Margaret Sanger was in the eugenics movement and said some things. I don't know, maybe she was a baby Christian or something. (Kidding, sorry, bad joke.)

Does he think that makes a productive contribution to the discussion?

How about this: if Planned Parenthood opposes anti-poverty programs to save its "abortion business," I'll

join your fight to have it completely defunded. And I'll admit you were right all along.

More extortion.

Meanwhile, I simply can't shake the suspicion that the pro-life movement is more interested in controlling women's bodies than it is in preserving life. And, yes, I know this is a longstanding canard of the pro-choice movement. And I know you'll insist you are sincerely concerned about life. I know, because that was me back in the day. But if you really, truly, believe that a fertilized egg is equal to an infant, then you need to prove it.

**i)** I have nothing to prove to the likes of Gloege. His approval is not my standard of comparison. I'm under no obligation to convince him of my pure motives. He's nobody to me.

**ii)** Moreover, he's framed the issue in a way that systematically begs the question. It's not incumbent on me to play his game when he uses marked cards.

Because when you repeatedly oppose programs that reduce abortions, it makes it look like your concern for "life" is a convenient cover for "control."

**i)** He hasn't even tried to demonstrate that welfare and other social programs reduce abortion.

**ii)** He ignores the role of private charities.

**iii)** If he thinks that's a convenient cover for "control," he needs to provide an argument to justify his conspiratorial

suspicious. So he thinks pro-lifers oppose abortion to control women? Is that it?

Keep in mind that childcare often involves men as well as women. Take child support payments. What do pro-lifers get out of "controlling" women? If their motives are underhanded, you'd expect men to desert the pro-life movement since many men prefer sex with no strings attached. Promiscuous men support abortion.

So, let's settle the question once and for all. What is your end goal?

One goal is to reduce the murder rate in general (see above).

Let me put it this way: because you are sincerely concerned about life, why not simply work for free access to birth control and anti-poverty efforts and then see what happens.

- i)** We've already seen what happens. Tried and failed. Repeatedly.
- ii)** If "poor" women can afford cellphones and cable TV, why not contraception?
- iii)** What about deadbeat dads? Before we make taxpayers pick up the tab for someone else's child, shouldn't our priority be making parents raise their own kids?
- iv)** That also means giving fathers a stake in the process, like joint-custody.

If you can't stomach more federal programs or higher taxes, I suppose I understand.

**i)** Gov't doesn't have any money of its own. It comes from wage-earners. Gleege acts as though people who work hard don't actually need the money they make to live on. Yet many people live paycheck to paycheck.

**ii)** When you keep raising taxes, you produce an economic death spiral. Businesses become less profitable. They must pay their employees less. That, in turn, lowers tax revenue.

**iii)** Social obligations are concentric. I have a greater obligation to my wife than to your wife. I have a greater obligation to my elderly parents than to your elderly parents. It's not hypocritical to prioritize caring for my own dependents. And if more people did that, it would be better for everyone concerned.

If an elementary school catches on fire, I will rescue my own kid first. That's not that the other kids are intrinsically less valuable. But my primary duty is to my own kid. After I get him out of harm's way, I may refocus on saving other kids. Mind you, I still have to be careful about risking my own life because I have dependents to support.

It's not hypocritical to simultaneously oppose abortion while opposing social policies that threaten my financial ability to care for my wife, kids, or elderly parents. It is not hypocritical to care about the wellbeing of strangers, or protecting the innocent, even if there are limits to how far I'd go. If I see a teenager drowning in a river, and I'm a strong swimmer, I have a prima facie obligation to save him. If, however, the river is infested with crocodiles, I might not risk it. That doesn't mean I think his life is worthless. But I may have multiple social obligations, including prior obligations. If I'm the sole caregiver for an elderly parent, I must avoid hazardous activities that would

endanger my parent. In balancing different duties, higher duties take precedence. I can care what happens to a stranger without taking a bullet for him. Charity comes in degree.

Maybe, in the end, we both believe abortion is simply a medical procedure with a touch of moral ambiguity.

That certainly shows you where Gloege is coming from.

## Pacifism and abolitionism

It's been a while since I've commented on AHA, but as I noted in a recent Facebook discussion, AHA has conflicting principles. The ultimate priority for abolitionists isn't to save babies but to preserve their imagined sense of moral purity. They regard incrementalism as ethically compromised.

This means that when push comes to shove, if the abolitionist strategy resulted in a thousandfold increase in abortions (or infanticides), abolitionists would continue to support it because their imagined sense of moral purity trumps saving babies. It's not about saving babies at all, but keeping their hands clean (as they define it). If incrementalism saved more babies than abolitionism, they'd opt for saving fewer babies or none at all, rather than saving more babies but getting dirt under their fingernails in the process. They will only save babies if they can keep their white gloves pristine. They sacrifice the lives of babies to preserve their puritanical scruples rather than sacrificing their puritanical scruples to save the lives of babies.

There's a direct parallel between pacifism and abolitionism. A pacifist deems it intrinsically wrong to take life to save life. He makes no distinction between the life of a murderer and the life of the murder victim. If he had a chance to shoot the sniper in the clock tower who's gunning down little kids in the park, he will let all the kids be shot to death because his priority isn't saving innocent lives but keeping his hands clean (as he defines it). He will dismiss arguments for the right of self-defense as "pragmatism," "consequentialism," "situation ethics," "moral relativism". He will categorically dismiss the lesser-evil principle or the end-justifies-the-means.



That's directly parallel to abolitionists, only their target isn't the right of self-defense, but incrementalism. Like the pacifist, they'd rather keep their hands clean (as they define it) than save innocent lives.

## What's the goal of the prolife movement?

**1.** I'm on what's conventionally labeled the "incrementalist" side of the prolife movement (in contrast to abolitionists). However, I don't think casting the issue in terms of incrementalism v. immediatism is the best way to frame the issue.

As I understand it, the usual claim is that incrementalists share the same goal as abolitionists. Both sides aim to eliminate abortion entirely. But they differ on strategy and tactics.

**2.** I think incrementalists take this position in part because they are put on the defensive by abolitionists. Imagine if the incrementalist said, "As a matter of fact, eliminating abortion entirely is not my goal".

**i)** Is that a damning thing to say? Well, that depends. The statement is ambiguous. It could be taken to mean I don't think we *should* eliminate abortion in toto. In general, that would be a morally deficient position—although even most hardline proliferers make some exceptions (e.g. ectopic pregnancies).

**ii)** However, we need to distinguish between *goals* and *ideals*. A proliferer might say eliminating abortion in toto is the *ideal*, but not the *goal*, because that's an unattainable goal. Is that a scandalous thing to say?

Suppose a doctor has a patient in the early stages of MS. Is it the doctor's goal to cure the patient? No, because he doesn't have a cure for MS. Imagine if the patient became irate: "What kind of doctor are you that it's not your goal to cure me!" But that's no fault of the doctor. It's not his goal

to cure the patient because he's in no position to cure the patient. It can be the goal of a medical researcher to find a cure for MS, but not the average physician.

**3.** That said, there can be value in having ambitious goals. One rationale for having ambitious goals is that if you aim higher, then even if you fall short of your goal, you may come closer to the goal than if you lowered your expectations.

Take an Olympic athlete who thinks he has a shot at winning a gold medal or breaking a record. He may push himself harder, and have a better chance of success, by aiming higher.

Or take an underdog sports team that's up against the best team in the league. The opposing team is undefeated. So the odds are stacked against the underdog team.

If the underdog team goes into the game with a defeatist attitude, that's a self-fulfilling prophecy of doom. A defeatist attitude is self-defeating. It pretty much ensures failure.

If, however, the underdog team aims high, it might score a surprise upset. Perhaps the opposing team was overconfident. The opposing team didn't bring their best game to the competition because they thought they were unbeatable.

**4.** However, it really depends on the examples we use to illustrate the principle. It's easy to come up with counterexamples where an ambitious goal is foolhardy. Suppose your goal is to graduate from Harvard med school. Suppose you don't have the chops to compete with the cream of the crop. You are no match for your classmates.

As a result, you wash out of Harvard med school with humongous student loan bills.

Suppose, if you aimed lower, you could graduate from a perfectly reputable, but less prestigious med school. By aiming too high, you missed out on both. You flunked out of Harvard, and you blew the opportunity to become a physician by attending a less demanding med school.

In addition, some Harvard students commit suicide because they just can't cut it, and they are too ashamed to face their pushy, ambiguous, disappointed parents.

To take another example, some competitive athletes suffer injuries at the gym. They push their body to the limit, hoping their body will adapt, but they push their body beyond the limit. They suffer injuries that require surgery. As a result, they may never get back to where they were before the injury.

And they weren't injured in the game. They didn't get to that point. This was conditioning to prepare themselves for the game, but as a result of the injury, they had to drop out.

So overly-ambitious goals are counterproductive. You don't end up with more. You end up with less—or nothing at all. Indeed, you may be worse off than when you started.

**5.** One of my concerns with making the total elimination of abortion the goal is whether setting the goal there is the justification for opposing abortion at all. Does the warrant or rationale for saving babies depend on having as a goal the total elimination of abortion? Is it not worth the effort if that's an unattainable goal?

To take a comparison, historically, Christians have been in the vanguard of founding orphanages. Should the goal be to have enough orphanages to care for every abandoned child? Suppose we lack the resources for that laudable project. Imagine someone setting a quota or threshold: unless we can save all orphans, or 90%, we won't build any orphanages! Let them all die on the street!

Rather than stipulating an artificial goal, we should just do as much as we can. Saving babies isn't predicated on the prospects of winning, as if it's not worth the fight if you lose. You do the best you can. To revert to the illustration, if you can only save a fraction of abandoned children, that's heartbreaking, but it hardly means you throw in the towel and refuse to save the few you can.

**6.** We should distinguish between *targets* and *goals*. Instead of having a utopian goal which may or may not be attainable, we should have targets. Not making the total elimination of abortion your goal doesn't mean you stop short even if you were making steady progress, and could achieve even more reductions in abortion.

We don't know what the future holds. If you secure one target, you move onto the next target. One might say the elimination of abortion is the goal if it's possible to eliminate abortion. If it's not possible to eliminate abortion, then that's not the goal. There's no obligation to pursue or commit to impossible goals. A problem with a setting hard-n-fast goal is that we don't know in advance if that's attainable.

**7.** Abolitionists accuse incrementalists of faithlessness, but there's no biblical promise that God will eliminate all or most evil during the church age. There's no biblical promise that God will eliminate murder during the church age. To

some extent we find out what's possible by doing what we can.

## Suicide by time-travel

**i)** Proabortionists often trot out situations where raising the child is a hardship on the mother. And there are undoubtedly situations where that's the case.

Consider cases where raising the proabortionist was a hardship on the mother. Suppose the proabortionist could step into a time-machine, travel back into the past, and preempt his/her own conception, thereby sparing his/her mother the ordeal of having to raise the proabortionist.

That would be both contraception by time-travel as well as suicide by time-travel. Or suicidal contraception by time-travel. How many proabortionists would step into the time-machine to preempt their conception, so as to spare their mother the onerous experience of having to raise them? How many proabortionists would commit suicidal contraception if they had that opportunity? I daresay not a single one would care enough about the hardship their existence imposed on their mother to prevent their existence from ever happening. Proabortionists are far too selfish to be suicidally altruistic.

**ii)** Now, I don't expect proabortionist to admit that. Since it's just hypothetical, it wouldn't cost them anything to lie about it. But it's a way of exposing their hypocrisy.

**iii)** In addition, sometimes you can plant an idea which will eventually cause a person to change their mind. They may not admit it to you at the time, yet it's something that never occurred to them, but once the idea is planted in their mind, it works its way through to the conclusion.

**iv)** A critic might object that my thought-experiment is unrealistic. It generates a classic time-travel antinomy, like the grandfather paradox. But that's irrelevant. The point of time-travel scenarios is to illustrate a principle in a picturesque way which makes it easier to grasp and appreciate. They can visualize the principle. It gives the principle a concrete setting. But the principle doesn't depend on the coherence of the illustration. It's just a fictional story.



## Power, personhood, and pulling the plug

A stock argument for abortion centers on the criterion of personhood. Aborting the baby is justified because the baby is not yet a person.

For discussion purposes, let's grant that the baby is not yet a person. Now let's take some comparisons. There are operations which, in a sense, require the medical team to kill the patient. That sounds paradoxical. What I'm referring to are operations where the patient's body temperature is lowered to the point where he has no vital signs. Technically, he meets the criteria of clinical death. He's indistinguishable from a corpse—albeit a very fresh corpse!

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that we say a patient in that condition is no longer a person. Would it be murder to pull the plug? In a sense, he's already dead! So you're not even killing him.

But, of course, if he's reheated, he will come back to life. So, is it murder to pull the plug?

Take another comparison: some comatose patients are declared to be in a persistent vegetative state. Yet some comatose patients in that condition regain consciousness. They are normal again. Or even if they suffer some lingering physical or cognitive impairment, they are still persons.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that we say that someone in a persistent vegetative state is no longer a person. But suppose we foreknew that in a week or month or year, our comatose patient would regain consciousness and be normal, or nearly normal. Would it be murder to pull

the plug? Indeed, there are medically-induced comas. But the point is to bring them back out of the coma.

Well, if a baby is allowed to come to term, that's what happens. He becomes a person—even if (ex hypothesi) we deny his prenatal personhood.

Now perhaps someone would object that my comparisons oversimplify the issue. The comparisons are disanalogous, for the baby is dependent on its mother. To be analogous, the patient would have to be dependent on a second party. But is the second party obligated to be at the patient's disposal? Does he have that claim on a second party? To that I'd say to things:

**i)** That complication is a backdoor admission that the (alleged) absence of personhood is an insufficient criterion to justify abortion. There must be an additional warrant, such as an "undue burden".

**ii)** Apropos (ii), suppose your mother requires weekly blood transfusions to stay alive. Suppose she has a rare blood type. As luck would have it, you have the same blood type. Do you have an obligation to make yourself available to keep your mother alive?

Some people might bite the bullet and say, no, even your own mother doesn't have that claim on your freedom. You have the right to let her die, even though it was within your power to keep her alive by donating your blood.

If so, that illustrates the moral consequences of the abortion ethic. It boils down to radical autonomy and power. But if that's the bottom line, then whoever has more power

has the right to kill whoever has less power in the pursuit of absolute freedom.

That's why laws are necessary. Some people have no conscience.

## Five embryos or one five-year-old?

There's a pro-abortion thought-experiment making the rounds. If a prolifer had to choose between rescuing a 5-year-old child from burning building or five embryos, which would he opt for? The purpose of this dilemma is to expose the "hypocrisy" of the prolifer. If he'd save the child, then he doesn't really believe what he says about life beginning at conception.

