

TRANSCENDENT STANDARD The Consistency of Christian Ethics

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During the span of a few days on March, 2010, there were twin suicide bombings in Moscow's subway network, the charging of a 12-year-old boy as an adult for double homicide, and the banning and subsequent outrage over a video game that has for its purpose raping women. All three stories invoke moral outrage; how can innocent civilians be targeted? Why is a young boy killing his father's pregnant girlfriend with a shotgun? How can people create such violent and perverse video games?

Many responses to these events have been outrage, shock, and disbelief. What has happened in these stories is tragic and evil. But there is a question to be asked, a question that is rarely asked in the mass consciousness. Why are these acts evil? To put it more strongly, why are these acts objectively evil? The question is one of foundation. The purpose is to examine the underlying presuppositions, the worldview, to see if the moral response is consistent according to that worldview.

In the culture where secularization and pluralism continue to grow deeper into the conscience of its people, this paper seeks to uncover the correct foundation that is needed to provide a consistent moral framework, so that the reader may understand how to lead a consistent life, from belief to action. The only foundation that can provide an adequate basis for objective morality is God. Without God morality loses its objectivity because humanity loses its transcendent standard, the standard that is universal, binding on all peoples. Ontologically speaking, theistic ethics provides for "the *actual* ground or *basis* that makes moral knowledge possible."¹ Atheistic ethics loses this ontological basis because "impersonal/physical, valueless processes [cannot] produce valuable, rights-bearing persons."² As Cornelius Van Til explains:

The basic difference, then, that distinguishes Christian from non-Christian ethics is the acceptance, or denial, of the ultimately self-determinative will of God. As Christians we hold that determinate human experience could

¹ Paul Copan, "God, Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality," in *The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath & Daniel Dennett in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 146. Copan's argument is transcendental, for it addresses the foundations of morality.

² *Ibid.*, 146.

work to no end, could work in accordance with no plan, and could not even get under way, if it were not for the existence of the absolute will of God as portrayed in Scriptures.... Looked at in this way, that which to many seems to be the greatest hindrance to human responsibility, namely, the conception of an absolutely sovereign God, becomes the very foundation of its possibility.³

Contemporary society has seen the rise of “independent judges of right and wrong, [who are] basing their choices on feelings and circumstances.”⁴ Moral relativism practiced by so many people, even Christians, is inconsistent. We cannot result to relative morality because it is no morality at all. It is merely preferential opinion thrust on its object and then onto other people. Morality, to bind on everyone consistently, has to be objective. God is the only object—if we can speak of him in such a way—who allows the precondition to have morality at all.⁵

The humanist chaplain at Harvard University, Greg Epstein, starts his book by painting a victimized picture of humanists, a group that, according to his statistics, has been unjustly deemed to be morally incompetent by the religious. He believes that questions such as “[whether] one can be good without God... be rejected outright.”⁶ This writer, as a Christian, agrees. The question is not whether an atheist can be good. The world is full of “virtuous pagans” who “seem to be doing good works... [and] are virtuous apart from Christ.”⁷ The Christian’s claim is not that atheists and pluralists cannot be ethical. The claim addresses the foundation, the basis for ethics and methodology, and not ethics itself. This is the area of metaethics.

The atheist and pluralist, from here addressed as secular humanist, are left without a solid foundation for morality, and every moral judgment ends up being inconsistent with their foundational basis, their worldview. The only choices left to them are to choose and worship the God of revelation, thus gaining the only adequate basis for ethics, or end with nihilism, the hopeless anarchy of humanity. Yet nihilism is impossible to live through consistently because it is a system that is “beyond good and evil... *beyond true and false*.”⁸ Those who do not worship the triune God of Scripture contends that there

³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, vol. 3 of *In Defense of Biblical Christianity* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1980), 35.

⁴ The Barna Group, “Young Adults and Liberals Struggle with Morality,” The Barna Group, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/25-young-adults-and-liberals-struggle-with-morality> (accessed April 19, 2010).

⁵ Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1998), 499. A precondition is that which allows for the intelligibility of anything.

⁶ Greg Epstein, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), x.

⁷ John Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 27.

⁸ Hans Kung, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (New York: Random House, 1981), 384.

are other possible basis for morality besides nihilism and God, but when examined, every non-Christian position turns out to be internally incoherent and inconsistent to its foundational beliefs.

