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JOY BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE WORLD: HOW CHRISTIANITY ABLY EXPLAINS THE MORAL FACTS

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APPROVAL SHEET

JOY BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE WORLD: HOW CHRISTIANITY ABLY EXPLAINS THE MORAL FACTS

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DEDICATION

for Sara Pruitt

You are my sure proof that
some fairy stories are true.

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Christianity ably explains the moral facts of moral goodness, intrinsic human value, moral rationality, and moral transformation.

Chapter 1 provides an explanation of the thesis, a historical overview of the moral argument, a defense of the method, a critique of William Lane Craig's deductive argument, and a response to some challenges to abduction from a Christian worldview.

In chapter 2, I explain how Christianity ably explains moral goodness. I first give some reason to think God should be identified with the Good, following Robert Adams. Next, I summarize some of the issues related to moral goodness. Then, I argue that being loving is an important way of being good. The Bible and Christian reflection upon revelation rightly understand God as consistent with the good. Finally, I suggest that given the importance of love to the good, the specifically Christian understanding of God as a single God in three persons powerfully accounts for this.

Chapter 3 argues that the Christian worldview strongly affirms the intrinsic value of human beings because they are made in "the image of God." I offer a functional account over an ontological one, suggesting that the functional account includes the ontological one and offers an even higher view of human value. Second, I show that the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity in Jesus of Nazareth implies a high view of intrinsic human value, both because of the function of the incarnation and the ontological implications for human beings.

In chapter 4, I argue that Christianity ably explains moral rationality because it provides a plausible account of how morality and self-interest are reconciled and because of the natural connection between morality and rationality on the Christian view. Specifically, I develop the idea that the Great White Throne judgment is not about moral rationality, but about the choice

between life and death and that moral rationality is only ensured once one enters into life with God.

In the penultimate chapter, I argue that Christianity ably explains why there is a moral gap and how to overcome it. Specifically, Christianity offers a realistic depiction of human incapacity. It also reinforces and heightens the moral demand. Finally, Christianity explains how we can overcome the moral gap by addressing moral guilt through God's forgiveness and through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, who graciously cooperates with man in his moral transformation.

Finally, I consider the practical import of the moral argument on offer, suggesting it has a potentially eternal consequence and transformative power. I also clarify the force of the argument, proposing that it is more suggestive than coercive.

It [*eucatastrophe*] does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

— J. R. R. Tolkien

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Christian worldview[1] ably explains the moral facts. That is the thesis of this dissertation, which will provide some powerful, suggestive reasons for thinking that the Christian worldview is a very good explanation of the moral facts. It is an abductive argument in the sense it seeks to show how well the Christian explanation accounts for the moral evidence. The case presented is, in the main, a positive case. It does not seek to show that Christianity is the best or even a better explanation than other accounts. Rather, the task is to show only that there are good reasons to think Christianity ably explains the facts in question. I have two aims for this chapter. First, to lay out the historical and developmental context for the version of the moral argument on offer and, second, to explain and defend the methodology.

The Moral Facts

Abductive arguments work by moving from facts in need of explanation to the likely truth of some hypothesis which better explains these facts. In this sense, facts are the common ground between rival theories; they are what each theory attempts to explain. In an abductive moral argument, the assumption that there are moral facts signals that the argument is meant to address moral realists who recognize that there are such things.[2] There are likely a wide range of phenomena that moral realists could agree count as facts, despite having their disparate moral theories. For example, nearly all moral realists might agree that this is a fact: Child torture for

[1] "Christian worldview" is used synonymously in this work with other terms like "Christian theism," "Christian story," and "the Christian hypothesis."

[2] Though I assume moral realism, there are compelling positive cases for moral realism. See, for example, David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*, *Taking Morality Seriously* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press, 2003).

fun is always wrong. David Baggett and Jerry Walls suggest four categories of moral facts: ontological, epistemic, practical, and rational.[3] The ontological facts have to do with rightness and goodness (moral obligations and moral values, respectively), and a range of other moral facts such as moral freedom, moral regrets, moral rights, intrinsic human value, and the like. Epistemic moral facts have to do with how moral knowledge is obtained and justified, particularly given such challenges posed by debunking objections to moral knowledge. Practical moral facts have to do with how it is possible to be moral or to live a successful moral life—ultimately how we can be forgiven, transformed, and perhaps even ultimately perfected. Finally, rational moral facts are facts about the correspondence between virtue and happiness, broaching such matters as Henry Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason, Thomas Reid's coincidence thesis, and Immanuel Kant's recognition of our being both noumenal and phenomenal creatures. At the broadest level, most moral realists agree that there are moral facts to be found in each area. Some things are good and right, human beings can know some of these things, they can be successfully moral, and it is rational to do so. This dissertation will adopt the same taxonomy of moral facts deployed by David Baggett and Jerry Walls in *God and Cosmos* (though, I will not specifically address moral knowledge).

I argue that the Christian worldview ably explains these facts. But what is meant, specifically, by "the Christian worldview"? I begin with something like what C. S. Lewis means by "mere Christianity." According to Alister McGrath, when advocating for mere Christianity, Lewis does not argue for a specific theological theory or an individualist, private interpretation

[3] David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 389.

of Christianity.[4] Rather, there is something more fundamental to the Christian life than individuals or discursive theology. Lewis says that mere Christianity is

> like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.[5]

Lewis suggests the *theories* are secondary to Christianity itself. In *Mere Christianity,* Lewis recalls his struggle as an atheist with theories of the atonement, specifically the substitutionary theory. Lewis says that what he "came to see later on was that neither this theory nor any other is Christianity. The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start."[6] He adds, "the thing itself is infinitely more important than any explanations that theologians have produced."[7] Lewis does not deny that at least some theories have value, but his point is that the core of Christianity is the thing from which the theory flows. Lewis's distinction between the reality of the events and persons of Christianity and human thinking about them is helpful, but I take mere Christianity to include at least some discursive and developed doctrines about those events and persons. One case would be the doctrine of the Trinity (a doctrine Lewis himself wholeheartedly embraces), and another would be the substitutionary nature of Christ's death, despite Lewis's initial reservations.

While Lewis's category of "mere" Christianity does not, by itself, give us a simple outline of what it constitutes, it is nevertheless helpful. I take it that mere Christianity would include at least the following ideas:

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[4] Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 143.

[5] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2016), 53.

[6] Ibid., 54.

[7] Ibid.

(1) that God is triune (a single God existing in three persons),

(2) that God created the world,

(3) that the Bible (at least) contains supernatural revelation of God,

(4) that God was incarnated in the person of Jesus,

(5) that Jesus died in the place of sinners,

(6) and that he was raised again.

I will argue that (1) has special significance for moral ontology, especially axiology. (2) and (4) ably explains intrinsic human value, both its reality and its degree. (4), (5), and (6) account for moral rationality in surprising ways, overcoming in satisfying fashion the dualism of practical reason. Finally, I argue that (1), (5) and (6) can solve some difficult issues related to moral transformation and the practicality of morality.

Though I help myself readily to the specifics of Christian doctrine, I do not assume these doctrines as true. Rather, I assume, in part, that the Christian worldview provides an internally coherent explanation of the world, along with the moral facts, and I intend to show that this explanation is an especially good explanation of the moral facts. In this way, I hope to give some reason to think that Christianity is correct, rather than simply assuming it to be so. The Christian worldview is rich and complex; at several points, it stakes out positions which are highly contested. The most obvious of these positions concerns the existence of God. If one is not already open to or convinced of God's existence, she may find most arguments for a specific and more ambitious version of theism highly implausible. For that reason (and others to be seen shortly) this argument should be understood as an *extension* of the moral argument for theism, and most closely related to the argument developed by David Baggett and Jerry Walls in *Good*

God and *God and Cosmos.* In this regard, I also assume it has already been satisfactorily shown that mere theism is, at least, a strong explanatory candidate for the moral facts.

History and Development

The moral argument takes various forms in the current literature, but almost all of them bear some relationship, directly or indirectly, to the moral arguments developed by Immanuel Kant.[8] While some rightly find the inklings of a moral argument in thinkers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant is widely considered to be the first to offer a discrete moral argument.[9] It is difficult to tell the complete account of the development and context of the moral argument, but providing some context and history of the moral argument is worthwhile for at least three reasons. First, and most obviously, it will help to clarify the argument of this dissertation. Second, insofar as these moral arguments overlap and harmonize (which they do considerably), they provide a kind of testimony to the validity of my extension of the moral argument. Third, laying out the array of influences on my own argument will plausibly contribute to its persuasive power. In most ways, the variety of moral arguments are complementary rather than rivals. The success of one argument is not a threat, but a boon to the others. Aside from simply providing an overview, I intend this chapter to show, by turns, the broad consensus which some of the key premises of the moral argument have garnered over the centuries and to show the power and effectiveness of previous moral arguments. With this

[8] See David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *The Moral Argument: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2019). See also C. Stephen Evans, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), accessed October 8, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/moral-arguments-god/.

[9] Evans, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God."

version of the moral argument, I also seek to contribute to the philosophical and theological discourse on the moral argument.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Kant thinks that our ability to know the world is limited in significant ways. Within his limited epistemology, Kant holds that the moral law is discoverable *a priori,* that is necessary and absolute, and that it exacts a very high demand. Kant's philosophy does not *a priori* rule out the existence of God, but he also cuts off, at least at the outset, traditional routes for justifying belief in God, namely tradition and revelation. Kant has an important role for God. But Kant's search for moral knowledge does not begin with God. Rather, since God is in the realm of the noumenal, Kant says he

> must, therefore, abolish knowledge [of noumenal objects like God], to make room for belief [in these objects]. The dogmatism of metaphysics, that is, the presumption that it is possible to advance in metaphysics without previous criticism, is the true source of the unbelief (always dogmatic) which militates against morality.[10]

Kant develops two different versions of the moral argument. The first is an argument from the need for grace. Baggett and Walls formulate a discursive version this argument:

1. Morality requires us to achieve a standard too exacting and demanding to meet on our own without some sort of outside assistance.
2. Exaggerating human capacities, lowering the moral demand, or finding a secular form of assistance aren't likely to be adequate for the purpose of closing the moral gap.
3. Divine assistance is sufficient to close the gap.
4. Therefore, rationality dictates that we must postulate God's existence.[11]

[10] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 2009), 34.

[11] Baggett and Walls, *The Moral Argument*, 21.

Since the moral law is necessary and absolute, it cannot consider any contingent features. Kant believes the features relevant to discovering the moral law include the status of human beings as autonomous rational agents with their own ends and desires. It is these analytic considerations that lead Kant to his various formulations of the categorical imperative, the second of which states: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."[12] This, notes Kant, is a very high standard to keep, if not impossible for a finite human being.[13] But we must meet it and so divine assistance is required.

Kant's second argument is one from providence. Baggett and Walls provide a concise outline:

5. Full rational commitment to morality requires that morality is a rationally stable enterprise.
6. In order for morality to be a rationally stable enterprise, it must feature ultimate correspondence between happiness and virtue.
7. There is no reason to think that such correspondence obtains unless God exists.
8. Therefore, rationality dictates the postulation of God's existence.[14]

John Hare rightly argues that for Kant, God has three specific roles, the legislative, executive, and judicial, so that for Kant God is the author of the law and "God gives us the assistance required to live according to the law. And God sees our hearts, as we do not, knows whether we are committed to obedience, and rewards us accordingly."[15] It is based on God's necessary judicial function that Kant develops a providential moral argument for God by means of practical

[12] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals; with, on a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, trans. James W. Ellington, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett 1993). 12.

[13] Cf. John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10–15.

[14] Baggett and Walls, *The Moral Argument*, 28.

[15] John E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 144.

reason. Kant held that a person is always obliged to keep the moral law. However, one's self-interest or happiness and keeping the moral demand can seemingly conflict so that it would not be rational to follow the law. To keep this seeming contradiction from becoming actual, Kant, as a postulate of practical reason, thought that God must exist to make sure that the moral law and happiness coincide. In light of the primacy Kant thought practical reason has, the belief in God that on theoretical reason is merely regulative (belief as if God exists) becomes on practical reason constitutive (reason to think God actually exists).

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Another important development in the moral argument comes by way of John Henry Newman. In terms of the moral argument, his most important work was *The Grammar of Assent,* completed in 1870, where he carefully analyzes what it means to believe (to assent to/to hold to) certain ideas or propositions.[16] In this work, Newman exhibits what Baggett and Walls call an "expansive epistemology."[17]

The British empiricists had, in Newman's view, too narrowly construed the requirements of rational belief. Newman's challenge to this idea comes in two steps. In *Grammar,* Newman argues that we are entitled to assent to certain propositions without providing a rationalistic proof of those propositions.[18] In response to Hume's famous argument against miracles, Newman

[16] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

[17] Baggett and Walls, *The Moral Argument*, 35.

[18] Newman should not be understood as saying man is not *rational.* That would be to betray his whole project. Rather, Newman means that man is not *rationalistic,* he is not merely moved by dry reason and propositions. He is rational, but not merely. In regard to Newman's belief that what counts as proper assent should be shaped by man's nature, Newman anticipates, to some degree, the work of Alvin Plantinga in Alvin Plantinga,

suggests that the right response is evocative and inclusive. Assent to the reality of miracles is not made possible by a discursive, narrow argument. "It must be no smart antithesis which may look well on paper."[19] Instead, one must approach the question of miracles in a way that includes diverse forms of evidence that Hume and other empiricists might disallow. Newman argues that the testimony of the Bible, the moral impact created by apparent cases of miracles, one's intuitions about God's potential purposes for miracles and his power to bring them about, all of these points and others must come to bear on the question. Newman says, "we must summon to our aid all our powers and resources" if we are to answer the question of miracles "worthily."[20]

While Newman does not intend to offer an argument for the existence of God, he nevertheless thinks that the faculty of conscience would be a good place to start. Equipped with the sort of expansive epistemology on offer from Newman, one can rely upon the "phenomenology" of the conscience. [21] We experience certain feelings, a feeling of right and wrong, of blame and praise, a sense of moral duty. It is in this veridical apprehension of the moral world that Newman finds "the materials for the real apprehension of Divine Sovereign and Judge."[22]

Warranted Christian Belief (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Cf. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 300.

[19] Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 307.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Baggett and Walls, *The Moral Argument*, 42.

[22] Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 102.

A. E. Taylor (1869-1945)

A. E. Taylor's key work in the development of the moral argument comes in his insightful book, *The Faith of a Moralist.* Taylor begins his work by arguing for an expansive epistemology, a motif that runs through most moral arguments. Taylor rejects the separation of fact and value. Morality is concerned with the nature of value, while religion connects fact and value.[23]

From his robust epistemology, Taylor shows that "it is permissible to look to our personal experience of the life of aspiration after the good for indications of the true character of the actual."[24] Since fact and value are found together in what is actual and since our minds have the capacity to recognize both aspects in the things we encounter, then we should able to say something about the way a thing *should* be. The more fundamental question is not "What acts ought I to do, but what manner of man ought I to be?"[25] Taylor posits that mere events are "morally worthless."[26] In order for events to have meaning, they must be embedded in a narrative. More specifically, they must be events in the narrative of persons who endure through time. The human good is not merely a matter of humans functioning well as humans, but of obtaining *the* Good. Since the Good is eternal and not temporal, really having it means that humans must transcend the temporal as well. The completed moral life "must be something which being had in fruition through a present which does not become past."[27] We can only have

[23] A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (New York: Macmillan Kraus, 1969), 29.

[24] Ibid., 67.

[25] Ibid., 68.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 99.

the Good in the eternal "now." Taylor identifies the Good with God: "Unity of personality and interest will only be attained, if at all, by a soul which has come to find its principal good in God."[28]

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

In *The Abolition of Man,* Lewis argues that moral realism is the necessary condition of genuine moral disagreement and a flourishing society.[29] Lewis thinks that people naturally recognize that some things are wrong, that some things have value and that they cannot stop themselves from having this insight, even if they are otherwise unconvinced of the truth of moral realism. He takes this moral sense as universal, even if there are some minor variations across culture. Each human person, unless somehow impaired, has the capacity to apprehend moral value and rightness.

In *Mere Christianity,* Lewis connects moral realism to his case for God's existence. Lewis proposes a dilemma. Either the universe simply exists with no further explanation or there is a "power behind it that makes it what it is."[30] We could not tell by making empirical observations whether there is such a power, because all we can observe is the universe itself. However, we do find that within our own conscience there is evidence of something beyond the

[28] Ibid., 101.

[29] In regard to the role that normative moral language plays in the function of language, Lewis anticipates the work of David Enoch and his argument from deliberative indispensability: "by deliberating, you commit yourself to there being relevant reasons, and so to there being relevant normative truths (you do not, of course, commit yourself to the reasons *being* the normative truths). Normative truths are thus indispensable for deliberation." Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, 75.

[30] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 24.

universe; it is like a command or influence "trying to get us to behave in a certain way."[31] We can go even further, argues Lewis. In our perception of the moral law, we find that it is "as hard as nails." We cannot possibly keep it, but also we cannot resign ourselves to becoming enemies of the Good. So, we are hopeless. We are sick and in need of remedy, and Christianity offers the cure:

> [Christians] offer an explanation of how we got into our present state of both hating goodness and loving it. They offer an explanation of how God can be this impersonal mind at the back of the Moral Law and yet also a Person. They tell you how the demands of this law, which you and I cannot meet, have been met on our behalf, how God Himself becomes a man to save man from the disapproval of God.[32]

So, Lewis shows that there is a moral law which can only be explained by a "power" behind the universe. And this power suggestively points to a Christian explanation of the moral law.

H. P. Owen (1926-1996)

Huw Parri Owen was a Welsh academic who was both a theologian and a philosopher. In his role as a philosopher, Owen argues for a distinctly Christian understanding of God. Owen begins his moral argument in *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* by explaining the nature of morality. Owen, like Lewis and others, thinks that many moral facts are discernible through common sense and innate conscience. Morality is epistemically self-justifying.[33] Owen proposes that morality is best explained by a specifically Christian account.

Owen makes his case in four different dimensions: duty, goodness, beatitude, and Christian revelation. With respect to duty, Owen says that moral obligations press upon us a

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., 31.

[33] H. P. Owen, "Morality and Christian Theism," *Religious Studies* 20, no. 1 (1984): 7.

sense of duty, a demand for obedience, and a certain kind of reverence that are best explained if the duties are grounded in a person. We also find that the moral demand is too great to keep, and that implies the need for grace. With respect to goodness, Owen first argues that the Good is attractive and aspirational; Owen thinks that only the embrace of a loving God can satisfy this necessary function. The attainment of the Good must be possible; since it is not attained in this life, there must be another world in which it is. With respect to beatitude, Owen argues that man's teleology, which is multidimensional, can only be properly satisfied by God who has the power to bring it about. Man's end cannot be achieved in this life. The end of man is personal, social, and ultimately, is "participation in the absolute goodness of God."[34] With respect to Christian revelation, Owen primarily sees the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God and the Bible as providing moral insight that enhances, deepens, and extends what is known by natural conscience. The Christian story, including its eschatology, provides a coherent narrative in which the practical requirements of morality can be realized. In this way, Christian revelation does not overturn conscience, but confirms it. Christian revelation harmonizes what can sometimes seem to be disparate aspects of morality in surprising and satisfying ways.[35]

Robert Merrihew Adams (1966-)

Robert Merrihew Adams has also made major contributions to the moral argument, specifically to the defense and articulation of the divine command theory. When Adams first published his landmark essay, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness" in 1973, the philosophical community largely viewed divine command theories as relics of a more

[34] Baggett and Walls, *The Moral Argument*, 194.

[35] This theme is especially evident in Owen, "Morality and Christian Theism."

unsophisticated age.[36] However, Adams, along with others like John Hare and C. Stephen Evans, have revived the interest in and respectability of divine command theories.

In *Finite and Infinite Goods,* Adams offers a fully developed account of theistic ethics. Adams begins with moral semantics. Adams suggests persons can understand the meaning of ethical terms without understanding the nature of ethical properties (in the way that both a scientist and a small child know what *water* means, but one has a better understanding of its nature). Adams then offers a Platonic, theistic explanation of the nature of the Good that identifies the Good with God. He does this along abductive lines, suggesting that such a view of the Good offers the best explanation of our intuitions about the nature of the Good. Adams's account of the right presupposes his view the Good, but also begins with a discussion of the semantics of obligation. Adams argues that obligation only has meaning in social contexts as a relation that obtains between persons. One is obligated when a demand is placed on them by another person. But merely human demands are not enough to create morally binding obligations. However, "God's demands are good enough and constitute ethically valid obligation."[37]

Contemporary Thinkers

In part because of the work of Robert Adams, theistic ethics has seen a revival among philosophers, with numerous promising and creative thinkers working in the field. William Lane Craig defends a deductive version of the moral argument which has been influential in both

[36] Robert Merrihew Adams, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 1 (1979): 66–79.

[37] Robert Merrihew Adams, "Précis of Finite and Infinite Goods," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64, no. 2 (2002): 443.

academic and popular contexts.[38] David Baggett and Jerry Walls provide further development of the moral argument. Baggett and Walls have completed three of four volumes in their planned tetralogy on the moral argument. The first volume, *Good God* deploys the taxonomy of moral facts mentioned earlier to make an abductive moral argument. *God and Cosmos,* the second volume, engages naturalistic rival explanations of the moral facts. *The Moral Argument: A History* summarizes and synthesizes about a dozen key thinkers in the history of the moral argument. Their final volume, yet to be published, will be an argument for moral realism.

John Hare also adds to the discussion. His *The Moral Gap* develops Kant's moral argument from the need for grace. Hare extends the Kantian argument, considering contemporary moral theories and possible ways that the gap between the moral demand and human capacity to meet the demand may be overcome. Hare concludes "there is a God who loves us enough both to demand a high standard from us and to help us meet it."[39] In *God's Command,* Hare lucidly defends the idea that God's commands are what cause something to be morally obligatory and that his prohibition is what makes it wrong. Hare engages a variety of different perspectives on divine command, including Islamic ideas and those of Karl Barth. Hare suggests that ultimately DCT and natural law have some overlap, God's commands are consistent with nature, even if they are not deducible from it.[40]

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[38] Craig's view will be detailed more fully later. See William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics.* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 172.

[39] Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 275.

[40] John E. Hare, *God's Command* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 309. Other influential works include the following: Mark Linville, "The Moral Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009). J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM Press, 2009). C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). R. Scott Smith, *In Search of Moral Knowledge: Overcoming the Fact-Value Dichotomy* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014). Mark C. Murphy, *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality*, Reprint edition. (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Methodology

Having provided some historical context for the moral argument, we can turn to the issue of methodology. This is an abductive argument, meaning it is an argument that the Christian worldview provides *a very good explanation* of the moral facts.

Aims and Inspiration

My approach to the moral argument is deeply influenced by the work of Jerry Walls and David Baggett in both *Good God* and *God and Cosmos.* In *Good God,* Walls and Baggett develop what they call an "abductive moral argument for the existence of God." Abductive arguments are arguments that aim to show that a particular explanation is the best (or better) explanation amongst rival explanations.[41] Baggett and Walls argue that "taking the features of morality seriously gives us excellent reason to think it's God who best explains it."[42]

Baggett and Walls generally have "mere" theism as their target. They want to show that classical theism (or theistic personalism) best explains the moral facts. But they also do not intend to artificially limit their argument to mere theism. They frequently integrate specifically Christian ideas about God into their argument. For example, the specifically Christian view of the afterlife plays an important role in their thinking about moral rationality.[43] Baggett and Walls clearly have the Christian God in mind when they develop their moral argument, especially in

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[41] Igor Douven, "Abduction," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2017. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), accessed September 4, 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/abduction/.

[42] David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 104.

[43] Ibid., 195.

their discussion of moral rationality and transformation. At nearly every turn, they readily gesture toward Christian truth. So, though Baggett and Walls position their argument as an argument for a robust kind of mere theism, they have laid a strong foundation from which others can extend the argument to Christianity in particular. That is my aim here.

I agree with Baggett and Walls that theism best explains various moral phenomena and extend their argument to show that the fine-grained, distinct version of theism offered in Christianity ably explains the moral facts. As Baggett and Walls point out, there are a number of rival explanations of the moral facts. However, they were also primarily considering theism and its rival naturalist explanations. Baggett and Walls further have in mind a version of divine command theory (DCT) inspired by the work of Robert Adams, though they note that DCT is not necessary to moral apologetics. Amongst even these relatively limited categories of explanations, there are many possible alternative accounts of the moral facts. However, to consider the Christian worldview as an explanatory candidate also invites others sorts of possible explanations, including other religious explanations, even other theistic explanations, like that of Islam. Practically, this means that case for a specifically Christian explanation of the moral facts must be ongoing and this dissertation can only be a small part of that wider project.

In addition to widening the set of possible explanations of the moral facts, this approach to the moral argument also includes a more complex explanatory hypothesis. The Christian worldview provides a rich, multi-faceted account of the different aspects of morality. The Christian explanation regarding the moral facts is, itself, difficult to capture concisely. One might consider, for example, the multiple substantive Christian approaches to the problem of evil and all the different elements of Christian theology that come to bear on this one issue. The Christian worldview can address this in many different ways, from soul-making theories first developed by

Irenaeus to the free will defense developed by Alvin Plantinga; Christians have said much about the problem of evil. In this case, nearly every category of Christian doctrine is relevant and has something substantial to say about why there is evil. Again, this has certain practical implications. The fully developed Christian account of morality is ongoing and this work can make only a contribution to the wider project.

Given the scope of the potential explanations and the rich complexity of the Christian worldview itself, I need to set the right sort of expectation for this argument. My aim is to show that the Christian worldview provides an especially good explanation of the moral facts, the quality of which *suggests* that it is the best explanation of those facts. I intend the aim to be modest and suggestive rather than coercive.

This aim is consistent with what Robert Nozick has in mind with his concept of "philosophical explanation." Nozick introduces the concept of a philosophical explanation in contrast to a philosophical proof.[44] Nozick sees many arguments in philosophy (especially the Anglo-American, analytic tradition) as aiming at coercion. They are meant to wrench a person by the force of the logic and the weight of the evidence to a certain conclusion. Nozick proposes that such arguments produce knowledge, but not understanding. They can show us that *p,* but not *how it is that p.*[45] Deductive arguments are frequently used to achieve this effect. Nozick suggests that such coercive means are incongruent with the true spirit of philosophy. Philosophy, at its best, is not about policing thought, but discovery and understanding. To that end, Nozick proposes that philosophers adopt a new approach to their task; they ought to seek explanation over proof.

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[44] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1983), 13.

[45] Ibid., 10.

An explanation attempts to answer how it is that something is possible in light of other beliefs. An explanation "may introduce explanatory hypotheses (*q*) which are not already believed, from which to deduce *p* in explanatory fashion."[46] The explanation *q* may not even be believed at all, but it is held out as a possibility. Nozick says that even the consideration of hypotheses known to be false can generate new insight as it can sometimes allow one to see new relationships and organic connections between what is being explained and other background beliefs. Nozick has in mind a mode of doing philosophy that seeks first to understand rather than to prove; though, significantly, he does not think the mode of proof should be done away with. It is still a necessary element of philosophy. However, that sort of modest and exploratory mode of reasoning is the sort of explanation I intend to offer in order to explain the moral facts. Of course, I believe the hypothesis on offer to be true, but my aim is to show *how it is that* this hypothesis explains the moral facts. To put it another way, I will show how Christianity explains four different moral facts and that it explains them well. The result is a cumulative case argument which shows that Christianity is a powerful explanation of the moral facts. On the basis of the moral evidence considered, Christianity is more likely true than not.

The Reason for Abduction

Most of the time, arguments move forward without ever calling attention to the mode of reasoning being employed. Rarely do deductive arguments comment on the features and advantages of deduction, for example. But it is worth doing so in for this abductive argument for at least two reasons. First, abductive reasoning has, in some cases, been met with skepticism

[46] Ibid., 14.

about its rationality. Those objections ought to be addressed, even if briefly. Second, in the case of using abduction to argue that Christianity is an especially good explanation of the moral facts, there are certain unique advantages. These advantages can be unfolded by giving some attention to the nature of abduction and some of the main objections.