I think these two philosophers say most of what needs to be said in response to that thought-experiment:

<http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/10/20332/>

But I'd like to make a few additional points:

**i)** All things being equal, it's better to save more lives than fewer lives. However, that's not an absolute consideration. Christian ethics is incompatible with raw consequentialism. Take the classic hypothetical case: should you euthanize a healthy person to harvest his organs in order to save the lives of five patients? It wouldn't be hypocritical for a Christian to let the five patients die rather than euthanize a healthy patient to supply them with life-saving organ transplants. While comparative numbers can be a relevant consideration, the issue has greater moral complexity. Comparative numbers are not necessarily a sufficient consideration.

**ii)** Dennis Prager often refers to surveys in which some pet owners say that given a choice, they'd save their pet dog rather than save a stranger. That, however, is hardly a good

argument for valuing the lives of animals above human life. By the same token, even if (ex hypothesi), proliferers were hypocritical on this issue, that does nothing to disprove the prolife position.

**iii)** Humans are wired to aid a child in distress. From a Christian standpoint, God endowed us with that instinct. If it came down to a child who's right in front of you or five frozen embryos, it's only natural for you to opt for the child. The status of the embryonic humans, while genuine, is more abstract, more intellectual.

It's analogous to bombing the enemy at 30,000 feet rather than hand-to-hand combat. Or how we take the death of someone we know more personally than the death of someone we read about in the newspaper. That's not a question of who's more human. It's just that we're designed to respond to something more immediate.

**iv)** By the same token, it's duplicitous to put people in real or hypothetical situations where they have to make a snap decision, then blame them for making a snap decision. They didn't have the leisure time to engage in philosophical analysis. Moreover, they were not in a situation where they could exercise serene critical detachment.

## Abortion, nihilism, and the limits of moral persuasion

There's a sense in which prolife arguments are too idealistic. We try to prove that the baby is human. The baby is a person. Abortion is wrong. Abortion is murder.

The problem is not with the argument but the audience. Moral arguments suffer from a build-in limitation because they only work for people who are prepared to do the right thing. Moral arguments appeal to duty, conscience, and empathy. But what if someone just doesn't care?

It's like attempting to reason with a sociopath. There's no foothold. The argument has no leverage with someone who acts from ruthless self-interest.

Many men and women are quite prepared to commit murder if they can get away with it. Human history is a history of murder. Murder on a vast scale. Many people will commit murder no compunction.

The reason we have laws in the first place is that you can't rely on human goodness. So it's necessary to create a disincentive.

As I often explain and document, consistent atheism is nihilistic. And abortion is a case in point.

Take the claim that the baby is just a clump of cells. Most atheists are physicalists. They think adult human beings are just a clump of cells. And they think this life is all there is.

Given that outlook, if you get in my way, and I can murder you with impunity, that's exactly what I will do to you. There's no doubt in my mind that you're fully human. I couldn't care less.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't argue against abortion. But we need to appreciate that there are limits to the effectiveness of moral and rational persuasion. Many people are morally hardened.

That's also why we need to go beyond prolife arguments to argue for Christianity. Without a larger framework regarding human significance and responsibility, prolife arguments don't make sense in isolation. In a godless universe, life is worthless.

One of the ironies of abortion is that in many cases, if they went ahead and had the child, natural parental bonding would kick in. But they don't let that happen.

## Time travel filicide



**The Tentative Apologist**  
@RandalRauser · [Follow](#)



A young couple learns that there is a 50% chance any child they conceive will be born with a terrible, untreatable disease which will result in the child's painfully slow death in a matter of weeks or months. Under those conditions, \*is it morally wrong\* for them to have a child?



94 votes · Final results

5:40 AM · Mar 17, 2019



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1. Wouldn't the same logic justify eugenic abortion?

2. Since Rauser is fond of thought-experiments, here's a test-case: suppose a couple has three kids. The first kid has a congenital untreatable disease which will result in the child's painfully slow death in a matter of weeks or months. His younger siblings are healthy.

Suppose a time-machine is invented. The couple can travel back into the past and erase the first child from the original timeline. But that action will automatically erase their two younger children from the original timeline. All three



children never existed in the new. Would it be wrong to do that to their healthy kids? Would that be tantamount to filicide?

## Unplanned pregnancies

Critics of Calvinism like to bring up hard cases. That's legitimate inasmuch as Calvinism can't duck the hard cases. It is, however, self-deluded for freewill theists to imagine that their alternative exempts themselves from equally hard cases.

Let's take the case of "unplanned pregnancies". From a theological perspective, are unplanned pregnancies good or evil?

In popular parlance, I think an "unplanned pregnancy" is generally a euphemism for a pregnancy resulting from premarital sex, extramarital sex, failure to use contraception (even though the couple didn't want a child), or contraceptive failure. From the standpoint of the couple, the pregnancy was unintended and usually undesirable. The most extreme example is a child conceived in rape.

From a human perspective, such pregnancies are unintended. But are they unintended from a divine perspective? According to open theism, just about every pregnancy is unplanned from God's viewpoint since God doesn't know the future. Exceptions might be Isaac and Jesus, although it's an interesting question how the God of open theism could promise Abraham a child if God doesn't know or control what human beings will do, including sex.

However, it's hard to see how any pregnancy can be unplanned under Molinism or Arminianism, for God's actions in creation and providence are necessary causes of every particular pregnancy, and God knows the end-results of his actions in creation and providence.

From a Reformed perspective, every pregnancy is predestined. Do freewill theists think humanly unplanned pregnancies are evil? Freewill theists often charge the God of Calvinism with hypocrisy for decreeing what he forbids.

But that's morally complex. If a child is conceived in sin, the process is evil, but does that mean the product is evil? Do freewill theists think the child is tainted by the process (e.g. premarital or extramarital sex)? Presumably not. Does it impugn divine benevolence if God welcomes every child into the world? Presumably not.

Assuming that every pregnancy is a providentially planned pregnancy, even if many pregnancies are humanly unplanned, the good outcome is inextricably linked to sinful causes in however many cases. Do freewill theists regret the outcome? Open theists might.

## Spontaneous abortion and induced abortion

A common argument that abortionists deploy against Christians is the phenomenon of miscarriage or spontaneous abortion. They say God is the greatest abortionist of all, given the number of miscarriages. Therefore, opposing abortion is tantamount to opposing God. I've discussed this before, but I'd like to add some additional considerations:

**i)** Scripture treats miscarriage as a tragedy. Therefore, the fact that miscarriage occurs in the course of ordinary providence doesn't mean it's good, from a biblical perspective.

**ii)** In Scripture, the fact that something providentially occurs doesn't automatically mean we have no duty to infer with it. For one thing, we live in a fallen world. Death is a providential event, yet Scripture treats death as evil. Providence by itself is not a reliable guide to our duties.

**iii)** Miscarriage is one of many natural causes of death. But in general, we don't think the fact that some deaths are due to natural causes is a reason to accept the status quo. Much of medical science is directed at preventing death by natural causes, where possible. Death by disease is natural or providential. That's no different from miscarriage.

**iv)** Scripture treats disease as a natural evil, yet Scripture also has cases of miraculous healing. So healing isn't impious.

**v)** Insofar as many miscarriages are beyond the ability of medical science (at present) to prevent, there's no duty to prevent them. That doesn't mean there's no obligation to

save individuals from gratuitous death, where that's preventable.

**vi)** In a fallen world, combatting providential evil can be a good thing. For instance, it cultivates soul-building virtues. God puts some obstacles in our way in order for us to overcome the obstacles.

**vii)** There's a sense in which some deaths are morally worse than others. Murder is worse than accidental death.

## Abortion and the soul

**1.** I notice that many proliferers shy away from appealing to the soul. They confine their arguments to genetics and embryology. They rest their case on physical properties. The moment of conception. A heartbeat. Unique DNA. A separate body.

But treating a baby as just a physical organism can be counterproductive. If human beings are reducible to body parts and organic molecules, is that an adequate basis for human rights?

It leads to equivocation about the "humanity" of the "fetus". Human hair, toenails, and even excrement are human. Just because something is human—in that sense—doesn't ipso facto make it entitled to protection.

**2.** The strategy appears to be in part that that's a scientific argument. In addition, that's a secular argument. Many proliferers seem to think that appealing to the soul is inherently religious, and therefore lacks common ground when reasoning with unbelievers.

However, arguments for the soul aren't necessarily religious. Take the hard problem of consciousness, or veridical near-death experiences and postmortem apparitions. We can present philosophical and empirical arguments for the soul.

**3.** Also, we shouldn't avoid religious argument. For one thing, it's impossible to justify human rights or women's rights on a secular basis. So we can put the abortionist on the defensive. That's an opportunity to deploy the moral argument for God's existence.

You can't simply assert religious claims when addressing unbelievers. That begs the question from their standpoint. An illegitimate argument from authority.

But you can give reasons for Christianity. And that, in turn, undergirds appeal to Christian ethics. Many unbelievers have no idea that there is any evidence for Christianity. They think it's all a matter of sheer faith. Make-believe and wishful thinking. By avoiding religious arguments, proliferators reinforce that damaging stereotype.

# Animal Rights

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## Whale Whores

*Whale Wars*, which glamorizes ecoterrorism, has begun a new propaganda season. This season, the Sea Shepherd crew is rescuing tuna fish as well as whales.

This reflects the irrationality of the secular animal rights movement. On a Darwinian worldview, fishermen are animals, just like fish. The fishing industry is simply a case of human animals killing nonhuman animals. That's no different than animals killing other animals. That's no different than sharks or barracudas killing other fish. Meat is a natural part of the human diet.

For that matter, our closest evolutionary relative is allegedly the chimpanzee, yet chimps kill and consume other animals. Chimps are carnivorous as well as herbivorous. Why does the Sea Shepherd obstruct human primate consumption, but does nothing to obstruct nonhuman primate consumption? What could be more speciesistic?

There's the claim that we're fishing certain species to extinction, but even if that were true, nature is no respecter of species. Mass extinctions are a fixture of evolutionary history.

## Viewer advisory

I saw a few episodes of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. The scenery is reminiscent of where I grew up, although we were spared the Arctic winters. The show is about an extended family who live off the land in Homer, Alaska.

What's funny is that after each commercial break, before returning to the show, Animal Planet runs a content warning about how some viewers might find some of the images "disturbing." It might not be "appropriate" for some viewers.

Let's see. There's a scene in which the family eats the milk cow. You don't actually see them shoot it. You just hear the gunshot, then see a BBQ. There's another scene in which someone shoots a squirrel, cooks it over an open fire, and eats it.

Are these the sorts of "disturbing" scenes which some viewers might be too squeamish to watch? Do they really need a viewer advisory to protect them from being traumatized by what they see?

This illustrates how out-of-touch environmentalists are with the environment. Hunting game and butchering livestock was how our not-so-distant ancestors put food on the table. If you lived off the land, you can't order delivery tofu burgers.

But, of course, most environmentalists are hitech urbanites. They don't live off the land. They live in climate-controlled condos and eat processed food.

Keep in mind that Animal Planet also has the usual run of nature shows with lions, sharks, snakes, and crocodiles eating animals alive. That's far more graphic than watching a hunter shoot a rabbit or pluck a chicken.

Environmentalists act like every wild animal is a pet dog or cat.

## Wok your dog

This raises an interesting conundrum for liberal ideology:

<http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/10/04/why-you-shouldnt-eat-dogs/>

On the one hand you have vegans and animal rights activities who think "meat is murder."

On the other hand you have Asian cultures who view dogs and cats as edible. Gives new meaning to the phrase "pet food."

So does multiculturalism take precedence?

## "Compassionate eating"

I'm going to comment on this article:

<http://byfaithonline.com/the-case-for-eating-compassionately/>

i) First thing I'd ask: who's the editor of *By Faith*? Why is the online magazine of the PCA pushing this politically correct rubbish?

It's like Invasion of the Body-Snatchers. Your neighbors are replaced by pod people. Alien lookalikes. When did By Faith become infiltrated by contributors like this? I'd note in passing that the previous article takes the Jim Wallis view on illegal immigration.

Here's a better idea: do an article on why Peter Enns is still a PCA elder in good standing.

ii) The article is written by a vegetarian. What a surprise.

Billions of animals are thus negated each year, denied the environment and context in which to live out their lives in the manner in which their Creator designed them: running, foraging, grazing, ranging, scratching, breeding, socializing.

That's very idyllic—like a Disney film, with fawns, butterflies, chipmunks, and bunny-rabbits. Of course, for those of us who watch nature shows, life in the wild typically consists of prey eaten alive by predators. Is that more humane than "factory farms"? Some species practice filial cannibalism. Is that more humane than "factory farms"?

CAFOs are the "factory farms" that produce the overwhelming majority of today's animal-based food. To many people concerned with animal welfare, including some Christians, CAFOs are notorious. More than simply being locations where animal cruelty takes place, CAFOs themselves are a systematized form of

creature abuse. Matthew Scully calls them “negation” — negation of cows, pigs, and chickens as created beings and affirmation of them only as units of production.

i) Like atheists who hyperventilate about the (alleged) problem of animal suffering, Mobley treats all animals alike, as if one species is interchangeable with another species. But animals range along a continuum of sentience.

Not only are some wild animals naturally stupid, but livestock are bred to be stupid. That makes them more manageable. More docile. Less likely to escape or attack the farmer or rancher.

Chickens aren't very bright—to put it mildly. What's the emotional life of a chicken?

Likewise, cows are awfully dumb. And they are bred to be dumb. If milk cows and beef cattle had the intelligence or temperament of Cape Buffalo, they'd be extremely dangerous for farmers and rangers to work with.

Pigs may be smarter than cattle, although that isn't saying much.

ii) In addition, we need to distinguish social animals that bond with humans (e.g. dogs, horses) from animals that don't bond with humans.

For instance, I think dogfighting should be illegal, but I don't think cockfighting should be illegal. I think cockfighting is depraved. It reflects very badly on the humans. But let's face it, chickens are really dumb. Honestly, what's a chicken's capacity for mental anguish?

iii) Consider the OT kosher laws. That involves slitting the animal's throat (*shechitah*). Animal rights activists have lobbied to have *shechitah* outlawed because they think it's inhumane. Did God command animal cruelty?



## Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?

I saw this show last night:

<http://www.bostonherald.com/entertainment/television/reviews/view.bg?articleid=1061155360&format=text>

It was refreshing. All my life I've heard it said that there are no confirmed reports of people killed by wolves. That's just folklore. Or so we're told.