God is the precondition for morality. Is this just a blind assertion? The answer is a resounding “No!” In our day-to-day lives, we encounter or hear about many ethical dilemmas. This act was good. That act was evil. We all have our opinions. But can we function as a society with mere opinions? Whose opinions will triumph to be the major view? What happens to the minority view? Will the adherents of the minority view be crowded out and punished if they do not follow others’ opinions-turned-norm? For morality to be objective and binding on everyone, it has to transcend every person and every culture, every individual and every society. It has to move from mere opinion to fact, for what is the purpose of stating, “Murder is wrong” if it has the same value as the opinion, “I love watermelons?” “Murder is wrong” has to be fact for the act to bind on everyone. Can we really be bound by the command, “Thou shall love Dallas Cowboys?” As a Redskins fan, this writer would lead a revolution against such a command, yet that is exactly the quandary we are left with when relative opinions rule the moral sphere. Morality has to be objective; it has to be fact. The idea of God is the only transcendent standard that will allow for objective morality. Yet it is not merely an idea of God, but the existence of an absolute personal Being who can provide the precondition for objective morality.⁹

In our current culture, the issue of homosexual rights has been hotly debated. What many homosexuals do not realize is that this is not fundamentally a rights issue, but, at its core, is an issue of morality. If homosexuality is intrinsically good, homosexuals should be allowed to marry, but if homosexuality is intrinsically evil, gay marriage should be banned. The logical question, then, is, “Who is right?” Which position corresponds to moral reality? This ethical question cannot be determined by the loudest voice. There has to be a true ethical standard that transcends all parties at all times. But what standard are we left with outside of humanity? It cannot be an impersonal force that governs morality, for such thing cannot exist in a secular humanistic, materialistic worldview. It cannot be impersonal nature, for nature cannot tell us anything.¹⁰ That which is impersonal is mute; it is only a fact, an “is.” If a secular humanist tries to argue for a basis for morality from a materialistic worldview, which is the only option she is left with without the supernatural, any argument that uses anything outside of the non-natural would be inconsistent within her ultimately naturalistic foundation. How could there be abstract facts such as morality and the laws of logic? Did they just bang into existence? If they banged into existence, are they contingent? If they are contingent, can they disappear or be changed? Only the Christian God can be the standard and the fact that binds everyone under his authority.

Let us look at a different example, one that pits two radically different cultures against each other. Though not widespread, Hindus used to practice *sati*, the self-sacrificial burning or burying of a widow with her deceased husband. This was seen as an act of

⁹ Frame, 20-21, 252.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20-21

everlasting devotion. It even drew praise of some Europeans. However, Lord William Bentinck, influenced by utilitarian philosophy, banned the practice in 1829.¹¹ The British and Hindus had developed their cultures over centuries before they had ever made contact with each other. They each had their own definition of good and evil. Consistent with secular humanistic ethical methodology, the Hindus had developed a social system that was deemed good and successful by the people. If this society had deemed the practice of sati as acceptable and even praiseworthy, what right did the British have to interfere and even jam their morality into the moral consciences of the Hindu people? Yet, this was exactly what had happened. A more powerful force with a louder voice came in and silenced the voice of a weaker people. Secular humanists cannot consistently defend this British “moral bullying” when their conception of the good is left to arbitrary opinions of other people such as Kai Nielsen’s “reasonableness” and Greg Epstein’s “desire to live with dignity.”¹² No matter how persuasive they may sound, their conceptions of the good are exactly that, their conceptions of the good. It may be that society agrees with their definition. However, that only pushes the problem out to include a greater amount of people. Their definitions are radically immanent; they cannot transcend all of humanity. Even if one’s concept of the good was ever to be agreed upon by all peoples, morality would be contingent in its nature. As the nature of contingency goes, the moral idea can change or vanish at any point in history.

As we can see, morality can only be binding on everyone if the standard is transcendent above humanity. Moreover, morality can only be transcendent when it is not man-made. The only concept that provides for such transcendence is a transcendent God. Yet, God cannot be merely an idea, for him to be merely an idea would be a man-made idea. A man-made idea is subject to the opinions of man. There is no true objectivity or absoluteness. Man-made ideas are immanent and not binding on all persons at all times. So if God was to not exist, then there would be no true authority to bind people to objective morality. For morality to be objective, binding, and universal, it requires an absolute, personal Being to communicate to us what is good.¹³

Morality can be objective only with the Christian God because only he is absolute and personal.¹⁴ He is above everything and rules everything. As Lord, his will is binding on

¹¹ Center for History and New Media, “Sati: Introduction,” George Mason University, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson5/lesson5.php?s=0> (accessed April 10, 2010).