Before articulating those features and advantages particular to abduction and especially in this context, it will help to make the case for abduction more broadly. The idea that one should prefer the hypothesis that best explains the facts is not a new concept, though the phrase "inference to the best explanation" was first used by Gilbert Harman.[47] C. S. Peirce frequently receives credit for bringing the idea to the attention of modern philosophy, though, as Dourven notes, "Philosophers as well as psychologists tend to agree that abduction is frequently employed in everyday reasoning."[48] Peirce coins the term *abduction* in the context of philosophy of science.[49] Different scientific hypotheses purport to explain the observed facts and Peirce seeks to provide a way to determine which theory ought to be preferred. Peirce suggests that though scientists have not been explicitly aware of abduction as a distinctive mode of reasoning, they have nevertheless utilized it when adopting new hypotheses, which they take to be more accurate, objectively, than the old. Peirce gives an explicit example of the sort of reasoning he has in mind:

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[47] Samir Okasha, "Van Fraassen's Critique of Inference to the Best Explanation," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 31, no. 4 (2000): 691.

[48] Douven, "Abduction."

[49] William Mcauliffe ably argues that Peirce's view on abduction is widely misunderstood as being the precursor to the inference to the best explanation. While Mcauliffe may likely be correct on this point, the aim here is not primarily to exegete Peirce, but to explain abduction according to the common usage of the term, which is something very similar to IBE. Mcaulife suggests that by "abduction" the mature Peirce had in mind only the generation of new hypotheses in light of the facts. William H. B. Mcauliffe, "How Did Abduction Get Confused with Inference to the Best Explanation?," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 51, no. 3 (2015): 300–319.

The surprising fact, C, is observed.

But if A were true, C would be a matter of course.

Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.[50]

With C, Peirce means any set of data or datum that one may attempt to explain. With A, Peirce means some complete hypothesis which "cannot be conjectured until its entire content is already present in the premiss."[51] The idea is that whole theories are assumed, along with all their implications, in order to determine which theory would best explain the surprising fact.[52]

But what does Peirce mean by the phrase, "best explains"? What would it mean for some hypothesis to count as the best or better explanation? Peirce argues that determining best fit is something like an aesthetic judgment:

> It was not until long experience forced me to realize that subsequent discoveries were every time showing I had been wrong, while those who understood the maxim as Galileo had done, early unlocked the secret, that the scales fell from my eyes and my mind awoke to the broad and flaming daylight that it is the simpler Hypothesis in the sense of the more facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests, that must be preferred; for the reason that, unless man have a natural bent in accordance with nature's, he has no chance of understanding nature at all.[53]

[50] Tim McGrew calls this particular example a "classic formulation" of abduction from Peirce. See Timothy McGrew, "Confirmation, Heuristics, and Explanatory Reasoning," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 54, no. 4 (December 1, 2003): 557.

[51] Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce,* ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 151.

[52] This mode of reasoning is like what Richard Swinburne calls "P-inductive" arguments. P-inductive arguments are arguments whose premises make the conclusion probable. These contrast with "C-inductive" arguments, where the premises only increase the probability of the conclusion. Swinburne further says that a correct, "good" P-inductive argument is one where those who disagree about the conclusion, nevertheless agree on the truth of the premises. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

[53] Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce,* 156.

Peirce's point is that ultimately what makes one explanation better than another will be based on intuition, a "natural bent," perhaps even relying on intuitions about beauty or elegance or simplicity.

Paul Thagard argues for three specific criteria for determining what counts as a "best" theory choice: consilience, simplicity, and analogy. Consilience "is intended to serve as a measure of how much a theory explains."[54] Better theories explain more. Others often refer to this as "explanatory scope." Simplicity has to do with the complexity of what is being explained in relation to the explanatory hypothesis. The better hypothesis is the one which explains more with less. Swinburne often tends to place this concern for parsimony at the center of his own evidential methodology.[55] The criterion of analogy has to do with how the structure of one hypothesis resembles some other explanation known to be true. Thagard offers the example of Darwin extending the known explanation of diversity of species through artificial selection to explain the diversity of species in nature by natural selection. Darwin's theory is made stronger by the analogous explanation and known explanation of species' diversity by artificial means.

Other philosophers have developed criteria that attempt to provide logical structure to the judgment; these are consistent with what Peirce and Thagard say about what make for good theory choice. Some suggestions are that the better explanation produces more "fruit"; it is simpler in the Ockhamist sense; it has more explanatory power; and it admits of no contradictions. One may think of the logical criteria suggested above as analogous to aesthetic qualities like proportion, balance, harmony, and unity.

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[54] Paul R. Thagard, "The Best Explanation: Criteria for Theory Choice," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 2 (1978): 79.

[55] For example, Swinburne says, "Simplicity is the major determinant of intrinsic probability." Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 108.

There are some objections to abductive reasoning in general, but by using the Christian worldview in particular as the explanatory hypothesis, some of these can be turned back in surprising ways. I will point out a few of the most common objections to the use of abductive reasoning and make some suggestions of how the Christian worldview can help address them.

Douven articulates what he takes to be the two primary challenges to abduction.[56] First, from van Fraassen, is that abductive styles of reasoning are *ad hoc.* When one practices abduction, she first observes the phenomena to be explained and then postulates a theory that attempts to harmonize all the known facts. Theories are "made to fit" the facts. People also face competing desires when using abduction, according to van Fraassen. In the first place, they desire the truth, but they also desire to have their curiosity satiated. This is what van Fraassen calls the desire for "information." Abduction satisfies the desire for information by providing an explanation, rather than aiming at true explanations.[57] For van Fraassen, this is a strike against any method that requires appeal to a "best explanation."

It may be that in some cases hypotheses are "made to fit" what they attempt to explain, but that does not mean they are not good explanatory candidates. In the case of Copernicus, his theory was made to fit the facts and it turns out his theory was much more correct than the traditional model. On the assumption of the truth of the Christian worldview, it would be difficult to argue that it is made to fit the facts since the core of the data comes from the Bible. If the Bible is to be authoritative and perspicuous, which is part of the complete Christian hypothesis, then the Christian hypothesis is given *to* and not made *by* human beings. It does not claim to be a human contrivance, like the ether theory for example, that seeks to explain reality.

[56] Douven, "Abduction."

[57] Ibid.

Even if it were the case that the perspective of the Bible was a contrivance, then it would not be the contrivance of people living today who share significantly different concerns when it comes to explaining the world. Therefore, even if certain instances of abduction were guilty of van Fraassen's charge, an abductive case for Christianity would arguably not be, or at least would not necessarily be.

Secondly, van Fraassen is also concerned that abduction utilizes principles, like inference to the best explanation, that add more "information."[58] The problem, as van Fraassen sees it, is that what counts as a better theory is in conflict with what counts as a rational theory. Some explanation of the data may explain more than another theory. In this case, the theory is better. Better theories explain more, but the more explaining a theory does, it also gains "more ways of being false" according to van Fraassen.[59] "Credibility varies inversely with informativeness."[60] Thus, van Fraassen sees abductive reasoning as self-contradictory. However, it is not at all obvious that the more informative a theory, the less credible it is. Some theories may extend an account's explanatory power, or informativeness, in ways that are natural to both the original theory and the evidence in question. This is arguably the case when considering the Christian worldview as an explanation of the moral facts.[61]

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[58] Bas C. Van Fraassen, *Images of Science: Essays on Realism and Empiricism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 185.

[59] Ibid., 280.

[60] Ibid.

[61] J. P. Moreland makes a similar point in his discussion of human consciousness and the explanations offered by naturalism and "biblical theism." Naturalism is arguably a simpler explanation of consciousness in terms of the ontological commitments, but that does not make it a better explanation, for it must propose all sorts of *ad hoc* causes and relations to account for consciousness. There are certain recalcitrant facts about consciousness that resist reduction to the limits of naturalism. Moreland says that biblical theism, as a plausible worldview, "provides additional resources for rejecting naturalism, given the various recalcitrant facts in view, because they not only provide disconfirming evidence against naturalism, they also provide confirming evidence for its rival." In other words, the more ontologically robust theory of biblical theism may better explain the facts, all things considered, even if it is initially more complex. See Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei*, 15.

One more objection to abduction comes from evolutionary psychology. Bertolotti and Magnani think that abductive reasoning in connection with supernatural beings faces a special problem. They argue that evolution has shaped human psychology so that they are prone to finding "agency" everywhere.[62] In human infancy, it was advantageous to develop neural processes which would allow a person to infer from certain signs, like the rustling of leaves, that some agent, whether friend or foe, was the cause.[63] Eventually, humanity "became more sensitive to recognize cues signaling complex conscious volition, moral behavior, for instance something happening to someone who just committed a mischief, *as if* she was being punished."[64] The habit of ascribing agency to various phenomena is hardwired into humanity so that "the generation of belief in something supernatural, inferred from certain signs, is just as creative and non-theoretical as the generation of the belief in an antelope hiding in the bushes: it is the same kind of inferential pattern, just operating on different kinds of signs."[65] If correct, Bertolotti and Magnani will have undermined the usefulness of abduction as a cognitive, rational process of apologetics. Humanity will see God as the best explanation for morality because that is what evolution has inclined them to see. In this regard, the objection echoes the concern of Van Fraassen about abduction featuring aims other than getting at the truth.

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[62] A very similar argument is raised by Daniel Dennett. For Dennett, Religion began because *homo sapiens* have an irresistible urge to assign agency to what they do not understand, a deep need to comfort themselves in the face of death, and to encourage cooperation. Further, human brains, like the brains of other animals are hardwired with what Dennett calls a "HADD" or "hyper active agent detection device, which causes human beings to attribute agency to potential threats in their environment as an aid to survival." See Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 103.

[63] Tommaso Bertolotti and Lorenzo Magnani, "The Role of Agency Detection in the Invention of Supernatural Beings," in *Model-Based Reasoning in Science and Technology* (Springer, 2010), 249.

[64] Ibid., 252.

[65] Ibid.

There are at least two responses the Christian can make. The first is that Bertolotti and Magnani's argument may prove too much. If abduction, even if limited to cases of thinking about God, is made non-rational because of its evolutionary origins, how can other modes of reason, or even abduction in other cases, be distinguished as cognitive, rational processes in a principled way? If the origin of the human cognitive suite is evolution, with an aim only to survival, this would seemingly undermine all human reasoning, including the reasons Bertolotti and Magnani provide for their position.[66] The other point is that Bertolotti and Magnani begin by assuming a non-teleological explanation for the origin of human beings and then extrapolate from that. If there is no God who made human beings to know him, then *ipso facto,* the processes which lead to humanity thinking he exists would not, under normal conditions, be truth conducive. But it is not obvious that Bertolotti and Magnani have begun with the right assumptions or that they are looking along from the right perspective. In other words, they beg the question.[67] According to Alvin Plantinga, if God exists then "God would certainly want us to be able to know him" and "the chances are excellent that he would create us with faculties enabling us to do just that."[68] And, of course, the Christian story tells us exactly that is the case: "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us."[69]

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[66] For a fuller articulation of this response, see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[67] William James makes a similar point: "a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule." There are certain assumptions or ways of reasoning that might prevent us from seeing the truth. William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 29.

[68] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 189.

[69] Acts 17:27, NIV.

While much more could be said to motivate these objections and in reply, this sketch suffices to show that taking the complete Christian worldview as an explanatory hypothesis can plausibly generate some novel and potentially compelling responses to common objections to abductive reasoning. These replies also serve to highlight some of the more general advantages of this approach.

Abduction and Deduction

There are at least three kinds of logical patterns used in moral arguments: deductive, inductive, and abductive.[70] William Lane Craig presents one of the most popular forms of the deductive version:

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.[71]

From premises (1) and (2), it follows that (3) God exists. Though this is often an effective argument, it does have some potential weaknesses. One possible weakness is that it does not say anything about the relation between God and objective moral values and duties, other than it is a necessary one. The skeptic might want Craig to say something more substantial about that relation. The deductive form of the argument does not allow for the possibility of some other non-theistic account of ethics to work. It actually entails that all non-theistic theories are false in premise (1).

[70] See Evans, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God."

[71] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 159.

David Baggett and Jerry Walls express a similar concern. They argue that Craig's first premise assumes the conceivability of a non-theistic world.[72] What one can know about such a world is very difficult to pin down. Christian theists are inclined to say that such a world is likely inconceivable and in fact a counteressential.[73] God exists necessarily, so conceiving of a world without him would be like trying to imagine a square circle. But, if one *could* conceive of an atheistic world, Baggett and Walls think that

> We still have relationships… and what seems like love and intersubjective moral agreement. Moreover, we have instrumental reasons to live ethically and perhaps strong convictions about the objective nature of morality and the various 'satisfactions of morality' that we all feel when we do the right thing.[74]

These features give atheists something substantial to motivate their moral theory. Therefore, insofar as Craig's argument implies that atheism leads to moral nihilism, many atheists will find it unpersuasive.[75]

As it stands, Craig's formulation implies that there is no other way to account for objective moral values and duties than the existence of God. While there may well be no other way to account for moral values and duties apart from God, this does not mean, given a world so

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[72] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 64.

[73]Mark Murphy captures this point especially well: "Here is a very crude picture of how to think about counterfactual thinking. You start with the way the actual world is, and then you ask what would be the case if the world were as close as possible to how it actually is, but differs in just a certain respect. But what you think about such counterfactual questions will of course differ based on what you think is actual. If you are an atheist, and you ask 'what value would creatures have without God?,' the 'nearest' world is the one we live in. So just ask: what value do they have? If you are a theist, by contrast, the 'nearest' world in which there is no God is outrageously remote. It is an impossible world, a deeply, deeply impossible world. It is of the essence of every possible creaturely substance that it is a creature. It is of the essence of God that all things distinct from God depend on God. When I try to take this thought experiment, as a theist, seriously, I go blank. And I think theists should go blank on this." Mark C. Murphy, "No Creaturely Intrinsic Value," *Philosophia Christi* 20, no. 2 (October 1, 2018): 354.

[74] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 99.

[75] John E. Hare, "Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, accessed March 31, 2021, https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/good-god-the-theistic-foundations-of-morality/.

value-laden as this one, that there cannot be plausible atheistic accounts.[76] So, an arguably preferable way to go might be to say that the *best explanation* of objective morality is God. This allows for the consideration of other (more or less) viable ethical theories.

Another potential problem with Craig's formulation is that it does not say anything about the relation between God and the existence of moral values and duties, other than they supervene on him in some way. Craig's first premise is a kind of "catch all" for a wide range of theistic moral theories.[77] Both William of Ockham and Thomas Aquinas could agree to it, though they have significantly different explanations of God's relation to morality. An alternative may be to first say what our moral theory is and then show how it counts as the best explanation (a sometimes long and arduous process) of the reality of moral facts.[78] The proponent of the moral argument may be accused of question begging unless he says enough about how God actually accounts for moral facts. Craig, of course, does say more elsewhere, but there could be a loss of rhetorical force on some occasions.[79]

Again, deductive versions can be and often are effective. However, there may be certain advantages in taking a different tack in some contexts. But the deductive version of the moral argument, as Baggett and Walls argue, tends to be "little persuasive, at least for principled and

[76] The ontology/epistemology distinction raised by Baggett and Walls can help clarify this distinction. See Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 200.

[77] Most likely, Craig sees this as advantage. He does not need to say how moral facts depend on God, only that they do.

[78] This is similar to Linville's approach in his argument for personal dignity. In his argument, Linville considers how different ethical theories fail to give an adequate account of why we should value others while his theory succeeds. See Linville, "The Moral Argument."

[79] See, for example, Craig's opening speech in William Lane Craig and Erik Wielenberg, *A Debate on God and Morality*, ed. Adam Johnson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

thoughtful atheists who recognize all the resources at their disposal to avoid nihilism."[80] Sometimes, a deductive philosophical proof may be the best argument to offer, but other times, and perhaps most of the time, an abductive philosophical explanation will fare better. It may well be a wise course to recognize that both forms of the moral argument have value in the right time and place. Rhetorically, the abductive argument invites the secularist to do her best using the resources of this world to construct her theory and admits she will be able to make some progress—but then argues that the theistic story is better. Those rhetorical advantages might be especially powerful when considering a complete worldview as an explanatory hypothesis.

C. S. Lewis was once standing in a dark toolshed when he noticed the sun was breaking in through a crack at the top of the door.[81] Through the crack, the beam provided enough luminance for Lewis to see the dust floating in the air, the color and shape of the door, the shadow of leaves rustling just outside, and the beam itself. But when Lewis decided to move so that the beam met his eye, he saw outside, the leaves moving, and the sun itself. *Looking along* the beam reveals something not visible when *looking at* the beam. From this short experience, Lewis draws an important analogy: the human epistemic situation is frequently analogous to his experience in the toolshed. Humanity often assumes some *epistemic norm*[82] by which they make different phenomena the object of study. For example, an anthropologist might consider an indigenous religion as an artifact of culture and tradition. It is an object to be studied according

[80] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 100.

[81] C. S. Lewis, "Meditations in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper, EPub. (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 236.

[82] The concept of "epistemic norm" is given some attention in Gerald Harrison, "What Are Epistemic Reasons?," *Philosophia Christi* 19, no. 1 (2017): 23–36. Harrison suggests that there are epistemic norms when one is "bid" or "favored" to believe some proposition. When someone is bid to believe some proposition, then she has normative reasons for holding that belief. Having a reason to believe is the same as having a normative demand (bidding, favoring) to believe. See especially pages 24-25.

to the epistemic norms of the anthropologist and not as a way of looking at the world, as it is for the people who believe in the religion. Similarly, Lewis points out that from the point of view of the scientist, love may be fully explicated by chemistry and physics. However, to the one in love, no such reduction is possible; this person *looks along* rather *looks at* and he sees something transcendental, something that goes beyond mere physics and chemistry.

A further problem according to Lewis is that one can "step outside one experience *only* by stepping into another."[83] Humanity cannot help but look along, even when they imagine they are objective observers. Humans, by their nature, are finite and always see from a situated, conditioned perspective. Though the anthropologist might think he observes the indigenous religion from an objective point of view (though, if any discipline should be disabused of this notion, it would first be the anthropologists), no such point of view is available. So, then, is knowledge impossible? Lewis resists the idea that experiences of looking along, therefore, do not reveal truth about the world. Lewis's modest suggestion is that in some cases the lover or the practitioner may have a better grasp of reality than the scientist. If phenomena like love and religion are examined by *looking along* rather than *looking at*, they may resist reduction into other categories.

Perhaps, then, one may utilize modes of reasoning that allow for looking along, that allow for "trying on" a worldview and judging its plausibility by its explanatory power and scope. If one reasons abductively about a complete explanation of reality (i.e. a worldview), then she looks at the facts of experience along the light that explanation provides. Moreland notes,

> One of the roles of a worldview is to provide an explanation of facts, of reality as it actually is. Indeed, it is incumbent on a worldview that it explain what does and does not

[83] Lewis, "Meditations in a Toolshed," 232. Emphasis added.

> exist in ways that follow naturally from the core explanatory commitments of that worldview. In this sense, we call a worldview and explanatory hypothesis.[84]

The upshot of using abduction, then, is this: abductive reasoning is especially well-suited for worldview-level explanations of something common in human experience, like the moral facts. Abductive reasoning further invites an explanation of how it is that God explains the moral facts without precluding, by strong implication, that rival ethical theories are impossible. It further allows one to adopt a way of looking at the world that is consistent with the worldview being examined.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained the thesis and the assumptions of this work. I argue that the Christian worldview is a powerful explanation of the moral facts, and I do so by abductive means. There was also a survey of various strands of the moral argument, showing the considerable overlap and harmonization of different approaches to the moral argument. Finally, I have offered an explanation and defense of the abductive mode of reasoning, along with some suggestions of how the Christian worldview might uniquely address some of the objections.

[84] Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei*, 3.

CHAPTER TWO: MORAL GOODNESS

In this chapter and the next, I suggest two important ways that the Christian worldview may powerfully explain a specific and important aspect of moral ontology. While there are several potential moral facts within the realm of moral ontology, including moral guilt, regret, and freedom, I focus only on moral goodness. I will first give some reason to think God should be identified with the Good, following Robert Adams. Next, I summarize some of the issues related to moral goodness. Then, I argue that being loving is an important way of being good. The Bible and Christian reflection upon revelation rightly understands God as consistent with the Good. Finally, I suggest that given the importance of love to the Good, the specifically Christian understanding of God as a single God in three persons powerfully accounts for this.

Theistic Platonism

One way to understand the motivation for theistic Platonism is to consider Plato's "Euthyphro dilemma." The dilemma occurs in Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue. There we encounter Socrates in conversation with a young man on the way to court. The young man intends to bring his case in order to solicit justice for his father who is accused of murder. Given Euthyphro's confidence in bringing his own father to court, Socrates says his understanding of things "pious and impious" must be "so very exact."[85] In light of Euthyphro's confidence, Socrates asks Euthyphro to explain the nature of piety. Socrates wants to know from Euthyphro "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is loved by the gods."[86] This is the dilemma in its original pagan context.

[85] Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (The Internet Classics Archive, 2009), accessed July 29, 2021, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyfro.html.

[86] Ibid.

Translating into contemporary terms, Louise Antony forms the dilemma this way: "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?"[87] Here the theistic ethicist faces a problem. If he chooses the second horn, he is a non-voluntarist and guilty of saying there is something external to God that determines what is good. Admitting that something besides God is the source of goodness would be a denial of theism. Erik Wielenberg notes that accepting this entails that "No being, natural or supernatural, is responsible for the truth of or has control over these ethical truths."[88]

On the other hand, if he embraces the first horn of the dilemma, he is a voluntarist and God's will alone determines what is moral. The voluntarist faces a whole host of other problems. If the only reason something counts as good is because God favors it, then God could have commanded us to murder, in which case it would be good to murder rather than refrain. If there is no other reason for something being moral than God favoring it, then God's commands appear arbitrary.[89] We could not know in principle what we ought to do unless God told us. In this case, we could not rely on our own moral intuitions or reason to guide us to the truth about morality. We must wait to hear what God has determined to be good. There is also a problem with the notion of goodness.[90] We think we know what the term means, but if God determines what is

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[87] Louise Antony, "Atheism as Perfect Piety," in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, ed. Nathan L. King and Robert K. Garcia (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 71.

[88] Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 66.

[89] See Terence Cuneo, "Arbitrariness Objection," *A Dictionary of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, July 23, 2020).

[90] Graham Oppy calls this the "vacuity objection." See Graham Oppy, "Morality Does Not Depend Upon God," in *Problems in Value Theory: An Introduction to Contemporary Debates*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

good based on a whim, so that murder or rape could be consistent with goodness, then we are simply equivocating when we use the term *goodness.*[91]

Several different approaches may be taken to make this kind of argument, but one powerful way, well-represented by the work of Robert Adams in *Finite and Infinite Goods* is to understand God as identical with the Good. Adams's argument works in two steps. First, Adams develops a view of the Good based on what he calls the "semantics of morals."[92] If human beings are competent users of ethical terms, then they must at least implicitly understand the role those moral properties play. Adams gives the example of the term "water" which he supposes has a nature identical to its chemical makeup, H_20. To have the property of being water, then, is identical to having the property of being H_20. Competent users of the term *water* must at least implicitly understand the role that property "being water" plays. Though the term *water* does not itself *mean* H_20, analysis of how the term *water* is used, when used competently, can tell us something about role that the property signified by the term must play. Adams holds that the same is true for moral terms. If we are generally competent users of terms like *good,* then we must at least implicitly know some of the features of the Good, even if we do not know what *good* means or its precise nature.[93]

The second step of Adam's case argues that God best explains the features of the Good implied by our competent usage of the term. Adams aims to identify the property good with God so that

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[91] See Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 118.

[92] Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

[93] A very similar argument is developed as early Augustine. Augustine argues that God is identical the Good and needed to make sense of our ability to recognize a hierarchy of goods. See Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City, 2015), 244.

> The part played by God in my account of the nature of the good is similar to that of the Form of the Beautiful or the Good in Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*. God is the supreme Good, and the goodness of other things consists in a sort of resemblance to God.[94]

Baggett and Walls similarly say, "In some important sense we wish to argue that God just is the ultimate Good."[95] By *good* here, they have in mind something like the Platonic notion of the Good. Adams thinks identifying the Good with God makes intuitive sense on the presupposition of theism, but also that, even without presupposing theism, the identification "may be commended by the way in which it accommodates such intuitions (widely if not universally shared) as that all excellence [or goodness] we experience seems to be pointing in some way to a standard of value that transcends it."[96]

This identification allows theists to split the horns of the Euthyphro Dilemma. By making God identical with the Good, Christian Platonists are able to say that there is nothing external to God that threatens his freedom or aseity. They can also turn back the arbitrariness objection. The first step is to recognize the distinction between the Good and the right. If we, along with Robert Adams, identify God with the Good, then we can say that something is good independent of God's favoring it. But this is not a problem because the standard of goodness is not external to God, but God's own nature. With respect to the right, we can say that something is right when God commands it. In this way, we can accept the voluntarist horn of the dilemma regarding the right, but without any of the problems mentioned above. God can be the standard of morality without morality being arbitrary because God is essentially and maximally good. A being like

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[94] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 7.

[95] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 92.

[96] Adams, "Précis of Finite and Infinite Goods," 440.

this would never make child torture for fun moral because that is not something maximally good beings do. What this solution to Euthyphro dilemma shows is that there is a way to be a voluntarist that theists can accept.

One can see how this answer to the Euthyphro dilemma provides some motivation for theists to think about the Good in Platonic terms, but we have yet to understand exactly what is meant by the term *good.* Adams's case rests largely on his analysis of the terms *goodness* and *excellence*, which he uses nearly synonymously.[97] If we extend the analysis offered by Adams, and the reflection offered by Baggett and Walls, it suggests that a specifically trinitarian, Christian view of God makes good sense of our use of the word "good." To make the case, I assume that the case made by Adams, namely that identifying the Good with God best explains the features of the Good discernible by competent users.

The Nature of the Good

But what is the nature of the Good? When discussing the nature of "the Good," it can help to disambiguate the term, as the word "good" has, as W D. Ross points out, "a wide diversity of senses."[98] There are moral and non-moral uses of the term. There are various accounts of the meaning of "good," some seeking to identify it with pleasure, others, like Philippa Foot, with certain natural, biological facts.[99] *Good* may refer to intrinsic or extrinsic goods. We can say that a basketball player is "good" without making any statement about his character or his intrinsic value as a human being. A "good" basketball player is one who helps

[97] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 13.

[98] W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65.

[99] Philippa Foot and others hold to "moral naturalism," the idea that moral properties are natural properties. See Terence Cuneo, "Moral Naturalism," *A Dictionary of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, July 23, 2020).

his team win. This is not a claim about moral goodness, but about instrumentality. Some things are *good for something,* and not necessarily intrinsically and morally good.

Moral goodness is often thought to extend beyond merely teleological notions of the Good, though some think that teleology alone can do the job.[100] Others, like H. P. Owen, argue that moral goodness cannot be captured in such terms. Owen considers a popular view of the Good as that which is *desired* for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Such things are *intrinsically* good and not merely instrumental or extrinsically good. Owen calls this the "subjectivist" analysis. Owen also considers the view that goodness is a property that can confront us and evoke reverence.[101] In this objective sense, goodness meets us and demands that we respect and honor what we recognize as good. It actually convicts us that *we ought to desire* what we perceive to be good.

In his analysis, Owen limits himself to the application of *good* to persons. Other things, like states of affairs can be called *good* if they are what a "good person would desire or commend."[102] The subjective use of *good* is ultimately dependent upon the objective use. He argues that the "subjective status of 'good' in sentences referring to situations derives its objective status when it is applied to human wills."[103] If the Good is identical to pleasure, then to judge someone or some state of affairs to be good is reduced to a statement about one's own feelings. But such a reduction contradicts our experience. There are some aspects of our

[100] A possible example here would be Philippa Foot. Sam Harris's *A Moral Landscape* also tries to transform teleology into an account of moral goodness: "Meaning, values, morality, and the Good life must relate to facts about the well-being of conscious creatures—and, in our case, must lawfully depend upon events in the world and upon states of the human brain." See Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape* (London: Bantam, 2010), 146.

[101] H. P. Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), 21.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

experience, like having a truly honest, kind, and courageous friend, which confront us and compel our admiration.[104] Owen admits that an appeal like this is more intuitive than discursive, but the intuition is powerful.[105] Owen concludes that "Many things are morally desirable 'in themselves' (that is, quite apart from further ends to which they may be means); but it is only in a will that moral goodness can inhere."[106]

To say that goodness *inheres* only in persons, is not necessarily the claim that the Good itself is only found within persons or even a divine person. But Owen does think that, ultimately, only persons are good, following William Sorely whom Owen quotes approvingly, "Goodness – when we distinguish it from beauty and truth—does not belong to material things, but to persons only."[107] Owen holds that moral judgments are objectively either true or false, which implies an external standard of goodness. This standard is either impersonal and Platonic or personal and theistic. Goodness "both obliges and attracts."[108] John Hare proposes that to say something is good is to say that "I desire or love it… that it *merits* such desire or love."[109] That is, the Good is aspirational, we desire to become good and rid ourselves of base desires like greed and ambition. And we not only naturally want to be good, we recognize that we *ought* to be. It is this sense of obligation to the Good that suggests that it cannot be explained by reference to mere ideal: "an idea (or ideal) cannot possess moral value. Therefore it cannot exert a moral obligation."[110]

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[104] Ibid., 20.

