

Can Michael Martin Be a Moral Realist?: Sic et Non by Paul Copan

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In a cartoon-strip of *Calvin and Hobbes* , the mischievous imp Calvin is listening to the tune, "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town":

He sees you when you're sleeping.

He knows when you're awake.

He knows if you've been bad or good;

So be good, for goodness' sake!

Reflecting deeply on this theme of Santa, Calvin reports his musings to Hobbes, his striped sidekick and co-conspirator. "This Santa Claus stuff bothers me . . . especially the judge and jury bit," Calvin mutters. He wonders why Santa carries such moral authority: "Who appointed Santa? How do we know he's impartial? What criteria does he use for determining bad or good? And what about extenuating circumstances? Kids should have the benefit of legal counsel, don't you think?"

In the spirit of this particular brand of "Calvinism," the atheist philosopher Michael Martin is also bothered—by this "God stuff." In his essay "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," he finds the theistic belief that God is the locus of objective moral values problematic. Who appointed God? How do we know he's impartial? What criteria does he use for determining good or bad?

At the outset of his essay, he states that the theistic claim that "atheists can provide no objective reason for not raping people" is "startling." He argues against the Mackian thesis that atheistic morality is necessarily subjective. Furthermore, he maintains that the commonly-held theistic position on morality (rooting objective morality in God's character rather than his commands) *still* does not escape the *Euthyphro* dilemma. Moreover, the Bible itself is "insensitive and chauvinistic" in its treatment of rape victims.

Sed contra , I shall respond that Martin's argument is flawed both philosophically and biblically. Regarding the **philosophical** shortcomings, (a) Martin offers no substantive *ontological foundation* for an objective morality within an atheistic framework (which would account for human dignity, human rights, moral obligations, and moral responsibility), and he confuses the order of knowing with the order of being. Thus I shall argue that Martin can be a moral realist epistemologically but not ontologically. Furthermore, (b) Martin fails to realize (i) that God's essentially perfect nature is not subject to the accusation of arbitrariness sometimes justly leveled against divine commands (ii) that, if true, his challenge leaves his own naturalistic moral realism in the same state of arbitrariness. Finally, (c) his argument is flawed **biblically** in its

handling of Deuteronomy 22:23-9 and other biblical passages pertaining to rape. So I shall, in each section, present a particular aspect of Martin's position and then respond to it.

I. "Is Atheistic Morality Necessarily Subjective?" A Question of Epistemology vs. Ontology

Martin points to two Oxonians, Richard Swinburne and J. L. Mackie, to reinforce his emphasis that an atheistic ethic need not be subjective. Martin claims that a case can be made for an objective morality that is independent of what particular human beings happen to believe or practice with regard to morals. Positively, Martin approvingly cites Swinburne's argument: "Genocide and torturing children are wrong and would remain so whatever commands any person issued." Martin adds: "[Swinburne] assumes that it is possible to objectively settle moral disputes concerning this topic if God did not exist." General moral principles are necessarily true given their allegedly analytic nature, he argues. Thus there is no possible world in which such moral truths cannot be coherently conceived.

Martin rightly notes that not all theists share Swinburne's perspective. These theists, Martin adds, "maintain that atheistic morality must be subjective," and they usually assert this "without argument."

What is the position of these theists? In *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, Martin lays out their premises, which we'll call Theistic Argument A (**TA-A**):
If morality is objective and absolute, then God exists.
Morality is objective and absolute.
Therefore, God exists.

To make their case, Martin argues, theists must refute the following argument (Atheistic Argument A, or **AA-A**) before their views on theistic morality can be taken seriously:

- (1) In order to show that atheistic morality necessarily is subjective, theists must show that all attempts to ground objective morality on a nontheistic basis fail.
- (2) But theists have not shown that all attempts to ground objective morality on a nontheistic basis fail.
- (3) Hence, theists have not shown that atheistic morality is necessarily subjective.

One is led to believe that Martin will provide just such a basis, but, as we shall see below, his attempts to "ground objective morality on a nontheistic basis" do indeed fail. In addition, the challenge Martin offers can be taken up by theists, who can show that atheism lacks a sufficient basis for objective morality and, going further, show how theism furnishes precisely the necessary moral context. We shall proceed to take up this two-fold challenge.

To cite J. L. Mackie as *the* atheistic perspective on ethics, Martin claims, is unfair, as his is not the only one to consider. Mackie's views "certainly do not represent the

views of all atheists." Nor do Mackie's arguments for a subjectivist ethic work, Martin holds. For instance, Mackie argues from *disagreement* (disagreement in ethical opinions supports ethical subjectivism) and from *strangeness* (moral properties are so strange that they would not fit into a naturalistic worldview). Martin disagrees with both of these arguments.

In response, Martin directly addresses the matter of *disagreement*, but his response to the *strangeness* argument is that, *contra* Mackie's internalist account, "moral realism is compatible with externalism." Martin does not give much of an argument for the latter except for a passing footnote.

However, in the next section of his essay ("Is Theistic Morality Necessarily Objectivist?"), Martin offers a more substantive argument for his position. I quote him at length:

Let us assume for the moment that the Biblical position on rape is clear: God condemns rape. But why? One possibility is that He condemns rape *because it is wrong*. Why is it wrong? It might be supposed that God has various reasons for thinking rape is wrong: it violates the victim's rights, it traumatizes the victim, it undermines the fabric of society, and so on. All of these are bad making properties. However, if these reasons provide objective grounds for God thinking that rape is wrong, then they provide objective grounds for others as well. Moreover, these reasons would hold even if God did not exist. For example, rape would still traumatize the victim and rape would still undermine the fabric of society [even if God did not exist].

Thus on this assumption, Martin claims, in this case, atheists could provide objective grounds for condemning rape—the *same* grounds used by God. Elsewhere Martin makes a similar statement about cruelty: "If I criticize Jones for being cruel, the criticism might well be correct even if God does not exist."

Here a major deficiency emerges in the objectivist ethic of the atheist. Martin completely ignores the ontological level of the discussion. He merely addresses the epistemological level and appears content with stopping there. That is, what counts as *being good* is one thing, but how we *know* the good is another. Atheists may be aware of the content of morality, but this does not furnish them with the basis for explaining how it is that there are moral truths and that we are able to know them.

Let me reiterate. Martin's working assumption seems to be this: If a *nontheist* can simply *recognize* or *know* that objective moral values—and thus universal moral obligations—exist, the job of justification is complete. We can be good without God! But this does not go far enough. The theist does not dispute that nontheists can *know* moral truths or principles. Whether atheists, Confucians, or Theravada Buddhists, nontheists can properly affirm that the Holocaust or Stalin's purges were immoral.

However, Martin does not tell us *why* such moral knowledge is possible. At the epistemological level, Martin and Swinburne are correct: One need not appeal to God to *know* whether or not cruelty, rape, genocide, or torturing children is wrong.

But if Martin thinks his task is completed, this is where he makes his major mistake. *He gives no ontological foundation at all for his reasons to oppose child molestation, torture, or rape*. It is unquestionable that rape is wrong because it violates the victim's rights and traumatizes the victim. But to affirm this is *still* not to offer the *ontological basis* for such affirmations. In his popular-level book *The Big Domino in the Sky*, Martin makes the same sorts of pronouncements, but again without ontological justification. For instance, he rightly declares that there have been "atheists of high moral character." Thus there is no reason to think that atheists are less moral than believers. Of course, Martin concedes, the question is not one about the moral character of atheists, but "whether they can justify their actions."

So does Martin justify his vantage point? Hardly. The sort of "justification" Martin offers is to claim that "there have been many secular moralities." "There have been various attempts to construct a naturalistic foundation of ethics that is both objective and absolute." Certain ethical philosophers "have given objective accounts of morality that are compatible with atheism."