¹² Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism Without Foundations* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1996), 587. Nielsen speaks of reasonable pluralism in this specific context, but moral pluralism and atheistic pluralism is similar and appropriate in the context used above; Epstein, *Good Without God*, xiii. Epstein follows Sherwin Wine’s definition of dignity to explain moral obligations.

¹³ Frame, 20.

¹⁴ It can be argued that other monotheistic gods are absolute. This is somewhat true, but upon further examination, it will be shown that they do not meet the standard of an absolute, personal Being. Since this is not a paper on comparative religion, I will not address the topic here. For further argument, see John Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 67-69.

everyone. We cannot accuse him of arbitrary opinion because, if there was a metaphysical absolute Being, he would be the standard on which everything depends on. He would be the standard ruler to measure everything. He also has the capability to speak to us, so that we may know his will. Indeed, he has spoken to us through his image in us. It may be argued that this is subjectivism. However, the *imago dei* ethics presupposes objectivity because of the one who is behind the subject. Since God is the one who furnishes the image, he is the presupposition that undergirds the knowledge of the good in humanity. We, coupled with the *imago dei*, also have a sense of morality through nature. When we see something evil, there is something in us that tells us that the act was evil. This does not defy the naturalistic fallacy because, in a theistic worldview, such moral conclusion from nature, a fact, presupposes a moral God.¹⁵ We also come to know God's standard through Scripture, so that we may know concretely, through good exegesis, his nature and his will. Even more, he continually speaks to us through the Holy Spirit to further illuminate our minds in our ethical choices. Ultimately, the subjective side is undergirded by the objective side of Scripture, so that morality is not left to pure subjectivism.

The antithetical, secular humanistic ethics can only be found upon the foundation of an impersonalistic, material universe. In this worldview, the secular humanist ethicist is caught in a conundrum. He cannot derive a moral *ought* from an impersonal universe, because the universe cannot speak. It can determine our behavior, as gravity keeps us down, but it can never speak to us morally. Nor can the secularist deduce a moral *ought* from observing an event. We can see the event, but there is no *moral* event presupposed in an impersonalistic universe.¹⁶ To deduce morality would once again be committing the naturalistic fallacy. The secularist cannot escape this conundrum by appealing to abstract universals either because the universe does not give any abstractions. Abstract entities such as laws of logic and morality cannot simply arise from atoms. Atoms cannot determine what is right or wrong nor can it determine what is up or down. It only acts according to its inherent, physical nature. So if the secularist proposes an objective moral system, he presupposes the laws of logic and abstract moral laws that are outside of the physical universe. If the secularist argues against a purely materialistic worldview, he has to give an account for the existence for abstract entities such as logic and morality. He cannot merely assert that they exist. Of course, they exist. The Christian is not arguing for their existence, but for the explanation for their existence. And how is it that something like mathematics and logic is logical, as in, coherent? Only the presupposition of an absolute, personal Being allows for the explanation for these abstract entities' existence.¹⁷ This is, to take Frame and Bahnsen's ideas, a transcendental explanation for morality. Without this transcendental presupposition, the secularist can argue for his system of morality without being able to give a reason for the existence of abstract moral laws that he relies on.

¹⁵ Frame, 60-61.

¹⁶ John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1994), 94-98.

¹⁷ Greg Bahnsen does a terrific job of demonstrating this in his debate with Gordon Stein, which can be found on www.cmfnow.com.

It may be argued that the Christian has loaded the deck. But has he? Christianity has always had a concept of a Being who is good and the creator of all things. This is not an ad-hoc position of the writer. According to our historic claim, God has always been powerful and moral. Therefore, humans can know and account for abstract entities such as morality. Now the secular humanist can argue that good is either good by its inherent nature or God created the good, and therefore, the good is under the mercy of the arbitrariness of God. Classically, this is posited as the Euthyphro dilemma, an argument one secular philosopher considers the “knockout punch” against Christianity.¹⁸ But is it really a knockout punch?