[105] Ibid., 24.

[106] Ibid.

[107] William Sorley, *Moral Values and The Idea Of God*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 120.

[108] Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism*, 77.

[109] Hare, *God's Command*, 22. Emphasis added.

[110] Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism*, 78.

This idea harmonizes well with the view of Baggett and Walls who think of moral obligations as identical to divine commands. They argue, following Robert Adams, that obligations in general are "broadly social requirements."[111] Hare notes, "The social character is that we are obligated to someone, or by someone."[112] To have an obligation "consists in being required (in a certain way, under certain circumstances stances or conditions), to do it."[113] One can have obligations because they value their social relations and want to keep their status within the community; keeping one's obligations would be an expression of their valuing of those relations.[114] However, a merely human social context will not account for all our *moral* obligations. Adams mentions that this teleological account would not generate *moral* obligation. These kinds of obligations may conflict with one another, or they may arise within an evil society. Genuinely moral obligations can only arise from a "social bond that is truly good" and not as a mere means to belong, but as "an expression that one already does belong."[115] The ground of moral obligation must be objective and truly good. Since obligations are social, then they can only come from persons. Therefore, the most likely ground would have three elements: personal, truly good, and objective. It is natural to think, then, that God who is personal, truly good, and provides an objective standard by reference to his nature, could issue commands that would generate moral obligations.

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[111] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 116.

[112] Hare, *God's Command*, 110.

[113] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 245.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 118.

Owen does not assume that God is the Good, as Adams does at this stage in his moral argument. However, the model of divine command theory he commends does give further support to Owen's notion that moral obligations are best explained by reference to a person who is himself the Good. It is difficult to make sense of the idea that some abstract object called "good" can be attractive and that we should be like this stark, bare entity. And as a nonperson, how can an abstract object be the objective ground for the *social* nature of moral obligations? Thinking of the Good as a concrete person who issues commands ably explains what is known via our deeply held intuitions related to moral value: the Good's capacity to attract and to oblige.

The Shape of the Good

Even if we have good reason to think of the Good as identical to God, there is still the question of what the Good is like. What are its features and properties? This a notoriously vexing question; philosophers have generally recognized the difficulty of articulating the shape of the Good, if it considered irreducible to pleasure or teleology. The difficulty is noted as early as Plato. In *The Republic,* Socrates tells Glaucon that explaining the nature of the Good is a task "too great for me."[116] For Plato, the precise definition of the Good is elusive, even if we can still have a limited, intuitive grasp of it. It is likely impossible to lay out the precise nature of the Good, and this is what we should expect if the Good is God since it would require unveiling the vast, mysterious, and often impenetrable mystery of God's nature. But if we are competent users, we are able to discern something about the role that word plays in our thinking and that can fill in, a greater or lesser degree, some aspect of its character.

[116] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (The Internet Classics Archive, 2009), bk. 6, accessed July 29, 2021, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html.

Robert Adams argues that the goodness found in finite things is explained in terms of resemblance to God, who is the Good.[117] God is both the exemplar of the Good and goodness itself. As a concrete object, rather than an abstract one, it makes sense to think of goodness in terms of resemblance rather than the instantiation of some abstract universal. From a Christian perspective, this would imply that we can discover the shape of the Good in at least two different ways. First, God has revealed himself and what he is like in the Bible and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, by God's special disclosure of himself in these ways, we are given an idea of the Good's features and contours.[118] Second, Adams's mode of analyzing the component usage of the term *good* in moral contexts to discover its nature is consistent with Christian perspective. For the Christian explanation of moral goodness to count as good explanatory candidate, these two sources of knowledge of the Good must be in harmony.

While there are many facets of the Good, I focus specifically on love and its relation to the Good. The first step is to get a clear definition of love. Love, like goodness, is not easy to define. C. S. Lewis notes that the Greeks had four different words for love: *storge, philia, eros,* and *agape. Storge* is the sort of love found between parents and children; Lewis evokes the image of a mother nursing her newly born baby; it is the "Gift-love of the mother" for her children.[119] Lewis explains that *eros* is "used to refer to that part of love constituting a passionate, intense desire for something."[120] Though, Lewis argues that *eros,* rightly understood and fully developed, is not mere passionate desire, but includes the recognition of one's need for

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[117] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 7.

[118] To be clear, by making this claim, I do not assume the Bible or Jesus Christ do, in fact, reveal God. Rather, divine revelation in these modes is only part of the Christian worldview and, consequently, its explanation of the moral facts. It is part of the hypothesis to be considered.

[119] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, EPub edition. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 41.

[120] Ibid., 42.

the other. To love with *eros* is to make another's interests fully our own. It leaps over "the massive wall of our self-hood."[121] *Philia* is affection and the brotherly love shared among friends; it is represented by the image of comrades standing shoulder to shoulder.[122] In the *Four Loves,* Lewis argues that these first three all have ways of going wrong. *Storge* can become overbearing and undercutting. *Philia* can only be truly found among kinsmen and companions. It has a limited practical range of application. *Eros* may take its object as an ultimate end and thus lead to evil for the sake of the beloved.

For Lewis, these three loves are the "natural loves." While good when applied in the right context and in the right way, they are in some ways only shadows of divine love or *agape*. Divine love ultimately transforms natural love into something else. To love with *agape* is to love the unlovable, to have affection where none is deserved, to befriend even the unworthy. *Agape* "arguably draws on elements from both *eros* and *philia* in that it seeks a perfect kind of love that is at once a fondness, a transcending of the particular, and a passion without the necessity of reciprocity."[35] This love *transcends* its subject and object; it relates to the ultimate good and seeks *the Good* for the other. *Agape* love is multi-dimensional. It acts for the sake of the other, but it also has a genuine affection and fondness for its object. It is the kind of love of which we see only occasionally among humanity and examples are often highly celebrated.

Perhaps one example comes from the heroic and selfless acts of WWII combat medic, Desmond Doss. Doss, a pacifist on religious grounds, faced the harrowing danger of war and carried no weapon. At the Battle of Okinawa, he saved nearly a hundred men, including even some of the enemy. Though wounded himself, he climbed a four-hundred-foot cliff dozens of

[121] Ibid., 146.

[122] Ibid., 89.

times, into enemy mortar fire, to pull soldiers to safety. He was finally seriously injured by a grenade and was being taken away from the fray on a litter when he crawled off and tended to the wounds of another man who was more seriously injured.[123] Doss risked his own life over and over, and not only for the sake of his friends, but even for those whom he had every reason to consider his enemies. He acted for the sake of others, and his care for their injuries evokes a sense of genuine affection.

In this story, we find an example of goodness that, as Owen suggests, confronts us and compels our admiration. It is difficult to explain away our sense that what Doss did was deeply good and loving in terms of mere chemistry and evolutionary psychology, as some have attempted to do.[124] There would be a gaping chasm between what seems obvious, that the heroic deed was good, and reality, that it was only the outworking of physics. One would be hard pressed to say that any person asserting, "What Doss did that day was good" was not a competent user of term in at least that instance. Certainly, one aspect of its goodness is Doss's commitment to carry out his duty as a combat medic. Fidelity to duty in the face of danger is admirable indeed. But perhaps its goodness is so clear because it is at least an analogy or fleeting glimpse of the divine love or *agape*.

The case of Doss in the Battle at Okinawa intuitively implies that there is some deep connection between the Good and love. Love itself is not identical to the Good, for one may love in the wrong way and the wrong mode, a point made by both Lewis and Augustine. As

[123] Congressional Medal of Honor Society, "Desmond Thomas Doss | World War II | U.S. Army | Medal of Honor Recipient," text/html, *Congressional Medal of Honor Society* (Congressional Medal of Honor Society, n.d.), https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/desmond-t-doss, accessed July 27, 2021, https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/desmond-t-doss.

[124] See for example the explanation of love given in terms of evolutionary psychology in Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 214.

Augustine says, when love is disordered it "corrupts you in your enjoyment of it."[125] But when love has the right object and the right context, it is clearly good.

Some suggest that love is central to a meaningful life. The novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch asks, "Is not ordinary human love a… striking evidence of a transcendent principle of good?"[126] She adds, "One cannot but agree that in some sense this is the most important thing of all."[127] Theologian Karl Barth asserts, "But there is also nothing beyond love. There is no higher or better being or doing in which we can leave it behind us."[128] Socrates says that "if our loves were perfectly accomplished… then our race would be happy."[129] Without the love of a friend, Aristotle says "no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."[130] The Bible echoes this point. The Apostle Paul writes that one may have all kinds of good traits, including selflessness, faith, and the gift of prophecy, but "If I… do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."[131] One could possess all these virtues and powers, but without love, one's life "becomes a hollow performance that falls flat."[132]

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[125] Augustine, *The Trinity*, 280.

[126] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 73.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, vol. 1 part 2 (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 374.

[129] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (The Internet Classics Archive, 2009), accessed July 27, 2021, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html.

[130] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (The Internet Classics Archive, n.d.), bk. 8, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.mb.txt.

[131] 1 Cor. 13:1, NIV.

[132] David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Ada: Baker Academic, 2003), 611.

Though there is widespread (but not universal) agreement on the centrality of love, it remains difficult to say precisely what the relation of love to the Good is. Nevertheless, there is a powerful intuitive pull to make the connection. In some way, love is intimately related to the Good. Plausibly, to love is a way of being good. It is, perhaps, as Paul suggests, "the most excellent way."[133] With this in mind, I turn to the other source of knowledge of the Good offered by Christian theism, the revelation of God in the Bible and in Jesus Christ.

The Bible and the Character of God

To extend Adams's moral argument from the God of philosophy to specifically the Christian God, we must at least show that the God of Christian revelation can consistently fulfill the role of the Good. To do this, I first answer the charge that the Bible does not make substantial claims about the nature of God, then I briefly discuss three of God's moral attributes developed in the Bible: his righteousness, goodness, and love.

Some have argued that the Bible does not make substantial philosophical claims or that it is, in some sense, too naïve or concrete to present a serious philosophical perspective. For example, James D. G. Dunn argues that the Hebews did not concieve of God as he is essentially. Dunn holds that these categories are too "Western" and "Greek."[134] Yoram Hazony, on the other hand, rejects the idea that the Hebrew Bible is unphilosophical but notes that Western philosophy has consistently viewed the Old Testament as mere revelation, in opposition to reason.[135] Dunn

[133] 1 Cor. 12:31, NIV.

[134] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, vol. 38a, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 40–41.

[135] Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17.

is likely correct in part. There is a danger of reading our own philosophical questions back into the Bible and the Bible likely does not answer the precise question of God's relation to *the Good*, at least in the Platonic sense.

Still, there are some reasons to challenge Dunn's view. The evidence suggests that Hebrews were capable of abstract thinking about God. For example, when God gave his name to Moses as "I am who I am" he intends to communicate several abstract ideas about himself.[136] David Freedman notes that these include his status as Creator of all things. God essentially *is* the source of all things. And read in light of the rest of Exodus, the divine name invokes his moral character of grace, mercy, and faithfulness, as he is the transcendent God now in the midst of Israel to fulfill his promise.[137] Durham notes, that the divine name is not merely a name: "It is an assertion of authority, a confession of an essential reality."[138] These features are not obviously concrete and extend beyond the immediate experience of the writers.

Another example comes in Psalm 90. Here the psalmist gives a clear description of God's eternality: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."[139] The psalmist is "affirming his [God's] everlasting nature."[140] That God would exist forever, in "immemorial majesty," even before the earth was made, is not something knowable by concrete experience. [141] Further, any good

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[136] Cf. Exod. 3:14.

[137] David Noel Freedman, "The Name of the God of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, no. 2 (1960): 155.

[138] John I. Durham, *Exodus*, vol. 3, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998), 38.

[139] Ps. 90:2, ESV.

[140] Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, vol. 20, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998), 437.

[141] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Donald J. Wiseman, vol. 16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), 360.

systematic theology will have scores of references to the OT that establish "abstract," incommunicable attributes of God (omniscience, omnipresence, etc.).[142] For many careful readers of the OT, these aspects of God's character are at least glimpsed throughout. This implies that though the Hebrews arguably were more concrete thinkers than us, it is wrong to say that they did not have abstract ideas about God as he is essentially is. The tendency to see Hebrew and Western thought as totally alien to one another is likely an overreach, made with the good intention to understand the Hebrew authors in their own terms, but an overreach nonetheless.[143]

One abstract and moral attribute of God well-developed in the Old Testament is his righteousness. The Hebrew Bible uses the term to refer to divine action, but also divine quality, or the character of God.[144] It has several dimensions, referring to God's justice, but also to his faithfulness to deliver his people (Judg. 5:11), upholding the cause of the oppressed and those in need (Ps. 9:7, 1 Kgs. 8:32).[145] God is righteous in the sense that "his actions are in accord with the law he himself has established. He is the expression in action of what he requires of others."[146] Righteousness has to do with God's perfect integrity. The conception of God as essentially righteous is carried forward into the New Testament. The Apostle Paul tells us repeatedly in his letter to the Romans that God is righteous and that he demonstrates his righteousness in his economy of salvation. Moo says that by his use of the term "righteous" in

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[142] See for example chapter 11 of Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

[143] For further discussion, see David Baggett and Thomas Morris, "A Perfect God," *First Things*, accessed July 29, 2021, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/01/a-perfect-god.

[144] Derek R. Brown and Paul A. Nierengarten, "The Fall," ed. John Barry, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2016).

[145] Allen Myers, "Righteousness," ed. Allen Myers, *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 888.

[146] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 254.

Romans 3:21, Paul has in mind the justness of God, and specifically "the 'integrity' of God, his always acting in complete accordance with his own character."[147]

This sort of maximal integrity between what God promises and demands and his own actions and character is a necessary condition for thinking of God as the Good. If the Good is a concrete person, as Adams suggests, then that person should have precisely this kind of integrity. Another necessary condition for thinking of God of scripture as *the Good*, on Adams's account, is that he be shown *recognizably* good. This follows from the idea that our use of ethical terms at least sometimes signifies a reality which makes them true.

This fits well with the testimony scripture that God is good. The discussion of righteousness has already hinted at the sort of character God has. God's righteous acts are morally good acts; they are acts of keeping his promises, of providing for the needy, of defending the innocent, and rescuing the oppressed. While the idea that God is good can be found frequently in the Bible, here are just a handful of examples where the claim is stated directly. Psalm 145:9 says that "The Lord is good to all." 1 Chronicles 16:34 states, "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!" Jesus tells us in Mark 10:18 that "no one is good but One, that is, God." Jesus's statement here expresses his "radical view of God's unique goodness. God is the source of all goodness."[148] Summing up the view of the whole canon, John Peckham writes, "The covenantal God of Scripture is good—entirely good."[149]

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[147] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1996), 219.

[148] Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, vol. 34b, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 96.

[149] John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 176.

Perhaps the most recognizable way to be good is to be loving. Biblical scholars and theologians mostly agree that love and goodness are central to God's character. Millard Erikson suggests that it is the love of God that first comes to mind when reflecting upon the moral character of God.[150] God's character of love is most dramatically and clearly revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. While there are various theories of the atonement, historically Christians have emphasized how the cross demonstrates God's moral character, both in terms of his justice[151] and in terms of his love for humankind.[152] Craig recognizes as "the message of the NT… that God, out of His great love, has provided the means of atonement for sin through Christ's death on the cross."[153]

Crucial to understanding the significance of the cross is the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity in Jesus of Nazareth. On the penal-substitutionary view of the atonement, Christ dies in the place of sinners, so that they might have eternal life with God. Most would recognize that, if Jesus were merely a man, his voluntary acceptance of great humiliation and death on behalf of mankind would be a heroic act. As Jesus himself says, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."[154] However, the sacrifice of Christ is deepened because of his status as the God-Man, both fully human and divine. It goes beyond the already valiant act of one man dying for his friends. God, in Jesus, took on a human nature and submitted himself to the cruelty of his own wayward creatures, and did this for their sake (2 Cor.

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[150] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 262.

[151] Cf. Rom. 3:26.

[152] Cf. Rom. 5:8.

[153] William Lane Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020), 14.

[154] John 15:13, NIV.

5:15). Alvin Plantinga argues that God created the world with the purpose of incarnation and atonement in mind, that a world in which the Son of God unites with man and redeems them, is a world rife with value, love, and the goodness of God. It is "one of the best of all possible worlds."[155] Erickson explains that God's holiness and justice requires the atonement, but "The love of God provides that atonement."[156] Reflecting on the revelation of God's character discovered in the cross, Plantinga rhetorically asks, "Could there be a display of love to rival this?"[157]

The Bible also says explicitly that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). On the verse, L. L. Morris comments,

> This means more than 'God is loving' or that God sometimes loves. It means that he loves, not because he finds objects worthy of his love, but because it is his nature to love. His love for us depends not on what we are, but on what he is. He loves us because he is that kind of God, because he is love.[158]

Colin Kruse cautions against understanding John as making an ontological statement, as if God were identical to love. Kruse suggests that the author is nevertheless "speaking about the loving nature of God revealed in his saving action on behalf of humankind."[159] A similar point can be found elsewhere. In 2 Corinthians 13:11 describes God as the "God of love and peace." This

[155] Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter Van Inwagen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 4.

[156] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 739.

[157] Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" 7.

[158] L. L. Morris, *1 John*, 4th ed., New Bible Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 1406.

[159] Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 2nd ed., The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 157.

phrase, found in the benediction of Paul's letter, intends to remind readers that "God shows inconceivable love to humans and makes peace through an incredible sacrifice."[160]

Jerry Walls thinks the Bible represents God as "the Greatest Possible Lover" and as part of his case, he cites three verses, all from the Gospel of John:

> "Father . . . you loved me before the foundation of the world" (17: 24).
> "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (15: 9).
> "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15: 12).

Walls comments that these three verses "encapsulate the heart of the Christian story as it pertains to love."[161] The first verse points to the reality of divine love even before the creation of the world. The second indicates that God is now extending that same divine love toward mankind; in the incarnation of Jesus, "we see Trinitarian love on open display."[162] And the third verse implies that the love between his disciples should mirror that divine love shared between the Father and the Son.

Since scripture reveals God to be righteous, good, and loving, it is therefore warranted to think that the God of the Bible is recognizably good. It is at least consistent, then, to think of the God as the Bible as identical to the Good, even though the Bible itself does not make that precise claim.

An Objection Considered

There is an important objection that ought to be at least acknowledged at this point. Some have argued that the God of the Bible is not good, but, in fact, evil. Richard Dawkins, while not a

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[160] David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 554.

[161] Jerry L. Walls, "The Argument from Love and (Y) The Argument from the Meaning of Life: The God of Love and the Meaning of Life," in *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*, ed. Jerry Walls and Trent Dougherty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 315.

[162] Ibid.

biblical scholar or theologian, makes the infamous remark that the God of the Bible is "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction…"[163] Dawkins goes on to describe God as, among other things, genocidal, vindicative, and bloodthirsty. Daniel Dennett adds that the God of the Old Testament is jealous, prideful, and has a "great appetite for praise and sacrifices."[164] Hazony argues that the Hebrew scriptures teach that God is not perfectly just or faithful; the text only offers the *hope* that he is.[165]

This is a concern to be taken very seriously as it cuts to the heart of the consistency of thinking of the God of the Bible as the Good. Baggett and Walls provide a distinction that may help address this problem. They point out that there is difference between the Good and the right. Specifically, in our evaluation of moral actions, we can discern that some acts are good, but not right. Some are right, but not good. Supererogatory actions are good, but not right in the sense that they are not morally obligatory. It would be a good thing to give away all one's money to the poor, but it is not morally obligatory, and, in that sense, it goes beyond what is right. On the other hand, some acts may be right but not good. Killing in defense of one's family, for instance, would arguably be right, but killing is not good.[166]

This is exactly the sort of thing we should expect to find given the view offered by Adams, Baggett, and Walls. Their account of divine command theory (DCT) can make sense of the distinction between good and right actions. This distinction would be more difficult to account for given a view like utilitarianism, which prescribes that one always act in a way to

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[163] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

[164] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 265.

[165] Yoram Hazony, "An Imperfect God," *Opinionator*, November 25, 2012, accessed July 28, 2021, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/an-imperfect-god/.

[166] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 17.

maximize utility and so, as Russ Shafer-Landau points out, there is no space for supererogatory acts.[167] DCT implies that there will be occasions where there may be a disconnect in good and right acts and permits supererogatory acts as well since we are only obligated to obey God's commands.

Extending this insight to the Bible, we also find that same pattern. There are some morally obligatory actions commanded by God that are not good; that is, they are plausibly not connected in any serious way to the Good. A possible example would be God's command to Israel to refrain from eating shellfish or to avoid wearing clothes made from two different fabrics.[168] These are not good acts, but nevertheless, at least for theocratic Israel, were morally obligatory. [169] On divine command theory, the moral law cannot be deduced from human nature, though it should still be consistent with it.[170] And the Bible allows for supererogatory acts. While the moral demand required by Jesus to love one's neighbor as herself is very high, it does not entail, as Baggett and Walls point out, that as human beings we are obligated "to do absolutely every good of which we are capable."[171]

[167] Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 3rd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 140.

[168] Lev. 11:9, Lev. 19:19.

[169] J. E. Hartley submits that the dietary laws are given to build solidarity and identity in the Israelite community. Possibly, they also have a symbolic force, where unclean animals represent disorder and clean ones symbolize order. The command about clothing may be intended to teach the value of persevering diversity. But this does not indicate a necessary or natural connection between the command and the Good. Commands may be given for good reasons, but the command itself need not have a direct connection to the Good. See John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, vol. 4, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1992), 163.

[170] Hare, *God's Command*, 100.

[171] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 17.

One of the main concerns with the moral character of God in the Bible comes from the Conquest of Canaan and similar episodes.[172] While the interpretation of these narratives is complicated and cannot be fully addressed here, it may be that God commands something bad, like killing, but it is nevertheless right because God has commanded it. In this case, on DCT, God's command for Israel to drive out the Canaanites would only need to be *consistent* with his character and not necessarily a positive reflection of it. He would need justifying reasons to command something bad, just like one would need the justification of self-defense to kill an attacker. And, the Bible does present justifying reasons for the conquest, suggesting that the authors of the Bible know that it is intrinsically bad and out of sync with God's character.[173] God's commands are never beyond the pale or bad for no reason. Commands to do something intrinsically bad do not necessarily imply that God is malicious or violent, in the same way that his command to refrain from eating shellfish does not likely tell us anything about what God is like.

That the Bible represents God as commanding morally neutral acts and even morally bad acts is a surprising support of Baggett and Walls's solution to the Euthyphro dilemma in the context of Christian theism. The Bible depicts God and his commanding in precisely the sort of pattern one would expect given that solution. The fit between the biblical data and the explanation offered adds to the overall explanatory power of Christian theism rather than

[172] See chapter 15 of Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

[173] John Walton and J. Harvey Walton see God as having justifying reasons, namely God acts to establish Israel as a kind of vassal nation, through which he would be represented to the world. Whether this justification is sufficient is not the issue at this point; it is that there are justifying reasons given. It implies a knowledge that killing is bad and its requirement by God needs explanation. See John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 237.

detracting from it. So, the objection from Dawkins, Dennett, and others, while challenging, can potentially show an unexpected way that Christianity accounts for the moral facts.

Christian Reflection upon God's Nature Revealed in Scripture

The foregoing gives reason to think that the God of the Bible is recognizably good, even despite some objections. Now I will consider two relevant aspects of Christian reflection upon revelation and their implications.

First, Christian reflection upon revelation and the integration of philosophy has led to the widely held view that God possesses all great making properties to the maximal degree, following the ontological argument of Anselm of Canterbury. While the soundness of Anselm's argument is contested, many Christian philosophers and theologians still think of God as being maximally great.[174] For God to be the creator of all that exists and for him to be worthy of worship, he must be maximally great. Richard Swinburne argues that God's moral perfection follows deductively from God's other essential properties.[175] If God knows all things, then he knows which acts are moral and immoral. Being omnipotent, he always has the power and freedom to do what is moral. And, Swinburne suggests, there are always decisive reasons for God to do what is moral and ultimately rational. These factors entail that God will always do what is moral, all things considered.[176] Therefore, God is perfectly good.[177]

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[174] For example, Richard Swinburne rejects the ontological argument, but defines God in Anselmian terms. See Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 298.

[175] Tom Morris also argues that God's goodness can be known intuitively or on the basis of inference from other beliefs. See Thomas Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 136.

[176] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 99.

[177] Mark Murphy argues that God's perfection does not entail his omnibenevolence, where we understand that term in the familiar way of caring about the well-being of his creatures. Murphy argues that God the "Anselmian being is not morally perfect" in this sense. Murphy's view is partly motivated by the idea that human

Second, reflection upon the scriptures has resulted in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Theologians and philosophers of religion have noted that the doctrine of the Trinity is "not discoverable by human reason, [but] is susceptible of a rational defense when revealed."[178] The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is complex, and the details are contentious.[179] Specifically, there is disagreement about the implications of the revealed data concerning the Trinity and how to harmonize these with reason. The debate largely concerns different models of the Trinity, variously emphasizing either the distinctness of the divine persons (Social Trinitarianism) or their unity (Latin Trinitarianism, a view held by Brian Leftow and others). Other issues relate to how to explicate the reality of three divine persons in one essence or substance. Camps here include functional trinitarianism, group mind monotheism, functional monotheism, and Trinity monotheism (William Lane Craig's view), among others.

However, all orthodox understandings of the Trinity conform to the view that God is one essence and three distinct persons. "God is not one and three, but one in three."[180] Craig and Moreland similarly state, "On the Christian view, God is not a single person, as traditionally conceived, but is tripersonal. There are three persons, denominated the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who deserve to be called God, and yet there is but one God, not three."[181]

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beings are neither intrinsically valuable nor morally virtuous and so God has no decisive reason to love them. I will explore this objection in more detail in chapter 3, which deals specifically with intrinsic human value. See Mark C. Murphy, "Précis of God's Own Ethics," *Religious Studies* 53, no. 4 (December 2017): 545–550.

[178] William Greenough Thayer Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 219.

[179] For a good overview of the landscape, see chapter 29 of James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003).

[180] Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 221.

[181] Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 223.

Moreland and Craig extend Anselmian theology to suggest that God must be loving and, ultimately, and a plurality of persons. God, as the greatest conceivable being (GCB) possesses all perfections. These include moral perfection. In this regard, they differ slightly from Swinburne who thinks that God's perfect goodness is derived from (at least epistemically) his other attributes. Craig and Moreland say that the GCB must be loving, "for love is a moral perfection; it is better to be loving than unloving."[182] From this, they argue that God's essential nature implies that God is a plurality of persons. For, to be loving, is to "give oneself away," to reach out "to another person."[183] To love requires at least two persons. God's essential attribute of love must be expressed within his own nature. God creates freely and a created world with other persons to love exists only contingently. Since love requires at least two people, it follows that God "is not a single, isolated person, as unitarian forms of theism like Islam hold; rather, God is a plurality of persons, as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity affirms."[184] Lewis agrees; to say, "God is love" has "no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons."[185]

Because a detailed discussion and defense of a specific view of the Trinity is not generally the issue and it would take us far afield of the topic in view, I will assume a certain view of the Trinity. A broadly social trinitarian perspective of the Trinity best harmonizes the biblical data and makes the most sense. Social Trinitarians, like William Hasker, hold that "the Father, Son, and Spirit are… distinct 'persons' where the word 'person' retains much of its familiar meaning derived from its application to human persons."[186] The three divine persons

[182] Ibid., 594.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Ibid., 595.

[185] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174.

[186] William Hasker, "A Leftovian Trinity?:," *Faith and Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2009): 154.

are, as Stephen T. Davis and Eric T. Yang suggest, bound together through the relation of perichoresis, which refers to the mutual interpenetration of the divine persons.[187] I further adopt the view of what Oliver Crisp defines as the *Weak Person-perichoresis.* On this view, "The persons of the Trinity share all their properties in a common divine essence apart from those properties that serve to individuate each person of the Trinity, or express a relation between only two persons of the Trinity."[188] On a view like this, the Trinity consists of a society of three persons, who are all fully God, reman distinct persons, and yet share a single substance or essence.