Notice that Martin's position simply *presupposes* the dignity of human beings, universal human rights, some objective purpose (e.g., that life has meaning *if* lived in a particular way), moral accountability, and the like. When Martin speaks of "bad making properties," he simply *assumes* that human beings possess an intrinsic worth which snails and sea urchins do not. But on what naturalistic or materialistic basis can human dignity or human rights be affirmed? What is it within Martin's worldview that furnishes us with such an ontology or metaphysic of personhood as being of intrinsic value or worth? *Nothing*, so far as I can see. Moreover, Martin makes no effort. He merely claims that "ethical absolutism is compatible with atheism." Martin suggests, following Roderick Firth, an ideal observer view of ethics (in which a "good" is what "an ideal observer would approve under ideal condition") is an atheistic alternative. Another suggestion Martin makes is William Frankena's "sophisticated version of non-cognitivism." Even if such views could carry the day for the atheistic moral realist, the problem still remains—namely, accounting for the metaphysical or ontological status of personhood and its attendant intrinsic goodness still remains. While moral truths can be known and moral judgments made in both systems, these systems still *presume upon*—without justification—the foundation human dignity, human rights, and obligations. But *why* suppose that human persons have moral worth?

Throughout his writings, Martin offers no reasons. He simply states that it is so:

I see no reason to suppose that if the cultural and intellectual accomplishments of X are worthless, then X's life is worthless. A mother who has raised intelligent, healthy, morally upright children, a doctor whose life has been devoted to caring for the indigent, a teacher who has spent a lifetime teaching pupils to be just and compassionate—each may have accomplished little from a cultural or intellectual point of view, but each has led a worthwhile life nevertheless.

But if Martin is going to insist that "it has not been shown that all attempts to ground objective morality on a nontheistic basis fail," he must do more than repeat the mantra: "But human beings *do* have dignity."

Here the theist offers just such a foundation: Human beings possess intrinsic or inherent worth because they are made in the image of God. They share the moral likeness of a personal God in their very nature or being, and, by virtue of their personhood, they are moral agents. As Keith Yandell puts it: "nothing which is not a person is a moral agent. Morality concerns only persons." Their personhood derives from the personhood of God. Their having basic moral intuitions about justice, goodness, and kindness reflect this moral connection. Thus we *ought* to be moral because we have been made as moral beings in the likeness of a good God. We have been made to know God personally, and when we are in right relationship with God, all other goods find their proper place; that is, we function the way we were designed to function. Thus, when human beings experience guilt (for murder, adultery, theft), it is not because they have simply violated societal laws, a social contract, or some set of Neoplatonic laws that are somehow part of the furniture of the universe. They have violated the character of the ultimate personal Being. Mackie's problem about the queerness of morality in a non-theistic universe persists; objective morality is just as strange as mental properties: just as mental properties are distinct from physical ones, so goodness belongs to persons rather than impersonal objects.

Martin, who frequently cites David Brink as offering a model of moral realism without appealing to God, may likely argue: "But why *can't* moral properties be viewed as comparable to supervening mental properties? After all, many nontheistic contemporary philosophers of mind hold this view." Brink himself reasons: "Assuming materialism is true, mental states supervene on physical states, yet few think that mental states are metaphysically queer." However, such optimism is misguided, as it assumes a smooth transition from the nonmental to the mental (and the nonmoral to the moral). But to use mental supervenience as a plausible analogy for moral supervenience is astonishingly bold and, so far as contemporary philosophy of mind goes, unwarranted. Take the mental property of consciousness. Ned Block forcefully asserts:

We have no conception of our physical or functional nature that allows us to understand how it could explain our subjective experience . . . [I]n the case of consciousness we have nothing—zilch—worthy of being called a research programme, nor are there any substantive proposals about how to go about starting one. . . . Researchers are *stumped* ."

The same could be said for moral properties. Just as consciousness is easily accommodated within a theistic framework (in which a maximally-aware Creator creates conscious beings), so moral properties fit into a theistic scenario (in which a supremely-good/moral personal Being creates morally-constituted persons). Therefore affirming human dignity and universal human rights is not simply a brute fact. A theistic universe helps make far better sense of human dignity or human rights than a non-theistic, naturalistic universe. The Christian offers a superior *contextual* framework—a "richer metaphysical account as to why the cosmos is such that there are objective values."

Martin might reply: "You theists might claim that God is the sufficient reason for the existence of morality, but you are still just positing God in terms of a *brute fact* , some ultimate stopping point. So what prevents the atheist from claiming that

objective morality and intrinsic human dignity simply exist as brute facts?" Up to a point, the atheist is correct: justification must end somewhere. But this does not mean that the theist and atheist are at an impasse.

Again, context is important. For instance, a hundred dollar bill has a greater value than a single dollar bill—even though they are the same size and contain (roughly) the same amounts of ink. It is the context (in this case, a conventional one) which enables us to ascribe varying values to these pieces of paper. What then is Martin's context for making sense of human worth? From his atheistic viewpoint, "There is no cosmic purpose if there is no God." We have before us the two relevant alternatives: (a) There is no cosmic purpose if there is no God and (b) There is a cosmic purpose if there is a God. At least *prima facie*, the existence of an objective human purpose is more obvious if God exists than if he does not.

Now Martin takes position that moral properties do exist independently of human beings:

Atheists not only can but have rejected this view [that human beings create values and do not discover them]. There is no reason why atheists cannot argue that values are discovered. For example, atheists such as Bertrand Russell in his early ethical writings argued that 'good and bad are qualities which belong to objects independent of our opinions just as much as round and square do.' Such qualities were discovered not created.

Now correlated to this affirmation is that somehow, *intrinsic worth and a moral constitution supervene upon human beings through their having achieved a certain level of organismic complexity*. According to David Brink, to whom Martin approvingly refers, this position is the most plausible position to take: "it is best for the [nontheistic] moral realist to claim that moral properties supervene upon physical properties."

So with this moral constitution, human beings have some inherent purpose, and therefore one ought to live one's life in a certain way (Says Martin: "Like Kant, I believe that one has a duty to fulfill one's talents.")

But if Martin's claim that there is "no cosmic purpose" is true, the relevant context for affirming a limited purpose is far from obvious. Martin moves from purposeless, impersonal, amoral, materialistic or naturalistic processes to—*violà!*—the emergence of intrinsically-valuable, personal, moral beings. Again, I simply do not see that his worldview has the ontological resources to bring about this remarkable transformation. Within theism, on the other hand, there exists a continuity, a smooth transition of intrinsic dignity—from a maximally-great personal Being to valuable created persons—as opposed to the naturalistic shift from the nonmoral to the moral. This moral *continuity*—the transference of moral properties from one moral Being to beings made in his image—has greater explanatory power than the *disjunction* between them on the naturalistic view. In the theistic view, moral properties have an ontological simplicity—as opposed to the naturalistic construal, in which moral properties are not ontologically simple.

Thus theists can take up Martin's challenge and offer a far more plausible basis for objective morality than the atheist can. We noted earlier Martin's argument (**AA-A**) against the theist who claims to have an objectivist ethic that the atheist does not have:

(1) In order to show that atheistic morality necessarily is subjective, theists must show that all attempts to ground objective morality on a nontheistic basis fail.

(2) But theists have not shown that all attempts to ground objective morality on a nontheistic basis fail.

(3) Hence, theists have not shown that atheistic morality is necessarily subjective.

On the *epistemological* level, Martin is rightly shocked by "Christian apologists"—whoever they may be—who claim that "atheists can provide no objective reason for not raping people." Theists and atheists alike can affirm the *same* moral principles as objectively true. But at the *ontological* level, it is the theistic *apologist* who is rightly shocked at Martin's claim. For Martin's worldview offers no obvious resources to affirm the uniqueness and dignity of the human being, individual human rights, personal responsibility, moral obligation, and the moral value of a cohesive social fabric. Thus, we can reply to Martin with the following syllogism (Theistic Argument B, or **TA-B**):

To ground an objective moral order, the atheist must show how naturalism furnishes an ontological framework for the intrinsic dignity of human beings, universal human rights, and moral responsibility.

