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# **THE FAILURE OF NEW ATHEISM MORALITY**

In his book *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, the Roman Catholic theologian John F. Haught discusses the recent growth of *new atheism*. According to Haught the new atheists—who include both scientists and philosophers—subscribe to a belief system known as “scientific naturalism.” The central dogma of scientific naturalism is the following: “[O]nly nature, including humans and our creations, is real; that God does not exist; and that science can give us complete and reliable knowledge of reality.”<sup>1</sup> As Haught’s description makes clear, scientific naturalists are committed to two beliefs: (1) *scientism*, which is the view that only science can give us complete and reliable knowledge of reality, and (2) *metaphysical naturalism*, which is the view that no supernatural entities exist.<sup>2</sup> In holding both of these beliefs, scientific naturalists separate themselves from the majority of scientists and philosophers who reject at least one of these beliefs.<sup>3</sup> In addition, as others have noted, there is an “evangelical” nature to the new atheism, “which assumes that it has a Good News to share, at all cost, for the ultimate future of humanity by the conversion of as many people as possible.”<sup>4</sup>

Because of their commitment to scientism and to metaphysical naturalism, new atheists have claimed that the methods of science can success-

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), x. Throughout this essay I use “scientific naturalism” exclusively as Haught defines it.

<sup>2</sup> For a good discussion of metaphysical naturalism and the new atheists, see Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), especially 1–11.

<sup>3</sup> Most scientists only affirm methodological naturalism, not metaphysical naturalism. And most philosophers reject scientism.

fully study topics traditionally considered outside of the bounds of science, such as ethics. For example, in his book *The God Delusion*, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins puts forth an argument that “our sense of right and wrong can be derived from our Darwinian past.”<sup>5</sup> And Sam Harris, in his book *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, argues that “morality can and should be integrated with our scientific understanding of the natural world.”<sup>6</sup>

I have treated the topic of scientism and its serious problems elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> As such, here I shall focus on the metaphysical naturalism that new atheists and other naturalists accept, with the goal of answering the following question: Can metaphysical naturalism provide an adequate foundation for objective moral values? I shall argue that the answer is “no” and I will discuss several serious problems inherent in a naturalistic account of the foundation of morality. Before I can do this, however, I must clarify what I mean by objective moral values.

First, I hold that moral values are prescriptive. That is, they tell us how we *should* act. The word “should,” however, can be used in different ways. For example, if you want to climb Mount Everest you should buy a very warm coat, and you should pack enough food and supplies, and you should get a good Sherpa to guide you. Of course, instead of doing all of that you could simply decide not to climb the mountain. After all, mountain climbing is optional. Morality, however, is not optional. This raises a second point, namely, that moral prescriptions carry with them a force of inescapable necessity. Immanuel Kant, in insisting that the supreme moral principle was not hypothetical, but categorical (and thus binding on all rational beings at all times) recognized this type of necessity. Third, and finally, I hold that a moral proposition such as “parental child abuse is wrong” is either true or false. In this particular case, I would argue that the proposition is true. As such, I will not entertain the view that moral values are neither true nor false as non-cognitivist philosophers hold, or that they are merely subjectively true or culturally true as moral relativists hold.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey W. Robbins and Christopher D. Rodkey, “Beating ‘God’ to Death: Radical Theology and the New Atheism,” in *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 214.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 195, note 9.

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Delfino, “The Cultural Dangers of Scientism and Common Sense Solutions,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 3:supplement (2014): 485–496.

Since at least as far back as Plato, the majority of Western philosophers have sought a metaphysical foundation or ground to support objective moral values in the sense I have described above—that is, prescriptions about good and evil that are objectively true and necessarily binding. Whereas for Plato the Form-of-the-Good provided this metaphysical ground and for medieval thinkers God provided this metaphysical ground, scientific naturalists cannot appeal to such supernatural entities. So, the question remains—can the scientific naturalist provide a metaphysical foundation that explains how moral values are objectively true, prescriptive, and carry with them an inescapable necessity? Let us examine that question next.