Of course, even if there were no confirmed reports, that wouldn't mean much. Wolves (and scavengers) tend to consume the evidence. Moreover, victims are usually killed in remote, isolated areas. So I wouldn't necessarily expect their death to be reported. In the wilderness, you can disappear without a trace.

I never believed the claim. This is animal rights propaganda. It's antecedently improbable that a hungry wolf pack wouldn't kill a human. An unarmed human is easy prey. Much easier than a bull moose.

The only reason wolves would hesitate to kill humans is if they fear humans, which would only be the case if wolves are hunted by humans. But that's what "conservationists" oppose.

Environmentalists, who generally live in cities, are reacting to a time when ranchers hunted local wolves to extinction. So they try to portray wolves as "misunderstood" animals.

I think it's nice to have areas where wild animals (including major predators) can survive and thrive. But let's not pretend that wolves aren't potentially dangerous to man.





## Unbearable

Lydia McGrew did a fine post on animal rights fanatics:

[http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2013/04/killt\\_him\\_a\\_bar.html](http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2013/04/killt_him_a_bar.html)

I'd like to make an additional point. From what I've read, bears (especially grizzly bears and polar bears) have no natural fear of man (Black bears aren't as large or aggressive, although they are not to be trifled with.). When the white man starting pushing into grizzly bear and polar bear territory, the bears attacked humans without hesitation.

But back then, human settlers had no compunctions about shooting bears. And bears aren't stupid. It didn't take them long to figure out that humans were dangerous. At that point, many bears would flee when they sensed the presence of humans.

BTW, I'm not saying these areas were uninhabited. But Indians with bows and arrows weren't much of a match for a charging grizzly bear.

However, now that we're protecting bears from humans rather than protecting humans from bears, I expect there will be more bear-maulings because bears will revert. Lose their acquired fear of humans.

And, of course, this isn't confined to bears. It also applies to other major predators like wolves and cougars.

BTW, I think all animal rights fanatics should be put in a cage overnight with a wolf or grizzly bear.



## Hunting

**i)** I'm going to venture some comments on hunting. I myself am not a hunter, much less a trophy hunter, so I have no vested interest in this debate. I do have male relatives who are hunters, but that's just not something I grew up doing.

I did grow up with nature shows and TV dramas like *Daktari* and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. I've watched nature shows all my life. I had a normal boy's interest in animals. Read many reference works on zoology. Read a book by a big-game hunter in Africa. Another book by a wolf-trapper. And a book by Joy Adamson. That's my background, such as it is.

**ii)** Some people distinguish between hunting and poaching. I think that's a valid distinction in principle. There are some problems in practice:

**a)** In poor countries, poaching is so lucrative that I doubt it's realistic to hope we can save animals by law. I like the idea of a wildlife refuge or sanctuary. But where a prize kill can fetch so much money in a poor country where money goes a long ways, I doubt we can successfully protect animals that way. Given the economic situation, laws are an ineffective deterrent. The potential reward outweighs the potential risk.

I've read many naturalists admit that zoos are probably the only way to save some animals from extinction. But some animal rights activists are so fanatical that they'd rather see animals go extinct than be kept in zoos.

**b)** Although it's valid to regulate hunting to prevent overhunting, this is a highly politicized issue. Animal rights activists, who oppose hunting and trapping in principle, will lobby gov't to declare a species "endangered" as a pretext to further their radical agenda. It's naive to unquestioningly accept a gov't classification.

**iii)** Feminism and animal rights activism intersect. Many men enjoy hunting. There's a concerted effort to shame men for enjoying things that come naturally to men.

But there's no reason men should be made to feel defensive about that, any more than women should be made to feel defensive about activities that many women naturally enjoy. This is anti-male bigotry.

I'd add that there are natural Tomboys who enjoy stereotypically masculine activities. Likewise, there are women who've grown up in wilderness areas where it's normal to be around guns. Where it's normal to hunt with their father or brothers.

Men enjoy hunting for the same reasons they enjoy sports, paintball, or archery tag. Competition. Comradarie. Testing yourself.

A hunter has to be very alert to his natural surroundings. Use his eyes and ears. Notice clues. Give the situation his undivided attention.

When stalking dangerous quarry, there's a heightened sense of alertness to the hunter's surroundings. His life depends on it. That's primal. Instinctual. Confronting life without a safety net. Just you and nature in direct contact.

Takes us back to an earlier time, not so very long ago, when we didn't have the suffocating technological bubblewrap. Our culture has become insanely risk-averse. I see lots of skaters with elaborate safety gear, on a straight level paved trail. They don't dare use a skateboard or roller skates without suiting up in full-body armor. What's next—human hamster balls for joggers?

There's nothing wrong with men being men—just as there's nothing wrong with women being women. Moreover, it's a salutary way of channeling male aggression.

**iv)** Is bowhunting more or less ethical than hunting with a rifle? On the one hand, in bowhunting, you're more likely to injure the animal rather than kill it outright. Some people think that's cruel. Mind you, it's no more cruel than how most animals naturally die in the wild.

On the other hand, lots of folks who object to hunting complain that it isn't fair; the animal didn't have a fighting chance against a high-powered rifle. By that standard, it's far riskier to the hunter to shoot some animals with an bow and arrow than a high-powered rifle

Likewise, it's very hazardous to track a wounded predator. So, from the standpoint of "sportsmanship," one could argue that bowhunting is "fairer" than using a gun. As a friend of mine said:

Bowhunting predators is a risky business:

- 1.** You have to get significantly closer.
- 2.** You have to make sure you hit him exactly in the sweet spot so he'll bleed out rather than become enraged.

**3.** You don't get a second shot.

## Snack food

Years ago I saw a special on Darwin, Australia. When settlers first moved into the area, it was infested with crocodiles. Saltwater crocodiles—along with the Nile crocodile—are the most dangerous crocodylian species. That made Darwin a hazardous place for humans to inhabit.

But back then, settlers did what settlers normally do: eliminate the major natural predators that pose a threat to man and livestock. They decimated the crocodile population, which made Darwin a much safer place to live.

But that was then and this is now. Thanks to the environmentalists, Darwin has reverted to its crocodile infested state of nature. In the meantime, the human population has greatly expanded from when the area was originally settled. And the situation is aggravated by periodic flooding, which brings crocodiles directly into populated areas.

How do the local authorities respond? "Be careful!"

No doubt that's good advice, but it takes the status quo for granted. It treats the massive crocodile population as a given. The issue, then, is not about crocodile control, but human control. Human behavior management.

Not surprisingly, there are Darwin residents who don't think the lives of crocodiles rate higher than human lives, but they complain in vain. This is an example of how a culture elite imposes its views on everyone else to the detriment of everyone else.



## Know-nothing nature lovers

I used walk along a paved trail where I was living at the time. Lots of folks walked their dogs there, too. As temperatures rose, some of them tried to hydrate their dogs.

Depending on how far I walked, there are four drinking fountains along the way. The one at the far end actually had a ground-level drinking fountain for dogs. But the others did not.

Some dog owners bring a little water bowl along. Some fill a cap with water. Some let the dog drink directly from their water bottle. Great idea, having dog germs on the water bottle you drink from.

One time I saw the owner of a toy dog lift the animal so that it could drink from the (human) water fountain. Get dog germs on that, while you're at it.

Now, why do I mention this? Because I left something out. The trail was right alongside a river. That's why it's popular. It's scenic.

It doesn't even occur to these dog owners that on a hot day, the logical way to hydrate your dog is to walk it down to the river—just a few yards a way. You know, the way people water their horse in Westerns? Or nature shows where wild animals frequent the local watering hole.

Not only could the dog drink, but on a hot day it could cool off in the river. Jump in. Get wet all over.

But somehow, these dog owners can't make the connection between a river and a thirsty dog. How do they think animals hydrate in the wild? Do they think wild animals drink tap water?

No, wild animals drink from rivers, lakes, ponds—even mud puddles.

I'm sure most of these dutiful dog-owners pride themselves on being animal lovers and environmentalists, yet they don't know the first thing about nature or animals. Even when nature is right under their nose, they can't make the connection.

I suspect their problem is that when they look at their dear pet dog, they don't see a canine—they see a furry human. And since they (the dog-owner) wouldn't drink river water, they subconsciously imagine that's unsanitary for a dog.

Of course, dogs have a tougher digestive system than humans. For that matter, our forebears had a tougher digestive system than we do.

## Dog "raped" and "murdered"

Let's begin with some headlines:

### **Dog found raped, murdered and left hanging from tree**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/dog-raped-murdered-hanging-tree-5000-reward-us-washington-a6954286.html>

### **Suspect arrested in rape, murder of Thurston Co. dog**

<http://www.kiro7.com/news/suspect-identified-in-rape-murder-of-thurston-co-dog/205174866>

### **FBI investigating dog rape, murder in Thurston County**

<http://www.kiro7.com/news/fbi-investigating-dog-rape-murder-in-thurston-county/178830564>

### **FBI investigating dog rape, murder in Thurston County**

<http://www.nbcrightnow.com/story/31565710/graphic-warning-fbi-investigating-dog-rape-murder-in-thurston-county>

So much to discuss:

**i)** Well, I guess we can be grateful that the FBI is investigating a dog killing rather than harassing conservative high school students:

<http://www.dailywire.com/news/4071/fbi-tells-high-schools-watch-out-anti-government-james-barrett>

That said, what does it say about current law enforcement priorities that the FBI is now investigating a dog that was killed?

**ii)** Notice that the mainstream media now classifies the killing of a dog as "murder". You can "murder" a dog—just like you can murder a human. Indeed, killing a dog is "murder," but killing a baby is reproductive freedom.

**iii)** Yet organizations like PAWS and the Humane Society kill animals. They call it "euthanasia". Is that "murder"? Certainly the animal didn't sign a consent form to be euthanized.

**iv)** Likewise, the same mainstream media now classifies bestiality as "rape". That's very instructive. Let's pursue that line of thought;

**v)** I myself think this was a perverted deed. However, I'm a knuckle-dragging fundamentalist who gets his moral code from a Bronze Age book about a glorified storm-god (or so we're told). So let's bracket my retrograde religious beliefs and approach the issue from the standpoint of an enlightened atheist:

**vi)** Peter Singer is the best-known, and perhaps the most influential, secular bioethicist of his generation. Yet he defends bestiality:

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/2001----.htm>

So we're going to have a conflict between secular animal rights activists who think bestiality is "rape", and secular proponents of zoophilia, zoosexuality, and/or bestiality.

**vii)** Presumably, the media said the dog was "raped" because this was forcible or coercive penetration. Against the animal's will.

If so, one problem with that rationale is that consent isn't a prerequisite for copulation in the animal kingdom. For instance, ever see ducks at mating season? Not much interest in foreplay. No candlelight dinner. Doesn't look like consensual sex to me.

**viii)** Perhaps, though, the argument would be that because the perpetrator was human, different rules apply. But suppose the perpetrator claims to be otherkin? Say he self-identifies as a dog. In that event, is it rape for him to sodomize a dog? Shouldn't we judge him by canine standards rather than our provincial, anthropomorphic standards?

For that matter, dogs kill other dogs. So if a person who self-identifies as a dog or wild predator (e.g. grizzly bear, Siberian tiger) kills a dog, how is that "murder"? When one animal kills another animal, zoologists don't classify that as murder. To do so would be speciesism.

**ix)** If, moreover, otherkin is a valid identity, just like transgenderism, then it isn't murder when a person who

self-identifies as a wild predator kills a human. After all, it's only natural for major predators to kill humans.

## Shooting King Kong to save Fay Wray

The predictably hysterical reaction to shooting of a gorilla to protect a child raises a number of issues:

**i)** We've had generations of Americans raised on evolution and environmentalism. They believe humans are just animals, like other animals. And they believe humans pose a threat to the ecosystem. In theory, they don't value human life above animal life. In fact, some of them demote human life in relation to animal life. Take the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society.

**ii)** Apropos (i), you have Darwinians who extrapolate from human rights to animal rights. After all, we're all just a bunch of animals.

It would, however, be more logical to reverse the inference. If there's nothing special about humans, then there's nothing special about any animal. Given naturalistic evolution, there's no basis for human rights or animals rights (a point I've argued in many occasions, so I won't repeat myself here).

Mind you, even if evolution were true, you can still value your own species more highly than other species.

**iii)** Indeed, the outrage graphically illustrates the consequences of a secular outlook, where nothing has intrinsic value. A child is only valuable if enough humans value his life. If more humans value a gorilla's life, then, given a choice, they will sacrifice the child to protect the gorilla.

Atheism is dangerous for everyone—not least for atheists. Secular ethics is inherently unstable. No one is safe. It all depends on who or what is valued at any given moment. An animal. A protected class. And that can change overnight.

**iv)** Many people have pitifully limited conceptual resources for assessing ethical issues. They filter every issue through hypocrisy or fairness.

You have outraged people who complain that Harambe was "unfairly" or "unjustly" killed. Indeed, "murdered."

But sometimes, justice or fairness is irrelevant. Is it fair when a wolf pack runs down an elk?

Is it fair that Michael Jordan is 6' 6". Would he be a basketball star if he were 5' 6"?

Is it fair that some diabetics must have a foot amputated? No. But that may be medically necessary to save the life of the diabetic.

Sometimes you have a duty to do things, not because it's fair, but because it's necessary.

It would be immoral to risk the child's safety to protect the gorilla. Wild animals can turn on a dime. The duty is to protect the child, not the animal. When in doubt, the child's safety takes absolute precedence over the animal's safety.

**v)** We have a developing culture divide where many young people operate with an antinatalist philosophy. They love dogs and cats instead of children. They consider children to be a nuisance. They resent children. They resent the elderly and developmentally disabled. Animal welfare becomes their alternative to true humanitarian concern. It makes



them feel virtuous to be kind to animals as a substitute for charity towards babies, the elderly, and the developmentally disabled.

## A moment in the sun

I'd like to consider the shooting of the gorilla (Harambe) from both a secular standpoint and a Christian standpoint.

**1.** I suspect most folks who wax indignant over shooting the gorilla to save the boy are Darwinian atheists. There may be some "progressive Christians" thrown in for good measure.

From a secular standpoint, the reaction to shooting the gorilla is irrational. Animals are temporary organisms. Harambe was not immortal. He was going to die anyway. Just a matter of time.

Animals naturally die. In the wild, many animals die a violent death: killed by predators. Many animals die young due to relentless predation.

Although Harambe was a magnificent specimen, individual animals are utterly replaceable. One male, silverback gorilla serves the same function as another male, silverback gorilla. The players change, but the play remains the same.