The atheist has shown no such ontological foundation (based on naturalism) to account for intrinsic human dignity, human rights, etc.

Therefore, the atheist's attempt to ground an objective morality fails.

On the other hand, the theist (as we saw above) can make a plausible moral connection between God and human beings. It is this personal and moral connection which grounds the dignity/value, rights, purpose, and responsibility of human beings. It is *only on this assumption*—at the *ontological* level—of humans' being intrinsically valuable that we can rise to the next level—the *epistemological*—to know that rape, for instance, "violates the victim's rights . . . traumatizes the victim . . . undermines the fabric of society, and so on."

What we have before us is then is a matter of theism's *greater contextual* probability. Furthermore, there are certain additional facts about the world which are much more probable or make much more sense if God exists than if he does not:

The fact of consciousness/subjectivity, intentionality, and various mental properties: Thomas Nagel writes, "Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable." John Searle notes that "the leading problem in the biological sciences is the problem of explaining how neurobiological processes cause conscious experiences." Moving from purely naturalistic, unconscious processes to the existence of consciousness appears to require a much greater leap than consciousness' deriving from an ultimate, conscious Being.

the existence of moral beings, which is better explained by a moral and personal Being than by their emerging through non-moral processes.

the existence of non-utilitarian beauty, which seems to be better explained by theism than by metaphysical naturalism. We could more easily expect "useless" beauty if God exists than if he does not.

the beginning of the physical space-time universe, prior to which there was nothing physical at all. Thus there was lacking (from the naturalist's point of view) even the *potentiality* for anything to come into existence from nothing. The metaphysical principle "out of nothing nothing comes" still holds.

the delicately balanced cosmic constants in the world that make conditions "just right" for human existence ("the Goldilocks effect," astrophysicists have called it). Freeman Dyson notes: "As we look out into the Universe and identify the many accidents of physics and astronomy that have worked together for our benefit, it almost seems as if the Universe must in some sense have known that we were coming."

the existence of evil, which not only presupposes objective moral goodness but also entails *design* (i.e., evil is a *departure from the way things ought to be*).

As William Davis argues, the skeptic may be able to offer naturalistic explanations for these features of the universe (or he could insist that features like objective morality and beauty do not exist at all). "But the best the skeptic can hope for is to show that metaphysical naturalism explains as much of what needs explaining as the existence of God explains In no case is it plausible that metaphysical naturalism explains the data better."

Moreover, the theistic foundation for morality has the virtue of greater simplicity on its side in that it offers a plausible linking of *two distinct entities* that, in an atheistic world, must be joined in some *ad hoc* fashion. These two entities are objective moral values and human persons.

On the one hand, a metaphysical naturalist like Martin apparently presupposes that moral properties supervene on "correctly-related" or "complexly-conjoined" non-moral ones. Then somehow two apparently unconnected components within the universe—namely, (a) these emergent moral properties and (b) the moral principles of justice, mercy, and kindness, which are analytically-true brute givens whether or not any human beings exist—happen to be, by fantastic coincidence, intimately related. Now Martin holds that moral truths exist as part of the cosmic furniture, and he also maintains that humans (independent of these standards) evolved naturalistically to such a point at which they became moral beings.

But why think that these moral principles which exist even *apply* to us or morally *obligate* us? To say that moral values are "just there" seems insufficient. Isn't it an extraordinary coincidence that out of all possible creatures that have evolved, human beings should just *happen to have* obligations to these pre-existing, analytically-true objective moral values? It seems that the evolutionary process somehow *anticipated* the arrival of human beings on the scene. But a less *ad hoc* candidate is the theistic alternative. (And, we could add, even if moral *properties* did exist on a naturalistic scheme of things, why think that moral *obligation* exists—particularly when such a duty conflicts with my self-interest?)

Whereas these are two unconnected entities appear to pose a problem for the metaphysical naturalist, theism brings them together in a much more concise way: A

personal God, who is the source of moral values, makes human persons in his image, and thus they share important moral and spiritual characteristics with God. Theism provides a *match* between our moral make-up and the structure of ultimate reality.

Thus objective moral values are quite at home in a theistic universe. Given God's existence, moral realism is natural. But given an atheistic universe (despite Martin's claims to the contrary), objective morality—along with its assumptions of human dignity, rights, and moral responsibility—is unnatural and surprising and "queer."

Furthermore, theism serves a very useful place in philosophy, as it suggests answers where there would likely be only conundrums or brute facts. As Alvin Plantinga maintains, theism "offers suggestions for answers to a wide range of otherwise intractable questions."

Earlier, we gave the (negative) syllogism as to why the atheist fails to account properly for objective morality (**TA-B**). Positively, however, we could put forth another theistic argument (Theistic Argument C, or **TA-C**):

To ground the existence of an objective moral order, which assumes human dignity, human rights, human responsibility, and so on, the theist must show how this is so. A theistic universe (and not, we have seen, an atheistic one) furnishes the ontological resources to explain these data—namely, a good and personal God in whose image humans have been made.

Therefore, the theistic account of morality succeeds where the atheistic one fails.

So while the atheist, who has been made in God's image, correctly believes (*epistemologically*) in moral realism, his own *ontological* foundation furnishes no basis for this belief.

II. The Euthyphro Dilemma . . . Again

We are familiar with the Euthyphro dilemma raised by Socrates: "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" Socrates rightly rejected the former—an inferior view—but accepted the latter. Martin asks us to suppose that rape is wrong *because* God condemns it. This raises the *arbitrariness* horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. (The other one is the *autonomy* horn.) He rejects—correctly, in my view—a divine command theory, which (in its weaker version) views the sinful and the morally forbidden as coextensive. It appears to me that unless the commands are tethered to the goodness of God's character, then these commands can appear arbitrary. But even contemporary divine command theorists like Philip Quinn and Robert M. Adams seem to go beyond divine commands to emphasize their grounding in God's character, which is the proper move to make.

Simply defining moral obligation in terms of being simply "that which God commands" runs into the problem of *tautology* , in which "good" and "right" are redefined. "Goodness" comes to mean nothing more than "God commanded X." Obedience to divine commands would thus appear to be arbitrary. As Alasdair McIntyre once asked: "what other reason can there be for such obedience but the appeal to divine power and to the consequences of flouting it?"

Thus many theists have argued that appealing to God's character as the source and standard of moral goodness helps us to avoid the horns of the dilemma. However, Michael Martin claims that theists who root objective morality in the character of God rather than the commands of God only *postpone* the problem since the dilemma can be formulated in terms of his character. I quote Martin at length:

Is God's character the way it is because it is good or is God's character good simply because it is God's character? Is there an independent standard of good or does God's character set the standard? If God's character is the way it is because it is good, then there is an independent standard of goodness by which to evaluate God's character. For example, suppose God condemns rape because of his just and merciful character. According to this independent standard of goodness, being merciful and just is precisely what a good character involves. In this case, even if God did not exist, one could say that a merciful and just character is good. Human beings could use this standard to evaluate peoples' character and action based on this character. They could do this whether or not God exists.

Suppose God's character is good simply because it is God's character. Then if God's character were cruel and unjust, these attributes would be good. In such a case God might well condone rape since this would be in keeping with His character. But could not one reply that God could not be cruel and unjust since by necessity God must be good? It is true that by necessity God must be good. But unless we have some independent standard of goodness then whatever attributes God has would by definition be good: God's character would define what good is.

So Martin wonders why the non-existence of God would adversely affect the goodness of mercy, compassion, and justice.

In response to Martin's revised Euthyphro dilemma, however, the theist can offer the following responses.