### Natural Foundations of Objective Moral Values

Objective moral values cannot exist if there are no moral agents. A necessary condition for moral agency is metaphysical freedom, which is the ability of an agent to have acted otherwise than she did because she has control over her actions. Even Immanuel Kant, who was certainly skeptical of traditional metaphysics, affirmed that freedom of the will is a necessary postulate of pure practical reason without which morality is not possible.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, scientific naturalists cannot appeal to supernatural moral agents. Therefore, if it turns out that metaphysical naturalism is not compatible with the freedom of living physical beings, then metaphysical naturalism cannot serve as a satisfactory metaphysical foundation for objective moral values. As such, the problem of freedom is an important issue that we must address.

#### *The Problem of Freedom*

There certainly have been some scientists and philosophers who have understood metaphysical naturalism to preclude human freedom. Consider, for example, the comments of neuroscientist and new atheist Sam Harris. In a chapter section titled “The Illusion of Free Will,” he writes the following:

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<sup>8</sup> “These postulates are those of *immortality*, of *freedom* considered positively (as the causality of a being so far as this being belongs to the intelligible world), and of the existence of God” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), 168 [5:132]).

[Y]ou tend to feel that you are the source of your own thoughts and actions. *You* decide what to do and not to do. You seem to be an agent acting of your own free will. As we will see, however, this point of view cannot be reconciled with what we know about the human brain . . . All of our behavior can be traced to biological events about which we have no conscious knowledge . . . you are no more responsible for the next thing you think (and therefore *do*) than you are for the fact that you were born into this world.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, when metaphysical naturalism is understood in this narrow, reductive, and determinist way, it cannot serve as an adequate foundation for objective moral values. For this reason, many naturalists have embraced a broader understanding of metaphysical naturalism—one, they claim, that is compatible with human freedom. Indeed, even some Christian philosophers and theologians have embraced a view very similar to this—that everything which exists, except for God, is a physical being. For example, Nancey Murphy—in her book *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*—asserts the following: “My central thesis is, first, that we are our bodies—there is no additional metaphysical element such as a mind or soul or spirit. But, second, this ‘physicalist’ position need not deny that we are intelligent, moral, and spiritual.”<sup>10</sup>

Murphy calls her position non-reductive physicalism; and apart from her stance on God, non-reductive physicalism seems like the only option left for metaphysical naturalists if they wish to defend human freedom and objective moral values. I have argued elsewhere, however, that there are serious reasons to doubt that non-reductive physicalism can account for human freedom.<sup>11</sup> I cannot reproduce all of those arguments here, but let me briefly discuss the main difficulty, which has to do with the problem of *emergence*.

In order for non-reductive physicalism to be different from the narrow understanding of physicalism discussed above, non-reductive physi-

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<sup>9</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 102–104 (emphasis in the original). Harris tries to salvage (unsuccessfully in my judgment) some notion of moral responsibility based on the overall complexion of one’s mind and character. See id., 106–112. See also Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 48–60.

<sup>10</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), ix.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert A. Delfino, “Christian Physicalism and Personal Identity,” in *Global Spiral* [[www.metanexus.net/essay/christian-physicalism-and-personal-identity](http://www.metanexus.net/essay/christian-physicalism-and-personal-identity)], accessed on Sept 28, 2015].

calists must hold that new causal powers, such as freedom, can emerge in living organisms over time. Because scientific naturalists do not want to appeal to souls or non-material entities, they must hold that these new causal powers emerge, ultimately, from complex arrangements of microphysical parts. However, with the exception of quantum indeterminacy, the microphysical world is a world of determinism. In addition, quantum indeterminacy, which is a kind of statistical randomness, is not enough for genuine freedom. Even if quantum events are random, I will not be free if my actions are caused by quantum events over which I have no control. As such, it does not seem possible that the causal power to make genuinely free choices can emerge from the microphysical world—quantum or otherwise.

If the above arguments are correct, then neither the narrow nor the broad understanding of metaphysical naturalism can account for freedom. In such a case, neither human beings nor any living physical being would be a moral agent, and thus the attempt to provide a naturalistic ground for objective moral values would have failed. Still, for sake of argument, let us assume that the ability to make free choices can emerge during the course of biological evolution. Even in this case, however, there would be doubts about whether biological evolution could serve as a satisfactory metaphysical foundation for objective moral values. So, let us explore that possibility next.

