

Morality and Meaning Without God: Another Failed Attempt

A Review Essay on *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*

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Utilizing new material and old, Michael Martin (professor emeritus at Boston University) has written a stimulating four-part book, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*.¹ Martin covers a good deal of territory to make his case for an objective ethic rooted in naturalism and to undercut the theistic/religious basis for objective morality.

In the first part of this essay, I set forth the salient features of Martin's book, and in the second part I offer a response.

I. Presenting Martin's Case

Part I seeks to develop and defend a nonreligious foundation of morality. After a brief introduction (chapter 1), Martin tackles objections to morality without religion (chapter 2). He looks at arguments from *motivation*, *derivation*, *materialism* and *naturalism*. In the first instance, he claims that atheists do have sufficient motivation for being moral or having high moral standards. (To buttress his point, he asks: If the US is so much more religious than Western Europe, why does the US have a higher crime rate?) The argument from derivation is that "theists might argue that objective morality can only be derived from belief in God" (34). In his argument from materialism and naturalism, he rejects that atheists are committed to materialism (he favors a supervenience model of moral properties: "morally wrong" is constituted by physical properties but is not reduced to them [42]): "Religious apologists give no well-articulated argument to support their view that materialism is incompatible with objective morality" (42).

Chapter 3 sets forth an Ideal Observer Theory (IOT), as (roughly) articulated by Roderick Firth. Ethical expressions such as "morally obligated" and "morally forbidden" can be meaningfully understood without reference to "theological terms" but rather to a fully informed, impartial observer with ideal properties (omnipercipience, dispassionateness, consistency, etc.).

In chapter 4, Martin espouses an ethical "decision procedure," which has been called—in a variety of contexts—"Wide Reflective Equilibrium" (WRE). This method is not just compatible with the IOT, but also stands in close relation to and is an explication of it, resulting in a coherentist view of ethical justification. In chapter 5, Martin defends WRE and IOT against various objections.

Part 2 critiques the theistic foundations of morality (and Christianity in particular). In his introduction to Christian ethics (chapter 6), Martin presents objections to theism to undercut the basis for Christian ethics. Then he discusses the divine command theory (the "extreme" and "modified" versions) in chapters 7 and 8. In the latter, Martin devotes significant space to the "essential moral attribute" response—that God cannot command rape or infant-torture because it conflicts with His moral nature. But, Martin asks, why think this nature is good? Also, we can assert without contradiction that (a) there are moral facts and (b) God doesn't exist: "if it were true that morality is dependent on God it would follow that if God did not exist, then the basic belief that

¹(Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press, 2002).

the gratuitous torture of babies is morally wrong would be mistaken” (143). Martin appeals to non-theists Richard Boyd, Peter Railton, and David Brink, whose arguments for moral realism with non-religious foundations “have not to my knowledge been refuted” (143).

In Chapters 9 (“Christian Ethics and the Imitation of Christ”) and 10 (“Christian Theism and Moral Skepticism”), Martin wonders why early Christian writers like Paul didn’t invoke Jesus’ views and ethical example. Jesus uses “insulting names” for certain persons. Jesus doesn’t address issues such as homosexuality, slavery, contraception, etc. And Jesus cannot be a moral example given His preaching about hell, cursing fig trees, or allowing demons to enter pigs that do a swine dive over a cliff. Martin questions any morality reinforced by rewards and punishments. Furthermore, Christian theism results in various types of moral skepticism rather than offering moral clarity.

Part 3 defends the possibility of life’s meaning without God. Martin believes that life can have meaning (“Positive Purpose Meaning”) even if God does not exist. Health care professionals, librarians, or composers can contribute to human well-being—even if there is no cosmic purpose. Martin challenges Richard Taylor’s conclusions regarding the meaning of life. He clarifies the claim that life “without religious belief” is absurd or without meaning or value (224). He then tackles the (existentialist) suggestion that “nothing matters” if there is no God, analyzing R.M. Hare’s and Quentin Smith’s approaches. Martin claims that life can be meaningful without immortality or cosmic purpose.

Part 4 seeks to show that “there are difficult problems in establishing the meaningfulness of the religious life in general and the Christian life in particular” (16). Martin focuses on Christian claims regarding the teleological fulfillment of human life through divine calling/vocation, redemption, or completion (believers receiving in the afterlife what could not be fully achieved in this life). In this section, Martin examines theories of the *atonement* (ch. 16), concluding that none of them successfully (non-arbitrarily) shows why Jesus died for sinners. Martin claims there are four purported (and conflicting) means of *salvation* in the New Testament (ch. 17): following a strict ethical code; making great sacrifices in following Jesus; having faith in Jesus; following Jewish laws (before Christ came). Finally, Martin looks at the meaning of life in relation to Jesus’ *resurrection* (ch. 18), which he considers initially implausible and lacking sufficient evidence.