First, we noted earlier that the "reasons" Martin offers for why rape is wrong already assume the dignity of human beings, the existence of universal human rights, an objective purpose/end for human existence, moral obligation, and moral responsibility. Thus Martin needs to offer a more robust explanation for these assumptions, but we have seen that the atheistic worldview lacks such resources while the theistic perspective anticipates a moral universe.

Martin's position on morality reminds me of what Bertrand Russell said in his BBC debate with F. C. Copleston. After being asked how the universe came into being, Bertrand Russell asserted, "I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all." Similarly, Martin appears to be saying, "The objective moral principles are there, and that's all." But is that *really* all? To paraphrase Father Copleston's response, "Why objective morality rather than none at all? That is the question."

To present a defeater against theism's claim to ontologically ground morality, Martin must do more than simply say that moral properties exist or that we can have moral knowledge or that moral properties supervene on physical entities. Nor will it do to say, "I offer the same reasons the theist does against rape." For the theist *already*

presupposes—and has a foundation for presupposing—human rights, human dignity, and the like. We've already noted even if the theist and atheist end up pitting "brute facts" against each other, the "brute fact" of a personal, good God who has made human beings in his image offers a more natural context for affirming human dignity than does an impersonal, unguided process.

Second, by presenting the revised version of the Euthyphro argument, *Martin simply postpones the inevitable—that is, applying a similar dilemma to his own atheistic version of moral realism*. If Martin thinks that he is forcing the impalement of the theist on one of the horns of the dilemma, how does Martin think that *he* can escape a similar dilemma, *mutatis mutandis*?

Now obviously, the atheist's moral position does not deal with the matter of *commands* issued by a personal being; so the Euthyphro argument is inapplicable in this regard. But, in principle, the atheist who raises the horns of this argument against the theist (whether pertaining to divine commands or divine character) must himself deal with the horns of autonomy or arbitrariness. So we can ask Martin, "Are the supervening moral properties—or even moral principles like justice—good simply because they are good, or is there some independent standard of good to which they conform?" Thus the alleged dilemma Martin claims the theist faces is the very same one the atheist does. So there is *no actual advantage* for the atheist in presenting this challenge. The same potential charges of arbitrariness or the existence of some autonomous moral standard (such as platonic Forms) still apply. If the atheist claims that he is *not* being arbitrary, then why should the theist's viewpoint be considered any less arbitrary? The sword cuts both ways.

We could carry the argument further by comparing Martin's view of supervenience with the common view that morality is the result of social as well as biological forces at work within human evolution. Bertrand Russell noted that

ethics arises from the pressures of the community on the individual. Man . . . does not always instinctively feel the desires which are useful to his herd. The herd, being anxious that the individual should act in its interests, has invented various devices for causing the individual's interest to be in harmony with that of the herd. One of these . . . is morality.

In such a scenario, it seems plausible to argue that rape—because of its enhancement of human survival and reproduction—could easily have developed into a good activity rather than a reprehensible one. (Male mallards, for instance, commit acts that look much like rape.) And ethnic or social-class cleansing, in which apparent "parasitic" or "unwanted" elements of human society could be eliminated, might also enable the human race to become hardier and thus better survive. But this obviously would render morality subjective and arbitrary. Similarly, I do not see how Martin's belief in intrinsic human dignity via supervenience is any more objective than a herd morality that develops due to socio-biological forces. It seems that both scenarios are on par. Martin's own version of atheistic moral realism does not evade the charge of arbitrariness based on the mindless, impersonal emergence of morality.

Third, in one sense, Martin's query is pointless. After all, we *must eventually arrive at some self-sufficient and self-explanatory stopping point beyond which the discussion can go no further*. Assume for a moment that God does not exist and that we have, instead, a Platonic form of the Good from which all values derive. At this point, it would appear silly to ask, "Why is the Good good?" It seems evident that Martin's argument is wrongly conceived. Rather, we have a metaphysical ultimate, and everything is good in approximation to this. This leads us to ask the question once more: *Why is atheism's basis for morality any less arbitrary a stopping-point than God's character?* Using Martin's own argument, can't we always push the atheistic moral realist back further, questioning even the sufficient stopping point for his morality? What makes the objective moral values that human beings have come to affirm right? To rephrase what I pointed out above: if these moral values exist (a) externally and independently of any human beings at all or (b) only in conjunction with the formation of human beings, then we can ask, "What makes *them* good?" Some stopping point will be necessary for both the theist and the atheist. So if the atheist charges the theist with *circularity*, the theist can turn the tables on the atheist. Since the atheist is not off the Euthyphronic hook (or horn!), the next step would be to examine moral justification in terms of which worldview provides a more fitting context for affirming the intrinsic dignity of human beings.

Fourth, Martin presupposes that even if God did not exist, he could still imagine a moral universe in which moral obligation, human dignity, and human rights and responsibility would still exist. But this is precisely the point of contention. In the first place, the question, *Why is there something (including human beings) rather than nothing at all?*, is the more fundamental one. Second, if this fundamental problem could be overcome, the atheist must be questioned on his assumption that human beings would be essentially the same if God did not exist. But the theist maintains that human beings would be radically different (if they were to exist at all)—more like *brutes*—and certainly without a moral constitution. The problem is still unresolved of how human beings became endowed with intrinsic value and rights and in the first place.

The theist has a plausible basis for this: human beings have value by virtue of their personhood, which is derived from the personhood of God—the ultimately valuable Being. Having been created in the image of God gives human beings their value. Their nature—with its moral, rational, and spiritual capacities—resemble God's. So to assume morality without God seems to miss the ontological implications of the question. That is, if there is no personal God to bestow personhood—and its attendant intrinsic dignity and moral responsibility, then we can't rightly say, "I can be a person with intrinsic dignity and moral responsibility even if God doesn't exist."

So for Martin to ask, "Why should I think God is good instead of an evil creator?", is a wrong-headed attempt to drive a wedge between God and his image-bearers. This is something Martin persists in doing, but to question the character of God is to question the moral capacities of human beings. Martin simply assumes that his moral faculties are intact and that he can make sound moral judgments. Yet this very capacity is a reflection of the *imago Dei*, which offers *prima facie* reasonable assurance that God's character is non-arbitrary. If Martin has a correct grasp of what is good, then this reflects that his moral faculties are functioning properly—as God

intended. If he *then* proceeds to ask about God's capacity to be evil, then Martin would then have to be skeptical about the proper functioning of *his own* moral faculties. Thus his objection becomes a moot one.

Fifth, Martin also presupposes that in order to avoid the arbitrariness horn of the revised Euthyphro dilemma, the theist must opt for some moral standard independent of God. Thus to do what is good, God would have to conform to that standard. In other words, God is *obligated* to "obey" or conform to that standard.

However, the appropriate response to this kind of claim is that God does not, say, keep promises because he *ought* to (which would imply some external moral standard). Rather, the theist claims that God *will* keep promises. It is impossible that he not act morally. What we have here is the Anselmian notion of God's "essential perfection." God is a *sui generis* being, whose *will* operates according to God's very *nature* .

This view, I believe, brings together the two horns of the Euthyphro dilemma. It states that, on the one hand, goodness is not **independent** of God but rather is part of God's nature and depends upon him for its existence. On the other hand, God's **will** operates according to a moral standard. That standard is *God's very nature* . The essential perfection view maintains that God is *necessarily good* ; he could never will evil, as this is a logical impossibility. This view avoids the arbitrariness charge, and it avoids the autonomy charge in that God does not consult a certain moral standard external to himself before acting. Moral justification ends with God, the absolute starting point for morality. So God's goodness does not derive from his adhering to a certain moral standard.