From an ecosystemic perspective, animals aren't more important than plants. There's a symbiosis between plants and animals, life and death, that sustains a balanced ecosystem. Animal death is necessary.

Nature is utterly indifferent to the plight of animals. According to Darwinians, most species become extinct.

Some atheists profess an Epicurean outlook on human death. As Mark Twain boastfully put it: "I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I

was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.”

In consistency, they should view animal death the same way.

**2.** From a Christian perspective, animals are temporary creatures. There is no afterlife for animals.

Perhaps God will resurrect Christian pets. I'm open to that possibility. But there's no reason to think God will resurrect animals generally. Indeed, there's not nearly enough room on planet earth to accommodate all the animals that ever lived and died.

With the possible exception of Christian pets, when an animal dies, that's it. It's gone. It won't come back. End of story. Life goes on, but not for it.

The animal kingdom is stark and sobering. Immortality is a rare gift. Among all God's creatures, only humans are promised biological immortality. Angels are the only other exception, and strictly speaking, they aren't alive (in the biological sense).

A few months ago I saw some coyotes frolicking in a meadow. Having their moment in the sun. That will pass. They will pass. In a few years, they will die—never to return.

A few days ago I sat down on a park bench. I noticed a little rabbit right beside me. Practically a baby. Unafraid of humans. It was busily feeding on the moist green grass.

Odds are, it won't survive until adulthood, and even if it does, it, too, will die. Mostly likely be killed by predators.

The gift of immortality is one thing that sets us apart from animals. Sure, we die, but that's punitive. Although humans are mortal, we die once but live twice. We have immortal souls. And we will be resurrected. For some, that's a gift—for others, that's a curse.

## The limitations of animals rights

One issue is that animals range along a psychological continuum. A chicken isn't a dog. Some people even fret over boiling lobsters, as if they can register pain the way higher animals do. But that sidesteps the question of which animals are capable of suffering. Once again, biological organisms range along a continuum of sentience. Bacteria, microbes, earthworms, cockroaches, clams, caterpillars, snakes... Short of panpsychism, we need to draw some distinctions.

Chickens are pretty dumb? In fact, domestication intentionally breeds mother wit out of wild animals to make them more docile.

In addition to the distinction between lower and higher animals, we also need to draw some distinction between the psychology of social animals and solitary animals. Dogs descend from social animals (presumably wolves). Also, predator species tend to be smarter than prey species. And we've bred dogs to be more compatible with humans. So there's a bonding experience.

Take blood sports. Although cockfights are degenerate, I don't think they should be illegal. Not all wrongdoing should be illegal. By contrast, dogs deserve a lot better. That doesn't mean imprisonment, but fines to deter the practice.

A limitation with debates over animals rights is that such debates reflect a human view of animals. Advocates vicariously assume a human viewpoint on behalf of animals. But lower animals have no viewpoint while higher animals, even if they have a viewpoint, lack a human viewpoint. Among terrestrial creatures, only humans have the critical

detachment to objectify our situation. To view ourselves from the perspective of an outside observer. And there's the danger of projecting our privileged viewpoint onto animals that do not and cannot share our outlook.

At best, we could extrapolate from adults who care for humans who lack that capacity (e.g. kids before the age of reason, the developmentally disabled, the senile). And that would only be applicable to some higher animals and/or social animals. And even that's not on a par with human rights.

## Evangelical Jainism

This has been kicking around for 4 years already:

<https://erlc.com/resource-library/press-releases/evangelical-coalition-releases-statement-on-responsible-care-for-animals>

Signatories include Albert Mohler, Russell Moore, Richard Land, Daniel Akin, and Bill Hybels (because nothing says moral authority like Bill Hybels). Here's a sample:

We resolve to rule and treat all animals as living valued creatures, deserving of compassion, because they ultimately belong to God, because He has created them, declared them good, given them the breath of life, covenanted with them, and entrusted them to our responsible rule. So while animals have been given into our hand and for food this does not mean we can treat them as objects or act cruelly towards them.

<http://www.everylivingthing.com/sign-the-statement/>

- i)** Does that include termites, cockroaches, deer ticks, head lice, fire ants, tape worms, bot flies, Tsetse flies, and mosquitos?
- ii)** What about rats?
- iii)** What about venomous snakes in residential areas? Or reticulating pythons in residential areas?
- iv)** What about dangerous predators in residential areas, viz. wolves, cougars, crocodiles, grizzly bears?

**v)** God didn't say every species is good. Gen 1 refers to the natural kinds that God created in the beginning.

**vi)** What about all the animals God destroys in natural disasters and mass extinctions?

The Every Living Thing site links to a video in which vegan open theist Gregory Boyd waxes sentimental about animal rights.

It has a girl who pats herself on the back because she volunteers at an animal shelter. What about volunteering to visit shut-ins, nursing homes, and hospices, full of lonely or dying people? What about abandoned street kids around the world, some of them quite young. Or child trafficking?

The video has a guy making the demonstrably false statement that "in treating animals more respectfully we will treat people more respectfully." To the contrary, lots of folks treat their pets much better than they treat strangers. Consider all the polls in which many respondents say that given a choice between saving their dog and saving a stranger, they'd save the dog. On the one hand we have laws against animal cruelty while, on the other hand, there's abortion, infanticide, and voluntary and involuntary euthanasia for the elderly, depressed, and developmentally disabled.



# Antinatalism

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## Freewill theism and antinatalism

As I've noted on more than one occasion, antinatalism is the reductio ad absurdum of atheism. But there's a sense in which antinatalism is also the reductio ad absurdum of freewill theism.

One of the major arguments for antinatalism is that it's wrong to bring someone into existence without his consent. And that generates a dilemma: you can't obtain the prior consent of a nonentity. But once you've brought him into being, it's too late for him to withhold consent. Hence, it's always wrong to bring anyone into existence.

But, of course, that's the price of admission for contingent beings like you and me. If we are to live at all, then our will depend on factors outside ourselves, on forces beyond our control. That's the only mode of subsistence available to a creature. It's either that or nonexistence.

The antinatalist can't stand the idea of being a creature. Can't stand the inherent limitations. To be utterly dependent on something else or someone else—like a baby in a crib. He says he'd rather not exist than have to exist on such demeaning terms. If you can't be God, be nothing.

And isn't that freewill theism, taken to a logical extreme?

## A "Christian" argument for antinatalism

<https://randalrauser.com/2019/03/a-christian-argument-for-antinatalism/>

To begin with, this isn't an original argument. Antinatalists have been using variations on that argument as a pressure point against Christians.

Let's consider the first premise:

(1) The belief that there is a reasonable chance (e.g. more than 20%) that your future child would be born with a horrifying and untreatable disease like Stevens-Johnson syndrome would provide a good reason to avoid having children.

**i)** Really? That's hardly self-evident. That consideration must be counterbalanced by the good of having other children. To avoid having a child with Stevens-Johnson syndrome by avoiding procreation in toto deprives other future children of the opportunity to have a good life. So this is not a question that can be answered in isolation to what may be countervailing considerations. Acting for the sake of more than one party. Rauser oversimplifies the issue.

**ii)** In addition, this life is not all there is. This life is just a nanosecond in relation to everlasting life. So the real choice would be between the nonexistence of a child with Stevens-Johnson syndrome or the existence of a child who temporarily suffers from that disease, but may have the opportunity to enjoy eternal happiness. Suffering at the front end is the only way to find happiness at the back end. So, once more, Rauser oversimplifies the issue.

Since Rauser isn't stupid, he's probably aware of the fact that his formulation is devious. He deliberately suppresses relevant factors. Moving along:

(3) Therefore, if the belief that there is a reasonable chance that your future child would be born with Stevens-Johnson syndrome would provide a good reason to avoid having children, then the belief that there is a reasonable chance that your future child would ultimately experience eternal conscious torment provides a good reason to avoid having children.

In addition to building on a false premise (see above), this seems to operate from the general principle that no one should be allowed to be happy unless everyone is happy. No one should go to heaven if anyone goes to hell. Better for no one to exist than for some to be happy if anyone is miserable.

But why should we accept that principle? And it's not as if the happy group are happy at the expense of the miserable group. Rauser acts like the wicked should be able to deny everyone else a joyful existence. Why should the wicked be granted ultimate power over the fate of everyone else? What kind of perverted logic is Rauser appealing to?

# Bribery

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## Counter-cheating

**i)** Is it cheating to cheat a cheater? Suppose I'm in a poker game. My opponent has bribed the dealer to stack the deck in his favor. If I cheat just enough to compensate for the cardsharp, is that dishonest?

I'm not cheating to secure an unfair advantage. To the contrary, I'm taking countermeasures to restore the balance. Make an unfair situation fair again. Call that counter-cheating, to rectify the disparity.

Indeed, the very concept of cheating presumes a situation in which most folks play by the rules. If nobody plays by the rules, then there are no de facto rules.

In fact, even if I cheated more than necessary, there's a sense in which my opponent would have it coming. Like double restitution for theft (cf. Exod 22; Lev 6). If a thief only has to repay what he stole, he has no incentive to refrain from stealing. He's only returning stolen property because he got caught on that occasion. Consider all the other times he got away with it. So unless there's an additional sanction to deter him, he has nothing to lose and everything to gain by continuing to steal.

**ii)** Many Christians avoid these dicey issues. They cast themselves as "absolutists." They think that simplifies matters. Just do the right thing and let God sort out the results.

Now, I myself am an absolutist in the sense that I believe in moral absolutes. Some actions are intrinsically right or wrong, obligatory or prohibitory. However, belief in moral absolutes doesn't entail that every action is reducible to

absolute duties, without regard to circumstances or consequences.

Moreover, "absolutism" is deceptively simple. For instance, if I do nothing to offset the actions of an evildoer, doesn't that make me complicit in his evil? If nothing is done to overcome his evil actions, then I'm passively facilitating his evil. So that doesn't ipso facto get me off the hook.

Now the point of this post is not to assess the ethics of counter-cheating at poker. Poker is just a game. A social convention. I merely use that as a convenient example to illustrate morally serious situations (unlike poker) where prima facie obligations may be overridden by higher obligations.

## Life for life

One of the most moving stories in Rosenbaum's deeply moving *Holocaust and the Halakhah* tells of how one can be a great moral hero even when acting out of mistaken conscience. A man in a concentration camp comes to his rabbi with a problem. His son has been scheduled to be executed. But it is possible to bribe the kapo to get him off the death list. However, the kapo have a quota to fill, and if they let off his son, they will kill another child. Is it permissible to bribe the kapo knowing that this will result in the death of another child? The rabbi answers that, of course, it is permissible. The man goes away, but he is not convinced. He does not bribe the kapo. Instead, he concludes that God has called him to the great sacrifice of not shifting his son's death onto another. The father finds a joy in the sacrifice amidst his mourning.

The rabbi was certainly right. The father's conscience presumably was mistaken (unless God specifically spoke to him and required the sacrifice). Yet the father is a moral hero in acting from this mistaken conscience.

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2019/09/fulfilling-requests.html>

**i)** I disagree with Pruss. All things being equal, it's certainly permissible or even obligatory for the father to bribe the kapo to save the life of his innocent young son. And that principle could be extended to protecting innocent lives generally.

**ii)** If there are two drowning children, one of whom is yours, it's permissible or even obligatory to save your own.



You have a greater duty to your own dependents, despite the tragedy to the other child.

But this hypothetical has greater moral complexity. It isn't just a question of whether the prima facie vice of bribery can be overridden. That's a separate issue. Considered in isolation, sometimes that's justifiable or incumbent. Bribery is not intrinsically wrong.

But by bribing the kapo, the father would knowingly facilitate child murder. He is collaborating with the child-killers. He becomes a part of that moral and causal nexus.

So the rabbi was most certainly wrong while the father was most certainly right. Although it would be psychologically understandable if the father did that, and there are mitigating factors, the deed remains objectively heinous.

**iii)** Mind you, this assumes we inhabit a moral universe where there's at least one right course of action open to us. That requires a strong doctrine of providence. If, on the other hand, reality confronts us with genuine moral dilemmas, then we're on our own.

# Contraception

## "Contraception and chastity"

Here's an oft-quoted statement by Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe:

If contraceptive intercourse is permissible, then what objection could there be after all to mutual masturbation, or copulation in vase indebito, sodomy, buggery (I should perhaps remark that I am using a legal term here - not indulging in bad language), when normal copulation is impossible or inadvisable (or in any case, according to taste)? It can't be the mere pattern of bodily behaviour in which the stimulation is procured that makes all the difference! But if such things are all right, it becomes perfectly impossible to see anything wrong with homosexual intercourse, for example. I am not saying: if you think contraception all right you will do these other things; not at all. The habit of respectability persists and old prejudices die hard. But I am saying: you will have no solid reason against these things. You will have no answer to someone who proclaims as many do that they are good too. You cannot point to the known fact that Christianity drew people out of the pagan world, always saying no to these things. Because, if you are defending contraception, you will have rejected Christian tradition.

The entire essay is currently available here:

<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/AnscombeChastity.php>

A few preliminaries:

**i)** I believe her primary audience is Catholic. She's writing to and for Catholics. As such, she sometimes mounts an argument from authority which is legitimate when addressing a Catholic audience, but begs the question in reference to a Protestant reader.

**ii)** Then there's the question of terminology. I don't know the intended distinction between sodomy and buggery. These are often used as synonyms. However, buggery may be a broader category, which includes both oral and anal sex.

**iii)** Assuming that's the intended distinction, it doesn't ipso facto follow that if one is wrong, both are wrong. In principle, anal intercourse could be intrinsically wrong whereas oral sex could be morally permissible under some circumstances. To condemn both requires a supporting argument, which she doesn't furnish. She just takes for granted that oral sex is morally equivalent to anal intercourse, both of which are morally equivalent to contraceptive intercourse. That's understandable when addressing a Catholic audience, where certain things are taken for granted. It's more a question of why be Catholic. But given Catholicism, you can simply punt to the authority of the Magisterium—at least in principle. However, that appeal has no sway for a Protestant reader.

**iv)** Conversely, is she using "sodomy" as a synonym for homosexuality, or a synonym for anal sex?

**v)** In addition, there's a potential moral distinction between oral sex involving a heterosexual married couple and a homosexual man performing *fellatio* on another man. What would make it wrong is not the act itself, but by whom and on whom it's performed.

To take a comparison, erotic kissing between a man and a woman is morally permissible, whereas erotic kissing between two men is morally impermissible. In both cases it's the same act. What makes it licit in one case and illicit in the other concerns the parties to the act and not the act itself. My purpose is not to argue that point, but simply draw attention to distinctions which she fails to make.