Both Nielsen and Epstein points to the Euthyphro dilemma as an argument against the theistic moral argument. Epstein challenges the believer’s concept of God that “goodness is what God says it is.”¹⁹ Uncovering the circularity of this strawman, he sets up another strawman by claiming that we know God’s goodness from his works. This is only partly true. As I have noted above, God’s goodness is known through nature but also through the *imago dei*, the Holy Spirit, and Scripture. Epstein’s argument is rather unconvincing, arguing that humans must create values wisely since God cannot, since he has swept away God’s goodness by God’s arbitrariness. He argues for a vague notion of the social contract theory, but once again, the question begs to be asked; “Who determines what is of good value?” Epstein believes, in line with Thomas Nagel, “that there are certain natural attitudes that already commit us to valuing our own lives,” and “logic commits us to universalize” that there are right and wrong.²⁰ What Epstein misses is that not everyone agrees on what is right and wrong. Epstein’s effort to subjugate morality to subjectivism and then universalizing that subjectivism is incoherent and oppressive to the dissenters.

Epstein goes on further by stating that “we cannot ever be confident that objective values exist.”²¹ But if Epstein leaves the door open for relativism, he loses every ground to condemn activities he might deem heinous. Would he object to the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA)?²² The only door he has left open for himself is the argument for social contract and wisely creating moral values. But according to Epstein’s standards, any member of NAMBLA can argue that man/boy love is a human need. In the ever-changing scientific and psychological research, researchers may one day discover an incestual gene or the human need for man-boy intimacy. Culturally this may be repulsive, but culture can change and boys can grow up to accept this type of custom. This may not happen quickly, but cultures can change, ideals can change, and norms can change over time. If Epstein lived in that hypothetical future, would he disagree with the present Epstein? The future Epstein may even have a boy partner for

¹⁸ Epstein, 32.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 35

²² www.nambla.org

himself. But who would be right? Epstein is left with no ground to stand on because he has stripped that ground away himself by negating the possibility of objective morality.

Epstein is worried that “anything can be justified” in the name of objective values.²³ This is a legitimate fear if different objective values were held by different people. But an objective value presupposes the law of non-contradiction. Epstein’s strawman bypasses the law of non-contradiction by presupposing that people can lay claim to objective values without the existence of objective values. However, if there is such thing as objective values, then whatever contradicts that objective value would be wrong. It cannot be justified. To illustrate further, there may be many people claiming objective values, even secular humanists unlike Epstein. However, the question that must be asked is, “Why and how is it objective?” If the objective value is good, then it is untrue that anything can be justified because the contrast would then, by definition, be evil and unjustifiable. If God is good and the definition of Good, then it cannot be *ipso facto* possible to justify the condoning of NAMBLA or any other evil.

Nielsen provides a more philosophically cogent Euthyphro argument. He challenges the theistic response that God is good by nature. His challenge to Christians is to furnish an explanation of how we can know God’s goodness. The Euthyphro is a false dilemma because God is inherently good, so He will not command what is evil. This is another way to say that “the will of God expresses the nature of God.”²⁴ Since the will reflects the nature, what God commands to be good is not arbitrary but grounded in objectivity. How can we know if this good is truly good? It is impossible for God to be evil because God is an absolute person. As an absolute, each part of his character would be absolute. Therefore, an “absolute negation,” such as evil, would cancel the “absolute affirmation,” the good.²⁵ We know God is good because He grounds us in the good. If God were evil, we would be mired in contradictions. Even if He were to command what seems to be evil, *a la* the sacrifice of Isaac, he has a morally good reason to command it, and by his good nature will not command what is truly, not seemingly, evil. He also has the right to take away life because he created that life and has exclusive claim on it. Furthermore, he takes it away not out of arbitrariness but out of wisdom and holiness. Because God is the definition of good by his nature, we now have an objective, transcendent standard to measure moral issues and objects.

Nielsen counters this argument by claiming that it is only by our “autonomous moral appreciation” that we understand God’s goodness.²⁶ Through this reasoning then, God presupposes morality, and “our moral understanding is logically independent of any belief we may have that God exists.”²⁷ He further reasons that we can know what is ultimately good by first having a concept of a good. This is an idea of a move from

²³ Epstein, 36.

²⁴ Van Til, 21.

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁶ Nielsen, 561.

²⁷ Ibid., 561.

simple to complex understanding.²⁸ All this sounds cogent and appealing to the common sense. But let us see where this leads Nielsen.