Because God is necessarily good and thus acts in conformity to his nature, the standards by which he acts are *descriptive of his own nature* rather than somehow *prescribed* to him. As philosophers have done, we can draw a distinction between *following a rule* and merely *acting in accordance with a rule* . Although empirically indistinguishable, they are logically distinct. It seems that if we speak in terms of "God ought to do X," then it appears that there is at least a metaphysical *possibility* that he not do X. But if God is essentially good, then no such moral obligations attach to God as they do to human beings. After all, it appears that when moral laws are in force (i.e., "one *ought* to do X"), there is the possibility that they will be disobeyed.

So God's goodness should not be viewed as his *fulfilling* moral obligations but as *expressing the way he is* . God does not "consult" ontologically independent moral principles before acting. No, *he simply acts as he is inclined to—which is in accordance with his good character, and this will necessarily be the best* . "No preliminary stage of checking the relevant principles is required." In this sense, God's goodness should be thought of along *axiological* rather than strictly *moral* lines.

Part of God's goodness does consist in his acting in perfect accord with those principles which would provide duties for a lesser being. This use of the model would be an explication not of God's moral goodness, but of his axiological goodness. When religious people claim that God is morally good, meaning that he acts in accord with moral principles, they are merely using that axiological conception with which they

are most familiar, moral goodness, to describe or model an aspect of divinity functionally isomorphic with, though ontologically different from, human goodness.

In other words, although, morally speaking, God acts in the same manner that humans *ought* to act (or as the ideal moral agent would act), his goodness is not a matter of fulfilling moral duties as it is for us. For instance, we speak of God's making a promise to Abraham to make his descendants as plentiful as the sands on the shore. Given this understanding of God's not being morally obligated to act—in this case, to keep a promise, we should more accurately describe God as *expressing his intention*, which is tantamount to a promise from our vantage point. William Alston writes,

Just as we can express intentions without obligating ourselves (provided we don't promise) so it is with God. The difference, of course, is that we can count on an expression of intention from God as we can on the promise from a human being, indeed can count on it much more, because of the utter stability and dependability of God's character and purposes.

Mark Linville states that "this is not merely an *ad hoc* construal of God's relation to moral duties as a result of trying to solve the problem of essential perfection and divine freedom. Rather, it follows naturally from the concept of an essentially perfect being." So contrary to Martin's claim, God is not obligated to some standard of goodness external to himself and thus does not consult it before acting; rather, he simply *does* what is in accordance with his nature.

Now Martin might, for the sake of argument, grant that God's nature is necessarily good. But this would not entail that God's character is the *standard* for human beings or that he is the *source* of objective morality. However, in light of the connection between human beings and God via the *imago Dei*, then we have good reason to suppose that there is indeed a necessary link between God's character and our moral constitution. Thus God would serve as both the standard and source of objective morality.

Sixth, another Anselmian point that follows from the preceding one is this: God by definition is a being worthy of worship. It is a necessary truth that he is the standard of goodness. If God were not absolutely good, then he would not be worthy of worship. The meaningful question to ask, then, is: Why should we regard God as the standard of goodness? Anselm's perfect-being theology maintains that God must be absolute goodness itself, the very embodiment of goodness. Thus he is worthy of worship. But if a being is not absolute goodness itself, then it would not be worthy of worship.

Getting back to Michael Martin, we had mentioned earlier Martin's tacit approval of the notion that certain moral truths are analytically true. However, it appears that some naturalists—relativists and nihilists, for instance—can easily imagine a world in which objective moral standards do not exist. Bertrand Russell was one such atheist who seemed to be quite consistent in this regard.

In sum, Martin's revised Euthyphro dilemma does not raise inescapable problems for the theist. This brings us to the matter of rape in the Bible.

III. The Bible and Rape

We come to the section, in which it becomes quite evident that Martin is not interested in doing serious study of the biblical text and its context. Although I could say much more, I'll let the arguments below speak for themselves.

Martin claims that in the Bible, "God seems to be tacitly approving of rape" in some places while in others "rape is condemned but without regard for the victim's welfare." The main example Martin gives is Deuteronomy 22:23-29. The text reads:

23 If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, 24 then you shall bring them both out to the gate, and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. 25 But if in the field the man finds the girl who is engaged, and the man forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lies with her shall die. 26 But you shall do nothing to the girl; there is no sin in the girl worthy of death, for just as a man rises against his neighbor and murders him, so is this case. 27 When he found her in the field, the engaged girl cried out, but there was no one to save her.

28 If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, 29 then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days (NASB).

Martin makes the following criticism concerning this passage:

Here [in vv. 28-29] the victim of rape is [treated as] the property of the father. Since the rapist has despoiled the father's property he must pay a bridal fee. The [girl] apparently has no say in the matter and is forced to marry the person who raped her. Notice also if they are not discovered, no negative judgment is forthcoming. The implicit message seems to be that if you rape an unbetrothed virgin, be sure not to get caught.

Before getting further into the discussion, we note that Martin displays a lack of exposure to the historical and social context in which the Bible was written. With regard to the Deuteronomy 22 passage, we should note three distinct scenarios:

#1: Consensual sex/adultery between a man and a betrothed girl: v. 23: "He lies with her"; this need not imply force or violence. This act is tantamount to adultery as engagement is tantamount to marriage ('he has violated his neighbor's wife').

#2: Rape of an engaged girl: v. 25: "[he] forces her [an engaged girl] and lies with her, then only the man who lies with her shall die."

#3: Rape of an unengaged/single girl: v. 28: "[he] seizes her [a girl who is single and not engaged] and lies with her and they are discovered": the word *seize* literally means "handle/take hold of." Although *rape* (as in the NIV) may be too strong a translation, according to Christopher Wright, this act does appear to be that of rape.

In response, then, to Martin's criticism, one must point out that only in a *legal* sense were children considered "property" of the father in Old Testament Israel. So, to violate a girl—even with her consent—would be an offense against her father/parents as well. This is not so foreign as Martin would make it appear. In the United States, it is not uncommon to hear of attempts at legislation which a parent should be notified before a young teenage girl can have an abortion. This is a reasonable demand—even though this teenager is not the property of her parents.

With regard to the claim that the girl has no say in the matter and must marry the man, Martin overlooks the cultural background to such a command. In the latter case (v. 28), the sexual encounter appears to be that of a man taking advantage of a "minor." Christopher Wright argues:

the girl would no longer attract a potential bridegroom and the exchange of gifts and dowry that went along with the marriage. It is for this loss that the man must compensate the father (29a). . . . [This law] gives the offender no option but to marry the girl (and the father no right to refuse), with no easy way out through a quick subsequent divorce. *The girl is thus assured of security and provision, in place of virtual widowhood if she had been abandoned after the loss of her virginity .*

In addition, the law offers a further protection to both the girl and the (possible) child born from this union.

Martin misses the point and engages in an argument from silence when he says, "Notice also if they are not discovered, no negative judgment is forthcoming. The implicit message seems to be that if you rape an unbetrothed virgin, be sure not to get caught." First of all, in the case of casuistic law in the Pentateuch, not *all* contingencies are accounted for. Thus it is commonly understood among Old Testament scholars that the Israelite laws are *exemplary* rather than *exhaustive* . So there is no reason to think that *all* conditions should be spelled out. Furthermore, common sense tells us that not much can be done if there is no evidence to act on! We could rephrase what Martin says and apply it to the crime of a well-planned murder: "Notice also if a murder is not discovered, no negative judgment is forthcoming. The implicit message seems to be that if you murder someone, be sure not to get caught." But this is so obvious that Martin's point seems silly. Thirdly, the mention of the word *discovered* in the biblical text (v. 28) is significant. It implies that if a man's taking sexual advantage of an unengaged single girl becomes *public knowledge* , then the girl would certainly not be viewed as a prospective candidate for marriage within her society.