II. Getting on Martin’s Case

In response, I shall merely highlight key issues as well as symptoms of Martin’s flawed methodology. Martin’s *chief* problem in defending naturalistic moral realism is that it is *long on epistemology and short on ontology*. While devoting much space to *recognizing* objective moral values (e.g., IOT, WRE) or life’s meaningfulness, Martin fails to present an adequate *metaphysical basis* for thinking a naturalistic context of non-conscious, valueless, impersonal, materialistic processes could produce conscious, valuable/moral, personal, rights-bearing beings (value from valuelessness). Martin believes that the finite, finely-tuned, life-producing, consciousness-producing, and value-producing universe ultimately came from nothing. Of course, the chances of something’s coming from nothing naturalistically are exactly zero. Theism, by contrast, furnishes just such a more plausible and necessary context—being made in the image of a self-aware, supremely valuable, personal Creator (value from value).

Yes, “moral atheists” exist and, because they are made in God’s image, can still enjoy significant meaning in life without *believing* in God (224), which is far different from God as the *basis* for human dignity and worth and Pattern-setter for a meaningful existence—whether one believes in God or not. Yet Martin glosses over the profound influence Christianity has had on Western civilization, from which he himself benefits. This civilizational impact has been admirably

documented in Alvin Schmidt's *How Christianity Changed the World*.² As John Rist argues, naturalistic moral realism—with all its talk of “rights” and “freedom”—appears to be the “ethical hangover from a more homogeneous Christian past.”³

Contra Martin's “empirical” claims that belief in God makes no moral difference in society, agnostic political scientist Guenther Lewy of U-Mass (Amherst) offers more extensive, nuanced empirical evidence supportive of theistic belief's positive social and moral impact. In *Why America Needs Religion*, Lewy observes:

adherents of [a naturalistic] ethic are not likely to produce a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa. Many of these people love humanity but not individual human beings with all their failings and shortcomings. They will be found participating in demonstrations for causes such as nuclear disarmament but not sitting at the bedside of a dying person. An ethic of moral autonomy and individual rights, so important to secular liberals, is incapable of sustaining and nourishing values such as altruism and self-sacrifice.⁴

(A brief glance at some of the titles and topics at the naturalist-oriented Prometheus Books' website illustrates Lewy's point.)⁵

Furthermore, the issue—important as it is—is less moral *motivation* (since atheist and theist alike possess the divine image) than which worldview affords the *metaphysical resources most consistent with* valuable, rights-bearing humans and virtuous, sacrificial living?

Martin's approach to ethics/duties—and his attendant criticism of Christian ethics—fails to consider the power of robustly virtue-sustaining Jewish-Christian *narrative* of God's involvement in redemptive history that has inspired Christian communities to selfless, death-defying sacrifice throughout the ages. Having created humans (though damaged by sin) in His image, God desires to reconcile them to Himself through Christ's remarkable ministry, self-giving death and resurrection, which will lead to a final restoration in a new heavens and a new earth. God's greatness is revealed by how utterly low He is willing to go for the salvation of humans. The God of such a grand story—more than mere ethical principles—is capable of inspiring and sustaining significant involvement in a wide array of redemptive/caring vocations and heroic actions.

(Consider ministries such as Prison Fellowship, whose recidivism rates are dramatically lower than their secular counterparts.)⁶ Lewy writes:

[there] exists no secular counterpart to the Order of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa The Christian injunction to care for those in need, reinforced by the inspiration and fellowship that are provided by the church as an ongoing community, has produced results no secular ethic has been able to match.⁷

Martin claims the naturalistic moral realists' arguments he cites have not, to his knowledge, been refuted. Rist offers another perspective. Referring to some ethicists Martin likes to cite (cf. 154-5 in Martin)—Darwall, Gibbard, Railton—Rist observes that their alleged “*fin de siècle*” assessment of the moral debate in favor of naturalistic alternatives shows “no

² Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

³ John Rist, *Real Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

⁴ Guenter Lewy, *Why America Needs Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 137.

⁵ <http://www.prometheusbooks.com/>.