Nielsen believes that “we can come to appreciate on reflection” what is wrong without the existence of God.²⁹ Would that be personal reflection for Nielsen? Whose reflection would he follow? Would the world have to come to a consensus to reach a definition of morality? This sounds more like Moore’s intuitionism, a view that breaks down in a pluralistic society with various views of right and wrong.³⁰ Opinions get muddled up when complex and controversial issues such as abortion are at hand. Nielsen believes that we can be “confident that we are right in claiming that torture, lying, breaking faith with people, or treating them as mere means are wrong” without God. Would Nielsen believe that a torturous act such as abortion would be evil? On whose reflection would this act be wrong? It seems as though Nielsen can make polemical rhetoric about broad moral statements that trigger moral outrage, but cannot give an explanation of the inherent evil of such acts. Even though he claims that we know what is good first, he cannot create a system that allows for agreement of goodness. It seems as though autonomous moral understanding cannot be the criterion for understanding morality, but indeed needs a standard moral ruler to measure people’s moral understanding. Without God, this moral ruler disappears, and we are logically abandoned to autonomous wills competing one another for supremacy. Once again Nielsen is only left to make assertions about the timelessness of objective morality without God.³¹ The reason why Nielsen’s arguments break down is because he falsely believes that autonomous moral understanding presupposes God and that objective morality somehow exists independently in this world. Much of Nielsen’s argument rests on man’s autonomous moral understanding, but he does not explain how man’s moral understanding presupposes ultimate morality.

Nielsen logically shows his inconsistency with his earlier claim of the existence of moral objectivity in the absence of God. “It seems no longer possible, in modern societies, for religion, or for that matter for anything else, to provide *such* a social bonding, to give us in the public sphere a sense of moral unity.”³² Whatever happened to autonomous moral understanding? If there was a prior understanding of moral goodness, should we not be able to come to some kind of a moral consensus since objective morality exists? On the one hand, Nielsen claims that there is “a cluster of mutually dependent fundamental moral and otherwise normative criteria,” explaining that normative criteria exists to understand objective morality.³³ On the other hand, he admits that there are “different moral beliefs and attitudes” which derives from people’s “assessment about

²⁸ Ibid., 561.

²⁹ Ibid. 561.

³⁰ Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 121-122.

³¹ Nielsen, 562.

³² Ibid. 579.

³³ Ibid., 572.

what the world is like... [due to] differing about cosmology and metaphysics.”³⁴ How can such two radically different views be reconciled?

Nielsen’s attempt to reconciliation is “a broadly Rawlsian, society-wide consensus on primary social and natural goods... and on what Rawls calls public reason... [which] I believe, serve as a functional replacement for this lost moral unity.”³⁵ Consensus that allows for a functional moral unity based on “reasonableness” is Nielsen’s answer to morality. As one can clearly see, this attempt clearly does not account for the existence of objective values, and he later stacks the deck clearly in his favor by defining what “reasonableness” is. Yet his best attempt is pragmatism that is, at root, pure relativism.³⁶

Secular humanism, with its disaffirmation of God, can only conclude in nihilism. What is nihilism? According to Nietzsche, “*nihilism means the conviction of the nullity, of the internal contradiction, futility and worthlessness of reality.*”³⁷ It is the belief system that values and ideals such as morality “are entirely the product of man’s invention and definition.”³⁸ It is clear that nihilism points to a world that is ultimately meaningless and valueless. These things are psychological, a stuff of man. Yet it fits perfectly in the mold of naturalism, the worldview of secular humanism. But it is the opposite of the worldview of the Christian, for Christianity presupposes an ultimate reality, that is, God. He is the ultimate value which presupposes all values. And thus we can act morally in the context of a moral God. In going back to nihilism, man is left to “start his moral activity in a perfect blank, [and] he has to continue to act as a moral blank and he has to act in the direction of a moral blank.”³⁹ Van Til understood the absurdity of the atheistic notion of morality, mainly that there is logically no morality to speak of. This is the nihilism of Nietzsche. But can nihilism be consistently lived out? Such a world, if it could even be possible, would be the stuff of apocalyptic science fiction, a world of anarchy where might and scheming rules. It is an unlivable world.

Man is left with two choices: Worship the God of revelation, therefore, have morality, or accept nihilism, which in its core is untenable and unlivable. There can be no in-between. Every other alternative is an attempt to instill moral values in an inherently valueless, materialistic world. But this is the hope offered by the triune God. He provides for us to live morally by reflecting his goodness, while providing the framework to consistently move from belief to action. The non-Christian, even though he can be moral, is left only with hopeless contradictions between his beliefs and actions. In the end, the verdict stands. God, therefore, morality.

³⁴ Ibid., 578-579.

³⁵ Ibid., 586.

³⁶ Ibid., 436-444.

³⁷ Kung, 388.

³⁸ Ibid., 389.

³⁹ Van Til 37.

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