Let us continue with Martin's argument:

In the case of the rape of a betrothed virgin in a city, the Bible says that both the rapist and the victim should be stoned to death: the rapist because he violated his

neighbor's wife and the victim because she did not cry for help [vv. 25-27]. Again, the assumption is that the rapist despoiled the property of another man and so must pay with his life. Concern for the welfare of the victim does not seem to matter. Moreover, it is assumed that in all cases that a rape victim could cry for help and if she did, she would be heard and rescued. Both of these assumptions are very dubious. . . .

On the other hand, according to the Bible, the situation is completely different if the rape occurs in "open country." Here the rapist should be killed, not the victim. The reason given is that if a woman cried for help in open country, she would not be heard. Consequently, she could not be blamed for allowing the rape to occur. No mention is made about the psychological harm to [the victim]. No condemnation is made of a rapist in open country, let alone in a city, who does not get caught.

We must clarify this notion of *property* in the first of the two paragraphs just cited. In verse 22, the penalty for adultery (to which a betrothed could be subject) is *death* (Dt. 22:22; Lev. 20:10). This fact argues against the assumption that women were nothing more than the property of their husbands in Old Testament Israel. After all, why destroy the "property" as well as punish the guilty man? Moreover, there is no other property offense in Old Testament law that is punishable by death. Thus Martin is simply wrong when he says "the [dubious] assumption is that the rapist despoiled the property of another man." Again, contrary to Martin's claim that concern "for the welfare of the victim does not seem to matter," we have seen how the law provided security and material provision for young women who were sexually violated.

The other "dubious" assumption Martin mentions is similarly flawed: "it is assumed that in all cases that a rape victim could cry for help and if she did, she would be heard and rescued." Again, Wright addresses this issue, urging us to consider both *intention, circumstances and action* :

. . . the circumstances in which [sexual intercourse] occurs affect the assumptions the court might make regarding *intention* and thus also affect its allocation of guilt and punishment. The contrast between a busy town and a deserted countryside makes an obvious difference to what could be assumed regarding the woman's consent. The difference is also expressed in the vocabulary [i.e., *consent* in v. 23 vs. *rape* in v. 25] *In the latter case, the court should accept what could only be the woman's own testimony in the matter and assume her innocence* .

Regarding the *first* instance mentioned in our Deuteronomy 22 passage (i.e., adultery between an engaged girl and another man), there is a certain legitimate assumption: Although rape could take place in the city, this particular case is not one of rape because if the woman *had* cried for help, then help most certainly would have come. But because she did not call for help, it can be assumed that she consented to the man's advances. But *pace* Martin, this Deuteronomy 22 passage is *not* assuming that in all cases the rape victim would be heard if she cried out, as Wright states. Thus given a few important facts about the biblical text and the cultural context, Martin's arguments lose their force.

There is another passage Martin mentions, to which we now turn—Numbers 31:18, where, Martin alleges, "Moses encourages his men to use captured virgins for their own sexual pleasure, i.e., to rape them" (5). At first sight, the passage does seem quite harsh: "Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man" (NIV). However, the context for this command—as in various other OT commands of this nature—should not be overlooked. In light of the rampant adultery at Baal Peor and its potentially corrupting influence, this command is put in perspective. It is these young girls who have not debased themselves in the orgiastic worship of Baal (Num. 25).

Furthermore, Martin's assumption that *rape* is presupposed here is mistaken. A similar passage in Deuteronomy 20:13-14 is worth noting:

When the Lord your God gives it [i.e., the city which has rejected Israel's terms of peace] into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself.

John Sailhamer comments: "The present law ensures the well-being of those captured women [and children] by giving them protection against being sold into slavery. It also provides for the assimilation of the captive women into Israelite society by allowing marriage to them." Thus it was permissible in such instances to, not *rape*, but *take a wife*, who would be incorporated into the people of Israel through marriage. It seems far *less likely* that men could be as readily integrated into early Israel.

Martin again fails to make his case regarding the biblical perspective on rape. In a number of ways, then, the psychological well-being of the raped girl is taken into account: (a) she is provided for rather than abandoned to virtual widowhood because she has been sexually violated; (b) easy divorce by the man is not possible; (c) a potential child from this union has the security of a two-parent family. Also, by failing to account for many of the cultural dimensions of Old Testament Israelite culture, the force of Martin's point is vitiated.

Conclusion

Michael Martin's use of philosophical argument and the biblical text is insufficient to make his case. First, he has not established—from an ontological point of view—the objectivity of naturalistic morality; he has only dealt with the *epistemological* dimension. We also saw that theism rather than atheism furnishes a more fitting context for moral values, which themselves presuppose human dignity, purpose, rights, and the like. Second, Martin's raising the Euthyphro dilemma seems purposeless since his atheistic position is vulnerable to just such a dilemma. Furthermore, Anselm's perfect-being theology offers a sufficient way out of the Euthyphro dilemma. In this scenario, we see a God who acts morally *naturally* and *without* consulting any exterior moral standards (i.e., without obligation). Finally, Martin's argument against the Bible's view on rape fails to make any case for the atheistic position.

So can Martin be a moral realist? Yes , with regard to the order of knowing; no , with regard to the order of being.

1. Taken from Bill Watterson, *The Authoritative Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury* (New York: Universal Press Syndicate, 1990), 105.
2. Michael Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 1. Taken from the Internet Infidels website, dated 23 July 1997. (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/rape.html). .
3. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 204. .
4. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 1. .
5. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 175-9. .
6. C. Stephen Evans offers a concise response to Swinburne's argument. First, moral relativists and nihilists appear to easily imagine a world without objective moral principles. Furthermore, even if Swinburne is correct, there is still the concern which Freud and Nietzsche raised, that morality is the result of human projections and is thus illusory. Second, even if Swinburne is correct that basic moral principles are necessary truths, it does not necessarily follow that they are analytic. For example, "water is H₂O" is a necessary truth, but is certainly not analytic. As Saul Kripke argued, there is a metaphysical necessity which, in this case, is discovered a posteriori.. Thirdly, and more to the point, "the fact that water is necessarily H₂O by no means rules out the need for an explanation for the existence or structure of water" (367). C. Stephen Evans, "Moral Arguments" in ed. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, *Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 346-7. A number of my points against Martin below also respond indirectly to Swinburne's claims as well. .
7. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 1. .
8. *Ibid.* .
9. Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 213-4. .
10. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 2-3. .
11. See J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 36-42. .
12. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 2. .
13. Martin's point would apply to either reason internalism or motivational internalism. .
14. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 3. .
15. Martin points to David O. Brink's *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Martin also refers to Brink's essay "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984): 111-25, to which I refer below. Martin's endorsement of Brink's naturalistic moral realism assumes a supervenience of moral properties on physical ones (119)—a variation of property dualism. Thus moral realism can be "true even if there are no reductive definitions of moral terms" (120n). (Robin Le Poidevin also takes this view in *Arguing for Atheism* [London: Routledge, 1996], 79-82.) a. However, this view rests on dubious assumptions. Brink engages in question-begging when he asserts, "Assuming materialism is true, mental states supervene on physical states, yet few think that mental states are

metaphysically queer” (120). Placing the mental in the area of philosophy of mind (which is dominated by naturalists and materialists) is precisely the defining task. John Searle points out that mental phenomena are radically different from physical entities in that they have a special feature not possessed by other natural phenomena, namely, subjectivity” (John Searle, *Rediscovery of the Mind* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992], 93). So for Brink to speak as though accounting for the mental in physicalistic terms is uncontentious is a massive error. The problem of “oddity”—whether properties be moral or mental in a physicalist worldview—still remains. We can go on to assert that mental states—and, we could add, moral properties—are so different from other entities that it is hard to see how they could emerge from physical states. It will not do for the atheist to claim to be able to imagine one entity’s emerging from another. D. M. Armstrong acknowledges the fact that the mental and physical are so radically different that the former could not have emerged from or supervened on the latter; for consistency’s sake, he adopts a strict physicalism as the only alternative (cf. “Naturalism: Materialism and First Philosophy,” *Philosophia* 8 [1978]). On the other hand, mental states (and, by extension, moral states) are quite natural in a theistic worldview, and they provide evidence for theism over against naturalism. See J.P. Moreland, “Searle’s Biological Naturalism and the Argument from Consciousness,” *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (January 1998): 68-91. .