The application of the Trinitarian doctrine and Anselmian theology has important implications for understanding the God of the Bible. Even prior to God's creation of the world, theologians recognize that God existed eternally and complete in himself, lacking nothing. Hasker explains that "wholly apart from creation, love and relationship abound within God, in the eternal loving mutuality of the persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[189] Karl Barth comments, "Like everything else that He is, He is love as the triune God in Himself. Even without us and without the world and without the reconciliation of the world, He would not experience any lack of love in Himself."[190] God exists in himself with maximal power, goodness, love, knowledge, and other great-making attributes so that, according to Plantinga, "the value of any state of affairs in which God alone exists is itself unlimited."[191] If

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[187] Stephen Davis and Eric Yang, "Social Trinitarianism Unscathed," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5 (2017): 223.

[188] Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31.

[189] William Hasker, "An Adequate God," in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. John Cobb and Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 228.

[190] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1 part 2:379.

[191] Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" 9.

God exists, *sans* creation, entirely complete in himself, this raises the question of why God would create anything at all. He lacks nothing, needs nothing.

Some have attempted to characterize God's creation of the world as necessary, but as Berkhof notes, "this is not a Scriptural position."[192] Rather, God creates freely. While Christian thinkers believe that the Bible does not reveal specially why God creates, one plausible suggestion is that God creates as an outworking of his loving nature. C. S. Lewis takes this a natural implication of God's self-sufficiency and the reality of creation: "God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them."[193] The contingent and gratuitous nature of the cosmos itself suggests that God is loving. Summing up the biblical data on the Trinity, John Peckham writes,

> God is love—the eternal Trinity of love. From eternity to eternity, the Father loves the Son and the Spirit as other than himself, the Son loves the Spirit and the Father as other than himself, and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son as other than himself.[194]

As we have seen, Christian reflection upon revelation has led to the idea of God as the GCB and that God is a Trinity. But how do these features explain moral goodness?

The Christian view of God accounts for the Good in at least two ways. First, Robert Adams makes an intriguing remark in a footnote in *Finite and Infinite Goods.* He states that social systems and interpersonal relationships are things to which we "confidently ascribe excellences."[195] Likely, one way for a social relationship to be excellent is to be characterized by rightly ordered love. Rightly ordered, loving relationships are excellent and, in some way,

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[192] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 130.

[193] Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 162.

[194] Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, 247.

[195] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 42.

resemble the Good itself. Our ascriptions of excellence to such relations are "likelier to be possible if the Good itself is importantly like a society."[196] On the Christian view of God, this is precisely the case and so it better explains certain aspects of goodness or excellence than would a unitarian view of God. This supports the point made by Adam Johnson: "Because morality is inextricably tied to personal relationships, it makes more sense to talk about love and morality in the context of multiple divine persons than in a context of a single person existing in eternal isolation."[197] We can judge certain kinds of loving relations to be good, like the relation between old friends, mothers and their children, and husbands and wives as morally good. They are good because they are right and loving relationships. Their goodness can be explained in terms of resemblance to the love shared in the divine community of three persons.

Second, the Trinity can make sense of the intuition that love is somehow central to the Good. The doctrine of the Trinity closely knits the Good and love together. Love is not something contingent to God's nature. Instead, Karl Barth proposes that God's triune nature implies that: "We cannot say anything higher or better of the 'inwardness of God [i.e. the nature of God]' than that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and therefore that He is love in Himself…"[198] Peckham similarly says, "God's character is itself love, and God is essentially loving. The members of the Trinity have always been involved in a love relationship… Intratrinitarian love is thus essential to God, a product of God's trinitarian, essentially related nature."[199] God is, as Lewis puts it, "not a static thing—not even a person—but a dynamic,

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[196] Ibid.

[197] Adam Johnson, *Proposing a Trinitarian Metaethical Theory as a Better Explanation for Objective Morality than Erik Wielenberg's Godless Normative Realism* (Wake Forest: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020), 43.

[198] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1 part 2:377.

[199] John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 252.

pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance."[200] If love is central to the Good, the Trinity capably explains why it is so.

Beyond mere explanation, though, there is a certain aesthetic quality and haunting beauty to this view of God. This picture of ultimate reality as divine dance attracts us and obliges us, in Owen's terms. It is attractive in the sense that it invites us to participate; the dynamic, to be part of the divine life is something to which we aspire. And just such an invitation is extended on the Christian view; humanity can become "partakers of the divine nature."[201] We can participate in "God's knowledge, virtue, and love" even as his dependent, contingent creatures.[202] It also obliges us and compels us to a transformed life, one characterized by virtue and goodness, exactly the sort of life needed to be amongst this divine community. Jerry Walls holds that the intended ultimate destiny of man is to live amongst a community of persons, in fellowship and communion with the Trinity, who have been "transformed by the perfect love made available to us in the incarnation of the Son of God and outpouring of the Holy Spirit."[203] Ultimately, even the saints will love each other with "same kind of love that eternally unites the members of the Trinity."[204] The desire for the Good is not unquenchable or unattainable, on this view. The transcendent good is made immanent in Jesus Christ and attainable by the power of the Spirit.[205] Love is central to all these elements. The world and human beings were made because of the

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[200] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174.

[201] 2 Peter 1:4, KJV.

[202] Michael W Austin, "The Doctrine of Theosis: A Transformational Union with Christ," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 8, no. 2 (2015): 181.

[203] Jerry L. Walls, *The Logic of Eternal Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 111.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Cf. John 1:14 and Gal. 5:22-23.

triune God's overflowing love, God saves the world because of his love for it, and he invites man to participate in the love found amongst the Trinity. This is why, in summing up the overall narrative of the Bible, Plantinga says, "This overwhelming display of love and mercy is not merely the greatest story ever told; it is the greatest story that could be told."[206] Likely no discursive argument could capture the point well enough. The suggestion, though, is that in this representation of God we find not only a view that makes analytical sense of the Good, but also a view which profoundly compels and confronts us, which energetically attracts and obliges us. It is difficult to imagine a view of the Good more wonderful and simultaneously more powerful in terms of explanation.

Conclusion

In sum, there is good reason to think that God is identical to the Good. Further, reflection upon the nature of love suggests that is somehow importantly related to the Good. Biblical revelation and Christian reflection upon revelation is consistent with thinking that God is identical to the Good. Additionally, the doctrine of the Trinity, which understands God as a society of three persons who share a single substance, can ably explain the goodness of love. Given love's importance, then, this should count as powerful explanatory evidence of the fact of moral goodness.

[206] Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, 59.

CHAPTER THREE: INTRINSIC HUMAN VALUE

In the last chapter, I argued that the Christian worldview ably explains moral goodness. In this chapter, I turn to another aspect of moral ontology, intrinsic human value. I argue first that the Christian worldview strongly affirms the intrinsic value of human beings because they are made in "the image of God." Second, I show that the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity in Jesus of Nazareth implies a high view of intrinsic human value.

Intrinsic Human Value as a Moral Fact

The true limit of human value cannot be quantified, but only evoked. Immanuel Kant says that there are two things that fill his mind "with ever new and increasing admiration and awe" whenever he reflects upon them. These are "the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."[207] Kant explains that contemplation of the vastness of the universe, the scale of cosmic activity and its incredible power, reminds him of his insignificance. But consideration of the moral law within, "infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals a life independent of all animality and even of the whole world of sense…"[208] Linville notes that for Kant, "our importance would be annihilated by the sheer immensity of the cosmos" if not for the moral law within us.[209] For Kant, the entire expanse of the cosmos was balanced by the moral conscience of a single human being. On this view, human beings have tremendous value. Kant's appeal in this context is more intuitive and experiential than discursive. However, there are elements to the moral argument developed by Baggett and

[207] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Mark D. Linville, "A Defense of Human Dignity," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2000): 325.

Walls that give more concrete reasons to affirm high, intrinsic human value, some of them coming from Kant himself. These shall be explored shortly.

C. S. Lewis thought similarly about the value of humanity. Lewis thought of each human person as bearing "the weight of glory," each a potential god or goddess. If we could see their ultimate, intended form, we would "be strongly tempted to worship" them.[210] Lewis says,

> There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.[211]

Other moral realists have generally agreed with Lewis and Kant that human beings have intrinsic value. Christine Korsgaard argues along Kantian lines that moral value is relational, and ultimately derives from our nature as rational agents.[212] She says goodness must be "a property of something belonging directly to the human being— our experiences or states of mind."[213] Philippa Foot proposes that to be human is naturally good; to be an excellent human is a meaningful end for one's life.[214] Erik Wielenberg suggests that various human activities, like falling in love, are intrinsically good. So long as one can pursue these intrinsically good activities, human life has meaning and value.[215] Wielenberg says his view "can affirm that

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[210] C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, Digital Edition. (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 45.

[211] Ibid., 46.

[212] Christine M Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 211.

[213] Christine M. Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *The Philosophical Review* 92, no. 2 (1983): 187. Korsgaard denies that human beings have intrinsic value in the Moorean sense, that is, in isolation from everything else, but nevertheless thinks human beings have intrinsic value.

[214] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 26.

[215] Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, 34.

human persons have intrinsic value."[216] The extent and implications of these pictures of human value differs. Some hold that human dignity entails certain natural and unyielding rights, a point where someone like Peter Singer demurs. Some may hold that it is rational activity, like valuing, which itself bestows value, like Korsgaard. However, it is fair to say that at least some moral realists recognize that human beings have, to some greater or lesser degree, intrinsic value.

There are also examples of implicit or outright denials of the intrinsic goodness of being human. The transhumanist movement declares just by its label that humanity is something to be transcended. Nick Bostrom, a transhumanist philosopher, says, "Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution."[217] But while in theory the transhumanists may seek to transcend humanity, in practice they sometimes only seek to free humanity from perceived defects. Bostrom himself says among the goals of transhumanism are the "radical extension of human health-span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities."[218] But the elimination of disease and the enhancement of human capacities is not transcendence from humanity in any sense. It is defeat of human defect. There is no reason to think that a life free of disease and death would entail the loss of humanity or the need to leave it behind. It may be, as the Bible suggests, the true intention for human life.[219]

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[216] Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 84.

[217] Nick Bostrom, "Human Genetic Enhancements: A Transhumanist Perspective," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2003): 493.

[218] Ibid.

[219] Cf. Rev. 21:4.

In one sense, there is a resonance between the transhumanist movement and the Christian worldview. There are real human problems that must be remedied, and some sort of outside help is needed to do so. Transhumanism offers the aid of technology: "The transhuman self is one that has pursued physical transformation, overcoming physical limitations in order to open up new intellectual and spiritual possibilities."[220] For Christians, the remedy is redemption found in Jesus Christ: "The new self of Christianity, however, is one that has been given new spiritual life, having been made righteous and being renewed in knowledge."[221] Perhaps, ironically transhumanists often articulate, without being aware of it, the desire to be a fully realized human being. Plausibly this is further evidence of the basicality and universality of the belief in the intrinsic goodness of being human.

Though there is disagreement in the specifics, implications, and extent, I take it that "human beings are intrinsically valuable" is a proposition worthy of the title "moral fact." More specifically, I argue that "humans have *tremendous* intrinsic value" is a moral fact. This should be taken as fact for two reasons. First, there is a certain intuitive apprehension of this as a fact. For example, J. P. Moreland takes intrinsic human value as so obvious that he simply assumes it without argument.[222] The universality of this belief is reflected in the horror we experience when hearing of a murder or the degradation of other human beings. In these cases, Robert Adams says the feeling of moral horror evokes the sense "of the violation of something sacred" and of 'the

[220] Jacob Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 168. John Hare's comments on "puffing up" human capacity are also relevant here. See Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 170 ff.

[221] Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God*, 169.

[222] Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei*, 143.

sanctity of human life.'"[223] Second, as an extension of the moral argument offered by Baggett and Walls, I help myself to their earned conclusions relevant to intrinsic human value.

There are several points of the moral argument deployed by Baggett and Walls which reinforce a high view of human dignity. Specifically, their moral argument suggests that morality requires that human beings are (1) immortal, (2) possess moral agency, and (3) that they have as their ultimate end God himself. First, Baggett and Walls extend Kant's moral arguments, both of which imply that human beings continue to exist after death, perhaps even that they are immortal. An afterlife is needed to balance the scales of justice, to ensure that happiness and virtue are reconciled. And immorality is likely needed to meet the moral demand; complete moral transformation requires "infinite progression toward moral perfection."[224] Second, they argue for a high view of moral agency, rejecting reductive, deterministic accounts of human action. For us to be moral agents, we must have "enough control over our actions to keep our promises, as well as meet our other moral responsibilities."[225] Baggett and Walls propose that likely we must be free in the libertarian sense, a view that implies a robust human ontology, with a suite of capacities and powers belonging essentially to every human person. Thirdly, they find within morality the signs of an important, meaningful destiny for human beings. Man's end is to embrace the Good, to really attain it. This is the only right conclusion given the requirements of moral rationality. Thus, "The voice of morality is the call of God to return to our only true and ultimate source of happiness."[226]

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[223] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 107.

[224] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 264.

[225] Ibid., 109.

[226] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 185.

My suggestion is that the Christian worldview accounts for these elements of human dignity and value. It explains how it is that human beings are immortal, moral agents, with their fulfillment found in God.

The Christian View of Human Value

The Image of God

There are at least two different ways that the Christian worldview supports the high view of human dignity. First is the doctrine of the *imago Dei,* which is the view that all human beings resemble God in terms of their personhood, or that they serve as his representatives on the earth. Second, the doctrine of the incarnation, the notion that the second person of the Trinity took on human nature, has prodigious import for Christian thinking about the value of human beings.

First, let us explore the implications of the *imago Dei.* The key text for this doctrine comes from Genesis 1:26-27:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth." God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.[227]

The Bible arguably has a high view of human beings relative to its original context. In contrast to ancient Egyptian religion, the creation of man is not "just a part of the process by which creation unfolded as the self-evolution of the primeval god."[228] They were not, in contrast to Sumerian

[227] Gen 1:26-27, NET.

[228] Bernard F. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near East and the Bible*, vol. 9, Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures (Winona Lake: Penn State University Press, 2013), 19.

legend, made as mere substitute laborers to perform menial tasks.[229] In contrast to Greek pagan religion, human beings are not the result of a "Titanic act of violence."[230] Instead, the Bible teaches that human beings are created by the intentional, meticulous act of the Most High. As the pinnacle of his creative activity, God chooses to create all humanity in his image and to place human beings over the rest of his creation.

The Bible affirms that all human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). The precise meaning of this phrase has been debated. Gordon Wenham notes at least five different possible interpretations. Possibly, to be in God's image is to possess the capacity of reason or personality, to be a free will creature, to physically resemble God, to be God's representative on earth, or to be able to relate to God.[231] Here there are two categories of options: ontological or functional. Most of these options suggest that to be in God's image is to be like him in some way. It is to be a person of a certain kind. These are the ontological options. In these cases, the image of God refers to certain essential features of human nature; in this case, the "image of God is something that is part of the essence of a person and is not primarily related to one's actualized capacities."[232] "God himself is a rational being, and humans are made like him in this respect."[233] Others have understood the image of God as a kind of title or function. That

[229] Ibid., 9:27.

[230] Velvet Yates, "The Titanic Origin of Humans: The Melian Nymphs and Zagreus," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 44, no. 2 (June 20, 2004): 195.

[231] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1986), 30.

[232] J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 379.

[233] Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 15.

the image should be understood ontologically is an "unbiblical idea."[234] Wenham argues that the strongest case is consistent with the idea that the "image makes man God's representative on earth."[235] That is, the text of Gen. 1:26-27 is best understood as supporting the functional view of the image of God.[236]

Christians have long appealed to humanity's status as divine image bearers to support certain ethical positions.[237] These have often assumed Gen 1:26 makes an ontological claim about humanity, so understanding the phrase as functional rather than ontological may seem to undercut a robust view of the value of human persons. If the Bible makes a direct claim about the ontological status of human beings, it is easy to see how that view could imply a perspective about the value of human beings. So, some, like Rae and Moreland, see the functional interpretation as damaging to Christian ethics. Rae and Moreland are concerned specifically with the view that one must exercise certain powers, like the power of reason or conscious thought, to be considered in the image of God.[238] Failure to exercise these powers would entail a loss of the image of God, and thus deprive certain human persons, like the unborn or those in a persistent vegetative state, of the dignity that being in the image of God affords. Functional views can potentially lead to the view that "some people can be more in God's image than others and so warrant greater respect and protection."[239] Some humans simply do not have the same capacities

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[234] John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 12.

[235] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 130.

[236] For a good overview of the biblical background of the phrase "image of God," see Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 50 ff.

[237] Ibid., 12.

[238] Moreland and Rae, *Body & Soul*, 378.

[239] Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 15.

as others. Any view which denies that image is intrinsic to human beings will ultimately fail to explain the universal nature of human value, which is the moral fact in need of explanation.[240] This is certainly a valid concern, but a right understanding of the functional view has several strong implications for human ontology.

First, the functional view implies that humans must be a certain kind of thing to carry out their purpose as divine imagers. If, for example, a governor assigns the task of lowering the crime rate to an advisor, it implies (if the governor acts in good faith) that the advisor is the sort of person that could at least potentially accomplish this task. As divine imagers, human beings are given an important and complex task. They are to be God's representatives on the earth, to take dominion over it and to care for it (Gen 1:28). The role of man is to be "king over nature. He rules the world on God's behalf."[241] Man is to care for nature "in the same way as God who created them."[242] If man's calling is to rule in God's place on earth, it implies that he must have a robust suite of cognitive faculties. The text of Genesis 1:26-27 itself implies that all human beings possess the image, whether or not they carry out their task. Humankind is made *in* the image; the image is not something that one attains by doing, but rather by being human. All human beings, then, are in the image of God. According to Heiser, "The image is not an ability we have, but a status. We are God's representatives on earth. To be human is to image God."[243] Thus, one cannot fail to be in the image of God, even if, in the biblical sense, it is not an essential *ontological* feature of human beings.

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[240] Hare, *God's Command*, 27.

[241] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 33.

[242] Ibid.

[243] Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 43.

Second, the full picture of what it means to be made in God's image from a biblical perspective is sometimes overlooked. Heiser argues that human beings are not the only creatures made in God's image. Humans image God on earth, but God creates other creatures to image him in the heavenly realms.[244] God is portrayed as consulting this heavenly council, as relating to them dynamically and with high esteem.[245] A key example comes from Ps. 82, where the psalmist writes that "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment."[246] Tate notes that the "gods" "are the divine beings who function as his counselors and agents."[247] This psalm portrays God in the midst of a heavenly assembly, where an anonymous member speaks to the council.[248] As his imagers, these divine beings are given a certain amount of authority and autonomy to carry out the tasks assigned by God. The scene evokes a sense of collaboration between God and his creatures, while simultaneously maintaining God's unique status and sovereignty. The picture on offer is one where God charges some of his creatures to image him in different realms. These creatures are given some autonomy; Heiser holds that free will is a necessary condition of being an image bearer.

Heiser thinks that in his creation of humanity, God intends to mirror this heavenly council. Heiser holds that God's original intention for human beings is to invite them to participate in a divine family, or the divine council. For Heiser, God intends to be with his

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[244] It is also potentially a problem with the ontological view that other creatures, like angels, are seen to have emotions, rationality, and even free will. But if the image is functional, then human imaging would still be unique. Ibid.

[245] Min Suc Kee notes that this picture of the divine council was a common motif in the ancient Near East and that motif is directly and indirectly deployed throughout the Hebrew bible. See Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-Scene," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 3 (March 1, 2007): 259–273.

[246] Ps. 82:1, ESV.

[247] Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 20:335.

[248] Ibid.

human creation, to counsel with them, and bestows upon them great moral agency: "Yahweh's original intention was that all humankind would be his earthly family, ruling in cooperation with him and his heavenly family."[249] This implies a high view of human beings as genuine collaborators with God.

There are objections to Heiser's understanding of the image of God and humanity's destiny as participants within this council. However, one need not adopt his views wholesale to see that it is at least suggestive of God's intended purpose and end for humanity.[250] The notion is at least consistent with the imaging language of Gen. 1:26-27, where human beings are given the responsibility of ruling the earth in God's place as his representatives. Further, the motif of humanity entering the family of God can be found frequently in scripture. Paul announces that believers are "heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17) so that they are "truly a part" of God's family.[251] Jesus calls his disciples "friends," implying that Jesus had a certain confidence in them.[252] The final end of man is also at least reminiscent of the divine council concept. 2 Timothy 2:12 tells us that the redeemed will "reign" with Christ: "The eternal glory (v 10) that awaits the elect is the rule of believers with Christ in the eschatological kingdom."[253] Rev. 22:5 implies that the saints "have such intimate fellowship with God that they not only take on his name (v 4) but also become associated with his throne (v 3) to such a degree that they are said to 'reign forever and

[249] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 307.

[250] If one remains skeptical about Heiser's view, we can also distinguish between what the Bible teaches specifically about the image of God and what it teaches more broadly about human beings. The issue is not specifically what it means to be in God's image, but what the Bible teaches about their value and status.

[251] Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 544.

[252] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1999), 275.

[253] William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2000), 517.

ever.''[254] Paul writes that believers will finally, "with unveiled faces" reflect the glory of God and be transformed into his image, "from one degree of glory to another."[255] Man's destiny is to dwell with God, to be his friend and child, to rule and reign with him; that is, to be in his image.

Reflecting on similar themes, C. S. Lewis writes,

> The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God…to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness…to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a son— it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.[256]

The sense that humans bear a "weight of glory" is right recognition of what the Bible reveals about human purpose and destiny.

In sum, then, the Bible may not communicate anything directly about the ontological status of human beings through "image of God" language. However, a functional view arguably intimates a perspective that goes beyond the ontological view. In the first place, the functional view assumes the ontological features that Christian ethicists are keen to emphasize. Robert Rakestraw notes that the functional view "presupposes some capacity, either actual or at least potential, for self-awareness and self-direction, for relationships and for the exercise of authority over creation."[257] The fact that all humanity is made in the image of God further implies that it is not the actualizing of these capacities, but the *potential,* which belongs to every human being: "Every human, regardless of the stage of development, is an imager of God. There is no

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[254] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1116.

[255] 2 Corinthians 3:18, ESV.

[256] Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 39.

[257] Robert V Rakestraw, "The Persistent Vegetative State and the Withdrawal of Nutrition and Hydration," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 3 (1992): 401.

incremental or partial instantiation of the image via some ability, physical or spiritual."[258] Thus, the image is universal. But the function itself, to be ultimately glorified, is, in Lewis's words, "almost incredible."[259] It is so lofty as to be almost embarrassing. It is a view that, if it were not threaded through all of scripture, one would be wont to say was conjured by a greedy and haughty man, swept up in the strong conviction of his own self-importance. It is an end higher and better than any modest man would ask of Almighty God. To be an adopted heir of Christ, to be in the family of God, to rule with him; it is difficult to imagine a more meaningful and value-laden view of human beings than the one revealed in the Bible.

No Creaturely Intrinsic Value?

This still leaves unanswered the question of whether human beings are *intrinsically* valuable, though it does provide some solid anchors for the answer. Mark Murphy argues that human beings are not intrinsically valuable, either due to some particular calling or otherwise.[260] Murphy's view is that creaturely intrinsic value is incompatible with the entailments of Anselmian theology. Thus, theism entails that there is no creaturely intrinsic value. For Murphy, if something has intrinsic value, it has that value all on its own, without relation to anything else, including God. Murphy distinguishes between intrinsic and final value. Something has final value when it has value for its own sake and not for the sake of bringing about some further end.[261] Creaturely states of affairs could have *final* value, but, Murphy says, "*Bearing intrinsic*

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[258] Michael S. Heiser, "Image of God," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016).

[259] Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 38.

[260] Murphy, "No Creaturely Intrinsic Value," 349.

[261] Ibid., 351.

value thus conceived is a nonrelational feature of a thing."[262] Since God is the source of all value, then *human* value can only be found in relation to him. Therefore, humans have value only extrinsically, as they are related to God. Creaturely states of affairs, like experiencing the beatific vision of God, can have *final* value, but the value is explained in relational terms. The experience is good *for* the person experiencing it, or because God wills it, or some other subjective relation.

Murphy is certainly right that all creaturely value must be explained, in the final analysis, by relation to God. If intrinsic value is defined as value that bears no relation to anything besides itself, then it would be correct to say, as Murphy does, that only God has intrinsic value. I concede that this value cannot be explained without reference to God, but on theism, nothing can be. Still, it is not clear that such a view of intrinsic value is what many theists have in mind when they affirm the intrinsic value of human beings. Rather, I take it that the claim is a bit looser, that something is intrinsically valuable when the value is present *in* the thing, when it is essential and not contingent. Or, possibly, something can bear certain relations *essentially* and those relations can be value conferring. It is the necessity of those relations obtaining that makes it intrinsically valuable. So, human beings could have intrinsic value because of what they are or what necessary relations they stand in. They are image bearers and thus bear a specific kind of necessary/essential relation to the Good and that just is what it means to have intrinsic value. We may still have intrinsic value, as John Hare puts it, "in a slightly odd sense."[263]

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[262] Mark C. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 61.

[263] Hare, *God's Command*, 29.

Hare holds, following Karl Barth, that the image is a kind of calling. To be in the image of God is to be inherently accountable to God. The image is *extrinsic* in this sense. But human value is *intrinsic*, not due to any particular capacities, potential or otherwise, but from "God's *calling* us to a certain vocation."[264] Hare takes this calling in both a universal and particular sense (partially supported by his reading of Rev. 2:17, where God gives each believer a "new name" written on a white stone). Universally, man is called to serve as God's imagers, but God has a special call for each human. God calls us each to live according to a unique way of loving God. Hare says,

> What we have here is an intrinsic good in a slightly odd sense; not that we have value, each of us, all by ourselves (which is one thing the phrase 'intrinsic value' might mean), since we have our value in relation. But the value is not reducible to the valuing by someone outside us, on this account, but resides in what each of us can uniquely be in relation to God.[265]

Hare holds that there is a dynamic relationship between God's call, man's destination in God, and the dignity of human beings. The "final value" of a human person depends on becoming what God has called her to be, but God's call ensures the power to live according to one's unique nature. We possess the call, but have not yet reached our destination of being transformed, of rightly bearing the name written on the white stone. Here Hare appeals to Kant's idea of human dignity arising from their potential ability to respond to the demands of the moral law. All human beings, as human beings, have the *potential* to respond to the call of the moral law, even if, due to illness or malformity, they cannot actually do so. Hare translates this Kantian

[264] Ibid., 28.

[265] Ibid., 29.

idea into language about the image of God and his calling of humanity. What gives human beings their dignity is their power to respond to God's call, a power guaranteed by the call itself.

Robert Adams also has an answer to how it is that human beings have intrinsic value. Adams's view is that goodness of finite things consists in "their *imaging* of God."[266] There is an obvious parallel here in the language. I argue that human beings are valuable because they are made in God's image and Adams suggests that it is imaging God that makes something good. But that similarity is somewhat misleading as Adams does not argue that humans image God because that is the testimony of the Bible. Rather, he thinks humans resemble God because of what they are. When reflecting upon the dignity of human beings, Adams holds that we have a sense of the "sacred." This is a real apprehension of value that is irreducible; it is "a kind of objective moral fact."[267] What makes human beings sacred is a confluence of different elements. It has partly to do with their status as living creatures and partly to do with their robust suite of personal faculties. Humans have a will, emotions, reason, and so on. But each human person is sacred, in part, because they are unique. Adams quotes Ronald Dworkin approvingly on this point, "the sacred is intrinsically valuable because— and therefore only once— it exists."[268] Human value is sacred because it is "a sort of excellence, an imaging of God. It is wonderful that *you* exist, because you are wonderful, in the way that parents rightly perceive their infant children as wonderful."[269] Human beings are intrinsically valuable because they *essentially*, by their very nature, resemble God. And each person does so uniquely. They possess, as human

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[266] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 33. Emphasis added.

[267] Ibid., 121.

[268] Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 73.

[269] Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 120. Emphasis in the original.

beings, features and properties that resemble the Good and they cannot fail to do so; therefore, they are intrinsically valuable.

Both Hare and Adams, then, think that an extrinsic relation to God does not undercut the idea that humans have intrinsic value. Mark Linville argues similarly that it is human status as genuine moral agents that makes them intrinsically (or inherently) valuable, an explanation that is ultimately grounded in God, but nonetheless, Linville does not see that as a threat to *intrinsic* value.[270] Likely, the best response to Murphy is to say that the sort of intrinsic value he has in mind just is not the same thing as many other theists.