Consensual incest is another example. Copulation between a parent and a grown child involves the same sex act as copulation between a man and wife, yet that doesn't make them morally equivalent. The moral differential factor is not the nature of the act, but the nature of the parties to the act.

**vi)** The same issue arises in the case of "mutual masturbation." In principle, that could be homosexual or heterosexual. If the latter, that could be marital, premarital, or extramarital. To say it's wrong in general demands a supporting argument. The fact that homosexual, and heterosexual pre/extramarital mutual masturbation is wrong doesn't entail that heterosexual marital mutual masturbation is wrong.

Suppose, for instance, a married couple uses that as foreplay. Or suppose, for some reason, that a married couple can't engage in sexual intercourse. Is mutual masturbation wrong in that situation? If so, Anscombe needs to supply an argument.

To ask, even rhetorically, "what objection could there be after all to...sodomy...when normal copulation is impossible or inadvisable...it becomes perfectly impossible to see anything wrong with homosexual intercourse" is very slack reasoning. Normal copulation refers to heterosexual copulation. If that's impossible or inadvisable, how does it

follow that homosexual alternatives would become unobjectionable? If the context begins with heterosexual conjugal relations, how do impediments to that suddenly shift the sexual repertoire to sodomy? Perhaps she's using "sodomy" as a sexual technique (anal sex) rather than sex with a partner of the same gender (man on man). If so, that would keep all the examples within the confines of heterosexual relations.

**vii)** There are at least two moral objections to anal intercourse:

- a) It's unpleasant to the recipient.
- b) It's hazardous—especially to the recipient.
- c) I'd add that there's a potential objection to oral sex on the same grounds: is it hazardous?

**viii)** If, however, she's using "sodomy" as a synonym for homosexuality, the insinuation is that once you decouple sex from procreative intent, there's no moral distinction between homosexual and heterosexual activity. But that's not a straightforward inference. There are several moral objections to homosexual activity:

- a) It is hazardous. Male and female bodies are sexually complementary in ways that two bodies of the same gender are not. That results in physically destructive behavior as well as diseases that are either unique to homosexual activity or aggravated by homosexual activity.
- b) Humans of the same gender are psychologically unsuited to form erotic emotional bonds with each other. It's a kind of mental illness.

There are "solid reasons" for (vii) and (viii) alike. It's intellectually irresponsible for Anscombe to say otherwise. Indeed, that's inconsistent with her larger position. There are natural law arguments against anal intercourse and homosexuality. And she herself resorts natural law ethics.

**ix)** Then there's the meaning of the phrase "copulation *in vase indebito*." That's a quaint technical term in Catholic moral theology. I don't know if she's using it to denote anal sex or "Onanism" (i.e. *coitus interruptus*). If the latter, that begs the question, since the very issue in dispute is whether contraception is morally licit or illicit. If the former, see above.

Furthermore, while one doesn't have to be learned (nobody has to be learned) or able to give a convincing account of the reasons for a teaching - for remember that the Church teaches with the authority of a divine commission, and the Pope has a prophetic office, not a chair of science or moral philosophy or theology - all the same the moral teaching of the Church, by her own claims, is supposed to be reasonable. Christian moral teachings aren't revealed mysteries like the Trinity. The lack of clear accounts of the reason in the teaching was disturbing to many people. Especially, I believe, to many of the clergy whose job it was to give the teaching to the people.

That exposes a dilemma for Catholic apologists like Anscombe. The argument from authority won't work, even if you acknowledge the religious authority in question, because moral theology is grounded in natural law, and natural law reasoning must rise and fall on the merits of the argument from proper function. The argument should work on its own terms, within the natural law framework. It

should be sound apart from appeals to religious authority. The arguments must be reasonable on their own grounds.

As a Catholic apologist, Anscombe must play the hand she was dealt. But what if her denomination's position on birth control is ad hoc? Then her supporting arguments will be ad hoc. Ultimately, the supporting arguments can't be better than the underlying position they are deployed to defend.

Again, with effective contraceptive techniques and real physiological knowledge available, a new question came to the fore. I mean that of the rational limitation of families. Because of ignorance, people in former times who did not choose continence could effect such limitation only by obviously vile and disreputable methods. So no one envisaged a policy of seeking to have just a reasonable number of children (by any method other than continence over sufficient periods) as a policy compatible with chastity. Indeed the very notion "a reasonable number of children" could hardly be formulated compatibly with thinking at once decently and realistically. It had to be left to God what children one had.

With society becoming more and more contraceptive, the pressure felt by Catholic married people became great. The restriction of intercourse to infertile periods "for grave reasons" was offered to them as a recourse - at first in a rather gingerly way (as is intelligible in view of the mental background I have sketched) and then with increasing recommendation of it. For in this method the act of copulation was not itself adapted in any way so as to render it infertile, and so the condemnation of acts of contraceptive intercourse as somehow perverse and so as grave breaches of chastity, did not apply to this. All other methods,



Catholics were very emphatically taught, were "against the natural law".

The substantive, hard teaching of the Church which all Catholics were given up to 1964 was clear enough: all artificial methods of birth control were taught to be gravely wrong if, before, after, or during intercourse you do something intended to turn that intercourse into an infertile act if it would otherwise have been fertile.

The new knowledge, indeed, does give the best argument I know of that can be devised for allowing that contraceptives are after all permissible according to traditional Christian morals. The argument would run like this: There is not much ancient tradition condemning contraception as a distinct sin. The condemnations which you can find from earliest times were almost all of early abortion (called homicide) or of unnatural vice. But contraception, if it is an evil thing to do, is distinct from these, and so the question is really open.

**i)** Which is a backdoor admission that artificial contraception doesn't really contradict tradition. It's anachronistic to prooftext opposition to contraception from church fathers or scholastic theologians, for given their primitive scientific understanding, they were unable to distinguish between abortion and contraception. So even if you think we should defer to the wisdom of church fathers and scholastic theologians, you can't invoke their opinion in this case, for it involves a more specialized question than they were in a position to consider at the time.

**ii)** And, of course, this has no cachet for Protestants. It's not that we should simply disregard tradition. Rather,

tradition has no inherent authority. We should give the church fathers and scholastic theologians a respectful hearing. But it comes down to the quality of their arguments. They are not authority figures.

We have seen that the theological defence of the Church's teaching in modern times did not assimilate contraception to abortion but characterized it as a sort of perversion of the order of nature. The arguments about this were rather uneasy, because it is not in general wrong to interfere with natural processes.

That's a very significant caveat, which she doesn't pursue. To oppose contraception along those lines, you'd need to present and defend a principle according to which interfering with natural processes is generally permissible, but wrong in this particular (or analogous) instance. However, having raised the issue, Anscombe fails to develop that line of thought. Perhaps because that's a dead-end. So she must look elsewhere to bolster her position. But she just leaves it hanging out there.

At this point she draws hairsplitting distinctions regarding intent. Perhaps *that's* the principle which distinguishes licit from illicit interference with natural processes—at least in this case:

For it was obvious that if a woman just happened to be in the physical state which such a contraceptive brings her into by art no theologian would have thought the fact, or the knowledge of it, or the use of the knowledge of it, straightaway made intercourse bad. Or, again, if a woman took an anovulant pill for a while to check dysmenorrhea no one would have thought this prohibited intercourse. So, clearly, it was the contraceptive intention that was bad, if contraceptive

intercourse was: it is not that the sexual act in these circumstances is physically distorted. This had to be thought out, and it was thought out in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

Here, however, people still feel intensely confused, because the intention where oral contraceptives are taken seems to be just the same as when intercourse is deliberately restricted to infertile periods. In one way this is true, and its truth is actually pointed out by *Humanae Vitae*, in a passage I will quote in a moment. But in another way it's not true.

The reason why people are confused about intention, and why they sometimes think there is no difference between contraceptive intercourse and the use of infertile times to avoid conception, is this: They don't notice the difference between "intention" when it means the intentionalness of the thing you're doing - that you're doing this on purpose - and when it means a further or accompanying intention with which you do the thing. For example, I make a table: that's an intentional action because I am doing just that on purpose. I have the further intention of, say, earning my living, doing my job by making the table. Contraceptive intercourse and intercourse using infertile times may be alike in respect of further intention, and these further intentions may be good, justified, excellent. This the Pope has noted.

He sketched such a situation and said: "It cannot be denied that in both cases the married couple, for acceptable reasons," (for that's how he imagined the case) "are perfectly clear in their intention to avoid children and mean to secure that none will be born." This is a comment on the two things: contraceptive

intercourse on the one hand and intercourse using infertile times on the other, for the sake of the limitation of the family.

But contraceptive intercourse is faulted, not on account of this further intention, but because of the kind of intentional action you are doing. The action is not left by you as the kind of act by which life is transmitted, but is purposely rendered infertile, and so changed to another sort of act altogether.

There's all the world of difference between this and the use of the "rhythm" method. For you use the rhythm method not just by having intercourse now, but by not having it next week, say; and not having it next week isn't something that does something to today's intercourse to turn it into an infertile act; today's intercourse is an ordinary act of intercourse, an ordinary marriage act.

**i)** The problem with this argument is that it falls short of what she needs to prove. It is not enough to draw distinctions between one kind of contraceptive intent and another kind of contraceptive intent. For that, by itself, fails to explain what makes one licit and the other illicit. So she needs to take it to the next step by explicating why that's a morally salient distinction. Yet she simply drops the analysis at that crucial juncture of the argument.

**ii)** Her omission is striking. She was a very capable philosopher. What is more, she was married to a very capable philosopher. Both were pious Catholics who wrote in defense of traditional moral theology. If, despite putting their heads together, she's unable to explain and defend why "artificial" contraceptive intent is wrong—unlike "natural" contraception intent—then the prospects for

making that argument must be pretty dim. This is about as good as it gets. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach were the power couple of Catholic philosophers.

**iii)** And remember that by her own admission, it should be possible to mount a purely rational justification for the moral teaching of the church. A rationale that's independent of the church's authority. So she fails to solve the problem she posed for herself, as she herself framed the terms of success.

A severe morality holds that intercourse (and may hold this of eating, too) has something wrong about it if it is ever done except explicitly as being required for that preservation of human life which is what makes intercourse a good kind of action. But this involves thoroughly faulty moral psychology. God gave us our physical appetite, and its arousal without our calculation is part of the working of our sort of life. Given moderation and right circumstances, acts prompted by inclination can be taken in a general way to accomplish what makes them good in kind and there's no need for them to be individually necessary or useful for the end that makes them good kinds of action. Intercourse is a normal part of married life through the whole life of the partners in a marriage and is normally engaged in without any distinct purpose other than to have it, just as such a part of married life.

A problem with that comparison is that some of our food consumption is purely for pleasure. It has no practical justification. Take deserts. We don't do that for the nutritional value. And the pleasure isn't a side-effect of nutrition. Rather, pleasure is the only motivation, and not an incidental consequence. Some deserts may have a bit of

nutritional value, but we'd consume the desert absent nutritional value. That's not even a secondary consideration, much less the primary consideration.

## Contraceptive intent

According to Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe:

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<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/AnscombeChastity.php>

I already commented on this once before, but now I'd like to make a more specific criticism of her argument:

**i)** A basic problem with her argument is that even if you accept her abstract distinction, there's no practical distinction in the case at hand. What motivates a Protestant couple to practice artificial birth control? (a) the desire to have conjugal relations; (b) the desire to avoid conception.

What motivates a Catholic couple to practice natural family planning? (a) the desire to have conjugal relations; (b) the desire to avoid conception.

At the level of intent, their intentions are identical in both cases, whether they practice artificial birth control or natural family planning.

**ii)** Now, it may be that Anscombe is using "intent" in the technical sense of double effect theory, where the agent did not intend the bad effect insofar as that was an incidental and undesirable effect of what he positively willed. But even if we accept that distinction, it fails to salvage Anscombe's argument:

a) Avoiding conception by exploiting a woman's infertile period isn't an undesirable side-effect of their action; rather, that's a primary motivation. They want to avoid conception. That's their direct intention. And successfully evading procreation is the desired result.

Moreover, their action is a means to that end (*pace* double effect theory).

**iii)** Furthermore, she switches arguments. She begins by distinguishing between different kinds of intent, but then shifts to different kinds of actions.

## Conception, contraception, and abortion

Let's consider a standard Catholic objection to "artificial" birth control:

During our second year at seminary, however, Kimberly discovered the lie that was at the root of our married life. In research for an ethics course, she found that, until 1930, Christian churches-without exception-condemned contraception in the strongest terms. The Protestant reformers, whom we revered, went so far as to call it "murder". Scott Hahn, "A Life in the Language of Love—Birth Control and Contraception".

That's a popular Catholic trope which gets cited time and again.

**i)** From the standpoint of Protestant epistemology, that's an illicit argument from authority. Traditional opposition to contraception doesn't make the tradition true. That's a circular appeal.

**ii)** Some denominations (e.g. Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy) foster groupthink. You're supposed to believe whatever your religious superiors tell you. In that case, a consensus of opinion is just a synonym for groupthink.

There's an elementary distinction between, say, people who independently arrive at the same conclusion, and people who think alike because they relinquish their judgment to a second party. For instance, cults may have great internal unity, but that's groupthink; that's unity based on rubber-stamping whatever the cult leader says. And that's the nature of very authoritarian, topdown religious institutions.

**iii)** One of the virtues of Protestant theology is that we are free to revise traditional errors.

**iv)** Before the advent of modern science in reference to understanding the reproductive system, contraceptive technologies and pharmaceuticals, was there a meaningful distinction between contraception and abortion? Traditional opposition to contraception might well be justified at a time when "contraception" was really an attempt to induce abortion.

But it's anachronistic to apply that to the contemporary situation. The modern scientific ability to distinguish between conception, contraception, and abortion provides new information and creates new possibilities that did not exist before then. Absent relevant medical knowledge to distinguish between conception, contraception, and abortion, as well as lack of technology or pharmaceuticals which could be that discriminating, it made sense to support a blanket ban.

To take a comparison, if a farmer doesn't know how much pesticide will kill all the insects, he will play it safe by using more rather than less to buy himself a margin of error.

**v)** I'm simply responding to Catholic apologists on their own terms. There are people who think there's something impressive and disturbing about the fact that there's been a shift in Protestant theology regarding the permissibility of artificial contraception. I'm pointing out that the Catholic appeal to prior consensus ignores the basis of consensus. If the grounds for opposing something shift, then opposition may logically shift, inasmuch as the original basis for opposition is now defunct.

The mere fact that a belief is prevalent doesn't create any presumption that it's true. And even if it was justified at the time, that can be due to considerations which are now obsolete. If traditional opposition to contraception was based on the information and resources at the time, which has been rendered obsolete by subsequent developments, then the traditional position now operates on a faulty premise.