16. Martin, “Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape,” 3. .

17. Michael Martin in “Frame’s Third Response to Martin,” (1996) (www.reformed.org/apologetics/martin/frame3html), 3. .

18. *The Big Domino in the Sky* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1996). .

19. *Ibid.*, 66. .

20. *Ibid.*, 65. .

21. *Ibid.*, 66. .

22. Martin, *Atheism*, 214. .

23. Taken from Martin’s essay, “Comments on the Craig-Flew Debate,” in a forthcoming book (under review at Oxford University Press) edited by Stan Wallace, 8.

24. Martin makes this point in a debate with Dr. Phil Fernandes, “The Fernandes-Martin Debate,” 1 (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/fernandes-martin/martin1.html). Here Martin points to various nontheistic thinkers like Richard Boyd, Peter Railton, and David Brink in this debate. Regarding these sources, he asserts: “to my knowledge, these attempts have not been refuted” (“Comments on the Craig-Flew Debate,” 8). Elsewhere, he points to the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill as a substantive example of a credible nontheistic ethic (*The Big Domino in the Sky*, 68). .

25. Space does not permit my addressing each of the sources Martin cites in support of his claim that moral realism can have a non-theistic grounding. (I do mention David Brink’s approach intermittently in this first section.) But I can say that each of these thinkers Martin references fails to offer any substantive metaphysics or ontology of personhood from a naturalistic vantage point to adequately account for the intrinsic value of human beings—a necessary starting point for moral realism. But let me offer a brief response to one of Martin’s references—Roderick Firth’s essay, “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952): 317-45. Ironically, Firth was not an atheist or a non-theist at all. Rather, he was a Quaker and thus sympathetic to things theistic. (This was recounted to me in e-mail correspondence [24 May 1999] with Charles Taliaferro, who had been a student of Firth’s at Brown University.) Oddly, Martin claims that the ideal observer

“does not have all the properties of God.” For example, the ideal observer is “not all-powerful” (Martin, *The Big Domino in the Sky*, 69). But Martin seems to be fudging here. To avoid being misleading, Martin should have said: “The ideal observer is not necessarily all-powerful,” implying that this attribute could, admittedly, be ascribed without contradiction to an ideal observer.” Even Firth himself maintains that “an ideal observer will be a partial description of God, if God is conceived to be an infallible moral judge” (“Ethical Absolutism,” 333). In Charles Taliaferro’s words, the ideal observer theory seems to “mirror closely” the concept of God within the theistic religious tradition (*Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* [Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998], 210). Again, this theory, while compatible with atheistic moral realism at the epistemological level, fails to substantiate the requisite metaphysic of personhood and its intrinsic dignity or value. Such a metaphysic is necessary for any objectivistic ethic to get off the ground. .

26. See Martin’s suggestions in note 1 in Part III of “The Fernandes-Martin Debate,” (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/fernandes-martin/martin3.html), 6. .

27. Michael Martin, *Atheism*, 23. .

28. Keith Yandell, *Christianity and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 266. Yandell continues: “. . . and things other than persons come into it only as they affect persons. (If sentient animals constitute some exception to this, it is by virtue of their resemblance to persons.)” .

29. Concerning Neoplatonism, we could respond thus: (1) How could these abstract moral principles produce a world with moral human beings in the first place? They are purely “passive” or formal entities, without the powers of efficient causality. (2) Even if such principles exist, why think they have anything to do with human beings at all? (3) If they apply to human beings, why don’t they apply to lesser life forms? Rather, these principles seem to anticipate the evolution of human beings, which appears quite odd.

30. Brink, “Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness,” 120. Brink offers a more detailed argument in his *Moral Realism and the Foundation for Ethics*, 156-67. .

31. “Consciousness” in Samuel Guttenplan, ed., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 211. .

32. Martin offers a Humean argument as an alternative explanation for ethics by appealing to polytheism. In his *Atheism*, he writes: “Finally, even if the objective moral facts would call for some supernatural explanation, it would not entail theism. Alternate explanations are possible, including polytheism” (214). Again, “. . . even if all naturalistic explanations fail, there are alternative supernatural explanations to theism, the most obvious of which is that the phenomena of conscience could equally well be explained by postulating a number of gods” (215). But, given Ockham’s razor, there is no reason to posit polytheism when monotheism will suffice.

Furthermore, the fact that a supernaturalistic basis for morality exists—whether it be monotheism or polytheism—would still undermine Martin’s position. It entails the denial of naturalism. .

33. Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, 370. .

34. Ran Shalom, “An Interview with Prof. Michael Martin,” 8. .

35. What is it that gives our lives purpose? In one place, Martin claims: “We can give our lives purpose by how we conduct them, and what we do, how we treat each other” (*Ibid.*). At least in this instance, Martin appears to be saying that dignity is not something inherent in persons, but is created through what they do. Now if Martin

intends to distinguish between meaning (which we can give to our lives) and purpose (which we already have inherently but with which we must align ourselves in order to live meaningful lives), this is fine. But he is merely postponing the deeper contextual questions noted below. .

But to say that somehow humans give themselves meaning through their actions is clearly arbitrary. This view essentially takes humans to be saying nothing more than this: "Let's pretend life has purpose. Let's invent purpose. Let's come up with some conventions according to which we can live our lives." If this is Martin's understanding, then meaning in life is merely arbitrary. One could give one's life meaning by becoming the best torturer or the best child-molester. Thus, on this reading, Martin's own position falls prey to the charge of arbitrariness. However, I assume Martin misspoke at this point. .

36. Michael Martin, "Atheism and Humanistic Value Theory" (1996):

www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/values.html, 2. .

37. Brink, "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments," 118-119. This option.

38. *The Big Domino in the Sky*, 43. .

39. Despite their best attempts, atheistic efforts by Corliss Lamont (*The Philosophy of Humanism* (New York: Continuum, 1990)) and, more recently, Paul Kurtz (*Exuberance: A Philosophy of Happiness* [Buffalo: Prometheus, 1999]) fail to set forth any tenable ontic grounding for affirming the intrinsic dignity of human beings. The atheist may respond: Don't theists within the Judeo-Christian tradition themselves maintain that human beings are "inherently evil"? How can they speak of humans as intrinsically good? For instance, Corliss Lamont, whose badly-argued book, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, asserts that one of the "great errors of Christian ethics" is that "man is inherently sinful and depraved" (New York: Continuum, 1990), 244). However, Biblical doctrine affirms that human beings have been made in the image of God; human nature is good because it is God's creation (cp. Psalm 8:4-6: 139:13-18; Matthew 10:31). Our rationality, personality, capacity for attaining moral goods, and the like are to be affirmed as good. Though, according to traditional Christian doctrine, sin has affected human beings, this does not render human beings "inherently sinful"—as though this is an essential quality to human nature. Rather, human nature as God created it is good, but the entrance of sin into the world has adversely affected this nature. But the divine image still remains and serves the basis for treating fellow human beings with respect (e.g., James 3:9 speaks of not cursing others, "who have been made in the likeness of God"). .

40. Brink argues: "Moral properties [like mental states] are not ontologically simple or independent" ("Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments," 120). .

41. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 1. .

42. "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435. .

43. John Searle, "The Mystery of Consciousness: Part II," *New York Review of Books* (16 Nov. 1995), 61. .

44. Freeman Dyson, "Energy in the Universe," *Scientific American* 225 (Sept. 1971), 25. .

45. See R. Douglas Geivett, "A Neglected Aspect of the Problem of Evil." Paper presented at the Evangelical Philosophical Society meeting (Orlando, Fla.), 19 November 1998. .