In sum, then, there are at least two ways to approach the idea that human beings are made in the image of God. There is a "top-down" perspective, which unpacks what biblical revelation says on the matter. In its use of this language, the Bible communicates that man has been given a special, universal commission by God and that has certain substantial implications for a scriptural view of human persons. But there is a "bottom-up" perspective, which explores, based on reason and experience, how it is that we image God. This mode of investigation is represented well by Alvin Plantinga:

> What is it to be a human, what is it to be a human person, and how should we think about personhood?. . . The first point to note is that on the Christian scheme of things, God is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood . . . and the properties most important for an understanding of our personhood are properties we share with him.[271]

What we find is that the insight gained from both perspectives harmonizes quite well. Both views affirm that human beings have a robust ontology, including moral agency and free will. Both views suggest that man is immortal, either because of the ultimate fulfilment of the task of

[270] See Linville, "A Defense of Human Dignity," 328.

[271] Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (July 1984): 265.

imaging of God, or because of their fundamentally spiritual, rational nature. And both views affirm that ultimate end of man is found in God. Thus, the points about human value gleaned from Baggett and Walls are well supported by the Christian view of the *imago Dei.*

The Incarnation

The incarnation of Jesus also indicates a high view of human value. The precise details of the incarnation remain mysterious and contested, but all orthodox views affirm that Jesus Christ "was made flesh through the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, making Him truly God and truly human, possessing two natures, which are not confused, changed, divided, or separated."[272] In contrast to the notion of avatars, where a god merely appears to be human, the incarnation affirms that the Second Person of the Trinity became genuinely human, while not compromising his status as God.

One way to see how the incarnation bears on human value is to consider God's possible motivation for becoming human. Richard Swinburne explores this theme in some detail. Swinburne begins with the assumption that God is maximally great, and, being maximally great, he is perfectly good. Swinburne also thinks of God as having certain moral obligations. God, once he has created, may be obligated to his creatures to perform certain acts. Such a being "will inevitably do any act that is a unique best act, and that will include fulfilling all his obligations."[273]

[272] L Woicik, "Incarnation," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016).

[273] Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34.

Whether or not God has any such obligations is a matter of contention. William Lane Craig, for example, denies that God is under any obligation of the sort (this follows from Craig's divine command theory of moral obligations). However, Swinburne's argument does not depend on God having formal moral obligations. One can understand "obligations" here as having morally decisive reasons to act in a particular way. With respect to creation God has total freedom and he could just as easily refrain from creating as create, as Swinburne notes, "God had no obligation to create us..."[274] But if he creates a world like the actual world, then God's relation to the world and its creatures may give God morally decisive reasons to carry out certain activities.

That God has morally decisive reasons to become incarnate is a theme explored as early as Athanasius, who thinks "It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil."[275] Because of sin and the consequence of death, the world, apart from God, is slowly wasting away. God, being good could not allow man, who is "like Himself" to be lost.[276] He also could not repeal the law of death and sin, as that would be inconsistent with his justice. The solution to this dilemma was the incarnation: "For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all."[277]

Swinburne's argument takes a similar tack. Swinburne sees God as facing a dilemma, but of a different sort. God cannot reveal himself too clearly or else defeat intentions he has for

[274] Ibid., 33.

[275] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Chalmette: Parables, 2021), 17.

[276] Ibid., 18.

[277] Ibid., 20.

humanity. Specifically, God intends man to be genuinely free, free to form their character and make their own choices, but also free to bear real responsibility. There must be a certain "epistemic distance" between God and man for this to happen. If the rewards for doing so are too obvious, then one's motivations might always be mercenary. On the other hand, God wants to help humanity, to enable us to achieve the end he intends. Swinburne sees the incarnation as the way through the dilemma, of providing the right sort of divine assistance needed to help man but preserve his intentions for him.[278] Swinburne holds that the incarnation does this in three ways. First, the incarnation makes atonement possible. Second, the incarnation allows God to identify with our suffering. Third, the human life of Christ serves as an example of how we ought to live.

There are two key points I take from Swinburne. First, the incarnation is the necessary condition of the death and resurrection for Jesus. Frequently, the incarnation is used as a shorthand for the entire story of Christ's life. One cannot fully grasp the significance of the incarnation apart from the consideration of the entire life of Christ and to focus too narrowly on the incarnation apart from these elements risks missing the forest for the trees. J.R.R. Tolkien makes this point well. The Gospels reveal a "self-contained" narrative, full of marvels. The story of Jesus is "the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe." [279] *Eucatastrophe* is a term coined by Tolkien to denote a "sudden happy turn in the story which brings you joy… it is a sudden glimpse of Truth."[280] Tolkien argues that "The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story

[278] Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 37.

[279] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 387.

[280] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 98.

begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality'."[281] Tolkien's point, in part, is that the incarnation is inextricably linked to the resurrection; they complete one another. Thus, in the incarnation we find the atonement and resurrection already implied. It contains the idea that God loves man, identifies with him, dies for him, and ultimately rescues him from sin and death. As Baggett and Walls say, the incarnation and atonement are a "decisive demonstration… of the depth of God's love for us…"[282]

The other significant point I draw from Swinburne and Athanasius is that God becoming a man is a good thing for God to do. Given that humanity bears the image of God, and our current predicament, marred by sin and incapable of rescuing ourselves, God considers it worthwhile not only to save humanity, but to do so by becoming a human being. This strongly implies that God loves humanity. Humans, though, often love what we should not. We love things that are not good. However, God, who is maximally good, has no misplaced affections. When God loves us, he does so because we are his children and made in his image. We have intrinsic value and are therefore worth loving. However, this worthiness is not autonomous from God, as if we could make ourselves worth loving. Instead, we are only worth loving because God graciously made us in his image, investing us with the worth we possess. As Mark Linville puts it: "God values human persons because they are intrinsically valuable. Further, they have such value because God has created them after his own image as a Person with a rational and moral nature."[283]

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[281] Tolkien, *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, 388.

[282] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 227.

[283] Linville, "The Moral Argument," 445.

If God becomes a human being, being a human being must be good. If being human is good, it means that our lives have meaning and intrinsic value. Erickson notes, "the fact that Jesus took upon himself our full human nature is a reminder that to be human is not evil; it is good."[284] We do not need to progress to the next stage of evolution (or transcend our humanity), we only need to live as humans as God intended. As Shatzer points out, "Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, shows us not only God in the flesh but also what it truly means to be human…"[285]

In sum, then, the doctrine of the incarnation harmonizes and reinforces much of what the Bible teaches about the image of God. The incarnation suggests that humans are valuable because God sees it fit to rescue humanity by becoming a human being himself. In this way, the incarnation also integrates the view of Adams who thinks humans have intrinsic value by virtue of their imaging God, at least in part, in their status as persons.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how two Christian ideas, the *imago Dei* and the incarnation, support the idea that humans have intrinsic value and that we have it to a high degree. I assumed, as an extension of the moral argument given by Baggett and Walls, that part of the explanation of human value includes immortality, moral agency, and an ultimate end in God. This chapter shows that both Christian ideas strongly support all three ideas. Therefore, the Christian worldview ably accounts for a high view of intrinsic human value.

[284] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 658.

[285] Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God*, 121.

CHAPTER FOUR: MORAL RATIONALITY

The third moral fact in need of explanation is moral rationality. It must ultimately be rational to be moral. In this chapter, I argue that Christianity ably explains moral rationality because it provides a plausible account of how they are reconciled and because of the natural connection between morality and rationality on the Christian view.

Moral Rationality as a Moral Fact

Moral philosophers frequently assume that there is a natural connection between morality and happiness. Perhaps the most obvious examples come from the ethical egoists, for whom morality just is a matter of acting in one's interests.[286] Plato and Aristotle agree that the moral life is a life of happiness and appeal to this as a motivating reason to be moral. Utilitarians as well often argue that the universal practice of maximizing overall happiness will result in the greatest possible personal happiness.[287] Deontological ethical theories also assume a connection between morality and happiness. Natural law theory, for instance, argues that what is moral to do is so because it is consistent with a thing's nature and the flourishing of that nature.[288] Immanuel Kant, perhaps the archetypical deontologist, formulates his Categorical Imperative as something ultimately consistent with human nature. According to John Hare, Kant thought "To be happy is

[286] This would be a form of "normative ethical egoism" according to the categories used by Robert Shaver. See Robert Shaver, "Egoism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), accessed August 21, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/egoism/.

[287] Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*, Revised edition. (Princeton University Press, 2011), 145.

[288] As Mark Murphy notes, the "precepts [of the natural law] direct us toward the Good as such and various particular goods." Mark C. Murphy, "The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), accessed August 21, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/natural-law-ethics/.

necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being and therefore an unavoidable determining ground of its faculty of desire."[289] Baggett and Walls note that for Kant, "a life of true happiness must be a moral life. Morality and happiness must ultimately perfectly converge. Something of an airtight relationship between them is needed, if morality is to be a fully rational undertaking."[290]

However, though there is a strong connection between morality and happiness in these thinkers, that connection is not always unbreakable. Henry Sidgwick argues that human beings face a "dualism of practical reason." As a utilitarian, Sidgwick thought of "Universal Happiness" as the ultimate good, the end for which all human actions ought to strive.[291] But sometimes an act which would bring about greater universal happiness entails the loss of individual happiness. A soldier falling on an enemy grenade to save his many comrades would be conducive to universal happiness, but, without the promise of life hereafter, entails the complete loss of the soldier's happiness. So, the soldier has two competing reasons to act. He can act in accordance with morality to save his comrades or in accordance with his own interests to preserve his own happiness. These are "competing ends."[292] Sidgwick acknowledges that, from his agnostic perspective, there is no obviously right solution to the problem.[293] This is a real concern for, if it is the case that morality and rationality come apart, then reason and morality are at odds, in

[289] Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, 157.

[290] Baggett and Walls, *The Moral Argument*, 27.

[291] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1890), 440.

[292] James Arthur Balfour, *Theism and Humanism* (London: Hodder, 1915), 124.

[293] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 261.

principle. Given the dualism of practical reason, there is no thoroughgoing answer to the question, "Why be moral?"

In Kant's case, moral faith is required to heal the schism between morality and rationality. Moral faith includes, in part, the conviction "that a life of true happiness must be a moral life, that morality and happiness must converge."[294] Kant does not so much argue for this point as he assumes it. From this he thinks it must follow, on the basis of theoretical reason, that there must be some agent who does, in fact, ensure that virtue and happiness are proportioned as "the highest good requires."[295] For Kant, since "the moral life requires belief in the possibility of the highest good, we are not merely free to believe there is such an agent; we are required to believe it."[296] Kant also thinks that immortality follows from this. Since happiness and virtue are not proportioned in this life, they must be in the life to come. In sum, Kant thinks that one must believe that God exists and that human beings are immortal to ensure morality is a rational enterprise.[297]

There are two reasons which Kant gives for needing moral faith. The first is a kind of empirical evidence, "from our experience of evil afflicting good people" and the apparent prospering of bad people.[298] And there is an *a priori* reason, "from our knowledge that we do not have the power over nature that would be required to produce the proportioning of virtue and

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[294] Ibid., 217.

[295] Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, 159.

[296] Ibid.

[297] Kant reinforces the need for immortality due to the requirements of moral transformation.

[298] Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, 158.

happiness."[299] But we know that morality and happiness must be reconciled, for this is what the moral life requires. So, we have evidence that in the ordinary course of events, morality is not rightly rewarded, and we know that we lack the power to rectify this problem. To put it another way, there are two challenges to moral rationality: the *a posteriori* and the *a priori* problems.

Baggett and Walls agree with Kant that the dualism of practical reason can be solved by theism, a solution that Sidgwick himself notes but ultimately rejects. For, on theism, God, who is perfectly good and omnipotent, has the power and the desire to balance the scales of justice, to ensure the ultimate harmony between virtue and happiness.[300] Theism also has the metaphysical "goods" to explain how it is that human beings can be immortal. As an extension of the moral argument offered by Baggett and Walls, I agree with them that theism does have the power to explain how it is that morality can be fully rational. I further contend that the Christian worldview extends the merely theistic explanation in several ways.

The Divine Judgment

Kant argues that God must exist, in part, because he is needed to serve the role of judge, handing out the right sort of rewards to ensure the rationality of morality. This has a seemingly obvious parallel to the biblical picture of God as judge. Revelation 20:11-15 presents a scene sometimes called the "Great White Throne Judgment." This judgment occurs at the end of the time. Here God judges all the dead, "great and small" (v.12). Books are opened and "the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done" (v.13). At this time, "All are resurrected and stand before God's throne before God actually judges the cosmos

[299] Ibid.

[300] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 262.

and its inhabitants."[301] The ground of God's final judgment has primarily to do with whether one's name was written in "the book of life" (v. 15). It is the disciples of Jesus who have their name written in the book and who are rewarded with everlasting life with God in his kingdom.[302] Those who do not believe in Christ, are cast "into the lake of fire" (v. 15). This is approximately the traditional view of God's judgment and the fate of human beings.

Some may object along this line: The Christian God simply does not perform the same function as the Kantian one. In his judgment, the Christian God is not concerned with the harmonization of virtue and happiness.[303] It is about something else, for one could live a moral life and not be rewarded. A moral person could still be sent to everlasting punishment. Socrates's martyrdom for the truth earns him nothing. So, on the Christian view, morality is not rewarded with happiness. Conversely the morally perverse may be granted everlasting bliss. For example, the thief on the cross, who admits that he deserves capital punishment, is told by Christ that "today you will be with me in paradise."[304] The only thing rewarded is, at best, a singular act, which is believing that Christ is the Son of God. The unbeliever may be morally better than the believer and get a gravely inferior reward.

Michael Martin argues that Jesus gave no reasons, moral or otherwise, for believing in him. All he offers is the naked claim that one must believe and "be rewarded in heaven whereas if you did not, you would be punished in hell."[305] Daniel Dennett similarly says that God's

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[301] Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1034.

[302] Cf. Luke 10:20.

[303] The relation of the reward of heaven to morality is one with a contentious history. Is heaven the reward for works or is it a gift freely given, apart from works? See Walls, *Heaven*, 34.

[304] Luke 23:43, NIV.

[305] Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 167.

apparent concern for what people believe demonstrates a kind of moral failure. This preoccupation shows God to have "kinglike jealously and pride, and His great appetite for praise and sacrifices."[306] This view of God is "a fossil trace of a rather embarrassingly juvenile period in our religious past."[307] A good God would be indifferent to what people believe. Dennett concludes that believing in God may have certain beneficial side-effects but is certainly not a meritorious act. The doctrine of hell, on Dennett's view, is "demeaning" to human nature.[308] Dennett argues that heaven is a "carrot on a stick" and the threat of hell alludes to a morally immature time in human history.[309] The divine judgment makes morality mercenary and infantile. Therefore, the problem is even worse for Christianity because it guarantees that much of morality will not be rewarded; there is the explicit disjunction between virtue and happiness.

There are a couple of points to raise in response. First, we can ask whether it makes sense to think that God should care what one believes. It may seem to Dennett, Martin, and others that one's beliefs have little to no moral relevance. However, Christianity offers its own metaethical theory and thus its own scales and balances in terms of morality. That is not to say that the Christian view of morality is totally alien, but it might not fit neatly into all our preconceived ideas. C. S. Lewis suggests that

> Divine "goodness" differs from ours, but it is not sheerly different: it differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel. But when the child has learned to draw, it will know that the circle it then makes is what it was trying to make from the very beginning.[310]

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[306] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 264.

[307] Ibid., 266.

[308] Ibid., 278.

[309] Ibid., 281.

[310] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 27.

Our understanding of the Good is analogical, not univocal. As Baggett and Walls point out, "God's goodness must be recognizable to be rationally believed in…"[311] We cannot be simply equivocating when talking about the goodness of God, but, on the other hand, we should not expect that there is an exact correspondence between our notion of the Good and the reality.

So, what of the moral relevance of one's beliefs? We can ask whether there is something contradictory about saying that the act of belief in Christ deserves eternal happiness and whether the inverse merits eternal damnation. Certainly, there is nothing logically incoherent about the idea. Some acts are more meritorious than others. Further, it is plausible to think, as some virtue epistemologists do, that one could be morally culpable for their beliefs.[312] Those who choose to believe in conspiracy theories, despite overwhelming disconfirming evidence, are arguably guilty of both an intellectual and moral failure. So, it seems there is nothing beyond the pale about the idea that God would judge primarily based on one's beliefs, particularly one's belief about ultimate reality.

Second, the issue here is not really one of mere belief or assent to a certain proposition. That has never been the Christian view.[313] Rather, the issue has to do with ultimate allegiance. The circumstance is rather dissimilar to condemning a student for refusing to agree with the professor. It is much more like being found a traitor, refusing loyalty to one's right authority. We recognize that such disloyalty is one of the severest of all sins and that is why it is one of the few crimes that still garners the death penalty in many places throughout the world.

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[311] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 48.

[312] Linda Zagzebski, for example, argues "the common view that epistemic good is independent of moral good is largely an illusion." Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, "The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good," *Metaphilosophy* 34, no. 1–2 (2003): 12.

[313] This does not mean that certain beliefs are not required. See Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*, 35.

This might not seem obvious based on a superficial reading of the Bible. There are, after all, many references like this one from Acts 16:31: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved…"(NIV). However, the word translated as "believe" is the Greek word *pistis,* which means "to believe to the extent of complete trust and reliance."[314] This is not mere intellectual assent. The phrase "Believe in the Lord Jesus," and other similar phrases in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 10:9) are typically summary statements.[315] They are meant to evoke a wider set of claims about Jesus. To believe in the Lord Jesus is not to merely assent to some fact, but to trust in him and rely upon him; it "means to accept him as κύριος [Lord], that is, as supreme authority."[316] What this means, in part, is that we are to trust in Christ *as* Lord. That is, we acknowledge that he is Lord and not ourselves or anyone else. What God requires, above all else, is that we trust him as Lord, that we bend the knee in recognition of his rightful kingship. Mere assent will gain nothing for even the demons believe "and they shudder."[317]

Martin and Dennett would likely say that this is a distinction without a difference. Perhaps there is greater moral significance in declaring allegiance rather than merely assenting to a proposition, but, nevertheless, there is much more to the moral life than allegiances. After all, atheists and adherents of non-Christian religions live apparently moral lives without ever submitting to Christ. For God to deprive these people of any meaningful reward for their efforts

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[314] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 375.

[315] For example the statement in Rom. 10:9, in context, implies "As Lord, Jesus not only demands allegiance from all; he graciously showers his 'riches' on all who 'call upon him." Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 660.

[316] C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (New York: T & T Clark, 1998), 797.

[317] James 2:19, ASV.

would still entail that the link between happiness and virtue is broken. God still sends good people to hell, so, it is no solution at all. This objection can be thought of as pushing two different problems. First is the problem of hell; second is the problem of heaven.

The problem of hell has been formed in various ways. John Hick thinks that a doctrine of hell is inconsistent with God's love and the product of a "sinful imagination."[318] Peter Geach holds that a traditional hell undermines the goodness of God's creation.[319] Others, like Marilyn McCord Adams think that certain conceptions of hell are inconsistent with the justice of God.[320] According to Adams, the central problem of traditional hell is that finite sins are rewarded with infinite punishment. The implications of the doctrine give us "a right to wonder whether… God is morally perfect."[321] Thus, the problem of hell concerns the seemingly unjust punishment for finite offenses. One can grant that even a finite offense can be abhorrent for various reasons (one might offend a God worthy of infinite honor, perhaps), but it will remain finite, nonetheless. How can this finite offense merit eternal punishment?

The problem of heaven, on the other hand, concerns the nature of the connection between heaven and morality. Having faith in Christ, which is the necessary and sufficient condition for gaining heaven, is sometimes understood as a direct contrast to good works. Faith is not a work that it should merit anything. One of many supporting scriptures comes from Titus 3:5 which says that God "saved us, not because of works done in righteousness, but according to his

[318] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 98.

[319] Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 140.

[320] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Hell and the God of Justice," *Religious Studies* 11, no. 4 (1975): 434.

[321] Ibid., 447.

[God's] own mercy…"[322] Mounce comments that "God saved believers not because they were deserving but because he is a merciful God."[323] Thus, with respect to heaven as well as hell, there seems to be a disconnect between virtue and happiness. Hell does not seem fair punishment and heaven is not the earned reward. The issue of justice, that the rewards and punishment fit one's life, just is the question of moral rationality. To show that Christianity ably explains moral rationality, it must address both problems.

Solving the Problems of Heaven and Hell

The first step in solving both problems is to concede that the Great White Throne judgment is not about ensuring the connection between virtue and happiness. This is a judgment about something else; it is a mistake to make that connection, though understandable because of the obvious, but superficial, resemblance to Kant's idea that God must act as judge to ensure moral rationality. There are good reasons to think that *this* judgment is not about rewarding or punishing morality. First, there are reasons related to the problem of hell as mentioned above. Adams is likely right that, if hell is about punishment for finite sins, then it is out of character for a good God. Second, the Bible is clear that faith, as the necessary and sufficient condition for entering God's kingdom, is a non-meritorious gift of God.[324] Third, though the text mentions the judging of deeds (v. 12), one's eternal location depends upon whether their name is written in the "book of life" (v. 15) and not upon the moral quality of one's life. In reality, then, the Great

[322] Titus 3:5, ESV.

[323] Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 46:447.

[324] Cf. Eph. 2:8-9.

White Throne Judgment is not the kind of judgment Kant has in mind. God, in *this* judgment, does not reconcile virtue to happiness.

This leaves the question of moral rationality unanswered, at least for now, and it raises another question. How is the Great White Throne Judgment consistent with God's goodness? The answer, in part, has to do with the sort of world mankind finds himself within, namely a fallen world. Man, apart from God, is destined for death.[325] But God makes a way to life through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Humanity was made by God and for him; he has a certain *telos* or purpose given by God. Man is not an autonomous creature, free to determine his purpose in life. As Oliver O'Donovan argues, the fact that the world is created already implies that there is a created order, with vertical and horizontal dimensions. Vertically, we must be oriented to God, which, in turn implies a horizontal orientation to our fellow creatures and creation itself.[326] The purpose of man is not only to be a certain kind of person, but to live in the right sort of social order. Second, human beings are fallen, which results in their refusal to take "the role assigned him by his Creator."[327] His knowledge, including moral knowledge, is "inescapably compromised" and he is not able to "set himself right with good will and determination."[328] The result is, according to O'Donovan, that mankind, as rational creatures, continue to observe "generic and teleological order… but misconstrues them…and constructs false and terrifying world-views."[329] Jerry Walls notes that

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[325] Cf. Romans 5:12.

[326] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 31.

[327] Ibid., 81.

[328] Ibid.

[329] Ibid.

on the Christian view, "human beings in their fallen condition are not disposed to love and worship God. Indeed, their more natural inclination is to self-centeredness, ingratitude, and disobedience."[330] C. S. Lewis says, mankind has "tried to set up on his own, to behave as if he belonged to himself. In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms."[331] That is, left to our own devices and due to the Fall, human beings are, in O'Donovan's words, destined to "uncreate" ourselves and the rest of creation. From the Christian perspective, human beings cannot achieve their *telos* without divine intervention.

This *telos* must be realized in the right way. Richard Swinburne argues that God's intentions for man include having a certain kind of freedom, including the freedom to "choose over a significant period of time the kind of people we are to be… and the kind of world in which we are to live." [332] O'Donovan similarly suggests that there is an "integrity of the created order" that must be respected for its good to be achieved.[333] If the "natural structures of the world," the connection between God's intentions and their realization, are broken even in the attempt to repair them, then it is destroyed rather than made whole. A necessary condition of the good for man is that it is achieved when humans develop within themselves through the slow process of habituation the right sort of character. There would be something deficient about a morally perfect world that was not achieved substantially by human effort. To see why this is the case, we can consider a thought experiment presented by C. S. Lewis:

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[330] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 37.

[331] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 56.

[332] Swinburne suggests this is a primary motivation for the incarnation. See Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 35.

[333] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 57.

> In a game of chess you can make certain arbitrary concessions to your opponent... You can deprive yourself of a castle, or allow the other man sometimes to take back a move made inadvertently. But if you conceded everything that at any moment happened to suit him - if all his moves were revocable and if all your pieces disappeared whenever their position on the board was not to his liking— then you could not have a game at all.[334]

If there is a human good and humans are meant to achieve it, then humans are in a scenario much like the one Lewis describes. We must win our game (or achieve our good) according to the rules required by our nature. An angel or space alien could "zap" us and repair our defects, but something integral to the human good would be lost. The human good would not be attained through the practice of the virtues, but by means of a shortcut and something less than the maximal human good would be realized. So, there is a restriction on *how* the good for man must be achieved; it must be substantially achieved through human effort.

Though some are confident that man can overcome his defects by himself (like some transhumanists), I take it as sufficiently evidenced that this is, at best, unlikely to occur.[335] This seems all the more unlikely when we consider that the human good requires not only that the individual be morally transformed, but his society as well. Some individual or group of individuals may, however improbable, live up to their nature, but would still fail to achieve the good for man without a society of similarly transformed people. This social dimension is found in Kant who "thinks the highest good requires two things: a system actually in place whereby happiness is in the end proportional to virtue, and a possible state in which everyone is virtuous and everyone is happy."[336] Aristotle as well thought of the human good as including the personal as well as social dimension. It was life in the *polis* that made one truly happy. And Lewis

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[334] Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 22.

[335] See for example the discussion of "puffing up" man's capacities in chapter 4 of Hare, *The Moral Gap*.

[336] Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History*, 158.

presents the compelling allegory for morality based on a fleet of ships, where each ship must be sound, and it must work in harmony with the fleet to reach their shared destination.[337] Real success in morality requires all these dimensions to be perfected.

Therefore, we are faced with a dilemma. We have a certain purpose for our lives that we must achieve substantially on our own, but we are unable to do so due to sin and our finitude. However, the resurrection of Jesus can solve this dilemma.

Redeeming the Connection through Christ's Resurrection

To understand how Jesus's resurrection can solve the tensions raised, we will first need to understand the significance of the resurrection as it is relevant. The resurrection makes it possible for morality and happiness to be reconciled, for the individual to be moral and to live in the perfect social order and it does this through the human effort of Jesus, meeting the logical restriction on achieving the human good.

To see how this is so, we must first understand that the early Christians thought of the resurrection as the center of history. At the beginning of this history, we learn, according to Genesis 1-2, that human beings were made in the image of God to serve a particular function or *telos*, namely to rule and subdue the earth as vice regents of God.[338] The biblical view of the human *telos,* then, is that humans are for the Kingdom of God. Wenham argues that Gen. 1:26 teaches that God's purpose for man is multidimensional.[339] This *telos* includes immortality,

[337] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 71.

[338] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 32.

[339] Ibid.

moral perfection, and a world fundamentally characterized by peace.[340] However, humanity fell in such a way that they cannot repair themselves. And this is precisely our condition, as Millard Erickson notes, "Sin is a serious matter; it has far-reaching effects—upon our relationship to God, to ourselves, and to other humans."[341] Therefore, God has set in motion a plan to restore man so that they can fulfil their God-given *telos*. Through God's self-revelation in the history of Israel, the Jews came to believe, according to N.T. Wright, that God would set the world right again through the work of the Davidic Messiah.[342] The early Christians, deeply influenced by the Jewish tradition and the teachings of Jesus himself, held that this plan to set things right again comes to fruition with the resurrection of Jesus and that the resurrection establishes the Kingdom of God. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeds and restores man to his original state of perfection (should they accept the reign of this new Adam).[343] The New Testament documents strongly support this view. Paul, for example, argues in Romans 5:12-6:4 that the resurrection of Jesus solves the problem created by Adam's sin.[344]

Jesus accomplishes the restoration of the human *telos* as a human being. Central to early Christian teaching is the idea that Jesus was both fully God and fully human.[345] God does not solve humanity's problems by mere *fiat*. Rather, God becomes incarnate in the Son and as a human being restores the human *telos.* O'Donovan makes the point that the resurrection denies a

[340] N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013* (Fortress Press, 2013), 380.

[341] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 564.

[342] Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*, 239.

[343] Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism*, 121.

[344] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 14.

[345] Cf. Phil. 2:6-11.

gnostic view where we are saved *from* creation. Rather, the redemption the resurrection brings is *of* creation.[346] Because the resurrection is of the *incarnate* Jesus, we have a declaration that humans are not saved from being human, but are instead redeemed so that they might be fully realized human beings. Thus, the work of Jesus does not undermine the human good by breaking the requirements inherent to it and so the resurrection meets the logical requirements entailed by the *telos* itself.