### *The Problem of Evolution*

A common strategy employed by scientific naturalists has been to argue that morality is the product of, and thus has its foundation in, biological evolution. For example, as I mentioned above, Dawkins made a Darwinian argument for the existence of moral values in his book *The God Delusion*. There he discusses how evolution can select for various things, including altruism towards kin and reciprocal altruism.<sup>12</sup> But is this an adequate metaphysical foundation for objective moral values? Can the fact that evolution has selected for altruism toward kin, for example, make the proposition “parents should not abuse their children” objectively true? It seems to me that the answer is “no” for several reasons.

First, as Richard Joyce argues, even if morality is the product of evolution, and thus it is useful for the survival of the species, it still could be a fiction. This serves to undermine, in the sense of casting doubt upon,

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<sup>12</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 219–220.

the truth of our moral beliefs: “[O]ur moral beliefs are products of a process that is entirely independent of their truth, which forces the recognition that we have no grounds one way or the other for maintaining these beliefs. They *could* be true, but we have no reason for thinking so.”<sup>13</sup>

Second, insofar as objective moral values have to be prescriptive, how can we move from the historical fact that evolution selected for X to the moral fact that parents should do X? This is directly related to David Hume’s point that we cannot derive an ought (how things should be) from an is (the way things are).<sup>14</sup> It is not enough to respond that parents should treat their children well because it is a fact that good treatment will be beneficial for the future of the human species. This is the type of “should” we discussed earlier when I said a person planning to climb Mount Everest should buy a warm coat. Such “shoulds” are merely conditional on whether you decide to pursue the end in question; they do not carry the inescapable necessity of a moral prescription.

Instead, to argue against Hume we need a way to overcome the “is-ought problem.” Unlike the new atheists, I think theists have a philosophical advantage here. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre argued in *After Virtue* that the “is-ought problem” can only be overcome by recognizing that human nature has an essential purpose and function, which has its ultimate foundation in God.<sup>15</sup> In other words, teleology is the key to overcoming the “is-ought problem.” Yet the new atheists, aside from rejecting God, also seem unanimous in their rejection of teleology in nature. Dawkins’s famous book *The Blind Watchmaker* expresses this position:

Natural selection, the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind’s eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 211.

<sup>14</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book III, part I, section I, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1978), 469.

<sup>15</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd ed., 1984), 58.

Some naturalist philosophers have argued for a kind of teleology in nature that requires no supernatural foundation.<sup>17</sup> But even if that were possible (and I don't think it is), the problem is that such teleology would be a contingent, brute fact—with no reason for its being.<sup>18</sup> And this leads to two additional arguments why I think that a person would be justified in holding that evolution, as understood by the scientific naturalists, is neither an adequate foundation for the truth of moral prescriptions nor for their inescapable necessity.

### *The Radical Contingency Argument*

The first argument I call the *radical contingency argument*. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins suggests that the benevolent actions of noble people, such as those who adopt children, could be the result of a misfiring of an evolutionary rule of thumb.<sup>19</sup> He gives the example of how mother birds are programmed by evolution to feed the little birds in their nest, but the rule misfires if “another baby bird [from a different mother] somehow gets into the nest.”<sup>20</sup> Following this train of thought, we might say that the virtuous actions of Blessed Theresa of Calcutta are nothing more than misfirings. Yet, significantly, would not this undermine the inescapable necessity that moral prescriptions are supposed to carry? After all, if this type of activity is the result of a misfiring, then should not Mother Theresa correct her behavior? As Haught has argued:

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Some examples include, Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Stephen R. Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (New York: Continuum, 2008), and Richard Cameron, “How to Be a Realist about sui generis Teleology Yet Feel at Home in the 21st Century,” *The Monist* 87:1 (2004): 72–95.