⁶ See Daniel Van Ness, *Restoring Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: Anderson, 1997); Charles Colson and Daniel Van Ness, *Convicted: New Hope for Ending America's Crime Crisis* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989); Daniel Van Ness, *Crime and Its Victims: What Can We Do?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

⁷ Lewy, *Why America Needs Religion*, 137.

acquaintance with anything contemporary not written in English.” They assume that all worthy moral debate can be abstracted from time and place. Further, they make no reference to theistic moral theory or natural law theory, nor do they mention Nietzsche—which thickens the “air of unreality which the historical parochialism of their article insistently exhales.”⁸ Furthermore, Frank Kirkpatrick rightly observes that many secular ethicists rely on “outdated and inadequate views of God.”⁹

Apart from this major theme, Martin’s book presents a number of dubious claims throughout. Let me mention a sampling. Although “science” is regarded by the typical naturalist as authoritative, Martin’s naturalism moves him in a rather *unscientific* direction, claiming the universe emerged uncaused from *nothing* (115). But how could it, since no *potentiality* exists for something to emerge? Science clearly supports the metaphysical intuition that something cannot come from nothing—a nice fit with theism. As atheist Kai Nielsen suggests: if there’s a bang and someone wants to know what caused it, to reply that “it just happened” would be unacceptable; in fact, it would be “quite unintelligible.”¹⁰ Indeed.

Oddly, Martin claims that there is “no a priori reason why objective moral values could not be constituted by matter” (45). But one will search in vain for any physics textbook describing moral value as one of matter’s properties! Perhaps one should not be surprised that Martin believes moral values *could* emerge from valueless matter. After all, Martin believes that the finite, finely-tuned, life-producing, consciousness-producing, and value-producing universe could emerge from literally nothing.

In addition, Martin wonders why, if designed, human life in the universe is “so rare” and “arrived so late” (115); Martin similarly wonders why the Incarnation and death of Jesus took so long to happen (259). But God is not slow, as Martin counts slowness. While being “time-efficient” may be an essential property of Germans, it is not necessarily a divine one. Time-efficiency makes sense if one is—like the Egyptian mummy—pressed for time. But, Scripture suggests, God is under no compulsion to move according human timetables. And Jesus’ death “in the fullness of time” is sufficient to redeem and save those living prior to the Incarnation who trusted in God and cast themselves upon His mercy (Romans 3:26).

Also, Martin asserts that Paul probably did not believe in the virgin birth “since he does not mention this” (279) is quite the argument from silence. Maybe Paul took this tradition for granted and did not think it needed articulation.¹¹

Martin misrepresents my own view as being that “God has an essential moral nature that limits the power of his will” (142), that God is “restrained” by His nature. Instead of viewing God’s nature and will as being harmoniously interrelated, Martin’s misconstrual pits one against the other. I suggest that God simply acts—without following some externally-prescribed rule—and it is good.

By claiming that (a) moral facts and (b) God’s non-existence are compossible (143), Martin simply helps himself to theistically-rooted assumptions that humans have (divinely-bestowed) dignity and worth. The Martin continues to miss it, the far more basic question is, Are intrinsically-valuable, rights-bearing, morally responsible human beings and God’s non-existence compossible? Indeed not. There is a necessary metaphysical connection between them. Increasingly, naturalists across the disciplines, in the name of consistency, are biting the bullet by denying intrinsic human

⁸ Rist, *Real Ethics*, 141-2.

⁹ Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *A Moral Ontology for a Theistic Ethic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), xi.

¹⁰ Kai Nielsen, *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper, 1971), 48.

¹¹ But see Gal. 4:4, which hints at this.

dignity and objective moral values—further reinforcement of naturalism’s lack of moral foundations. While atheists rightly affirm that “murder is wrong,” this presupposes human rights and dignity—something entailed by the divine image rather than naturalism. Moral properties would simply not be instantiated if a good personal God (who created beings in His image) did not exist. No valuable beings would be around to act morally. (*Mutatis mutandis*, a parallel argument could be made regarding the meaning of life without God.)

Do objective moral values exist independently of human beings (a priori)? If so, it is a huge, cosmic coincidence that these values somehow “anticipated” our eventual arrival on the scene and *happen* to correspond to our moral constitution. If *not*, how could value, dignity, rights, and moral freedom emerge from valueless, material, determined processes? Naturalism and moral realism are massively mismatched.¹²

Despite Martin’s appeals to them, the IOT and WRE are merely epistemological or methodological tools for making moral judgments. They *assume* human dignity and value rather than *ground* them.