## Natural law and contraception

Catholic philosophers and theologians who support Rome's position on "artificial" birth control attempt to construct natural law arguments in defense of that position. And pop Catholic apologists recycle those arguments.

Natural law arguments can be valuable, but they need to be formulated with great finesse. Teleology, per se, isn't sacrosanct. There's nothing wrong with impeding gravity so that we can fly airplanes. Likewise, water pumps contravene gravity to make water flow uphill.

The natural goal of a chicken egg is to hatch into a chicken, but it's not immoral to violate its tells by consuming scrambled eggs. Eating veal parmesan disrupts the natural order. After all, calves were designed to grow into cows or bulls. But eating veal parmesan is not immoral—the protestations of vegans notwithstanding.

The nose and ears weren't designed to be a platform for glasses, but it's okay to co-opt them for that purpose.

If letting nature take its course was a general (much less universal) imperative, that would pretty much abolish the medical profession.

The point of counterexamples is to test whether you consistently apply the principle you appeal to, or whether you make ad hoc exceptions.

The standard Catholic argument against "artificial" contraception treats procreation as a special case of a general principle: natural teleology. The question, then, is whether the general principle is sufficiently discriminating to

justify that particular application—while compartmentalizing that application from other permissible examples that run counter to the ordinary course of nature.

(When I say "special", I'm not using "special" as a synonym for "exceptional"; rather, I'm using "special" as a synonym for "specific"—in contrast to generic. For instance, brain cancer is a special case of cancer. Cancer is the general category, of which brain cancer is one example.)

The question is why the other examples, which interfere with the ordinary course of nature are permissible, but "artificial" contraception is not.

The Catholic argument begins with the general principle of natural teleology, then treats procreation as a special case of that principle. And it regards the natural teleology as normative with respect to human procreation.

Problem is, Catholics are forced to admit that natural teleology is not a reliable indicator of normative ethics. There are ever so many cases where it's permissible to disrupt the natural order. Take pesticides. Or selective breeding.

Or, to consider some examples involving human pregnancy, viz. epidural anesthesia during labor and delivery. A caesarian section? Those artificially circumvent or contravene the ordinary course of nature.

What criteria can Catholics use to refine their appeal to natural teleology while preserving their appeal to natural teleology? They can't begin with that principle, then admit that it may properly be superseded in any number of cases. In that case they have no consistent operating principle.





## The Catholic contraceptive taboo

I'm going to comment on a longish defense of Rome's position on contraception by a Catholic philosophy prof. (Christopher M. Brown) at UT Martin:

<https://arcdigital.media/want-to-live-the-good-life-then-dont-use-contraception-93c47b0c06fd>

One of the problems with natural law arguments against "artificial" contraception is that such arguments don't originate in natural law principles, but in Catholic dogma. Natural law appeals are then scrambled after the fact to retroactively justify Rome's position.

There are striking parallels between arguments for transgenderism and arguments for the Catholic ban on contraception. Both resort to artificial distinctions and dichotomies.

Given the hand he dealt himself, I think Brown plays that hand about as well as can be done, but there's only so much you can do with a losing hand.

In addition, one does not contracept if one attempts to prevent conception after a rape; in such a case, the intention isn't to prevent the natural consequences of a conjugal act, but rather to prevent the consequences of an act of violence. Just as it is not wrong in some circumstances to defend yourself with lethal force, it's also not wrong for a woman or a doctor to use hormones to thwart the rapist's semen from impregnating the rape victim.

That's a false dichotomy. One *does* contracept if one attempts to prevent conception after a rape. Of course the intention isn't to prevent the natural consequences of a "conjugal act," since this is rape, but that doesn't mean it isn't contraceptive. Yes, it may be to prevent the consequences of rape, but that doesn't obviate the fact that it's contraceptive. This is an example of special pleading, where a Catholic ethicist indulges in hairsplitting distinctions to rationalize Rome's ad hoc exceptions.

Although the Catholic Church teaches that it is wrong to avoid pregnancy by contracepting, the Catholic Church also teaches that it is morally okay for a couple to space their children by taking into account our knowledge of a woman's natural cycle of fertility.

Is using a form of natural family planning in order to avoid pregnancy a form of contraception? No. Contraception works—and those who contracept intend—to sterilize an otherwise fertile conjugal act. Using a form of natural family planning in order to have sexual intercourse without getting pregnant has the couple abstaining from sexual intercourse during the period when a woman is fertile. Although the end of having sexual intercourse without getting pregnant is the same for both couples, the means they use couldn't be more different.

They employ different strategies, but with the same aim. "Natural family planning" is a calculated effort to evade and circumvent the procreative design of sexual intercourse.

The contracepting couple realizes the end of having sexual intercourse without getting pregnant by using the means of blocking the consummation of good, natural, and otherwise fertile conjugal acts, whereas

the couple using natural family planning as a means for realizing the end of having sexual intercourse without getting pregnant accepts the natural consequences of each and every conjugal act in which they engage, while also practicing (the development of) the virtue of continence—that is, the ability to easily and gracefully neither under-indulge nor over-indulge the great goods of sexual union and sexual pleasure.

**i)** Contracepting couples who reject abortion also accept the natural consequences of sex if contraception fails. Although their preference is not to have a child at that time, they will do so. So that doesn't distinguish contracepting couples from the tiny minority of Catholic couples who practice "natural family planning".

**ii)** What does it mean to "overindulge" in conjugal relations?

The difference between practicing periodic abstinence in the case of natural family planning and contracepting is not in the end they seek but in the means they use. Sometimes, this makes all the difference in the world.

And sometimes it makes no morally salient difference.

A first argument for why contracepting gets in the way of living a good human life takes its start from two plausible moral principles. The first moral principle is we should never treat persons as non-persons. More specifically, we should always treat each and every human person with the dignity rightly accorded persons — for example, we should not instrumentalize or use human persons, but always treat them as ends-in-themselves.

To the contrary, I'd say that's an implausible moral principle:

**i)** Is "instrumentalizing" a person equivalent to, or a special case of, treating persons as nonpersons? If so, what's the argument?

**ii)** Human "dignity" carries a lot of freight in modern Catholic moral theology. I don't think everyone should be treated alike, although there is a lower threshold.

**iii)** When I go to the doctor, I'm using him as a means to an end. When I service my car, I'm using the automechanic as a means to an end. That doesn't mean I'm mistreating them, treating them as nonpersons, exploiting them, taking unfair advantage. They offer goods and services in exchange for remuneration. I'm doing it for my own benefit, although that has a fringe benefit for them.

If Jane kills an innocent person in order to preserve her wealthy standard of living, then Jane has instrumentalized or used a human person and has therefore done something morally wrong...the wrongness comes from treating a person as though they were not a person, but rather as though they were a mere object or instrument; the wrongdoer instrumentalizes or uses a person.

**i)** That's a pretty elliptical, generic way to explain what makes murder wrong. Surely there are more direct ways to argue against murder.

**ii)** Moreover, that would be, at best, a cause of "instrumentalizing" someone in a bad way. It doesn't imply that "instrumentalizing" people is intrinsically wrong.

So we can put this first moral principle another way:  
true lovers don't use each other.

Why the heck not? If I want something that only a woman can give, while she wants something only a man can give, what's wrong with that mutually agreeable arrangement?

To begin with an obvious case, consider a case of rape. Rape is obviously morally wrong. One way of thinking about why what the rapist does is morally wrong is that the rapist uses his victim in that act: he treats a person with only his own interests in view; he treats his victim as though he or she were not a person but a mere object or instrument, as that by which he can make himself feel powerful.

**i)** Again, this fails to establish that it's inherently wrong to use someone as a means; at most, that's a case of using someone in the wrong way, because it harms an innocent person.

**ii)** Also, the feminist sociological cliché that rape is about power rather than sex.

There are other ways to use persons in the sexual act. For example, Sam uses Sally in the conjugal act if he has sex with her merely for his own pleasure. For in doing so, Sam does not treat Sally as a person, a being of inherent dignity and value, but simply as an object conducive to his being pleased. It is not that it is wrong to expect to take pleasure in the conjugal act; but it is morally wrong to reduce a conjugal act to simply something that produces pleasure, for doing so has one treating a person as a mere instrument for the producing of pleasure.

Take another example of instrumentalizing someone in the conjugal act. Sally uses Sam in the sexual act if she has sex with Sam simply because she wants to feel the safety and security that comes with being intimate with someone in the conjugal act. Even if Sally, while engaging in the sexual act, recognizes that Sam is a person—for what she wants is to feel the safety and security of being intimate with a person—that is not the same as treating Sam as a person, a being of intrinsic dignity and worth; if she engages in the conjugal act with him just to feel safe and secure, she treats Sam, whom she recognizes to be a person, as a mere instrument for the bringing about of a certain positive emotional state. Again, it is not wrong to expect to take comfort in feeling close to a person in the conjugal act, for the conjugal act is typically a bodily act that brings about a feeling of closeness; it is wrong to reduce the conjugal act to an act that produces positive feelings of safety or security or intimacy, since doing so involves using a person as a mere instrument for the producing of such positive feelings.

**i)** That's very one-sided. Although sex ought to be mutually enjoyable, marriage involves implicit sexual consent. If you don't like sex, stay celibate. It shouldn't be necessary to negotiate every conjugal act. That's a decision you make before marriage: whether or not to get married. Conjugal relations are part of the package.

**ii)** An individual goes into marriage for what he hopes to get out of it. Self-interest is primary. There's nothing inherently wrong with acting in one's self-interest. We have natural God-given needs. So long as there's reciprocity, there's nothing abusive about that.

**iii)** In fact, each spouse *ought* to feel sexually desirable to the other spouse. That's a proper expectation.

**iv)** In close relationships, it's acceptable, within limits, to impose yourself on someone else. Suppose I'm a teenager. I like to sleep in on Saturdays. Unfortunately, my best friend is a morning person. He shows up at my doorstep, lonely and bored, and wants to hang out. I had other plans, but I drop them.

Now, if he did that on a regular basis, the friendship would end. But of course the reason we're friends in the first place is because we have rapport. We like the same things. We like hanging out. Up to a point, it's okay for one friend to impose on another friend. That's the nature of friendship.

Imagine a mock conversation between two teenagers:

**Tyler:** Did you and Jessica break up?

**Trevor:** Yes.

**Tyler:** Why?

**Trevor:** She treats me as a sexual object. She only wants me for my body!

**Tyler:** What a bummer!

**Trevor:** One time she kissed me without my permission. When I asked her why she did it, she said she was just curious what it felt like to kiss me. Was I a good kisser?

**Tyler:** No wonder you dumped her. I couldn't stand a girlfriend like that!

**Trevor:** It gets worse. One time when we were walking barefoot on the beach, she reached out and grabbed my hand. When I asked her why she did it, she said she just wanted to hold my hand because it made her feel good! I felt so...*used!*

You have to wonder what parallel universe Brown inhabits.

We need to examine a second moral principle before I present the first argument against contracepting. Here's the principle: it is morally wrong to intentionally put a person — including oneself — in a near occasion of moral wrongdoing — it is morally wrong to put a person in a situation where one knows it is very difficult for that person not to do what is morally wrong.

Forcing married couples to practice abstinence is a good example of tempting them to do wrong.

Why, in general terms, does a couple contracept? We might think that the answer is as follows: either the couple wants to have sex without running the risk of pregnancy or the couple wants to plan the size of their family without leaving the size of their family up to chance.

We can rule out the second option. After all, it is common knowledge that women are not always fertile. In fact, given the advent of various contemporary methods of natural family planning — for example, the Billings ovulation method, the Creighton Model, and sympto-thermal methods — a couple can, with training and practice, come to possess a near scientific knowledge of the woman's fertility cycle. So a desire to plan family size can't be a sufficient explanation for



what motivates the contracepting couple. Planning family size can be achieved without contracepting. Therefore, the members of the couple contracept in order to have conjugal relations whenever they want to, while avoiding the risk of pregnancy.

But that's a lot more complicated than "artificial" contraception. So that doesn't rule out the second motivation.

Given the fact of human moral weakness, particularly the inclination to use one another in the conjugal act, a couple that engages in conjugal acts whenever they want is such that each member of the couple does not take due precautions against (a) using another in the conjugal act (i.e., using another merely for the sake of experiencing sexual pleasure or using another merely for the sake of feeling emotionally connected to a person) or (b) putting oneself or another in a near occasion of moral wrongdoing, specifically, the near occasion of using another in the conjugal act.

If a prospective spouse isn't open to sexual spontaneity in marriage, don't get married. If a prospective spouse is that unreceptive to sexual advances within marriage, the problem is not with the spontaneous spouse but the unreceptive spouse. The onus shouldn't be on the spouse who takes the initiative to first do a lot of second guessing about whether their feelings will be reciprocated. If you don't want a sexual relationship, don't get married. There should always be a general openness to conjugal relations in marriage, barring special circumstances.

The conjugal act means, "I give myself wholly to you" or "we give ourselves wholly to one another." If the conjugal act has such an intrinsic meaning, then people

can lie with their bodies and not simply in the sense of reclining, but in the sense of telling an untruth, when they engage in the conjugal act in a way that contradicts this intrinsic meaning of the conjugal act.

**i)** Is *that* what it means? Or does it have a more direct, down-to-earth meaning? I have a need/desire for sexual intimacy, and my spouse is the chosen object of my sexual desire.

For someone who takes refuge in natural theology, it's not as though Brown's notion of what the conjugal act means derives in any recognizable fashion from natural theology. Wouldn't a natural explanation for the significance of the conjugal act be more like God designed us with a natural drive to see sexual union with a member of the opposite sex?

**ii)** Humans shouldn't give themselves totally to another human being. That's idolatrous. Humans should hold something in reserve. Humans should only totally give themselves to God.

A married couple are two adults with minds, beliefs, and interests of their own. They don't sublimate all that in marriage. They retain a degree of independence.

Recall that the person using contraception engages in a conjugal act and intends to render infertile (what they believe is potentially) an otherwise fertile conjugal act. But by intending to render infertile an otherwise fertile conjugal act, the person using contraception thereby intends to withhold his or her fertility from another with whom he or she engages in the conjugal act. It therefore follows that such a person does not intend to

give himself or herself wholly to the other in the conjugal act.

Since the conjugal act means, "I give myself wholly to you," or, collectively, "we give ourselves wholly to one another," such a person therefore tells a lie with his or her body. On the traditional assumption that it is morally wrong to tell lies — especially to those whom we love and care for most deeply — it follows that contracepting is objectively morally wrong. Those who contracept not only lie with one another, but lie to each other.