Jesus' resurrection establishes a new head of humanity and that all those who take Jesus as their head are part of the Kingdom of God. Those who are in the kingdom become rightly ordered to Jesus as Lord and Jesus enables their moral transformation through his example and the power of his Spirit. So, the future Kingdom of God is composed, in part, of human beings who are perpetually being transformed to the likeness of Christ. That is a good start for a perfect society, but one more thing is required: the appropriate environment. The human good cannot be fully realized in a world marred by sin and suffering. But in the resurrection, Jesus not only brings about the redemption of human beings, but the redemption of the whole world.[347]

O'Donovan posits that the resurrection is the "sign that God has stood by his created order, with mankind in its proper place within it, is to be totally restored at last."[348] When perfected human beings are placed in a redeemed world, then can the human good can be finally and fully fulfilled. Through Jesus, God has acted to overcome human sin in a way that does not compromise the internal integrity of humanity. This kind of picture resonates with the idea that God is the Good. For, if God is identical to goodness, then the moral life requires the embracing

[346] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 14.

[347] Cf. Romans 8:21.

[348] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 14.

of him, of swearing allegiance, so to speak, to the Good himself. If the Good is a person, it is natural to think that a necessary condition of happiness is standing in the right sort of relation to that person. Apart from him, humans are unable to achieve our God given *telos.* But with him, we can become what God intends. [349]

If we return to the Great White Throne Judgment, we can now see it through this lens. This judgment is about choosing death or life, and not primarily about rewards for the moral life. It is consistent with God's goodness because he gives man the opportunity to be saved, rather than leaving him to die. This solves the problem of heaven and hell, at least as they have been construed here. With respect to the problem of hell, God is not unjust because death is the inevitable destiny of man apart from God, not the, strictly speaking, punishment for finite offenses. It solves the problem of heaven by clarifying that heaven is not the reward for good works, but a restoration of God's intentions and purposes for man. It makes it *possible* to reconcile virtue to happiness.

This does not yet solve the problem of moral rationality, though it does make some inroads. Kant gave two reasons for needing moral faith: *a posteriori* and *a priori.* the resurrection deals with both. Specifically, Christianity explains why there is an *a posteriori* problem. Understood in a Christian context, this is the problem of evil. Evil exists, in part, as a result of free will choices, and due to the fallenness of the world and ourselves.[350] Positively, the resurrection is a public and evidenced event, which provides some significant *a posteriori*

[349] There is also the question of how God can be just in his forgiving of human sin and failure. This answer comes in the atonement, which will be a focus of the next chapter.

[350] The problem of evil could be a considerable challenge to moral rationality from a Christian perspective. However, I do not take up the problem here directly, in part because there are several powerful responses to it from a specifically Christian perspective. See, for example, Ronnie P. Campbell, *Worldviews and the Problem of Evil: A Comparative Approach* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2019). See also Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa.'"

support for moral faith.[351] Historian and philosopher Gary Habermas argues powerfully that the relevant historical evidence is best explained by Jesus's resurrection.[352]

Christianity also explains why there is an *a priori* problem. One could certainly imagine a world where each person had the power to ensure that their virtue was rewarded with happiness. These need not be limited to solipsistic worlds only. God could have empowered individuals to serve as their own judge, imbuing them with the needed faculties.

Alternatively, we could imagine a possible world where intelligent creatures have no need for others and nature is perfectly stable. This alien race might be so spatially isolated from one another that they have no influence on each other. In this world, virtue always is its own reward; the law of karma rules without defect. C. Stephen Layman notes that worlds where the law of karma applies would be governed by both natural and impersonal moral laws. "These moral laws… regulate the connection between each soul's moral record in one life and that soul's total circumstances in the next life."[353] This is not an impossible world, or, at least, it does not represent an obvious logical contradiction,[354] but it is not the world in which we find ourselves. Rather, we find ourselves in a world where we *cannot* put happiness and rationality together by our own power and there is evidently no karmic law at work.

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[351] Cf. 1 Cor. 15.

[352] Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 32. For a thorough discussion of the nature of Jesus' resurrection in early Christianity, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 466 ff.

[353] C. Stephen Layman, "A Moral Argument for the Existence of God," in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough? : A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, ed. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 58.

[354] If we assume that God exists necessarily, even then he could choose to enact a law of karma.

This fits with the Christian notion that our good is ultimately found in God and in loving others. If estranged from God and if our relationships with others are broken, then the Good may be out of reach of mere human effort. With respect to the *a priori* problem, the resurrection explains that man is only part of a created order; that his ultimate happiness depends on the right relations obtaining between himself, God, and the cosmos. The Christian view anticipates the need for moral faith on this point.

Further, the resurrection of Christ redeems the world so that virtue and happiness *can be* reconciled. Conversion to Christ "is an event in which reason and will together are turned from arbitrariness to reality."[355] God invites us to enter that redemption, but should we choose to reject his invitation, there morality remains arbitrary and broken. We can choose to be a part of the created order where morality makes sense. And in that redeemed world, virtue is, in fact, proportioned to happiness.

Before exploring just how it is that Christianity harmonizes happiness and virtue, some looming objections should be considered. Even if we grant that the world is the sort of place and we are in the sort of predicament that I have described, there are still potentially serious problems. There remains the problem of those who have not heard, the problem of divine hiddenness, and the problem of those who have perhaps heard, but cannot really accept God due to certain psychological distortions.

I cannot fully respond to all these concerns, but I can make some suggestions that flow from what we have already considered. First, we should note that the precise time of the Great White Throne Judgment is unknown, aside from it occurring at the end of time. This leaves open the possibility of posthumous conversion. Some argue, with considerable conviction, that the

[355] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 114.

Bible does not allow for this. I will consider just two frequently cited passages to suggest that the door is not entirely closed on this idea. One often cited passage thought to preclude any "second chance" after death comes from Hebrews 9:27, "…it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment…"[356] However, the author of Hebrews likely does not intend to communicate anything about what happens between death and judgment. The point is to show that the physical death of the individual, like the death of Christ, is a one-time event. The author communicates, in part, that "death is an unrepeatable experience."[357] It is *not* that the temporal sequence is death then, immediately, to judgment.

Another important passage comes from Luke 16:19-31, a pericope sometimes called "The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus." In the parable, we are told that "a great chasm has been fixed" between hell and "Abraham's side."[358] Many, like Darrell Bock, take this to suggest strongly that "how we respond in this life is decisive for where we reside in the next."[359] However, this text has unique interpretative challenges. First, it is a parable, and as Bock himself notes about other features of the narrative, "It is graphic and pictorial and reflects a reality, rather than describing it literally."[360]

Second, commentors do not generally understand the permanence of one's position in the afterlife as a central point of Jesus's teaching here. Rather, the primary issues concern the

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[356] ESV.

[357] William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, vol. 47B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 249.

[358] Luke 16:26, NET.

[359] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1373.

[360] Ibid., 2:1369.

reversal of fortune between the rich and poor and the sufficiency of scripture.[361] This raises the question of whether a tertiary detail in the parable should be taken to communicate a literal truth. So, in at least these two cases, the possibility for posthumous conversion remains.[362] As N. T. Wright says, "It's actually quite difficult to give a clear biblical account of the disembodied state in between bodily death and bodily resurrection"[363]

But are there any positive reasons to think there is an intermediate state? Jerry Walls argues that belief in an intermediate state where moral progress and even conversion is possible coheres with other well-founded doctrines "clearly taught in scripture, or can even be inferred from them as a reasonable theological conclusion."[364] The Bible might underdetermine a view on an intermediate state, but the possibility of posthumous conversion might nevertheless be a sound inference from reason and theology. Walls posits that "This debate will inevitably be a profoundly theological one that will involve one's reading of the whole biblical narrative and of the nature and purposes of the God who drives it."[365]

I will not make an argument here from the overall trajectory of the biblical narrative. Still, it is not a leap to think that the God of the Bible, who shows himself faithful to Israel, despite that nation's many moral failures, and who pursues man so passionately as to become

[361] Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 422.

[362] Walls also notes that the possibility of an intermediate state is sometimes rejected due to certain theological assumptions rather than the testimony of the Bible. See Jerry L. Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55.

[363] N. T. Wright, *For All the Saints?: Remembering the Christian Departed* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2004), 31.

[364] Walls, *Purgatory*, 56.

[365] Ibid., 57.

incarnate and make atonement at his own expense, would continue to offer grace even after death.

On the other hand, the notion that God is the Good would seem to resonate well with the idea of a second chance in an intermediate state. For if we think that God is the Good, then insofar as unbelievers love what is good, they love God. They may not be conscious of this. They would be analogous to the person who uses the term *water* but do not understand its nature as H_20. This does not imply religious pluralism, but it does imply that at least some people can both not accept Christ but also not reject him, either. H. P. Owen argues that other religions "contain *some* truth." And it is contact with the truth which allows some genuine moral progress outside of explicitly Christian belief. The moral transformation "the Hindu sage achieves is due to a genuine (though clouded) grasp of ultimate reality."[366] In that case, at death, the Hindu sage may have not rejected God and may, at least implicitly and partially, have accepted him. It would seemingly be out of character for God to preclude this person from a substantive presentation of the gospel where he might fully embrace God.

To accept Christ as Lord requires grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, but at least some people have not totally hardened their hearts against God and the Good and, if presented with the gospel in the most complete and compelling way possible for them, they could accept Christ.[367] This clear and unobstructed offer of eternal life is consistent with what Walls calls "optimal grace." If there is a possibility that someone could be redeemed, it would seemingly follow from the idea that God is perfectly good, that he would bring about the conditions for that

[366] Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism*, 123.

[367] I am indebted here to Jerry Walls's analogy of Rapunzel and Gretel and his notion of "optimal grace." See Walls, *Purgatory*, 127 ff.

person to be redeemed, and it seems deeply consistent with the picture of God we have in the Bible. This does not mean that all people will eventually accept Christ. Some may choose to harden their hearts; they may choose to forever remain in the "grey town" of Lewis's *Great Divorce.*[368] Those who finally and profoundly reject the Good will be given what they wish, which is eternal separation from God.[369] And one can understand the Great White Throne Judgment as the finalization of that choice.

If something like this picture obtains, then it would go some way toward answering the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of those who have not heard of Christ. Certainly, we can still ask why God is not more evident *now,* but in the end, God will provide each person with the best possible chance to accept him, supplying whatever knowledge and grace that are needed to enable that choice.

Reconciling Competing Ends

With all this now on the table, it is easy enough to understand how it is that Christianity ensures the reconciliation of virtue and happiness. Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason purportedly shows that self-interest and morality, or egoism and altruism, can become disconnected. But on the Christian view, this is not so. Firstly, Christianity affirms the goodness of acting in one's own interests. Balfour says that Christianity demands the "subordination" of our desires, "but not their complete suppression."[370] Jesus commands that we love others *and*

[368] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 66.

[369] For an explanation of whether it is realistic to think that anyone would finally reject God and the Good in favor of hell, see Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 113 ff.

[370] Balfour, *Theism and Humanism*, 127.

ourselves.[371] Second, the Christian understanding of morality assumes a complete picture of the world. Human flourishing can only occur within the parameters delimited by human nature. Human beings are made by God and for him, to love their neighbor and to care for creation. Their purpose is to love and to live in a world where that love is reciprocated. Since this is man's *telos,* it is also his interest. Because man was made for the moral life, then it is, *ipso facto,* always in his interest to be moral. Balfour says, "in the love of God by the individual soul, the collision of ends *for that soul* loses all its harshness, and harmony is produced by raised, not lowering, the ethical ideal."[372] In a fallen world, the reciprocal nature of love can be frustrated, but in the world to come, there will be no such brokenness. Owen similarly says,

> In this earthly life God's Reign will never *fully* come. The Christian is constantly afflicted by evil in both its moral and non-moral forms. Yet he has ground for endless hope. Because of the victory won for him by Christ he knows that no aspiration after goodness and no enactment of it can be lost.[373]

It is rational to continue the moral life now because, as Walls indicates, "God takes pleasure in the obedient sacrifices of his children and openly promises to reward them in the life to come."[374] Walls argues that Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason "is simply dissolved on Christian premises. Indeed, it is an impossible dilemma from a Christian standpoint."[375]

Further, Christianity confirms what Kant thinks morality requires on the basis of theoretical reason. First, there is the issue of immortality. Theism is certainly consistent with the

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[371] Cf. Mark 12:31

[372] Balfour, *Theism and Humanism*, 126.

[373] Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism*, 122.

[374] Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*, 191. One of many examples would be Jesus's promise of a "great reward" for those who are persecuted. Cf. Luke 6:22-23.

[375] Ibid.

idea that humans are immortal, but it does not entail everlasting life. However, on the Christian view, Jesus promises that those who follow him "shall never perish."[376] Christianity also clearly pictures God as a just judge, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked.[377] For Kant, God must be postulated to rescue morality from the clutches of absurdity. But, "In Christian thought, resurrection and immortality are not afterthoughts, nor are they postulates to salvage morality from irrationality. They are integral to the grand claim that ultimate reality is reciprocal love." [378] God as the Good is both the aim of the moral life and, through the resurrection, the power that makes it rational.

Conclusion

Moral philosophers have generally affirmed a strong connection between morality and rationality. But Sidgwick and others have observed the possibility for their disconnect. From the Christian perspective, moral rationality is guaranteed by the redemption of the world and of individuals through the power of the resurrection of Christ. The Christian view also holds morality and rationality together as a natural unity, rather than a postulate of practical reason. This shows that Christianity ably explains the rationality of morality.

[376] John 10:28, KJV.

[377] Cf. Ps. 34:21-22.

[378] Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*, 192.

CHAPTER FIVE: MORAL TRANSFORMATION

For Baggett and Walls, moral transformation concerns the "performative question, the issue of actually becoming moral persons."[379] For an ethical theory to count as a good explanation of morality, it must account for how it is that we can become morally transformed. I argue that Christianity ably explains this aspect of morality.

Moral Transformation as a Moral Fact

Many ethical theories recognize that the moral demand is very high. A consequentialist ethical theory like utilitarianism generally prescribes that one always ought to do what increases the overall happiness. Often, we have the power to increase that aggregate but fail to do so. Utilitarian Peter Singer, for example, argues that the perspective of "objectivity," of considering the happiness of others as equally important as one's own, entails a "demanding standard…we must be prepared for extreme demands."[380] Aristotle's ethic, likewise, implies a high moral standard. To be fully morally transformed, to live according to the human *telos*, one must have a perfected character. One must also obtain states of affairs that are at least partially out of one's control. One must live in the right sort of society, have good health, and be at least moderately wealthy. Aristotle holds that the Good includes physical, social, and soulish aspects and these must all be properly ordered if the human good will be realized. Aristotle's view implies that human excellence must be equivalent to human perfection. This is a conclusion shared by Miller: "For human beings the ultimate good or happiness (*eudaimonia*) consists in perfection, the full

[379] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 215.

[380] Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 153.

attainment of their natural function… i.e., activity in accordance with the most perfect virtue or excellence."[381] Thus, morality requires human perfection on Aristotle's view.

Baggett and Walls, following John Hare, explain the moral demand in Kantian terms. Though they hold a different ethical theory, they find Kant's explication of the moral demand insightful and useful. The moral demand follows from Kant's categorical imperative, which he formulated in various ways. The humanity formula says that "we should never act in such a way that we treat humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself."[382] Experience reveals that man can fulfill this obligation at least some of the time. But to honor it at all times and in every way seems nigh impossible. In so many subtle (and not) ways, many beyond our sometimes blurry perception of the full implications of actions (or inaction), we fail to meet this standard. Even the greatest moral exemplars in human memory could undoubtedly have been and done better. Mother Teresa could have helped *one* more orphan.

Kant thinks "that human beings have a deep moral problem, a tendency to be curved inward on themselves, an intractable ethical taint, a deeply flawed moral disposition in need of a revolution."[383] No matter how good we are, morality "still speaks and tugs, beckoning for our attention, calling us toward the goal, ultimately, of nothing less than moral perfection."[384] For many moral philosophers, then, there is what John Hare calls a "moral gap," "the attendant sense

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[381] Fred Miller, "Aristotle's Political Theory," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2017. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), accessed November 22, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/aristotle-politics/.

[382] Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2021. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), accessed September 5, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/kant-moral/.

[383] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 218.

[384] Ibid., 215.

of failure and the conceptual difficulty that we seem to be under a demand that is far beyond our capacities."[385] The problem concerns how we can "become *other* men and not merely better men (as if we were already good but only negligent about the degree of our goodness)."[386] A revolution of the will is required. As Lewis puts it, we are rebels who must lay down arms.[387] Richard Swinburne similarly says, "We are too close to the situation of the criminal who has spent his ill-gotten gains and is unable to make reparation. We need help from the outside."[388] A gaping chasm exists between the demand and our ability; morality requires that we bridge that gap.

Since *ought implies can*, a principle Baggett and Walls say is "axiomatic" of deontic logic, then it follows that morality obliges us to perfection.[389] We apparently cannot attain perfection; indeed, failure seems inevitable. If it is, in fact, an impossible standard, then we cannot live up to the moral demand and ought does not always imply can. In that case, morality would be "beyond our reach" and perhaps, then, lack "the authority we thought it did."[390] Baggett and Walls argue that standards which are impossible to meet cannot be fully authoritative. So, if morality actually has the sort of validity and demand it seemingly does, then there must be a way to be fully morally transformed.

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[385] Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 26.

[386] Hare, following Kant, calls this formulation "Spener's Problem." Ibid., 53.

[387] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 56.

[388] Richard Swinburne, "The Christian Scheme of Salvation," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1988), 27.

[389] Baggett and Walls, *God and Cosmos*, 219.

[390] Ibid.

There have been different suggestions concerning how we might cross the gap. As an extension of Baggett and Walls's moral argument, I take it as sufficiently shown that the prospects for a naturalistic or secular provision for closing the gap are unlikely. But Kant and others hold that divine assistance may be sufficient. Kant invokes "moral faith." In the previous chapter, we saw that Kant believes moral faith is needed to ensure the rationality of morality; "justice prevails only in the heavenly city."[391] But Kant also thinks that the Good was such that we cannot attain it by our own effort. We must have faith "in the actuality of virtue."[392] That is, practical reason demands that we believe that we actually can become fully virtuous people. Kant thought this was only possible with God's supplement. I will not develop Kant's specific explanation of how to overcome the moral gap here. First because I take it that the moral gap shows up in many different ethical theories, not just Kantian ones. So, though Kant should be credited with developing the idea, it is not strictly Kant's problem. Second, the aim is not to exegete Kant, but to show how the Christian worldview explains the moral gap.

We can think of the moral gap as involving three distinct elements, each of which are derived by reason and experience.

(1) The incapacity of man to meet the moral demand.

(2) The moral demand itself and its loftiness.

(3) The moral gap and the need to explain how the gap can be overcome.

There are various logical options for how the moral gap may be closed. We might puff up man's capacity or we might try to lower the moral demand. Hare thinks that the prospects for these are

[391] Frederick C. Beiser, "Moral Faith and the Highest Good," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 594.

[392] Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 37.

dim.[393] Another possibility is that we obtain some outside assistance, but this also has an internal restriction. If the transformation is really *moral* transformation and not merely the changing of behavior, then human beings must cooperate with the help. The help must not be so great or independent of human effort as to make the achievement of virtue meaningless (call this the "internal restriction"). As Linda Zagzebski explains, "intrinsic to the nature of virtue is the way in which it is acquired."[394]

Robert Adams notes that some have "moral luck." By this he means that some may have, due to nature or some other reason, a good moral character without any substantial effort of their own. That is perhaps possible. The first man, Adam, for example, may have had, by means of his direct creation by God, a much better character in many respects than an average contemporary person. Adams suggests that we can still think of a person with moral luck as virtuous, for they still embody the virtues.[395] However, he also says that the effort to become virtuous is also admirable. The existence of moral luck would also not undercut the contention that in order *to become* virtuous, one must do so by substantially their own effort, by at least cooperating with some outside assistance. Moral transformation seemingly requires a process where a person endures through time, willing gradually and with ever more continence to do what is good and right. This is how virtuous character is formed and likely there is no other way. The primary aim of this chapter will be to see how well Christianity addresses the final element (3), but it is not insignificant that the Christian perspective also has something to say about (1) and (2).

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[393] Ibid., 115.

[394] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 104.

[395] Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 163.

Man's Incapacity

Christianity strongly affirms that man lacks the capacity to be fully moral. This is due, at least in part, to the Fall of man, the idea that "the transgression of the first human beings resulted in humanity's fractured relationship with God, loss of innocence, and entrance into the condition of sin, which ultimately results in death."[396] The "condition of sin" explains man's incapacity. This idea is central to the Christian story, sometimes summarized as creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. It is not an *ad hoc* idea, meant to explain some recalcitrant fact of experience. Rather, the Christian narrative takes as foundational the idea that man is marred by sin.

Paul in Romans writes that "sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all people because all sinned."[397] Exegetes debate what Paul intends to communicate by linking universal sinfulness to the sin of a single person. This debate concerns the nature of original sin and it need not be settled here, but the assertion of the universal nature of sin is significant. According to Douglas Moo, regardless of the view one takes with respect to the specific nature of the connection, Paul explains why "people so consistently turn from good to evil of all kinds." [398] His answer is "human solidarity in the sin of Adam." [399] Those who live "in the shadow of Adam," Witherington says, "are unable by willpower… to free themselves from the bondage of sin and death." [400] Sin effects humanity so deeply and thoroughly that they

[396] Brown and Nierengarten, "The Fall."

[397] Romans 5:12, NET.

[398] Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 329.

[399] Ibid.

[400] Ben Witherington and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 204.

"are completely unable to extricate themselves from their sinful condition."[401] Moo concludes, "the biblical explanation for universal human sinfulness, appears to explain the data of history and experience as well as, or better than, any rival theory."[402]

One objection may be that the Bible goes too far on man's incapacity. Perhaps experience suggests that man is not really a "slave to sin" as Jesus says.[403] Human beings do not go around only ever doing what is wrong. Some people are apparently good people and do good things.

The objection is based on the mistake of thinking that the Bible teaches that people are as bad as they possibly could be. Even on a relatively pessimistic Christian view about human ability, that human beings are "totally depraved," this does not mean that "every man is as thoroughly depraved as he can possibly become."[404] The condition of sin strongly predisposes man to sin; it pulls him with inevitable power to act in selfish ways: "In every human being there is a strong inclination toward evil, an inclination with definite effects."[405] However, according to the Christian view, man, even apart from God, is not completely evil. The image of God is effaced and not destroyed. Also, there is a sense in which the Bible affirms the potential of genuinely good moral character of people apart from Christ, as Erickson notes, "There are genuinely altruistic unregenerate persons, who show kindness, generosity, and love to others, who are good, devoted spouses and parents."[406] To be a slave to sin is not to be resigned to a life

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[401] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 574.

[402] Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 329.

[403] John 8:34.

[404] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 246.

[405] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 571.

[406] Ibid., 572.

where only sin is possible. It is the idea the gravity of our sinfulness inexorably inclines us toward sinfulness. To be clear, the Bible also teaches that relative to God and his perfection "No one is good—except God alone."[407] Nevertheless, it is a mistake to understand the Bible as teaching something out of step with our experience of non-Christians at least sometimes being relatively good people and doing good deeds.

There is an issue here of balance. On one hand, we should be careful not to overstate man's ability, but on the other, we should not represent his inability so strongly as to be unrealistic and out of step with experience. William Wainwright similarly says that "Common experience shows that our loves are restricted, partial, and private, and thus fall infinitely short of love to being in general."[408] But at the same time, Wainwright adds, experience shows that people do not, in general, intentionally, deliberately neglect the Good. Love may be disordered, but it is rarely completely backwards. On the whole, though, the Christian view of the incapacity of man is realistic; it is true to our experience, while also showing the miry pit in which he finds himself.

The Moral Demand

The second element of the moral gap, the high moral demand, Christianity also anticipates. On the Christian view, the moral law is determined by God and revealed by him both directly and indirectly. Indirectly, God communicates the moral law through nature and conscience.[409] Knowledge of the moral law available through this route may be partial and

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[407] Mark 10:18, NIV.

[408] William Wainwright, "Original Sin," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 37.

[409] Cf. Romans 1:20 and 2:15.

incomplete, but Paul still thinks of man as falling short of what he knows through this general mode of revelation. The clearest pronouncement of the moral demand comes from Jesus himself. Jesus commands that man should love God with all his heart, soul, and mind, and that he should love his neighbor as himself.[410] Keener notes that "these commandments epitomize all the commandments in the Bible."[411] Love of neighbor includes even love of one's enemies, as Jesus teaches powerfully in his parable of the Good Samaritan, "neighbors may be found anywhere."[412] Jesus extends these commandments to include the controlling of one's thoughts.[413] One must love even in their thoughts, not degrading others in the mind for selfish pleasure or indulging even in a momentary violent fantasy. Douglas Groothuis says, "The love Jesus commends is nothing less than extraordinary."[414]

One criticism of Christian ethics is that it is *too* demanding as to be impossible. Sometimes the command to love one's neighbor as one's self is thought to be unrealistic. Michael Martin calls aspects of Jesus's ethical teaching "harsh" and "otherworldly."[415] But Christianity is not alone in this requirement. Singer suggests "there is no magic in the pronoun 'my' which gives greater intrinsic importance to my interests… I ought to do what is in the interests of all, impartially considered."[416] While Singer does not explain his account of moral

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[410] Cf. Matt. 22:37

[411] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 532.

[412] Bock, *Luke*, 2:1029.

[413] Cf. Matt. 5:21-30.

[414] Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003), 70.

[415] Martin, *The Case Against Christianity*, 169.

[416] Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 153.

obligation in terms of love, he still implies that we are obligated to treat our neighbors with exactly the same regard as we give ourselves. I also take it that the full implications of Kant's categorical imperative require something very near Jesus's command. So, on this point, the Christian demand is high, but not beyond what others have thought to be the rational requirements of the moral law.

Others have concerns about Jesus's prohibitions against having certain thoughts. Michael Martin says the command to control one's emotions and desires is psychologically harmful and that those with an informed opinion on psychology recognize that such things are "involuntary and cannot be controlled."[417] Christopher Hitchens says Jesus's commands to control one's thoughts constitute "rules that must, yet cannot, be followed."[418] For this, Hitchens and others have accused the Christian view of God as reifying Orwell's thought police.[419]

Likely, this sort of criticism assumes a naturalistic ontology of human persons, where all human activity, including thought, are determined by physics. If human beings are souls, as the Christian view implies, then there is no reason to think that controlling one's thoughts is impossible, even if it is very difficult. Further, Jesus likely does not communicate that temptation itself is wrong when he prohibits lustful thoughts and dwelling on vengeance. One may be tempted to indulge a degrading fantasy, but there is a clear demarcation between the desire to indulge and indulging. For one, Hebrews tells us that Jesus "was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin."[420] Genuine temptation implies that one desire the object of temptation.

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[417] Martin, *The Case Against Christianity*, 169.

[418] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 366.

[419] Ibid., 365.

[420] Hebrews 4:15, BSB.

Tom Morris argues that giving into temptation was a real "epistemic possibility for [Jesus]."[421] And, if Jesus was sinless as Christians believe, then the temptation itself is not wrong. The desire to sin is not prohibited, though we should take steps to curb sinful desire. Likewise, a person may have intrusive and involuntary thoughts. But these are not sinful from the biblical perspective. They may lead to sin if allowed to linger, to become the object of fantasy. There is no reason, assuming libertarian freedom, to think that we cannot substantially control our thoughts. Intrusive thoughts can be pushed aside. Emotions can be reined in.[422]

Further, it seems that if we *can* control our thoughts, then we *ought* to do it. Virtually any human action, even those that are, in themselves, seemingly benign, can become immoral if abused. There is nothing particularly moral about sleep, but one can be lazy and sleep too much or irresponsible and sleep too little. Therefore, if we *can* control our thoughts, it is natural to think that there would be moral parameters involved. Most would recognize excessive daydreaming as a kind of moral failure to pay attention to more substantive and pressing concerns. So, in principle, there is nothing strange about thinking that morality would require us to control our thoughts and that some thoughts should not be indulged.

These objections could constitute an implicit lowering of the moral bar. If the demand is too difficult to meet, then it is not so bad to fail to do so. That some people have a certain psychological comfort in moral failure does not imply that the moral failure is less bad. John Hare argues human beings have a propensity for "cultural blindness" whereby certain aspects of

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[421] Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, 143.