Martin’s reading of Jesus’ ethics is uncharitable in some places and shoddy in others. As much has been written on these topics in commentaries, journal articles, and monographs (which Martin seems to ignore), I offer the following examples. First, Martin claims Jesus did not address racism or sexual discrimination (164). A simple reading of Luke’s Gospel, for example, suggests numerous affirmations of women and Gentiles as equal partakers in the kingdom of God. Second, Martin calls Jesus’ approach to poverty “unrealistic” and “simplistic” (165). But Jesus did not offer a socio-economic program;¹³ he addressed underlying attitudes such as greed, generosity, industriousness, and contentment—attitudes that have huge economic ramifications.¹⁴ Third, Martin’s allegation that Jesus advocated “hating” parents (Lk. 14:6) misses the point: choosing Christ over family might appear to unbelievers to be an act of familial betrayal, especially in many non-Western cultures. For the charitable reader to takes the biblical context seriously (cp. Lk. 6:27; 16:13), “hate” is simply a comparative term. And while Martin is correct that Jesus did not directly address many contemporary moral issues, ample moral resources exist in the Scriptures for dealing with many of them.¹⁵ At any rate, many of Martin’s criticisms tend to be uninformed, proof-texting potshots rather than substantive argument.

Regarding the historical Jesus and the resurrection, he relies on the lopsided “nonfundamentalist” (315n) scholarship of the Jesus Seminar or Gerd Lüdemann; both routinely ignore the many well-argued points of conservative scholarship). Martin also depends on discredited work of G.A. Wells. (In his book on historical Jesus sources, Robert Van Voorst remarks that “Martin’ argument is flawed by a reliance on Wells for his knowledge of New Testament scholarship.”)¹⁶ Both the Jesus Seminar and Lüdemann (who, *contra* Wells, *do* believe Jesus

¹² See Michael Rea, “Naturalism and Moral Realism,” in *Knowledge and Reality*, ed. Thomas Crisp, et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004).

¹³ R.T. France, “God and Mammon,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 51 (1979): 3-21.

¹⁴ Craig Blomberg’s *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

¹⁵ For just a few examples, see J.P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); John F. Kilner, et al., eds., *The Reproductive Revolution: A Christian Appraisal of Sexuality, Reproductive Technologies, and the Family* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹⁶ Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 14.

existed) have been roundly critiqued by William Craig and others¹⁷ Martin's calling the evidence for Jesus' resurrection "flimsy" (175) is startlingly dismissive.¹⁸ I point these out as mere examples of the questionable methodology Martin utilizes in an attempt to undercut Christian ethics.

Martin's assertion that "early Christian writers" *never* appeal to "Jesus' ethical pronouncements" or "ethical teachings" as stated in the New Testament (158, 159— "*none* of them" does!) is plainly wrong. Such statements truly detract from the strength of Martin's attack. James' epistle throughout is bursting with allusions to the Sermon on the Mount. In Acts 20:35, Paul quotes Jesus' agraphic ethical teaching on giving, refers to Jesus' teaching on divorce (1 Cor. 7), and cites Jesus' ethical exhortation from Mt. 10:10 (1 Tim. 5:18). In fact, Paul's *chief* concern is showing how Jesus has fulfilled Old Testament hope and expectation. Thus Paul draws primarily from Old Testament themes and passages though he is thoroughly familiar with the Jesus tradition (Galatians 1:13-2:14).¹⁹ Moreover, David Wenham has done an excellent job of connecting Paul's ethical teaching (and theology) to that of Jesus;²⁰ so I shall not rehearse that here. Note also the late first-century Christian document, the *Didache*, which cites Jesus' ethical teaching from the Sermon on the Mount in particular. I shall not here appeal to the abundance of early Christian texts (from Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, etc.) which refer to Jesus' ethical teaching.

Of course, Jesus was more than a teacher of ethics; he is—despite Martin's prooftexts in this section—a moral example to imitate and whose moral qualities believers should "put on" (1 Cor. 11:1; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; 8:9; 13:4; Eph. 4:20-5 Philp. 2:1-11; Col. 3:12-13; 1 Thes. 1:6; Heb. 12:1-3; 13:12-13; 1 Pet. 2:21-5; etc.). *Contra* Martin (160-1), the New Testament writers seem to know where imitating Christ is appropriate and where, because of Jesus' unique mission and authority, it is not. Despite Martin's claim that aspects of Jesus' life are "morally questionable" (171), one wonders why the Evangelists, in the face of their own claims of Jesus as a moral exemplar, would promote a morally-defective Jesus. Perhaps the problem is more with how Martin reads biblical texts than with the Evangelists' presentation of Jesus.