But in point of fact, such a person, insofar as he or she holds back his or her fertility or refuses to receive it, also says, "I am not giving you my total gift of self right now; although I have my fertility to give right now, I will not give it to you," or "I refuse to receive your total gift of self right now, since I refuse the gift of your fertility, which you have given to me." The person who uses contraception thus lies to the beloved with his or her body.

**i)** That builds on the false premise of what the conjugal act means.

**ii)** It's not a lie since the couple knows what contraception entails. That's by mutual consent.

**iii)** I don't grant that lying is intrinsically wrong.

A second objection: But what if someone does not believe that the conjugal act means, "I give myself wholly to you." Lying requires saying or doing the opposite of what you believe to be the case. So, if someone does not believe the conjugal act means, "I

give myself wholly to you," then that someone will not be lying with his or her body if he or she contracepts.

Granted, lying requires saying or doing the opposite of what you believe. In addition, not everyone has the same degree of moral knowledge. It is possible that someone who is morally very immature does not know the conjugal act means, "I give myself wholly to you." Indeed, such a person may not be subjectively morally culpable in contracepting. Although contracepting is objectively morally wrong, a person who does not know it is morally wrong may not be subjectively culpable for such an objectively wrong act.

If the problem is that they don't know that it's wrong, then remedying that would be a positive thing. Insofar as engaging in objectively morally wrong actions always have bad consequences for human beings, both for the agent of such actions and those who receive such actions, it is a good thing for us to learn — as soon as possible — what we don't already know about the moral life. If the conjugal act really does mean, "I give myself wholly to you" — and some persons believe that is what the conjugal act means — it will be a good thing for anyone engaging in the conjugal act to learn this as soon as possible.

But there are other possibilities. It may be that the person who says he does not believe the conjugal act means, "I give myself wholly to you," is lying to himself all along. Perhaps he does not want to admit it to himself or to others.

Now, say Sam contracepts and the reason he doesn't know the meaning of the conjugal act is that he's intentionally kept himself from learning its meaning,

whether through lack of attention to the teaching of his elders, or through the cultivation of a bad habit of treating persons as sexual objects, say through his habit of viewing pornography.

Now Brown's backpedaling from his original claim. Moreover, he's made his claim unfalsifiable. Nothing would count as evidence against his claim because the contracepting couple won't "admit to themselves" that it's a lie. That's a good example of beginning with what you want to prove, then redefining concepts to agree with your agenda.

A third objection: Aren't couples who practice natural family planning also withholding their fertility from each other? After all, they engage in the conjugal act during periods in which they believe the woman is naturally infertile, and they abstain from it during her period of fertility. Yet the Church teaches that natural family planning is not necessarily immoral. So do we have a case here of ruling out practices that are deemed morally permissible?

The objection confuses "a couple's withholding fertility" and "a couple's withholding fertility in the conjugal act."

But what think that's anything other than a makeshift distinction to salvage Brown's position?

The couple that decides not to engage in the conjugal act during a fertile period is, in a sense, "withholding their fertility" from one another, but there is nothing wrong with doing that per se. Similarly, it is not wrong per se for a couple to "withhold" for a time other goods from one another, for example, the goods of hand-holding, conversation, kissing, or engaging in the

conjugal act, when those acts are not appropriate or mutually desirable.

Unnecessarily withholding sex in marriage is a violation of conjugal duties. Brown acts as though marriage is an on-again/off-again arrangement.

It is not wrong to abstain from a good kind of action as long as one is not obligated to perform that kind of action. But couples are not at all times obligated to give their fertility to one another, no more than at all times is one obligated to take care of the sick, the elderly, and the poor. It would be wrong to always refrain from doing these good things. But one is not always obligated to do these good things, as even the overdemandingness criticism of utilitarianism would contend.

There is nothing morally wrong with periodic abstinence within marriage. In fact, as Janet E. Smith points out, in practicing periodic abstinence, for example, during a woman's fertile period (say the couple has decided prayerfully to wait a while to have a child or to have another child), a couple can actually give to one another the great gift of self-restraint, or act in such a way that leads to the development of the virtue of continence, which is one of the greatest gifts of love the spouses can give to one another (as we'll see below).

It's pointless to be celibate within marriage.

Furthermore, couples are not obligated to have conjugal relations only when they can naturally give their fertility to one another. Consider that women are fertile for only a short period of time each month and

also consider the strength of the sexual urge. These two factors would seem to constitute a natural sign that couples are not morally obligated to have sexual relations (only) when the conjugal act is fertile.

Actually, they constitute a natural sign that couples are welcome to have conjugal relations throughout the month.

One of the ways that married persons help each other grow in virtue is by moderately engaging in the conjugal act, which act has the power to foster great friendship, tenderness, and unity between spouses. But married persons will not always be able to engage in the conjugal act with one another, even when they want to. Therefore, one of the virtues married persons need in particular is the virtue of continence — that is, the ability to easily and readily forego engaging in the conjugal act for certain, even long, periods of time, and in so doing, refrain from doing what is morally wrong with respect to sex.

There are going to be times within any marriage when the couple cannot engage in the conjugal act — for example, when spouses are away on business, when spouses are visiting relatives, when spouses are sick, after a woman has delivered a child, etc. The virtue of continence (and only the virtue of continence) enables the spouses to easily and readily forego engaging in the conjugal act for periods of time, and when they do so, to remain faithful to one another.

**i)** What is Brown's notion of *immoderate* conjugal relations? How much sex is too much sex in marriage (assuming it's consensual)? Does he have a quota?

**ii)** Why does he keep saying abstinence is supposed to be easy? Even assuming for arguments sake that marital abstinence is virtuous, since when is self-denial supposed to be easy rather than sacrificial?

**iii)** Yes, there are situations in which couples must forego sex. But to normalize that defeats a primary purpose of marriage. George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Billy Graham neglected their wives to the point of desertion by spending so much time on the mission field. Their motives were well-meaning, but they were shirking a prior obligation.

**iv)** To my knowledge, a woman's libido naturally peaks during ovulation. Scheduling sex during her infertile period is hardly natural, since that's when she finds sexual relations least appealing.

Assuming the contracepting couple believes that God created and designed the reproductive system of human persons (and that such a God exists), it follows that the couple that contracepts says to God, in effect, "we don't like the way you have designed the female body and the male body; we know better than you when a woman should be infertile or when conjugal acts should be fertile." But that's impious and objectively morally wrong. Therefore, contracepting is objectively morally wrong.

Rather, contraceptives, used as contraceptives, suppress a healthy, functioning system in the human body.

**i)** Assuming parents believe God created and designed the immune system, it follows that parents who vaccinate their kids tell God, in effect, "we don't like the way you designed the immune system; we know better than you when a child



should be sick." But that's impious and objectively morally wrong. Therefore, vaccination is objectively morally wrong. Not to mention pasteurized milk and fluoridated water! That's impious and objectively morally wrong!

It won't suffice for him to say vaccination "prevents" disease, for by his own logic, that casts aspersions on God's design for the immune system.

Assuming Catholics believe God created and designed the digestive system, it follows that cooking meat tells God, in effect, "we don't like the way you designed the digestive system; we know better than you." But that's impious and objectively morally wrong. Therefore, we should only eat raw meat.

**ii)** Wearing sunglasses suppresses a healthy, functioning visual system. Wearing noise-canceling headphones suppresses a healthy, functioning auditory system. These aren't used merely to block damaging noise, but annoying sounds.

**iii)** God designed hair and nails to grow continuously. Cutting your hair and trimming your nails says to God, in effect, "I don't like the way you have designed my body!"

**iv)** What about selective breeding? Does that tell God, in effect, "we don't like the way you have designed wild animals; we know better than you."

## Wasting seed

Gen 38:8-10 is a traditional prooftext against "artificial" contraception (and masturbation). But what exactly is Onan's sin? According to one interpretation, "wasting seed" is a grave or mortal sin. To put this in Thomistic natural law terms, "wasting seed" thwarts the natural telos of seminal fluid. There are, however, problems with that interpretation:

**i)** V9 adds a qualification. Not merely "wasting his seed", but for a particular reason. So intent is a necessary condition.

**ii)** If wasting seed per se is sinful, then that drastically restricts licit sexual intercourse. Having intercourse with a postmenopausal wife is "wasting seed". Having intercourse with a manifestly pregnant woman is "wasting seed".

Even during ovulation, only one, or rarely, two sperm will be able to fertilize the ovum. Most sperm are "wasted". They never reach the goal.

**iii)** Ironically, if wasting seed per se is sinful, then this is a prooftext against "natural family planning". The husband is deliberately wasting his seed by intentionally limiting intercourse to infertile periods during his wife's cycle. By design, the couple is frustrating the natural teleology of semen. A calculated effort to subvert and circumvent the biological goal of seminal fluid. What could be more wasteful than that? So this is a highly counterproductive text to defend "natural family planning" as the licit alternative to "artificial" contraception.

# Miscellany

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## Should we warn children about hell?

Looming large in many deconversion accounts are apostates who complain that their parents terrorized them by threatening them with hell. Their childhood was haunted by fear of God. Should Christian parents warn children about the danger of hell?

**i)** Christian pedagogy, like pedagogy in general, needs to be age-appropriate, suited to the cognitive development of children. What we teach a 5-year-old and what we teach an 15-year old may be two different things. We may save some teachings for a later age.

**ii)** There's certainly a point at which the doctrine of hell should certainly be part of their instruction in the Christian faith. And they can also pick that up on their own when they're old enough to read an adult version of the Bible.

**iii)** Is "warning" children about the danger of hell a euphemism for threatening children with hell when they misbehave? The whole issue of whether any children are in peril of hell is an open question in theology. I don't think we have sufficient revelation to answer that question with any degree of certainty. I don't think we should issue a warning unless we have good reason to think they're at risk. Threats should be credible threats, not empty threats.

**iv)** It can also be just lazy parental discipline to threaten young children with hell. Especially for childish misbehavior that's quite unlikely to rise to the level of damnable offenses. How much of that is just an expression of parental exasperation, because it's so easy to threaten them with hell?

**v)** What about adolescents and teenagers? Do they need to be warned about hell? One question is whether there's a distinction between teaching them about hell and warning them about hell. If they already understand the nature of hell, and they believe it, do they also need a personal parenting warning? I mean, just reading about hell in the Bible will acquaint them with warnings about hell.

**vi)** Apropos (v), do you need to be warned not to stick your fingers in a blender, then push the start button? If you know what a blender is, you don't need a warning over and above your understanding of the blender not to stick your fingers inside when it's running.

**vii)** I think what young children need is not to fear God but to be taught to love and trust God. Taught that God is someone to turn to in time of need. Or pray to for the needs of others. Young children need a sense of security.

**viii)** It might be objected that just as it's proper and necessary for young children to both love and fear their parents, the same holds true for God. But I think the comparison breaks down. Although God can manifest himself to children directly, I think God is ordinarily an abstraction for children in a way that parents are not. If, say, Christian parents must spank a misbehaving child, that will be followed by an act of reconciliation—reaffirming their love for the child. That's very tangible in a way that a child's relationship with God generally is not.

Of course, above a certain age, children should cultivate a more complete and adult understanding of God and hell, which includes a God-fearing attitude, as well as love, trust, devotion.

BTW, my parents never threatened me with hell, so my own position isn't in reaction to my childhood.

## Is it always wrong to violate a confidence?

A friend asked me whether it's always wrong to violate a confidence. Sharing a confidence involves a two-way trust. It carries the implicit condition that the individual sharing a confidence not abuse the trust or take advantage of the person he confides in.

There's a prima facie obligation not to divulge information shared in confidence. But that's not absolute. For one thing, you don't know in advance what someone will confide in you, so you can't render informed consent to keep it secret. A person can't unilaterally obligate you to keep their secret. They don't have that coercive moral authority over you. You can't reasonably be expected to make a commitment when you're in the dark. Indeed, open-ended commitments can be unethical.

There may be other the concerned parties who also have rights. Keeping a secret may unjustly harm them. So we have to balance competing duties. In case of conflict, some duties override other duties.

To take a hypothetical case, suppose I know the pastor's son is a closet homosexual. I suspect that, and at some point he confides in me.

Normally I'd protect his identity. I'd cover for him (without lying), because he has a struggle, and he needs a straight friend to talk to, where he's free to let down his guard. To out him would be gratuitously harmful to his reputation and his faith.

If, however, he decides to follow his dad's career path by going into the family business, as a youth pastor (say), that

changes things. Now he's inserting himself into a situation which will, at the very least, expose him to unnecessary temptation, and at the worst he's deliberately exploiting the situation to seduce vulnerable young men. At that point, all bets are off.

Minimally, I'd warn him to stay clear of Christian ministry and other venues where he works with other young men. I'll also tell him that if he doesn't heed the warning, I will be obligated to out him for the protection of the innocent. At that point he forced my hand.

Just to clarify, there are situations in which I'd lie for someone to cover for them, but in the hypothetical situation I raised, I don't owe him that. All other things being equal, I'm prepared to cover for him short of lying for him. There's a difference between concealing and deceiving. Sometimes both are justified, but sometimes concealing is justified while deceiving is not.

Suppose I know a classmate cheated on an exam. Suppose he knows I know. But he's now remorseful about his action.

I'm not going to rat him out, in part because I'm not personally responsible for what he did, and he's contrite about his wrongdoing. At this stage it would be more harmful to rat him out. In that sense I'll cover for him. I'd keep it between us.

If, however, his action was exposed by someone else, I'm not going to lie for him. He did wrong. It's not my duty to lie to coverup his wrongdoing. He can't reasonably expect that from me. Having taken a risk, he must be prepared to face the consequences.





## Autocracy

A friend pointed me to this:

<http://bloggingtheology.wordpress.com/2012/08/11/was-hitler-appointed-by-god/>

Several problems:

**i)** It's hypocritical for Muslims to inveigh against autocratic government. Does the Saudi Arabian regime tolerate dissent? Were the Caliphs tolerant towards religious and political dissidents? Islamic regimes are highly autocratic.

**ii)** You can't read Rom 13:1-7 in a vacuum. You need to do some reading between the lines. We know some things about Paul. He was a devout Jew, living in the Roman Empire.

**iii)** I doubt it's coincidental that Paul wrote about the state in a letter addressed to Christians living in the capital of the Roman Empire.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), Rom 13:1-7 has an apologetic dimension. We'd expect Paul to be very tactful when he writes about the role of the state to Christians living in the imperial city. He's not going to make seditious statements that would get them into trouble (if the letter were intercepted).