<sup>18</sup> Aquinas in the fifth way (*Summa theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3) and in other passages (e.g., *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 1, a. 2, responsio, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, 23, n. 6, and *De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 2, responsio) successfully argues, in my judgment, that the teleology in natural things must have its foundation in intelligence (a willed, rational order). One reason intelligence is necessary is because only intelligence as an immaterial power can envision an end that does not yet exist *yet* order something to that end of being (essence and existence). In contrast, matter by itself cannot transcend what is here and now. For an excellent discussion of this topic see, Leszek Figurski, *Finality and Intelligence: Is the Universe Designed?* (Wydawnictwo Bezkręsy Wiedzy, 2014), especially chapter four.

<sup>19</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 220–221.

<sup>20</sup> Id.

How can the amoral process of natural selection become the ultimate court of appeal for what is moral? Even if our ethical instincts evolved by natural selection, we still have to explain why we are obliged to obey them here and now, especially since they may be evolutionary misfirings.<sup>21</sup>

Misfirings in the course of evolution show that there is a contingency problem when trying to use biological evolution as a metaphysical foundation for objective moral values. But the contingency problem is much deeper than this. It extends also to the nature of the physical universe—for example, the laws and constants of physics and the natures of things such as electrons and quarks. If an intelligent cause is not responsible for them, then there is no reason why the aforementioned things have the natures they do.<sup>22</sup> As such, they could have had different natures and that raises a second contingency problem. We are still not finished, however, for the contingency problem runs even deeper than this.

There is a third contingency problem concerning the existence of the universe itself. Why, we might ask, does anything exist at all? Again, unlike the new atheists, I think theists have a philosophical advantage here. Theists can argue that in the absence of a necessary being there is no reasonable explanation for why anything exists at all.<sup>23</sup> Of course, some philosophers, such as Hume, have suggested that the material universe is a necessary being.<sup>24</sup> However, Thomas Aquinas has argued (correctly in my judgment) that a composite being cannot be a necessary being (and certainly the universe taken as a whole is a composite of many beings).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> As argued in note 18 above, only intelligence can ground teleology. However, in the world of the scientific naturalists, intelligence emerges very late in history. It is not prior and foundational to reality, as in a theistic world-view.

<sup>23</sup> *The Ultimate Why Question: Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatever?*, ed. John F. Wippel (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> David Hume, *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), part IX, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 18 and 42, 8–11. In *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3, Aquinas makes a distinction between a necessary *per se* being and a necessary *per aliud* being. But even if the material universe were a necessary *per aliud* being that would not be enough to salvage Hume's objection. For Hume to succeed he must argue that the universe is a necessary *per se* being, yet he cannot do that for the reason I gave above and for other reasons. For example, to be a necessary *per se* being precludes a real distinction between being and essence. But even if the material universe were one thing, as opposed to a collec-



Moreover, even if things could exist in the absence of a necessary being, then surely their existence would be contingent. At best, then, scientific naturalists are faced with a contingency that runs through everything—that is, they have a *radical* contingency problem.

Given this radical contingency, two important questions arise. First, how can nature, understood as radically contingent, ground objectively true and necessarily binding moral prescriptions? The answer is that it cannot because whatever moral inclinations or moral values emerge in such a world would be radically contingent and there would be no ultimate reason for why they should be this way and not another way or, even, why they should exist at all. This nullifies the necessary force moral prescriptions are supposed to have. A second question that arises is the following: Why should I, as a rational being, feel obliged to obey something that is non-rational and thus clearly inferior to me? Let us examine this next.

#### *The Transcendence of Persons Argument*

The last question leads to a second argument which I call the *transcendence of persons argument*. Recall that we have been assuming (for the sake of argument) that human persons with reason and freedom can emerge from biological evolution as understood by the scientific naturalists. In such a case, however, there would be several senses in which human persons would transcend the mechanisms of evolution and thus would not be subject to them. For example, evolution might explain why I have the inclination and desire to have children, but does this put upon me a moral obligation to have children? No, for unlike lower life forms, my ability to freely choose to mate or not allows me to transcend the mechanisms of evolution. Also, I transcend the mechanisms of evolution in the sense that, unlike other life forms, I have the power to alter the course of evolution through genetic engineering. Finally, as a rational and free being, I am superior to the non-rational and non-free mechanisms of evolution and thus transcend them. As such, any moral inclination or rule of thumb produced by evolution lacks the necessary force required for moral prescriptions.