Regarding salvation, Martin's claim that the New Testament presents at least four conflicting means of salvation is undercut by the following: (a) while Jesus commanded His followers to hold material possessions lightly, He prescribed getting rid of one's possessions (the rich young man in Mt. 19) when wealth undermined devotion to God (the same could be said for sexual promiscuity or holding a powerful political position). Martin overlooks the fact that Matthew, who recounts the story of the rich young man, *also* notes that Joseph of Arimathea was *both* "rich" and a "disciple" (27:57). Martin regularly assumes that Gospel writers were so naïve as to miss such "contradictions" within several chapters of each other! (b) Good works (and judgment according to them) and great sacrifices must always be understood in the context of God's enabling grace (1 Cor. 15:10; Philp. 2:12-13; Col. 1:29; cf. Eph. 2:8-10), which is required for initial belief and an ongoing life of faith (Col. 2:6). (c) Martin's suggestion that Paul (in Gal. 3:24-5)

¹⁷ Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998; Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli, eds., *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

¹⁸ See N.T. Wright's recently-written *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003; see also Stephen T. Davis' criticisms of Martin in "The Rationality of Christian Belief in Resurrection," *Philosophia Christi* 5/2 (2003): 501-17.

¹⁹ Andreas Köstenberger, Review of *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* *Trinity Journal* NS 16 (Fall 1995): 260.

²⁰ David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); see also N.T. Wright, *What Did Saint Paul Really Say?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

believed people before Christ were saved by keeping Jewish laws *misses the whole point of Galatians!* There, Paul responds to Judaizers, asserting that Jews *never* were saved by the Mosaic Law, since Abraham was saved by faith before the Law was given; those saved by faith are true children of Abraham. Rightly understood, good works indicate that we trust God's provision and rely upon His Spirit. These works are organically connected to faith/trust (cp. Eph. 2:8-10).²¹

On the "atonement," Martin concludes that "no theory convincingly explains why Jesus was incarnated, died on the cross, and was resurrected" (266). As one scrutinizes Martin's arguments, they are, surprisingly, not all that effective. For example, while Anselmian or penal-substitution views of the atonement must be properly nuanced (e.g., avoiding individualistic and anti-trinitarian overtones), Martin's own criticisms are surprisingly weak: "it is certainly not obvious that the sin of humanity is infinite" (258) or why the "wrong brought against God by humanity is infinite" (258). But to reject a relationship with God is to *reject* a relationship with an *infinite* God and this is, ultimately, what separates us from that infinite God. So this sinful rejection has "infinite" dimensions. Also, the Scriptures view the atonement more holistically, narratively, and comprehensively than the compartmentalized theories Martin assesses. While the substitutionary dimensions of the atonement are clear in Scripture, Jesus' incarnation, atonement, and resurrection are crucial for renewing all things and establishing the cosmic reign of God's righteousness. Jesus successfully lives out Israel's and Adam's story, fulfilling their vocation as the second Adam and new Israel. He representatively reverses the curse of sin by taking its exile upon Himself so that blessing could come. In the cross is a demonstration how humiliatingly low God, directly facing evil, is willing to go to rescue humans from it.²² Jesus' death in our place brings about a victory over demonic powers, serves as a moral example of self-giving love, and much more. One fears Martin has more work to do in many of these areas.

Martin raises some important questions in this book of his—questions theists should think through and to which they should respond. However, the effectiveness of his arguments is at important points diminished by straw men, misrepresentations, and weak arguments. Much more can be said in response (and has been said elsewhere).²³ But here we can say, to borrow Martin's wording, "Naturalist apologists give no well-articulated argument to support their view that naturalism is compatible with objective morality." Indeed, despite Martin's attempted bombardment, the case for the moral argument and Christian uniqueness still stands strong. It "has not, to my knowledge, been refuted."

²¹ This point is made throughout Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001)—though I disagree with his Reformed perspective.

²² Richard Bauckham's *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

²³ Further responses to Martin's arguments and objections can be found in Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser, eds. *The Rationality of Theism* (London: Routledge, 2003); Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus* (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 2003); William Lane Craig's response to Martin (and other critics) in Stan W. Wallace, ed., *Does God Exist?* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003).