[422] Some may still insist that emotions cannot be controlled, that controlling emotion really is a kind of "repression" and ultimately harmful. However, we all recognize that we should control our emotions in at least some contexts. Anger at one's children should be repressed and controlled. Anger in particular is generally recognized as a controllable emotion. The APA even offers strategies to "reduce… your emotional feelings" that anger causes. Cf. "Controlling Anger — Before It Controls You," *Https://Www.Apa.Org*, accessed September 12, 2021, https://www.apa.org/topics/anger/control.

the moral law are distorted or overlooked due to the attitudes of contemporary society. Hare says that "there is an insidiousness in this propensity; for the human heart tends to deceive itself in regard to its good and evil dispositions…"[423]

Sometimes human beings are only "dimly aware" of the moral law because "they have chosen not to be vividly aware of it."[424] Hare's point, in part, is that our resignation to live skirting the requirements of morality is not evidence of the moral acceptability of such a life, but of our dulled conscience. And history shows that moral sense can be dramatically dulled, though never completely lost. The general acceptance of chattel slavery in the ante-bellum South could serve as a good example of this.

In sum, then, the Christian view of the moral demand does not entail any contradictions. It does not violate the "ought implies can" principle in the sense that it does not require human beings to do something logically impossible, like control something which is by nature involuntary. It prescribes a high moral demand, one that includes the "taking captive" of every thought, so that even our minds are placed under the lordship of Christ.[425] It also includes the exalted requirement that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Thus, Christianity anticipates the second element of the moral gap, which is a high moral demand.

Closing the Gap

The third element has to do with how Christianity closes the moral gap. The Christian bridge comes with the doctrine of salvation. Sometimes, salvation is thought of too narrowly, as

[423] Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 139.

[424] Ibid.

[425] Cf. 2 Cor. 10:5.

if Christian salvation were merely about escaping hell in favor of heaven. But the doctrine is both wider and deeper than that. Richard Swinburne says, "Christianity offers to us salvation, salvation from the guilt of our past sin, salvation from our proneness to present sin, salvation for the enjoyment of the Beatific vision in the company of the blessed in Heaven."[426] Swinburne adds that, "this salvation was made available to humans by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."[427] Swinburne's description of salvation reflects its comprehensive and continuing nature. For the believer, there is a sense in which salvation has already occurred, but it also continues. She is already saved, but is simultaneously being conformed to the image of Christ day by day.[428]

Forgiveness

With respect to the moral gap, we are most interested in the "salvation from our proneness to present sin," though all elements of salvation are naturally connected and it is not easy to consider only one aspect in isolation from the others.

Before I discuss sanctification directly, it will help to spell out some of its antecedent conditions, specifically forgiveness and justification. What, after all, makes sanctification possible? Understanding these elements will also shed light on how it is that the process of sanctification actually works.

First, a necessary condition of sanctification is justification. For Erikson and most evangelicals, one is justified before God, that is given something analogous to a legal status of

[426] Swinburne, "The Christian Scheme of Salvation," 15.

[427] Ibid.

[428] Cf. Rom. 8:29.

"not guilty," at the moment of conversion: "Justification is a forensic or declarative matter… while sanctification is an actual transformation of the character and condition of the person."[429] Erickson, like many evangelicals, makes a sharp distinction between the process of sanctification and the status of justification. Others, like N. T. Wright, see justification as an ongoing process that includes sanctification.[430] But both views see the restoration of a right relationship with God as the cornerstone of sanctification.

In terms of moral transformation, this is no ancillary point. We must find some appropriate way of dealing with moral guilt. Elizabeth Anscombe argues that when someone does what is morally wrong, she has the sense that she has violated a moral law. Moral failures are rightly met with ascriptions of moral guilt. We often take such moral judgments to "imply some absolute verdict" about our actions.[431] A. E. Taylor makes a similar point. He says that moral guilt is "a striking and characteristic feature of our actual experience of the moral life… abundantly witnessed to by the universal language of mankind."[432]

This weighty sense of guilt, of having slighted the cosmos, can be psychologically debilitating to moral progress. Taylor says that moral guilt imposes upon us the idea that the natural self must be remade, a "cleansing of the thoughts" and reorientation of our interests is required to pursue a life of honor and virtue.[433] We are implicitly aware that we do not succeed "in keeping the Law of Nature," as Lewis puts it. We deeply and perhaps universally believe that

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[429] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 899.

[430] N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 251.

[431] G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 5.

[432] Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist*, 191.

[433] Ibid., 199.

there is such a law, "but cannot bear to face the fact that we are breaking it."[434] Psychologically, the feeling of defeat and shame likely must, to some degree, slow and prevent moral transformation.

Hare argues that moral guilt distorts our motivations. We seek primarily to avoid it; "it becomes pervasive, affecting my memory of what I have done already, my perception of what I am doing now, and my expectation of what I will do."[435] We might "revise our moral convictions to justify our past performance," a process Oliver O'Donovan thinks is typical human behavior.[436] We can lower the moral bar and convince ourselves we are not so guilty after all. But, O'Donovan argues, the veridical awareness of guilt remains. Our moral sense of guilt is in part the "consciousness of having acted irrationally." [437] The tendency is to feel that our guilt "must be assuaged, even at the cost of reason's grasp on reality."[438] We can possibly rid ourselves of the subjective sense of guilt by diluting conscience, but at a cost. For those who take morality seriously, this is not a live option.

Another way to deal with moral guilt would be forgiveness. Likely, some moral progress is possible without forgiveness. A thief might reform himself without ever asking or even seeking forgiveness from those he defrauded. Perhaps forgiveness is not even possible for him. His victims may have since died or staunchly withhold forgiveness from him. We would not want to conclude that due to some contingent facts of circumstance that he could not be morally

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[434] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 8.

[435] Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 25.

[436] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 112.

[437] Ibid.

[438] Ibid.

transformed. But the sense of moral guilt that is in view here is that one has sinned against the Good itself. For moral progress to be made, we need the sort of "cleansing of the thoughts" Taylor has in view. In that case, morality demands that there must be a way to deal with moral guilt.[439]

If we have sinned against morality itself, how can we be forgiven? Forgiveness of this stripe is probably not possible from a naturalistic perspective. Taylor thinks our sense of moral guilt is best explained in theistic terms; we feel guilty because we have offended "the living and personal God."[440] As I extend a theistic moral argument, I assume Taylor is correct about this. On a theistic perspective, where God is the Good, then we can be forgiven for our trespasses against the moral law itself.

In a Christian context, this is essentially what God offers humanity in justification. Justification is how God reconciles sinners to himself. Significantly, the grounds of the forgiveness are appropriate to the weight of moral guilt. Moral guilt, when rightly apprehended, does not imply some trifling infraction has been committed. Taylor and Lewis suggest that we perceive that we have done something gravely wrong by transgressing the moral law.

The Bible frequently ties the reconciliation of God to sinners with the life and death of Christ. Paul writes that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them…"[441] In Romans, he says, "while we were God's enemies, we

[439] We can also distinguish between objective and subjective guilt. Subjective guilt is the guilt we sense, the sort we know by experience. But there also objective guilt. To draw a legal analogy, to be objectively guilty is to be *judged* guilty.

[440] Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist*, 208.

[441] 2 Cor. 5:19, ESV.

were reconciled to him through the death of his Son."[442] William Lane Craig argues, "By his death on the cross, Christ has thus made possible the reconciliation of alienated and condemned sinners to God."[443] Though details of justification are debated, it is clear that the Bible views this as a weighty matter. God does not simply overlook sin forever.[444]

The Christian view concords with what we know by our experience of moral guilt. It is a serious and sober matter that cannot be lightly brushed aside. Christianity holds that nothing less than the death of incarnate God could make forgiveness possible. But the God of the Bible forgives. For those who repent and trust him, he is the one who "blots out" their transgression and remembers their "sins no more."[445]

Of course, forgiveness is not moral transformation. It provides a clean slate; our past deeds need no longer burden us. However, as Jerry Walls notes, "the problem is much more serious than what we do. It ultimately comes down to what we are. And what we are needs more than forgiveness. It needs deep transformation."[446] Forgiveness is only the first and necessary step; what we need is to be made holy, sanctified.

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[442] Rom. 5:10, NIV.

[443] Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 13.

[444] Acts 17:30, NIV.

[445] Isa. 43:25.

[446] Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things That Matter Most* (Ada: Brazos Press, 2015), 105.

Repentance

With moral guilt absolved, we still must turn from selfishness and conceit to the Good. This is the first step toward moral transformation. The turn from the old to the new is repentance. In some contexts, repentance can be relatively low stakes. A husband may realize he was wrong to speak with a certain tone to his wife. He can then commit to no longer speak that way. That would be an example of repentance, but repentance can also be dramatic and costly. Given man's incapacity and the demand of the moral law, repentance at this level is a tremendous feat.

In a Christian context, repentance entails the turning away from one's own desires and preferences, however warped they may be, to the way of God. In this vein, Lewis describes repentance as "Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor."[447] Biblically, repentance "entails a relational shift that engages one's affections, actions, and words."[448] In one of the first Christian sermons ever preached, Peter says, "repent and turn back so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord…"[449] Here Peter makes repentance the necessary condition for receiving forgiveness and entering the presence of God. According to Barrett, a major theme of Peter's sermon is that "Forgiveness and the future salvation of the people of God are thus dependent on repentance.[450]

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[447] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 54.

[448] Mark J. Boda, *"Return to Me": A Biblical Theology of Repentance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 182.

[449] Acts 3:19, NET.

[450] C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 (New York: T & T Clark, 1998), 203.

Thomas Oden concludes that salvation can only "become subjectively appropriated when one repents, trusts in God's pardoning grace, and follows the narrow way."[451]

The necessity of repentance creates a certain tension. Given the magnitude of repentance in salvation, of willingly laying aside one's own desires in favor of accepting Christ as Lord, it seems like an impossible task, especially considering man's incapacity. One concern is just how it is that rebel man can become disposed to loving God; how he can even begin this feat of becoming holy. Justification may remedy his standing with God, but what, precisely, happens to man to enable him to be sanctified? What causes him to lay down his arms?

Calvinists typically argue that one must be regenerated in order to convert to Christ. According to Erickson, regeneration "is God's transformation of individual believers, his giving a new spiritual vitality and direction to their lives when they accept Christ."[452] Thomas Oden adds that "It implies a change in the inward person by which a disposition to the holy life is originated, and in which that life begins.'[453] James White insists that the Bible teaches that the unregenerate man is incapable of doing anything to please God and having faith in Christ, becoming converted to him, would be pleasing to God. According to White, man is dead in his sins; he is analogous to Lazarus in the tomb. He must be made alive before he can respond to God.[454] Therefore, regeneration must come before faith.[455] This regeneration makes conversion

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[451] Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, vol. 3, Systematic Theology (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 81.

[452] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 872.

[453] Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 3:156.

[454] James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and Reply Norman Geisler's Chosen but Free* (Amityville: Calvary Press, 2000), 69.

[455] Ibid., 83.

inevitable and irresistible. This assumes a compatibilist view of human freedom where God determines what man will do, but man is free in the sense that he does what he desires most. Regeneration makes it so that he desires to repent. Thus, regeneration is brought about by a special, personal act of divine grace where God calls his elect.

Arminians, on the other hand, hold that prior to conversion, God extends prevenient grace to all people. This grace is a means of "calling and awakening" the sinner: "The prevenience of grace antecedes all human responsiveness."[456] It does not override human faculties. Prevenient grace makes it possible for man to respond to God, but it "does not inevitably lead to repentance."[457] A person may choose to cooperate with the grace of God or not. Regeneration follows faith on this view. Potentially, any person, endowed with libertarian freedom, can respond to God by means of prevenient grace and repent. Of course, repentance is not itself full moral transformation. It is the recognition of one's sinfulness and the *commitment* to be better. Repentance and not regeneration constitutes the beginning of moral transformation on this view.

While there is significant disagreement between the Calvinist and the Arminian on how repentance works, both agree that grace, a certain kind of divine assistance, is required. Apart from God's help, man cannot turn to God. The points of divergence are also instructive and raise some issues that will need to be solved as we further explore the nature of God's grace. There is the nature of human freedom in relation to moral transformation. Often, moral responsibility is thought to require libertarian freedom.[458] I am only responsible for my actions if I could have

[456] Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 3:294.

[457] Ibid., 3:91.

[458] Here I assume and concur with what Baggett and Walls say about the necessity of libertarian freedom or "meaningful free will." Cf. Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 45.

done otherwise. The libertarian says that the will constitutes, at least some of the time, a terminal explanation for why people act. The murderer could have refrained, but simply willed to commit violence anyway. This is a common sense understanding of moral responsibility, implied by what J. P. Moreland calls "folk ontology."[459] But Calvinists are committed to compatibilism. On this view, the murderer could not possibly do anything else. His actions are inevitable given the circumstances. The terminal explanation also does not end by reference to his own will, but to God's. On the Calvinist view, there is the looming threat of breaking the internal restriction of moral transformation. It is not obvious how this view would allow for genuine cooperation between God and man.

What is needed is a form of divine assistance that allows for, as the general mode of operation, the genuine cooperation between God and man in moral transformation. If man is not morally responsible for his own moral progress, then it is not obvious that his transformation would be a moral one. Perhaps it would be consistent with moral transformation, that the process is "jump-started" by a monergistic act of God. However, that cannot constitute the entire process, as Calvinistic compatibilism requires. Thus, in the process of sanctification we must find a way to understand God's grace as working with man's libertarian free will.

Sanctification

Sanctification in general, according to Millard Erickson, is "the continuing work of God in the life of believers, making them actually holy."[460] It is a process that continues throughout

[459] J. P. Moreland, *Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 91.

[460] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 897.

one's life and, perhaps, even in life beyond. Though there are some differences in how precisely sanctification relates to the whole of Christian salvation, Christians have historically agreed that God transforms the character of a person to reflect the character of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit sanctifies us.[461] As Paul writes, believers are "being transformed" into the image of God.[462] Garland explains that "this transformation is something done by God, and Paul's exegesis makes clear that it happens through the Spirit."[463]

Marylin McCord Adams gives a summary of the Christian perspective:

> Christians believe that God's solution to human non-optimality problems is not simply to send prophets and sages or even God Incarnate on the outside. God's plan also includes dispatching live-in help, the gift of the Holy Spirit, whose indwelling or abiding with the believer brings about a character-transformation that turns her/him into a saint and fits her/him for heaven.[464]

Clearly, the Christian idea of sanctification closely resembles the sort of divine assistance needed for moral transformation, but how does it work specifically?

William Alston offers four different models of sanctification: the external, fiat, interpersonal, and sharing models. Alston considers the first two to be "extreme" views of the process of sanctification. On the external model, one may think that the Holy Spirit transforms the believer by merely sustaining us, as God does all of creation. He offers no special power and expects that we will be able to become good people on our own steam.[465] Given man's

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[461] Cf. Rom. 8:13.

[462] 2 Cor. 3:18

[463] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 29:200.

[464] Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit: Some Alternative Models," in *The Philosophy of Human Nature in Christian Perspective*, ed. Peter Weigel and Joseph Prudhomme (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 83.

[465] William Alston, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 125.

incapacities, this likely would not suffice for moral transformation and it ignores the more intimate picture of the Holy Spirit's role revealed in scripture.

At the other end of the spectrum is the fiat model. It is a view that "God alone is active… that God simply 'takes over,' replaces the human agent."[466] Alston argues that, though there are some verses which suggest that God at least occasionally might simply will that someone have a new, better disposition of character, this is not the general mode of operation. This would also break the internal restriction of moral transformation.

A better, but still insufficient model according to Alston, is the interpersonal model. On this view, the Holy Spirit is not internal to the believer, as though the Spirit becomes part of the person's personality. The believer and the Spirit are distinct persons, but relate "as intimately as possible."[467] Alston says, "The distinctive thrust of the interpersonal model lies in its construal of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit on the analogy of the moral influence one human being can exert on another."[468] As one human being can influence another through their words, example, and emotional bond, so the Spirit influences the believer.

Alston admits that this model does some justice to the biblical picture, but ultimately does not account for all the biblical language of the Spirit indwelling the believer. There is also the question of whether mere external influence, however powerful, can make moral transformation possible. Influence and example can certainly help. However, Hare argues that this is not sufficient and faults Kant for holding a similar view. Hare thinks of Kant as ultimately cutting off any internal means of grace. God can serve as a kind of example, but without a

[466] Ibid.

[467] Ibid., 137.

[468] Ibid.

revolution of the will, "the moral task is *not yet* calling us with sufficient power."[469] We can know *what* we ought to do, but we lack the power to align ourselves with the Good.[470]

Alston finally adopts the sharing model. Alston proposes that the Spirit is not external to the believer, but that there is a "literal merging or interpenetration of the life of the individual and the divine life, a breaking down of the barriers that normally separate one life from another."[471] This is strongly suggested by the biblical language of the Spirit "filling" a person, of being "poured out."[472] For example, Jesus says that the Spirit "resides" with believers and he "will be *in*" them.[473] Gerald Borchert comments that Jesus means that "The Spirit was to dwell *personally* in the disciples and become their guide."[474]

Alston senses that this view might collapse into the fiat view. If God is *in* us, then how can anything of human volition remain? Alston admits that to some extent the precise nature of the Spirit's indwelling will forever remain mysterious. However, indwelling does not imply that the will of the Spirit simply replaces the believer's. Alston thinks of indwelling as a kind of participation in the life of God. It is not assumption or dissolution into God, but a real participation in the divine life. It results in the sharing of certain feelings and dispositions.

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[469] Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 64.

[470] Porter and Rickabaugh argue for a revised model of the interpersonal model. They agree that there the Holy Spirt is internal to the believer, but take this in a more analogical rather than literal way. I agree with Hare that something more internal is likely required for a revolution of the will. See Steven L. Porter and Brandon Rickabaugh, "The Sanctifying Work of the Holy Spirit: Revisiting Alston's Interpersonal Model," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 6 (July 19, 2018): 112–130.

[471] Alston, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit," 141.

[472] Cf. Eph. 5:18; Joel 2:28.

[473] John 14:17, NET. Emphasis added.

[474] Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21* (Nashville: Holman, 2002), 125.

Gary Osmundsen provides a model for understanding how the Spirit could be internal to us, but allow us to retain genuine freedom. He suggests that on certain occasions human agency may have "joint agency" with the Trinity. Some actions may be understood to have multiple agents as a cause. This could be the case, for example, if we think in terms of Aristotle's four causes. Here is an incomplete example: The President might be the efficient cause of a declaration of war (the final cause) and the American people the material cause, as they give him the power to act. Osmundsen applies this in the life of a Christian believer in a Trinitarian way. The Father is the final cause. Christians act for him and to manifest obedience to the Father, following the example of Jesus. Jesus is the formal cause. He serves, in part, as the moral exemplar, the model which believers are intended to emulate and become.[475] The Holy Spirit is an efficient cause; he provides "additional resources" to compensate for human deficiencies.[476] Osmundsen thinks of the Spirit as empowering the believer to act as Christ would act. He does this by producing Christ-like awareness, feelings, and dispositions within the mind of the believer. The selfish bent of humanity is replaced with a divine sense of love for God and neighbor. Both the Spirit and the believer work together as the efficient cause to act in accordance with the formal and final causes. Adams revises Alston's sharing model with a similar result. She says,

> [The] Holy Spirit enters into lived partnership with psychic agencies of the created person so that they work together to manage inputs from the outside and impulses on the inside and so coordinate the person's interactions with the world.[477]

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[475] Cf. Gal 3:27

[476] Gary Osmundsen, "Sanctification as Joint Agency with the Triune God: An Aristotelian Causal Model," *Philosophia Christi* 21, no. 2 (2019): 351.

[477] Adams, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit: Some Alternative Models," 151.

Likely, O'Donovan has something similar in mind when he writes that the grace of God works by the Spirit amid the "most inward dimensions of human consciousness."[478] This intimate internality means that, according to Oden, "There is nothing too subtle or dense for the Spirit to penetrate or too sinful for the Spirit to cleanse or… too dead for the Spirit to breathe life into again."[479] Leidenhag and Mullins note an advantage for this view:

> A living consciousness is all that is required with inputs of awareness and experience from the outside world. A person can be said to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit in their internal life, no matter how traumatized, disabled, developed, or corrupt, that internal life may be or may appear.[480]

Because the Spirit is internal to the believer, he can bring about the revolution of the will in any man. This model also evokes a promise Jesus makes to believers about the Holy Spirit: "From within him will flow rivers of living water."[481] The love of God "flows abundantly from the believer's heart, proceeding from the Spirit given to dwell within all who believe."[482]

On the sharing model, the Spirit works internally to give us the power to do what is right. The Spirit is not coercive, overriding the will, but enables him. Alston notes that the sharing model does not preclude interpersonal influence. The Spirit may be both in and near the believer, both empowering her and drawing her to the Good. This intimate and personal capacity for refreshing and renewal makes the moral life possible, on the Christian view. God's grace, applied by the Spirit and in cooperation with man means man can be morally transformed.

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[478] Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 3:55.

[479] Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 3:55.

[480] Joanna Leidenhag and R. T. Mullins, "Flourishing in the Spirit: Distinguishing Incarnation and Indwelling for Theological Anthropology," in *The Christian Doctrine of Humanity: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Zondervan Academic, 2018), 197.

[481] John 7:37, NET.

[482] Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 3:178.

Conclusion

In sum, Christianity ably explains all three elements of the moral gap. It gives a realistic explanation of human incapacity. It reinforces the lofty nature of the moral demand. Finally, it offers a coherent explanation of how to close the moral gap through the divine assistance offered by the Holy Spirit, who graciously enables believers to be fully moral.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In the final pages of this dissertation, I first consider what sort of practical difference this argument may make. Second, I address some final objections and explain precisely what sort of rhetorical force the argument presented may have.

A Practical Difference

One's ethical theory, even if held only implicitly, makes a practical difference. C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity,* gives his well-known "Parable of the Ships." Lewis says that for any fleet of ships to sail a voyage successfully, three conditions must be met. First, the individual ships must not disrupt each other or wreck one another. Second, each ship must be seaworthy, in good working order. Finally, the fleet needs a destination, a place where all the individual ships are headed together. Lewis argues that morality is like a fleet of sailing ships. He says that in an analogous way morality is concerned, first, with "fair play and harmony," second, with "harmonising the things inside each individual," and finally with "the general purpose of human life as a whole."[483]

Lewis's parable illustrates a key idea: moral beliefs matter. The moral perspectives adopted by individuals determine what those people count as important and worthwhile. Ethical theories also inform what human beings consider appropriate treatment toward one another. Ultimately, moral beliefs determine how human beings think of themselves in relation not only to themselves and their neighbors, but also to the cosmos itself.

If the three categories of morality are going to be rightly satisfied, then one must know what is actually true in terms of ethical theory. What, really, is the nature of the Good? What

[483] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 71.

does it mean to say something is morally right or obligatory? Humanity needs rational, credible answers to these questions if we hope to make the voyage. After all, it is the answer to these critical metaethical questions that ultimately determines *where* humanity ought to be heading and *what* it means to be a morally healthy person.

An Eternal Consequence

Most would likely agree with the logic of Lewis's parable. However, Lewis plots the course according to a Christian perspective, a route that is, at least at some important junctures, distinct from all other routes. One distinctively Christian aspect of Lewis's view in this regard is his view of the importance of the individual in relation to society. For Lewis, even after all human civilizations have crumbled away, then every human being will still persist:

> There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.[484]

Each human, immortal, will outlast the relatively short-lived histories of great civilizations and societies. The goal of morality, on the Christian view, goes beyond mere material and worldly considerations. Significantly, it does not eschew the material world, but seeks its redemption. Or, as N.T. Wright puts it, on the Christian view, the world is not in need of evolution or abandonment, but of redemption and renewal; it is the resurrection of Jesus that is the "promise and guarantee" that these will occur.[485] The ultimate end of man is to "glorify God and to enjoy

[484] Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 56.

[485] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 107.

him for ever."[486] Therefore, on the Christian view, one's accounting for morality makes an eternal and infinite difference.

The Transformative Potential

Moral arguments are part of a discipline sometimes called "moral apologetics." This fits within the wider context of Christian apologetics. Christian apologetics, according to William Lane Craig, apologist *par excellence,* "is a theoretical discipline that tries to answer the question, What rational warrant can be given for the Christian faith?"[487] Broadly, one might understand apologetics this way: the rational, considered investigation of the Christian worldview. Though some see religion and reason in conflict, Paul Gould and James K. Dew suggests what they call a "convergence model."[488] Gould and Dew see Christian philosophy and apologetics as a part of a wider tradition where "faith and reason work together to provide truth about God."[489] Christian history is replete with apologists, from Justin Martyr (c. 100 – 165 AD) to the present day; the value of apologetics for the church is evident.

David Horner argues that the chief objection to the Christian worldview, at present, is that it is "too bad" to be true: "Christians and Christianity seem to increasing numbers of people to be bad. The gospel, as they see it, is (therefore) implausible—it couldn't be true; it's too bad

[486] "Shorter Catechism: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church," accessed March 31, 2021, https://www.opc.org/sc.html.

[487] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 15.

[488] James K Dew and Paul M Gould, *Philosophy: A Christian Introduction*, 2019, 16.

[489] Ibid.

to be true."[490] Though Christians claim that God is the ultimate good and that the Christian life is characterized, more so than any other sort of life, by goodness and rightness, these claims are widely rejected. Horner suggests that this rejection has two different motivations. First, Christians have failed to live the sort of life God intends, and secondly, Christians have not responded persuasively enough to the philosophical objections raised against the Christian worldview. As a result, skeptics find the Christian ethic off putting, distasteful. While both issues must be addressed (the Christian life and the Christian discursive reply), Horner sees responding to the intellectual objections as a first step.[491] A good, convincing case for the Christian ethical vision begins, for Horner, by first understanding and articulating what it means for God to be good. On Horner's account, this is at first go, an academic exercise (though not merely so) which produces some inkling of the goodness of God. This insight leads both to moral transformation of Christians and to a more persuasive and powerful philosophical answer to skeptical objections.

Often apologetics is thought to be only for the skeptical outsider. However, as Craig's definition of apologetics suggests, the scope of apologetics need not be so limited. Apologetics has tremendous value both outside and inside the church. Outside, the value of apologetics concerns, most obviously, evangelism and what some call pre-evangelism. This can occur directly and academically as a discursive reply to specific objections, but apologetics can also work indirectly. Horner suggests that the academic reply is the mere beginning of moral apologetics, and that the subsequent outworking of apologetics should include the moral

[490] David Horner, "Too Good Not to Be True: A Call to Moral Apologetics as a Mode of Civil Discourse," *Moral Apologetics*, n.d., accessed January 23, 2021, https://www.moralapologetics.com/wordpress/too-good-not-to-be-true-a-call-to-moral-apologetics-as-a-mode-of-civil-discourse.

[491] Ibid.

transformation of the moral apologist. Paul Gould has something similar in view when he introduces the notion of *cultural* apologetics. Cultural apologetics, according to Gould, constitutes, in part, "the work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture."[492] Moral apologetics to the skeptical outsider can serve both these functions. It can offer a discursive reply to objections. But it can also be the foundation from which Christians can work to become a voice of moral authority and conscience to the wider world. It can help to make Christians "salt and light."[493]

Equally valuable is the role apologetics plays within the church. Apologetics can help assuage doubts, not by mere hand-waving, but through substantive engagement. According to Gary Habermas, C. S. Lewis thought of apologetics as having value for the Christian as a way to combat doubt. Critical but fair-minded examination of the "strong philosophical and historical foundations" of the Christian faith allows the Christian to call himself "back to reality."[494] Apologetics can bolster the Christian's confidence in God. If one assumes that good philosophy is a good guide to truth, as Dew and Gould do, and that Christianity is true, then by inference, the considered examination of one's Christian beliefs should, at the end of the day, result in their vindication.

More than reassurance, however, apologetics can also refine and reform conceptions of God. For example, the argument from contingency may help one to better understand God's role as creator, but moral apologetics has the special power to shape one's view of the goodness of

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[492] Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 24.

[493] Cf. Matthew 5:13-16

[494] Gary Habermas, "C. S. Lewis and Emotional Doubt: Insights from the Philosophy of Psychology," in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Jerry Walls, and Gary Habermas (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 103.

God. In this way, moral apologetics has not only an intellectual, but also an affective, pastoral element. Moral apologetics better allows one to apprehend what C. S. Lewis calls "the divine ethics."[495] By this, Lewis has in mind the factual nature of the Good, determined by the nature of God. Lewis says that we know implicitly the rough shape of the Good; it is not as though investigation of the nature of the Good, if done rightly, will result in total discordance between what we believed to be "good" and what actually is. There will be a reformation rather than replacement. In other words, if Lewis is right, then we know, even if imperfectly, what it means to say that God is good, a conviction that will only grow, coming into ever greater focus, as one better understands "the divine ethics." In sum, there are at least two reasons this moral argument matters: its eternal consequence and its transformative potential.