There is something of an irony here for scientific naturalists who embrace non-reductive physicalism. The very non-reductive physicalism they hope makes the emergence of reason and freedom possible for hu-

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tion of things, there would still be a real distinction between the being and essence of the material universe.

mans would also make humans transcend, in the ways described above, the physical world and its processes—including biological evolution. Because of this transcendence, there is a sense in which a human being would occupy a position similar to God for scientific naturalists. This is because in the world of the scientific naturalists human beings, at least as far as we know, are the supreme form of life. Humans alone, it appears, exist with freedom and reason in a physical universe largely filled with lifeless matter and mostly (or exclusively) non-intelligent and lesser life forms.

With no God and humans occupying the role of supreme beings, why should humans look to evolution or anything else in nature as a foundation for objective moral values? This opens the door to the dark path of Friedrich Nietzsche that Étienne Gilson warned about in his essay “The Terrors of the Year Two thousand.”<sup>26</sup> It is the path of asserting your own will and creating your own moral values without being limited by nature or the values of the masses. It is a dangerous path and one that is incompatible with objective moral values.

### Conclusion

Although the arguments above are not exhaustive, they cast serious doubt on the view that metaphysical naturalism can provide a satisfactory metaphysical foundation for objective moral values. Indeed, the new atheist attempt to ground objective morality in metaphysical naturalism fails for three reasons. First, metaphysical naturalism cannot account for freedom or moral agency. Second, the “is-ought problem,” in the context of metaphysical naturalism, precludes the prescriptive nature of objective moral values. Third, and finally, the problems of radical contingency and transcendence of persons, which result from metaphysical naturalism, preclude the necessary force that is supposed to accompany objective moral values.

If this analysis is correct, then only two options remain. One option is, simply, to reject objective moral values. Perhaps some naturalists will be content with a much weaker understanding of moral values. Indeed, some of them might feel liberated to view morality as an illusion—as something foisted upon us by our genes for the sake of reproductive success—and something from which we can finally rid ourselves. However, I

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<sup>26</sup> Étienne Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000* (Toronto: St. Michael's College, 1949).

am sure many will find this position unacceptable. Indeed, I agree with Joyce, who has made the argument that:

Moral naturalism without clout [i.e., without the inescapability of moral prescriptions] . . . seems to enfeeble our capacity to morally criticize wrong-doers; . . . might actually encourage wrongdoing for certain persons; and . . . renders moral language and moral thinking entirely redundant. Such a value system is . . . surely too wimpy to be mistaken for morality.<sup>27</sup>

The only other option is to argue that objective moral values have a non-natural foundation. I think this is the correct course to take, and as I alluded to above, I think the solution can be found in theism, specifically as understood in the Thomistic tradition. God, as the intelligent cause responsible for both the existence and natures of things, can account for the teleology that is necessary for the prescriptive nature of moral values. God, as intelligent, necessary, and Supreme Being avoids the problems of radical contingency and transcendence of persons that undermined the necessary force that is supposed to accompany objective moral values. Of course, to provide an adequate and detailed defense of God as the only satisfactory metaphysical foundation for objective moral values would require much more space than I have here, so I will have to argue for it elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

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## THE FAILURE OF NEW ATHEISM MORALITY

### SUMMARY

New atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, generally speaking, are committed to two main beliefs. The first is scientism, which is the view that only science can give us complete and reliable knowledge of reality. The second is metaphysical naturalism, which is the view that no supernatural entities exist. In this article the author focuses on the metaphysical naturalism that new atheists and other naturalists accept, with the goal of answering the following question: Can metaphysical naturalism provide an adequate foundation for objective moral values? He argues that the answer is “no” and he discusses several serious problems inherent in a naturalistic account of the foundation of morality.

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<sup>27</sup> Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, 208.

<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank Marie George, Jon Weidenbaum, Tony Spanakos, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful suggestions on this paper. My gratitude also extends to Peter Redpath, Curtis Hancock, and Fulvio Di Blasi for their encouragement. *Et Deo Gratias*.

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