**v)** In vv3-4, Paul is obviously describing the ideal. That's what rulers are *supposed* to do.

But it's scarcely possible for Paul to dictate those verses without an acute sense of irony. As a Jew living under

Roman rule, Paul was painfully aware of the glaring discrepancy between the ideal and the reality. This was a pagan regime. By definition, even the best Roman emperors (and their surrogates) were wicked men. Likewise, Paul's audience was hardly less aware of the conspicuous contrast. Indeed, Paul is alluding to the onerous Roman tax system.

In addition to Paul's personal experience, there was his background knowledge of OT history and Intertestamental history. Heathen idolatry and immorality. Indeed, Paul reviews that at length in the opening chapters of his letter. So Paul knew perfectly well that Roman magistrates were often evildoers who abused their power.

**vi)** Paul's argument is implicitly conditional. Even heathen magistrates derive their authority from God. Because their authority is derivative, their authority is conditional.

Christians ought to submit to the civil magistrate because he administers justice. But, of course, that argument contains a converse implication. If the rationale for civil obedience is the role of the magistrate as an agent of public justice, then in cases where the magistrate becomes an agent of injustice, you now have a rationale for civil disobedience.

Paul doesn't develop that implication since that would be impolitic. But that's implicit in the argument.

And in the back of Paul's mind are OT cases of civil disobedience (the Hebrew midwives, Daniel's friends). There are even cases where godless monarchs were forcibly deposed (e.g. Athaliah). Moreover, the entire Exodus, which Paul alludes to in Rom 9:15-17, was an act of mass civil disobedience.

**vii)** Likewise, Paul's argument doesn't envision modern democracy, where the governed are part of the government, through their elected representatives. Where the state answers to the citizenry, rather than vice versa.

## Christian snitches

I will comment on a part of this:

<http://www.mortificationofspin.org/mos/1517/the-duggar-disaster>

On the positive side, pastor Pruitt makes some excellent points. I also appreciate the fact that unlike the ostrich posture of a Darryl Hart, Pruitt understands the importance of the culture wars.

However, I think the analysis goes a bit haywire under point #3, when he says:

The church and Christian families must never tolerate or in any way seek to cover up sexual abuse. Among Christians, sexual sin which does not violate the law can and should be dealt with through the means of church discipline (Matt 18; 1 Cor. 5). Illegal sexual activity, however, is never an in-house matter for the church. Christians are to be subject to the governing authorities. That means Christians are accountable to God to report any sexual abuse to those authorities God has entrusted to administer justice (Rom 13:1-7). A failure to do so is a sin both against God and the victim.

There's some truth to this, but it's overstated. It needs to be more qualified:

**i)** As evangelicals, it's our duty to avoid the kind of stonewalling that's occurred in the Catholic abuse scandal. That said:

**ii)** We need to distinguish between genuine sexual abuse and technical infractions. Feminism is redefining sexual harassment in elastic, subjective terms. It becomes a fill-in-the-blank definition. It's all in the eye of the accuser.

Consider the DOJ guidelines (under Holder's tenure) to universities. That's not about genuine sexual assault, but weaponized ideology.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), we need to distinguish between just and unjust laws. The secularization of the political class has led to a proliferation of unjust laws. I don't think it's the duty of Christians to report violations of unjust laws to the authorities.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), under our system of gov't, private citizens aren't gov't flunkies. It's not our civic duty to spy on our neighbors or report them to the authorities. We're not the police. We're not gov't informants. We're not agents of the state.

That's what you get under totalitarian regimes, where everyone spies on everyone else. Where loyal citizens are expected to report "subversive" activity to the authorities. But that's the paradigm of a police state, not a free society.

There are, of course, situations where it's appropriate to report illegal activity to the authorities. But that's when it serves the public interest. The state works for us, not the other way around.

**v)** We should make allowance for the fact that Paul probably had various caveats in the back of his mind, but didn't include these in his letter. I doubt it's coincidental that he said this in a letter addressed to Christians living in the capital of the Roman Empire. He wants Christians to be

good citizens, to the extent that's possible under a pagan regime. He wants them to avoid unnecessary provocations.

However, Paul was a firm believer in the OT. So he presumably viewed Rome in much the same way he viewed Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. Yet he has to be discreet about what he says in a letter addressed to Roman Christians. What if that was intercepted by the authorities? What if that contained statements deemed seditious by the authorities? The recipients would suffer.

So we need take into account the fact that Paul is being tactful in what he says about the Roman state. Although he says what he believes, there are other things he's leaving out. He says less than what he thinks. There's certainly more to be said about a pagan state than he lets on in a letter to Roman Christians. In that sensitive context, he's not going to say what OT prophets say about Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon. What he says will be true so far as it goes, but there are implicit qualifications—given his larger frame of reference, which remains in the background. Of necessity, his statement is circumspect.

## Ash Wednesday

Every year, Ash Wednesday comes around. Every year, some Protestants take the occasion to take a swipe at Ash Wednesday, usually with Roman Catholicism in their sights. Every year I think about doing a little post on Ash Wednesday, and every year the occasion gets past me because I'm overtaken by other priorities. So here are some belated musings on Ash Wednesday:

**1.** If you take the Puritan view, then you oppose Ash Wednesday for the same reason you oppose manmade holy days in general. There are, however, Protestants who celebrate Christmas and Easter, but take issue with Ash Wednesday. So they're not opposed to manmade holy days in general.

**2.** There's a distinction between whether it's obligatory or optional. I think Ash Wednesday is permissible but hardly mandatory. Moreover, it's spiritually delusive to imagine a manmade custom compels God to confer a spiritual benefit on the observance.

**3.** Ash Wednesday is somewhat different from Christmas or Easter. Those commemorate particular events in the life of Christ.

By contrast, the significance of Ash Wednesday is more artificial, eclectic, and diffuse. It is based in part on an idea (human mortality) rather than an event. It's good to be mindful of our mortality, although an annual ceremony isn't much of a reminder.

In addition, it commemorates Jesus in the desert, after his baptism. It's a lead-in to Lent, as a season of fasting and



penitence. So unlike Christmas and Easter, the significance of Ash Wednesday seems to be more of a pastiche. As it evolved, disparate things became attached to it.

**4.** There's no particular season when Christians ought to be especially penitent. They should be contrite whenever they sin. But presumably they don't sin according to a calendar. So they shouldn't be more penitent during one part of the year and less penitent during another part of the year.

**5.** And, of course, I reject the Catholic sacrament of Penance.

**6.** The significance of Jesus in the wilderness is usually taken to be that his baptism symbolically reenacts the Red Sea Crossing while his forty-day sojourn in the wilderness reenacts the time of testing and punitive wandering of Israel in the Sinai. Only that involves a point of contrast as well as comparison because Jesus succeeds where Israel failed.

In any case, that's not an experience which Christians can properly emulate. It figures in the unique work of Christ. We can commemorate the baptism and temptation of Christ, but we can't parallel his over experience. At best our efforts will recapitulate the failure of Israel.

**7.** Lenten fasting isn't analogous to the experience of Christ in the wilderness. It's just token fasting.

**8.** Some Christians say they find fasting a useful spiritual exercise. It helps to concentrate the mind on prayer. Help take their mind of the world.

I don't have a considered opinion on fasting. I don't practice fasting as a spiritual discipline. There may be the danger

that fasting has a placebo effect: the perceived spiritual benefit is autosuggestive. It has that a certain result because you expect it to have that result. You think it's supposed to make a difference, and that in itself exerts a psychological influence. So the conditioning may be naturally self-induced.

**9.** Ash Wednesday also has a spiritually ostentatious potential. Having the sign of the cross in ashes on your forehead as you go out in public can be a form of virtue-signaling.

**10.** If you regard the church calendar as optional, you can be selective. You might attend an Ash Wednesday service, but skip the Catholic rigamarole associated with Lent.

I don't have a problem with a lead-in to Easter. Just depends on how that's structured.

**11.** I used to have an elderly relative who asked me to drive her to Ash Wednesday services. I remember the last time she asked. But then she'd suffered a medical breakdown. I told her that I didn't think she had the stamina for the service. She reluctantly agreed. She wanted to go but her body let her down. It was poignant. I associate Ash Wednesday less with the traditional ceremony than with my devout deceased relative. It reminds me of her more than anything else.

## Withholding sex

*Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control ([1 Cor 7:5](#)).*

This raises an interesting question. Scripture repeatedly condemns adultery. That's one of the grave sins in Scripture. It even becomes a spiritual metaphor.

But what exactly makes adultery a sin? One can think of pragmatic reasons why adultery is bad, but what makes it wrong as a matter of principle?

In one sense, adultery is sex with someone other than your spouse. But what makes that wrong?

In another, perhaps deeper sense, adultery is withholding sex from your spouse. Instead of reserving sex for your spouse, you give it to another. You take what belongs to your spouse and give it away.

In that respect, withholding sex in marriage is similar to adultery. If sex is something you're supposed to save for your spouse, then adultery and withholding sex are both examples of not saving sex for your spouse. In one case you keep it to yourself while in the other case you share it with someone who's not entitled to your body.

By the same token, if adultery is grounds for divorce, is withholding sex grounds for divorce? Mind you, there can be extenuating circumstances for why a spouse might withhold sex. But that's not what I have in mind. I'm thinking of motives like revenge, getting even, an unforgiving attitude.

There can also be a vicious cycle where a bad marriage poisons conjugal relations while bad conjugal relations poison a marriage.

## Grudem on divorce

**1.** Wayne Grudem has broadened his position on grounds for divorce:

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/november/complementarian-wayne-grudem-ets-divorce-after-abuse.html>

Since his new position contradicts the staged position in his recently published magnum opus on ethics, I wonder if he will issue a revised edition.

**2.** Grudem has a linguistic argument for his new position. I don't have a considered opinion on his linguistic argument.

**3.** I agree with Grudem, but for methodological reasons rather than narrow linguistic reasons. Sometimes Christian ethicists are walking a tightrope. That's because Jesus condemned the religious establishment for two opposite errors. On the one hand he condemned the establishment for inventing loopholes to evade God's law.

On the other hand, he condemned the establishment for mechanically obeying God's law without regard to the purpose of some laws. Paradoxically, obeying God's law is sometimes diametrically opposed to the intent of God's law. Divine commands and prohibitions have an implied context. There are situations in which obedience to God's law is counterproductive to the purpose.

So Christian ethicists must labor to avoid repeating the two opposite extremes that incurred the condemnation of Jesus when he reprimanded the religious establishment. We can't

just play it safe by mechanically obeying commands and prohibitions, because Jesus already warned us that that's not good enough. We must think harder.

To take an illustration, the OT condemns lying trial witnesses. But what's the implied context? The implied context is witnesses who falsely accuse the defendant of wrongdoing. They lie to incriminate an innocent defendant. That's the normal motivation.

But suppose we change the context to a show trial or kangaroo court in which a witness has an opportunity to lie to exonerate an innocent witness. The defendant has been unjustly indicted. Unjustly prosecuted. Suppose a witness can provide an alibi for the defendant? The alibi is a lie, but it's a lie that gets the innocent defendant acquitted. A lie that rectifies the injustice. A lie that unrigs the system.

The OT prohibition doesn't envision that situation. Indeed, that's the polar opposite situation of what the prohibition has in mind. Instead of lying to get an innocent defendant convicted, a character witness lies to get an innocent defendant acquitted. To offset a system that's stacked against him.

Now you may disagree with my illustration. You may still think lying is prohibited under any and all circumstances. But even so, the example illustrates the moral complexities when we change the implied context. You can't change the implied context but assume that the command or prohibition remains unchanged. Divine laws and prohibitions have a rationale. Altering the situation may sometimes moot or thwart the rationale.

Some actions are intrinsically right or wrong. Circumstances are irrelevant. But in other cases, circumstances are morally

relevant considerations.

Back to the question of divorce. It's antecedently unreasonable to presume that what Jesus said was designed to address every conceivable contingency. Jesus is giving specific answers to specific questions or challenges. In addition, there's a general moral framework which both sides take for granted.

It isn't feasible to have a divine law code for every possible situation. Law codes are finite.

What if a wife unwittingly marries a cannibal. He plans to eat her on their honeymoon. If, at the last minute, she finds out he's a cannibal, does she have a right to divorce him?

The Bible doesn't answer questions like that. So sometimes we have to use our own intelligence. Sometimes we have to take other biblical principles into account. Sometimes those override specific commands or prohibitions in case of conflict. In extreme or exceptional situations.

That, however, opens the door to abuse the principle. To invent loopholes. To rationalize sin. Not only does it create that potential, but the principle will in fact be abused by some denominations that are spoiling for an excuse.

So that's the knife-edge. You can fall into error on either side, just like the Jewish establishment in Jesus' day.

I'd just make two additional points:

**i)** Since this is a predicament God has put us in, since we don't always have clear-cut, ready-made answers, I don't think God is going to whack us if we're mistaken so long as

we make conscientious decisions. So long as we're motivated by fidelity to God. So long as these are honest mistakes.

**ii)** Conversely, if some denominations use the principle as a pretext to game the system and flout their religious duties, they will pay the price. God is not mocked. They may get away with it in this life, but divine justice will catch up with them. You can't play God for the fool.

Finally, this isn't an appeal to "what God is telling the church today". This is not an invocation of where the Spirit is said to be leading the church.

That's a blasphemous way to invoke God's name for the illusion of divine guidance when denominations are simply following the Zeitgeist. That appeal should be no part of the discussion.



## Divorce and remarriage

My answer to a question on Facebook:

A valid divorce means the spouse is no longer married. They are single again. So valid divorce implies the legitimacy of remarriage. The only obstacle to remarriage is if one is already married. That would be adulterous. If, however, one is no longer married in the eyes of God, then there's no impediment to remarriage. It's a fresh start, like getting married the first time since divorce resets your marital status to single.

By valid divorce, I mean cases where there are biblical grounds for divorce (e.g. desertion, infidelity). The effect of a valid divorce is to cause the divorcé/divorcée to revert to their premarital status. They revert to the condition they were in before they got married in the first place.

This is partly an issue of theological method. Do we expect the Bible to spell out all the implications. Do we just act on what the Bible says, and if it doesn't say certain things, we don't act on that? Jesus makes some pithy statements about divorce. There's a lot he leaves unstated. Are we supposed to stop with what he explicitly teaches, or consider the logical implications? Do we expect a trail of bread crumbs? Jesus frequently criticizes the religious leaders for failing to consider the rationale for certain biblical laws. By robotically obeying the law, they sometimes subvert the original purpose of the law. So we do need to think about the logical implications of Biblical ethics. Likewise, the commands and prohibitions of Scripture usually deal with typical situations, not extreme or exceptional situations. They don't address every conceivable circumstance.