How Good is the Christian Explanation of Morality?

I frame this argument in abductive terms. This may seem like an odd choice since I do not substantially consider any alternative explanations of the moral facts. Abductive arguments, after all, are meant to show which explanation is best among a range of alternatives. There are at least two related and potential objections. First, this argument is not really an abductive one. Second, this argument only shows that Christianity is *possibly* true as it, at best, shows that Christianity is a coherent explanation of the moral facts. In that case, this would be more a work of theology than apologetics. To show that it is the best or even better explanation, some comparative work needs to be done.

[495] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), l. 398.

The Force of the Argument

To clarify the force of my argument, I consider why it should be considered an abductive argument and why it gives some reason to think that Christianity is true.

What makes this an abductive argument? Abductive arguments typically function like this example from Josephson and Josephson:

(1) *D* is a collection of data (facts, observations, givens).

(2) *H* explains *D* (*H* would, if true, explain *D*).

(3) No other hypothesis can explain *D* as well as *H* does.

(4) Therefore, *H* is probably true.[496]

In this dissertation, I address at least (1) and (2). There are moral facts which are explained by the Christian hypothesis. But since I do not attempt to address (3), someone might object that I cannot help myself to the conclusion (4), which would be that Christianity is probably true. Also, since I skip (3), this is not an abductive argument.

In reply, I first concede that this objection has validity. I have not made a complete abductive argument. And there are some real limits to the force my conclusion can take, given the argument on offer. However, an incomplete abductive argument can still be considered abductive in mode and method. It may even still suggest that some explanation is likely true. Abductive reasoning can be broadly understood as a kind of inference "requiring premises encompassing explanatory considerations and yielding a conclusion that makes some statement about the truth of a hypothesis."[497] This broad conception makes no specific reference to

[496] John R. Josephson and Susan G. Josephson, eds., *Abductive Inference: Computation, Philosophy, Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5.

[497] Douven, "Abduction."

comparison. It is a mode of reasoning that puts "explanatory considerations" in pride of place. An important part of abduction is identifying what constitutes a *good* explanation. The precise criteria differ among philosophers, but they generally include concepts like explanatory scope, simplicity, and unity. My contention is that the Christian explanation not only explains the moral facts, but explains them *well.* Therefore, it is abductive in at least this important sense.

Further, abductive arguments do not necessarily consider alternative explanations in detail. Consider the following example, modeled after what Douglas Walton says is a standard pattern for abduction:

> I own a wily cat named Spot who likes to knock over my expensive antique lamp whenever he gets hungry. I leave for work early in the morning, negligently forgetting to feed Spot. I return home that evening and find my lamp on the floor. I have a fact in need of explanation, namely that my lamp is on the floor. One explanation is that Spot did it. There are, of course, rival possible explanations, like an earthquake. But no earthquake was mentioned on the news, so Spot likely knocked over the lamp.[498]

One implication of this example is that the level of consideration given to other explanations depends, in part, on the background beliefs of the person who makes the judgment about the likelihood of the given explanations. The success of an explanation can be considered in objective or subjective terms. There is a fact of the matter about how well some explanation fits the facts. If God, from the point of view of omniscience, judges some explanation to be the best, then, in fact, it is the best explanation. But abductive arguments often occur in what Douglas Walton calls a "framework of dialogue."[499] It is a kind of conversation that occurs between two people and takes into account background beliefs and other elements of the context.

[498] This example is patterned after an example which is said to be a typical example of abduction in Douglas Walton, *Abductive Reasoning* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 7.

[499] Ibid., 85.

The dialogical element can affect how the hypothesis is judged. If my neighbor, who avidly watches conspiratorial UFO documentaries, knocks on the door and wants to know what all the commotion was about while I was away at work, he may not be satisfied with the explanation that "Spot did it." He may believe that the broken lamp is better explained by a curious alien visiting while I was away. Perhaps this is a common motif of alien visitations according to the supposed reports. Background beliefs make a difference to how we judge the fit of explanations to the facts. So, it will help to consider what the background beliefs might be when considering a Christian explanation of the moral facts.

I offer an explanation of some important moral facts and suggest that Christianity provides a good explanation of those facts. My argument is an extension of the moral argument made by David Baggett and Jerry Walls in *Good God* and *God and Cosmos.* Their argument shows that theism, in the context of naturalistic alternatives, is a better explanation of morality. Practically, that limits the field of live options for morality quite considerably; this provides a specific "dialogical context." If the argument of Baggett and Walls is successful, then naturalistic explanations of morality are not viable challengers for the account I offer here as my explanation is consistent with theirs. This leaves supernatural explanations as live options. Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Mormonism, and virtually all other religions offer at least an implicit explanation of morality. So, on the surface, it may seem that, by opting for a religious explanation, I have invited many more rival theories to the table. However, it is not obvious that all religious explanations of morality are live options. To see why this might be the case, we will have to make a few assumptions, but none of them are unlikely.

First, we can assume that some religions are simply not live options. They strain credulity and appear immediately to be intrinsically unlikely. This is particularly true of new religions like

Scientology, the revisionist Norse religions, and UFO cults. At least some religions are bad explanations for practically anything they would attempt to explain.

Second, some religions are relevantly similar to naturalism so that they would suffer the same, or nearly the same, explanatory deficiencies of other naturalistic explanations considered in *God and Cosmos.* Of course, I cannot do justice here to any particular religion, but here are a couple of suggestive points. Some forms of Buddhism are practically the same as naturalism. Mark Siderits notes that classical Buddhism holds that the gods were finite, subject to the laws of the cosmos just like human beings. They "play no role whatever in the quest for *nirvana*."[500] Buddhism's similarity to naturalism partly explains why it has been embraced (with some convenient revisions) by naturalists like Sam Harris.[501] I have argued elsewhere that Mormonism is so similar to naturalism in terms of practical application that it is subject to Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism.[502]

Third, natural theology tends to point to the existence of a personal God. William Lane Craig thinks that his *kalam* cosmological argument implies that a "personal creator of the universe exists."[503] Design arguments suggest the intentional actions of a designer best explain certain features of the universe and biology. The argument from consciousness proposes that an immaterial, divine person best explains the human mind.[504] The ontological argument as well

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[500] Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 19.

[501] "Interview With Sam Harris: Faithless Dharma," *Inquiring Mind*, 2006, accessed September 13, 2021, https://www.inquiringmind.com/article/2202_19_harris_faithlessdharma/.

[502] Jonathan Pruitt, "The Eternal Progression Argument against Mormonism," *Eleutheria* 3, no. 1 (2014): 17.

[503] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 154.

[504] Moreland, *Consciousness and the Existence of God*, 50.

suggests a personal God for, plausibly, to be a person in possession of a will is a great making property. While there have been arguments for other supernatural positions developed in the history of philosophy (like Hegel's pantheism), the relative strength of the theistic arguments gives an at least *prima facie* reason for thinking it more plausible than rival theories. This provides a kind of cumulative case for theism, specifically the belief in a personal God, that rival supernatural theories lack. For many, at least in the West, there are only two live options: theism and naturalism.[505] This would be a disadvantage for non-theistic religions, like Hinduism.

A fourth consideration has to do with what we might naturally expect to be the case if theism were true. Theism entails that God is maximally good, he is the creator of human beings, and that he is personal. Since he is maximally good and the ultimate source of goodness, their well-being would likely at least be enhanced by a relationship of some kind with himself. If a good God makes human beings, likely he would want them to know the truth about himself and he would arrange the world in such a way that as many people as possible would know him. As Swinburne argues, "there is reason to expect that [God] will take steps to ensure that they acquire information as to how to attain that well-being..."[506] It is natural to think, that if God is good and personal, that one of the major world religions would be substantially correct.

Swinburne also makes the case that a good God would not permit "mass deception" regarding certain kinds of religious claims. Specifically, Swinburne says the hypothesis that Jesus was incarnate and raised from the dead is so theologically and evidentially significant that it "looks like God's signature, and of course—since God is omniscient and omnipresent—a

[505] Thomas Nagel seems to agree as he thinks of theism and reductive materialism as "polar opposites," and seeks a way to explain certain features of the world that avoids, from his perspective, the deficiencies of both. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

[506] Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 72.

signature inscribed with God's knowledge in his presence." [507] That is why, according to Swinburne, "God would not allow some devil (or some human agent perpetuating a fraud or a hoax)" to bring about a state of affairs where the incarnation and resurrection were so well-evidenced.[508] The state of the evidence surrounding Jesus is not the primary point here; it is the suggestion that we can be entitled to think that God would not permit mass deceptions of a certain kind based on his moral character. This would seemingly imply that God would provide his signature, given his desire to know human beings and his concern for their well-being, and that this signature would effectively, but not coercively, point to the truth about him.[509] If effective, then we should expect that many people actually discern the significance of the signature.

So, on the basis of these assumptions, there are only really a handful of plausible religions explanations on the table. They would be theistic and widely adopted explanations.[510] On the basis of these further assumptions, we have reason to think that the remaining live explanatory candidates would be the major theistic religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. That narrows the dialogical context quite considerably.

Finally, if we have other reasons for thinking the prior probability of Judaism and Islam are low, or if we have reasons for thinking that they are not good explanations of the moral facts, then Christianity would be a better explanation of morality and we could know that without

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[507] Richard Swinburne, "Does God Permit Massive Deception?," *Philosophia Christi* 15, no. 2 (2013): 269.

[508] Ibid.

[509] This idea of a "divine signature" bears some resemblance to Evan's notion of a "natural sign." These are events or phenomena that "point to God but do not do so in a coercive manner." C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

[510] We could likely rule out strong pluralism, where all religions are equally true, on the basis of self-contradiction.

giving serious attention to rival theories.[511] To be clear, this sort of judgment relies on assumptions that many will not share. It is not a claim that, objectively, Christianity is the best explanation of the moral facts (though, I think that is true). Rather, it is the claim that in the context of a certain dialogue, where certain assumptions are in play, then in that highly specific case, one may be justified in thinking that this dissertation gives reason to think that Christianity is a better explanation of the moral facts.

Given the limited range of that application, it makes sense to have a fallback position in order. What does this argument do in a dialogue with only the assumption that Baggett and Walls's moral argument is successful? In that case, I contend only that the Christian explanation is a very good explanation of the moral facts. The strength of an explanation can be determined without doing comparative work. My neighbor could likely see that "Spot did it" is a good explanation, even if he thinks there are better explanations available.

This raises the question of whether, in fact, the explanation I have offered is a good one. How can we be sure that there is a good fit between the facts and the hypothesis? This is a challenging question in part because of the complexity of the facts and of the explanation itself. Wesley Salmon suggests that the best way to tell if an explanation is likely is by Bayesian probability calculus.[512] That may or may not be true, but thinking in Bayesian terms helps illustrate the problem my argument faces.

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[511] One critique of Islamic ethics would be Kevin Richard, "Tawḥīdic Allah, the Trinity, and the Eschaton: A Comparative Analysis of the Qualitative Nature of the Afterlife in Islam and Christianity" (Liberty University, 2019), https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2074/. Richard argues that certain versions of Islamic paradise do not do justice to human value and nature.

[512] Wesley Salmon, "Explanation and Confirmation: A Bayesian Critique of Inference to the Best Explanation," in *Explanation: Theoretical Approaches and Applications*, ed. Giora Hon and Sam S. Rakover (Boston: Kluwer, 2013), 62.

In the explanation of forgiveness, itself only a part of the explanation of moral transformation, there are number of probabilities to consider. What is the probability that God exists and, if he does, that he would become incarnate? We must also consider the probability that Jesus is God incarnate (and not the Buddha, Vishnu, or someone else), relative to these other probabilities, and the likelihood that he in fact died for our sins, and so on. The calculus in just this one case would be astronomically difficult and it is unclear whether such an arduous task would really show how well Christianity accounts for moral forgiveness. That is not to say that the likelihood is low that God forgives, but it does raise a question about the value of offering a Christian explanation of forgiveness that is meant to be persuasive.

The concern is that the explanation is too complex to be commendable to anyone who did not already accept it as true. In that case, the work here would be philosophical theology rather than apologetics. As a general rule, complexity in an explanation is undesirable; better explanations explain more with less. Sometimes, though, added complexity can produce other explanatory virtues that overcome the cost of the added complexity. If there are certain recalcitrant facts that simpler theories struggle to explain, then a more sophisticated theory might be a better explanation, depending upon how well it explains those facts. Christianity is a complex explanation of the moral facts. I do not assume it to be true. I only hold it out as a hypothesis that might be true. If I have to assume more, that is a real burden in terms of complexity. Whatever is assumed has to pay off at least what it costs in terms of its added complexity.

Richard Swinburne seems to perceive the force of an objection like this in his work on the incarnation. Swinburne wants to offer positive evidence that God was incarnated in Jesus

Christ and he notes that he will have to avail himself of certain details of the Christian story to make the case. His reply is worth quoting at length:

> When I give these reasons, the reader will be right to feel that I would not have given them if I had not derived them from the Christian tradition. Indeed, I shall be arguing later that neither Jews nor pagans of the first century AD expected an incarnation of the sort I shall describe. It needs the Christian tradition to make us aware of a theory—a particular theory of the divine nature and of what a being with that nature might be expected to do, to be found in the New Testament but articulated more fully by such writers as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—before we can judge whether or not, by objective standards, the evidence supports that theory well. Most physicists could never have invented the general theory of relativity for themselves, but once it has been proposed for discussion, they can then assess whether in fact the evidence supports it. Or again, Inspector Lestrade and the bumbling police of Victorian Scotland Yard so often saw everything Sherlock Holmes saw. But they could not see its inductive implications, what it made probable. It needed Sherlock Holmes to suggest a theory to account for the data; and once they had heard his theory, then they came to see that the evidence supported that theory. But the evidential relations were there, whether or not they saw them. I shall be arguing that the Christian tradition of what God might be expected to do is correct.[513]

From Swinburne's perspective, the Christian story may be something like a Sherlockian explanation. It may not, through the cognitive powers of most, be extrapolated from the available data. But, once it is on the table for consideration, it may, nevertheless, be so compelling that everyone comes to see it best explains the available data.

But there is still the question of how we can make a judgment about the explanatory fit of the Christian hypothesis relative to morality. Charles Sanders Peirce suggests that in some ways, our judgments about the fitness of an explanation are aesthetic judgments.[514] Peter Lipton draws distinction between the *likeliest* explanation and the *loveliest* explanation.[515] Likely explanations are those explanations that can be shown to be the most warranted based on Bayesian

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[513] Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 35.

[514] Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce,* 156.

[515] Peter Lipton, "What Good Is an Explanation?," in *Explanation: Theoretical Approaches and Applications*, ed. Giora Hon and Sam S. Rakover (Boston: Kluwer, 2013), 46.

probability. Lovely explanations are those explanations that conform to explanatory virtues, like simplicity, consilience, depth, and power. Lipton makes the distinction, in part, to answer a couple of objections about the validity of inference to the best explanation.

Possibly, some explanation could be lovely and not likely. Lipton himself thinks the objection can be met by showing how likeliness contributes to loveliness. Perhaps, Lipton says, part of what makes an explanation lovely is that it has a causal element. The thing that explains brings about the effect which is what needs explanation. There may be a necessary connection between explanations and explanandum and we perceive that connection as lovely. Certainly, there could be, on occasion, some likely but unlovely explanation that turns out to be correct. But that would be the exception and not the rule and experience, especially in the history of science, would seem to confirm this idea.

The other possibility is that lovely explanations just are likely ones and so the distinction collapses; there really is only one explanatory virtue: likelihood given prior probabilities. But likely explanations may not produce any understanding. One can explain opium's tendency to put people to sleep in terms of its "dormative power," says Lipton.[516] That is a very likely explanation, but lacks loveliness because it does not add to our understanding. It is likely, but trivial. Lipton thinks that in practice, we actually use loveliness rather than mere likelihood as a guide for selecting explanations and that it has worked exceedingly well in the history of science. Similarly, Tim McGrew argues that "attention to our pretheoretical notions of loveliness may at times be a surer guide to a theory's probabilistic merits and the structure of our reasoning than purely algebraic manipulations."[517]

[516] Ibid., 57.

[517] McGrew, "Confirmation, Heuristics, and Explanatory Reasoning," 564–565.

So, what this suggests is that our judgments about the fitness of explanations does not necessarily require a precise understanding of their likelihood. It also implies that we cannot set exacting weights and measures to specific explanatory virtues. Rather, the judgment is often more aesthetic, based on intuitions, and pretheoretical ideas about the beauty of explanations. With that in mind, I want to consider the overall aesthetic appeal of the Christian explanation of the moral facts. When we consider the whole picture, do we perceive a beautiful and elegant explanation or, perhaps, a contrived and ugly one?

Myth or Meme

In the late 2000s, the "Four-Horseman" of the New-Atheism appeared on the scene. They were uniquely able to capture the attention of millions of people in their attempt to popularize atheism. One distinct feature of their approach had to do with the disdain and disregard for religion in general and Christianity in particular. On the whole, they saw religion as a deeply harmful and anti-intellectual stockade, holding humanity in place and keeping us from the progress available by adopting a more "scientific" worldview. Their position is evident even in the subtitle of one member's book, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Richard Dawkins admits that he is "hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise… it subverts science and saps the intellect."[518] Dawkins goes on to say that "faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument."[519]

Daniel Dennett offers a more developed argument against religion. Dennett supposes religion is an artifact of a certain kind of evolution. Religion, as it exists today, must

[518] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 321.

[519] Ibid., 347.

be analogous to a mutation of something more primitive and basic. Religion began because *homo sapiens* have an irresistible urge to assign agency to what they do not understand, a deep need to comfort themselves in the face of death, and to encourage cooperation. Further, human brains, like the brains of other animals, are hardwired with what Dennett calls a "HADD" or "hyper active agent detection device," which causes human beings to attribute agency to potential threats in their environment as an aid to survival.[520] These features, along with others, resulted in early *homo sapiens* coming to believe in the existence of something beyond the concrete and material world: "The memorable nymphs and fairies and goblins and demons that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us."[521]

Religion itself is also explained in terms of evolution; those ideas or "memes" which provide the most benefit were adopted and others rejected. Dennett thinks that religion is, at its heart, an arrational enterprise, arising spontaneously from biological programming aimed at survival and not truth. Religion might avail itself of a certain veneer of rationality, but at the end of the day, reason is used only to prop up the crumbling foundations of religion. A similar point is made by atheist philosopher Alex Rosenberg, who suggests that religious belief can only be maintained due to the "evolutionary forces" that bring it about. Religion is ultimately "unproveable" and is at odds with the facts of science.[522]

As a foil to the idea that religion is an unfortunate accident of physics, we can consider the notion that the Christian religion is the "true myth." Lewis argued that human thinking tends

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[520] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 109.

[521] Ibid., 122.

[522] Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), x.

to be either abstract or concrete, and that rarely, if ever, would the two ever be integrated. Things like the axioms of mathematics can be known only abstractly, but "the only realities we experience are concrete—this pain, this pleasure, this dog, this man. While we are loving the man, bearing the pain, enjoying the pleasure, we are not intellectually apprehending Pleasure, Pain or Personality."[523]

Philosophical arguments can sometimes be like the merely abstracted arguments for mathematical axioms. That is not to say there is no value in abstracted arguments; quite the contrary is so. Mathematics has a tremendous value, after all. Even in Lewis's own case, one could understand "abstracted arguments" as being a kind of sufficient condition for his conversion to Christianity. Lewis first became a theist and then a Christian. Lewis recalls that he was convinced by philosophical argument and his own experience that "mind was no late-come epiphenomenon; that the whole universe was, in the last resort, mental; that our logic was participation in a cosmic *Logos*."[524] Lewis says it was through the philosophy of idealism that the "great Angler played His fish and I never dreamed that hook was in my tongue."[525]

On the other hand, direct experience allows for a concrete knowledge by acquaintance, but it cannot provide real understanding of the experience, argues Lewis. Merely feeling, tasting, smelling is not completely understanding. Lewis says this puts us in a dilemma: "The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think."[526] Lewis argues that the category of "myth" provides at least a partial solution to this problem, as he sees it.

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[523] C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2014), 57.

[524] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 256.

[525] Ibid., 258.

[526] Ibid., 56.

While Lewis does not offer a straightforward definition of myth, Jerry Walls provides this gloss on how Lewis uses the term: For Lewis, a myth is a beautiful story that speaks to "our imaginations and longing for goodness and meaning."[527] Elsewhere, Alister McGrath argues that though Lewis was reluctant to define *myth,* there were, nevertheless, several distinct components of myth in his thought. Myth evokes a certain kind of experience; it is contemplative, otherworldly, yet grounded by realistic characters. The tone is always serious; it may be marked by joy or sadness, but not levity. Finally, and most importantly, according to McGrath, Lewis thought myth to have "numinous qualities."[528] McGrath explains,

> For Lewis, a myth is a story which evokes awe, enchantment, and inspiration, and which conveys or embodies an imaginative expression of the deepest meanings of life – meanings that prove totally elusive in the face of any attempt to express them abstractly or conceptually.[529]

According to McGrath, Lewis came to believe that "Christianity was not a set of doctrines or moral principles, but a controlling grand narrative – a myth, in the true sense of the term – which generated and sustained such ideas and values."[530]

While Lewis's understanding of Christianity as true myth provides a powerful way to consider the entire Christian story, there are some potential pitfalls. McGrath argues convincingly from Lewis's letters that Lewis did indeed think of Christianity as a kind of image in contrast to truth. Lewis describes myth as a "mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths here in the valley… [Myth] is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it like direct

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[527] Jerry L. Walls, "Introduction: Jack of the Philosophical Trade," in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 137.

[528] McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, 61.

[529] Ibid., 63.

[530] Ibid., 62.

experience, bound to the particular."[531] However, this move to categorize truth as the "abstract" and the knowledge gained by direct experience as something other than truth is likely unnecessary. It is, perhaps, a lingering echo of the narrow, stifling epistemology left behind when Lewis encountered the true myth in the gospels. A more satisfying reconciliation of abstraction and experience can be found in the work of Lewis's friend, J. R. R. Tolkien.

Tolkien argues that good myths, or good "fairy stories," do not deny the cold facts of reality. They are not escapist in this sense. Instead, in part, a good myth gives a "fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief;" it is "numinous."[532] Good myths point beyond their own narrative, to a truth that transcends their story. What we see in Tolkien's thinking on myth is a rejection of reductionist epistemologies. Tolkien proposes, against the tide of modernist thinking, that, "Fantasy [myth] remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."[533] For Tolkien, "Fantasy is a rational, not an irrational, activity."[534] Good myths are cognitive things, human artifacts made by God's own image bearers. A difference between Lewis and Tolkien on myth seems to be this: Lewis thinks of myth as a synthesis between two different ways of knowing. Tolkien thinks that no such synthesis was needed; any division was illusory. Instead, the boundaries of what counts as "rational" only needed to be expanded.

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[531] C. S. Lewis, *C.S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000), 141.

[532] Tolkien, *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, 383.

[533] Ibid., 371.

[534] Ibid.

Tolkien says that in the Christian myth, the story is "supreme and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord of Angels, and of men, —and of elves. Legend and history have met and fused."[535] Tolkien represents this idea vividly in a specific seen from the *Lord of the Rings.* A rider from Rohan asks, "Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?" The response from Aragorn, and presumably Tolkien himself is this: "A man may do both."[536] Myths, for Tolkien and Lewis, are the sort of things that can point us to transcendent truths, but there is also the possibility that the narrative of the myth is itself true, historical, factual. In the case of the Christian story, they agreed that both elements of myth were true. Jesus walked in legends *and* on the green earth in the daylight. What we find in their talk about myth is an *expansive epistemology,* which allows knowledge to come by way of *both* abstraction and experience. In myth, abstract ideas are incarnated, concretized.

Lewis, of course, came to think of Christianity as the "true myth," for in the Christian story, Lewis found the most compelling harmonization of reason and experience. By considering the Christian worldview, and ultimately the Christian God, as the best explanation of the moral facts, we avail ourselves of the *true myth,* which seeks to bring together abstract and concrete realities. So, the term *myth,* as we have seen, need not convey the notion that the story is ahistorical, but only that it is a certain kind of evocative narrative. In the Christian narrative, the Christian God is *revealed* as acting within history.[537] He acts and he is known, most clearly in the incarnation.

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[535] Ibid., 398.

[536] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers: Being the Second Part of the Lord of the Rings*, vol. 2, Lord of the Rings (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 29.

[537] Significantly, according to the Christian worldview, knowledge of God is available through both special and general revelation. These modes of revelation are not in competition with one another but serve distinct purposes. Cf. Romans 1-2.

Thinking of Christianity as a myth or narrative may also have certain implications for ethical theory. One likely reason for this effect comes from a particular feature of the Christian worldview: the centrality of its ethical perspective. This point is captured well by Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas argues that Christian ethics is a sort of narrative ethic. Narrative ethical theories say that story, either stories of individuals or of communities, constitute and give meaning to ethical concepts. [538] The notion of what it means to be a good person, for example, is determined by appeal to a normalizing story which contextualizes what counts as a good person.

What Hauerwas suggests is that Christian ethics (and Christianity itself) can only be understood when grounded in narrative. It cannot be abstracted into a set of axioms, like mathematics. He rejects what he considers to be modernist, rationalist ethical theories that attempt to universalize ethics by rationalization. Rules grounded in mere reason are not sufficient for an ethical theory (and are ultimately meaningless, hollow). Hauerwas posits that Christian ethics is not secondary to the truth of Christianity. Rather, the truth of Christianity is itself ethically transformative. Hauerwas powerfully argues that it is only within God's story, the one told by God's people, who are the Church, and grounded in the Scriptures, can a person grasp this truth about themselves and embark on the truest form of the moral life.[539]

Hauerwas's interpretation of the Christian worldview *as* an ethical theory is not without its problems, but it illustrates a vital idea: the Christian worldview has at is core a concern for ethics. This rings true with what many have considered to be the basic teaching of the Bible:

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[538] Anna Gotlib, "Feminist Ethics and Narrative Ethics," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d., accessed September 29, 2020, https://iep.utm.edu/fem-e-n/.

[539] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 56.

Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. These core Christian ideas reflect the Christian narrative, with God as the central character, imbuing his creatures with intrinsic and immense value, acting as moral law giver and judge, and setting about the redemption (and *not* the transcendence) of the world.

Conclusion

There are, then, at least two different explanations about the origin of the Christian story. Dennett and others consider it to be a particularly virulent meme. Lewis and others see it as a transcendent and true myth. With that in mind, we can return to the idea that good explanations are lovely explanations. I contend that in the Christian myth we find a compellingly beautiful explanation of morality that suggests it is likely a true explanation. In chapter 2, I contended that the Christian story includes the idea that God is good, that he cares for the weak and oppressed, that he sets about a plan to bring about the redemption of the world at his own expense. This narrative holds that God is three persons in one substance, making sense of the centrality of love to the Good. In Chapter 3, I argued that the Christian narrative makes sense of our intuitions about intrinsic human goodness and that God's call for us to be his image bearers elevates man's status to a point beyond what we would ask, but also does justice to our perception of the value and sacredness of human life. In the incarnation, God shows his love for humanity by condescending to us, becoming fully human in Jesus Christ. He verifies man's value by his genuine humanity. In Chapter 4, I proposed that Christianity makes morality make sense through the resurrection of Jesus. In the resurrection, God overcomes death and sin and makes human flourishing possible. In the redeemed world, there is perfect harmony between morality and rationality. In Chapter 5, I argued that the Christian explanation of moral transformation is

deeply satisfying. It provides a balanced view of man's inability and of the gravity of the moral demand. The atonement provides a satisfying and sufficiently weighty explanation for how we can be relieved of our moral guilt. Finally, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit shows how we can have the right sort of divine assistance to become genuinely and fully transformed people. This is a particularly lovely explanation of the moral facts that suggests the Christian story is more likely true myth than false meme.

The argument of this dissertation is not coercive. It is not, in Nozick's terms, a philosophical proof, but a philosophical explanation.[540] It is suggestive, gesturing toward the conclusion "Christianity is true." It works within a dialogical context, as part of a wider conversation about the best explanation of morality. It is easily resistible as the argument relies on many assumptions. However, I think there is a certain aesthetic quality found in the surprising unity and completeness of the Christian story, the natural connection between our moral sense and the specifics of Christian doctrine, the way that Christian ideas challenge us to extend and deepen our moral convictions, and the way it confirms our most deeply held moral beliefs, that make the meek and resistible power of the argument rather alluring. It invites us to "Taste and see that the Lord is good."[541]

[540] Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 13.

[541] Ps. 34:8, CSB.

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