46. William C. Davis, "Theistic Arguments," in ed. Michael J. Murray, *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1999), 36. .

47. As noted earlier, Martin gives endorsement to David O. Brink's *Moral Realism and*

the *Foundation of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and his essay "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984): 111-25, which take this view. .

48. A persuasive case for the queerness of morality in an atheistic universe is George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Curiously, Brink's book *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, which discusses at length the issue of "queerness," overlooks this important essay. .

49. Alvin Plantinga, "Natural Theology," in ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa, *Companion to Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 347. .

50. Plato, *Euthyphro* 10a. .

51. These terms are taken from Mark D. Linville, "On Goodness: Human and Divine," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (April 1990): 143-52. .

52. This is not to deny that divine commands do have a proper place in certain instances—perhaps for clarifying moral requirements which are not apparent through natural revelation. .

53. Quinn writes: "Theists of all stripes will insist that God is perfectly just" (*Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978], 136). Robert Merrihew Adams asserts: It matters what God's attributes are. God is supremely knowledgeable and wise—he is omniscient, after all; and that is very important motivationally. It makes a difference if you think of commands as coming from someone who completely understands both us and our situation. It matters not only that God is loving but also that he is just ("Divine Commands and Obligation," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 [July 1988]: 272). H.P. Owen writes: "divine commandments merit our obedience because God's will is inseparable from His goodness" ("Response to Flew and Kurtz," *Truth* 4 [1991]: 40). .

54. Alasdair MacIntyre (with Paul Ricoeur), *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 34. .

55. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 4. .

56. H.O. Mounce has little patience for secularists who use the Euthyphro dilemma to establish the autonomy of morality. They end up presenting two alternative claims, both of which are "incoherent." On the one hand, the claim that God could will honesty today and dishonesty tomorrow "makes no kind of sense," as God is being treated "as though he were an exceptionally unstable human being." But since God is the Ultimate Reality, to assume that he could just as easily will dishonesty as honesty is to assume that he is in conflict with himself. On the other hand, to suppose that God wills honesty because it is good fails as well since "God cannot hold anything good unless he already values it. But then his valuing cannot depend on its being good" ("Morality and Religion," in Brian Davies, ed., *Philosophy of Religion* [Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1998] 278). 57. In ed. John Hick, *The Existence of God* (New York: Collier), 175. .

58. Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), 124. .

59. William Alston asks this question in "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," in ed. Michael D. Beaty, *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). .

60. William Lane Craig, "Design and the Cosmological Argument," in ed. William

Dembski, *Mere Creation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998). Martin takes seriously the view that something could come out of nothing, that whatever begins to exist need not have a cause. But this is problematic, as literal nothingness possesses no potentiality whatsoever. .

61. This rebuts the contention made by atheist Robin Le Poidevin: "The problem is this: we can, apparently, only make sense of these doctrines [that God is good and wills us to do what is good] if we think of goodness as being defined independently of God" (*Arguing for Atheism*, 85). Le Poidevin hasn't shown that the *imago Dei* explanation has failed. If God is the very source of our moral constitution, then there is no need to look beyond God as a source for goodness. That is, between God and his image bearers, there exists the necessary relation to render an independent standard superfluous. .

62. Some have suggested that there are problems with this view the notion of a necessarily good God. For instance, Nelson Pike declares that "God could not be perfectly good if He does not have the ability to sin. If an individual does not have the creative-power necessary to bring about evil states of affairs, he cannot be praised (morally) for failing to bring them about." (Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," in ed. Baruch Brody, *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974], 362; see also Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* [New York: Fordham University Press, 1982], ch. 7; Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 94). Moreover, Pike, Reichenbach, and Davis do appear to have a point in that a person who fulfills his duties or obligations—whether God or not—should not be praised simply for carrying out an obligation. We don't praise people for not beating their children, for not burning down another's house, or for not cheating on their income tax returns. As Thomas Morris rightly claims, "praise is never strictly appropriate for duty satisfactions." Rather, we rightly praise God—as we do any person—for moral acts of supererogation. So when God keeps his promise or declares what is true, God ought not be praised for this, strictly speaking. Why then should God be praised? On the Judeo-Christian understanding of God and his activity, it becomes quite apparent that God's condescension and grace—undeserved kindness—offer justifiable reasons to praise him. For instance, God, in order to be free, was not obligated to create at all. Nor was God, having willed to create, obliged to make the best possible world—only a good one, but not a less-than-good one. God is also not obligated to communicate with and enter into covenant relations with his creatures. He is not morally compelled to forgive human transgression or to give second chances to those who have defied his authority. Such actions are not the fulfillment of duty but acts of supererogation (cf. Thomas V. Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," in *Anselmian Explorations* [Notre Dame: University Press, 1987], 35, 38). .

63. See Mark D. Linville, "The Euthyphro Dilemma," Thesis from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, IL, 1996), which I utilize quite significantly in this section. .

64. William Alston, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," 315. .

65. *Ibid.*, 320. .

66. Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," 40-41. .

67. See Mark Linville, "Euthyphro and His Kin," in ed. William Lane Craig and Mark McLeod, *The Logic of Rational Theism* FS Stuart C. Hackett (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 203. .

68. William Alston, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," 316. God's goodness is a matter of *de re* necessity; consequently, there is no possible

Ockhamistic world in which God's moral demands would be different from those of the actual world. God's nature, not merely God's will, assures us that God's "white" is not our "black." God's own nature is the ultimate moral criterion (Linville, "Euthyphro and His Kin," 205-6).

69. Linville, "The Euthyphro Dilemma," 144.

70. The question may be raised: How would we even recognize that the theistic God is to be worshiped? That is, how do we recognize God as having an unqualified claim on our obedience? Obviously, God has made human beings with a certain freedom or moral autonomy to reject the worship of God. But if God is the source of perfect goodness and we, who have been made in his image, recognize our own falling short of that standard of one who is morally perfect Being, we can recognize that this standard of moral perfection would demand our obedience only in keeping with what would be best for us rather than deleterious to us.

71. C. Stephen Evans, "Moral Arguments," 367.

72. It seems that Bertrand Russell's conclusions, assuming an ultimately purposeless universe, follow inevitably: "That man is the product of causes that had no prevision of the end they were achieving. That his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves, his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. That no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. That all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspirations, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievements must be inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation, henceforth, be safely built" (Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays [London: Allen & Unwin, 1963], 41).

73. I am not here assuming that everything within the Old Testament or the Mosaic Law is binding upon Christians. Nor do I assume that all Old Testament protocol regarding treatment for rapists or rape victims is to be legalized in our day. Atheists typically fail to recognize the unique salvation-historical nature of God's covenant with Israel and Israel's herself to God. Thus numerous Mosaic regulations which were binding upon Israelite society are not binding upon Christians, who do not fall under the purview of that distinctive covenant.

74. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 5.

75. Ibid.

76. A few resources that address Old Testament ethics in such a context are Christopher J.H. Wright's *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle, U.K.: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1990), from which I heavily borrow; idem, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); idem, *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998).

77. Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy NIBC* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 244-45.

78. Ibid., 244-45.

79. Ibid., 245 (my emphasis).

80. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy NICOT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 295. Craigie points out that the crime committed in the case of the single girl is less severe than adultery because this crime does not involve a breach in a relationship. .
81. Martin, "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape," 5. .
82. See C. J. H. Wright, *God's People*, 200-208. "It is therefore quite mistaken to describe adultery as a violation of property rights" (205). .
83. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 244 (my emphasis). .
84. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 295. .
85. Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 966. .
86. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 459. .
87. Derek Kidner, "Old Testament Perspectives on War," *Evangelical Quarterly* 57 (April 1985): 109. .
88. I am grateful to Doug Geivett, Charles Taliaferro, Stephen Davis, and Ron Tacelli for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.