

Edward Feser

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Does morality depend on God? (Updated)



Not the way many people think it does. A reader asks me to comment on [this post](#) by Trent Dougherty over at The Prosblogion. Dougherty notes that if someone accepts Aristotelian essentialism, it seems to follow that he ought to allow that morality can have a foundation even if there is no God. For from an Aristotelian point of view, what is good for a human being, and thus how we ought to treat human beings, is determined by human nature,

and human nature is what it is whether or not there is a God. Well, I think Dougherty is more or less right about that much, though I would qualify what he says in ways I'll explain presently. And as I've argued elsewhere (e.g. in [The Last Superstition](#)), it isn't atheism *per se* that threatens the very possibility of morality, at least not directly. Rather, what threatens it is the mechanistic or anti-teleological (and thus anti-Aristotelian) conception of the natural world that modern atheists are generally committed to, and which they (falsely) assume to have been established by modern science.

Keep in mind that from an Aristotelian point of view, teleology or final causality is immanent to the natural order in a way it is not immanent to artifacts, in the manner explained in [my recent post on nature versus art](#). To borrow an example from that post, a hammock made out of liana vines does not have its hammock-like function inherently, but only relative to an artificer who imposes it from outside. The vines themselves, by contrast, do have their liana-like tendencies inherently, just by virtue of being liana vines. The liana-like tendencies follow from their *nature* or *substantial form*, whereas the hammock-like tendencies do not, but result from a merely accidental arrangement (in the technical Aristotelian sense of "accidental"). And so what is good for a liana vine - that is to say, what constitutes its flourishing as the kind of living thing it is (taking in water and nutrients, exhibiting such-and-such a growth pattern, etc.) - is determined by the ends that

About Me



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I am a writer and philosopher living in Los Angeles. I teach philosophy at Pasadena City College. My primary academic research interests are in the philosophy of mind, moral and political philosophy, and philosophy of religion. I also write on politics, from a conservative point of view; and on religion, from a traditional Roman Catholic perspective.

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follow upon its nature or substantial form.

Now, natural law theory as understood in the Aristotelian-Thomistic (A-T) tradition presupposes this understanding of natural objects. Human beings, like every other natural substance, have a nature or substantial form, and what is good for them -- what constitutes *their* flourishing -- is determined by the ends or final causes that follow upon having that sort of nature or substantial form. But just as we can normally determine the efficient causes of things without making reference to God, so too can we normally determine the final causes of things without making reference to God. And thus, just as we can do physics, chemistry, and the like without making reference to God, so too can we do ethics without making reference to God, at least to a large extent. For we can know what is good for a thing if we can know its nature, and we can know its nature by empirical investigation guided by sound (A-T) metaphysics. At least to a large extent, then, we can know what the natural law says just from the study of human nature and apart from any sort of divine revelation. That's why it's the *natural* law. Goodness, or at least the possibility of it, is just *natural to us* ([as Philippa Foot might say](#)).

Now of course, human beings, liana vines, and everything else could not from an A-T point of view exist even for an instant unless God were conserving them in existence. They also could not have the causal power they have even for an instant if God as first cause were not imparting that causal power to them at every moment. All of this is (I would say) what the A-T versions of the cosmological argument, rightly understood, establish. Similarly, human beings, liana vines, and other natural phenomena couldn't manifest the teleology or final causality they do even for an instant if God weren't continually "directing" them toward their ends. That is (I would say) what the Fifth Way, rightly understood, establishes. But just as A-T versions of the cosmological argument don't entail that natural objects don't have real causal power, so too the Fifth Way does not entail that natural objects don't have inherent teleology. To use the traditional metaphysical jargon, the reality of "secondary causes" is perfectly compatible with the A-T idea that all natural causes must *ultimately* at every moment derive their causal power from God; A-T firmly rejects [occasionalism](#). Similarly, the reality of immanent or "built in" teleology as Aristotle understood it is perfectly compatible with the idea that all teleology *ultimately* derives from God.

"Ultimately" is the key word here. It is because secondary causes are real that natural science is possible. When we study the physical world, we are studying how *physical things themselves* behave given their nature, not the capricious acts of God. And it is because immanent teleology is real that natural law is possible. When we study ethics, we are studying *what is good for human beings given their nature*, not capricious divine commands. *Ultimately* the facts studied by science and the facts studied by

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ethics depend on God, because *everything* depends, at every instant, on God. In that sense, science, ethics, and everything else depend on God. But *proximately* ethics can be done at least to a large extent without reference to God, just as natural science can.

In that sense, many moral truths would still be true even if, *per impossibile*, there were no God -- just as the periodic table of the elements would be what it is even if, *per impossibile*, there were no God. (All of this is discussed in chapter 5 of *Aquinas*. And see the first half of [this article](#) for a sketch of A-T natural law theory.)

Now that doesn't mean that God is irrelevant to ethics; far from it. For one thing, only *part* of the natural law can be known without reference to God. For example, that murder, lying, adultery, dishonoring parents, etc. are contrary to the good for us can be known from an examination of human nature alone. But the fact that God exists naturally has moral implications of its own, and since for A-T the existence of God can also be known through natural reason, there are certain very general religious obligations (such as the obligation to love God) that can be known through reason alone, and thus form part of the natural law. (Indeed, these are our *highest* obligations under natural law.) Then there is the fact that the natures of things, including human nature, derive ultimately from those ideas in the divine intellect which form the archetypes by reference to which God creates. (In this way morality is for A-T neither independent of God nor grounded in arbitrary divine commands, as I explained in [a post on the Euthyphro objection](#).) Furthermore, for A-T, a *complete* account of moral *obligation* requires reference to God as legislator (even if moral obligation can *proximately* be explained by reference to the natural end of the will). Finally, divine revelation is also needed for a *complete* account of everyday moral life. For one thing, divine revelation discloses certain details about morality that the human intellect is too feeble reliably to discover on its own. For another, some aspects of the natural law are so demanding that many people are capable realistically of living up to them only given the hope of a reward in the hereafter, of the sort divine revelation promises. (Again, all of these issues are discussed in *Aquinas*. See chapter 8 of [the first volume](#) of Michael Cronin's *The Science of Ethics* for a useful treatment of the proximate and ultimate grounds of moral obligation.)

All the same, since *to a large extent* the grounds and content of morality can be known from a study of human nature alone, it follows that *to a large extent* morality would be what it is even if human beings existed and God did not. For, again, morality is not based in arbitrary divine commands any more than scientific laws are expressions of some arbitrary divine whim. From the A-T point of view, "divine command theory" (or at least the crude version of divine command theory that takes the grounds and content of morality to rest on sheer divine fiat) is, I would say, comparable to occasionalism, and similarly objectionable. (Cf. [my recent post on Ockham](#).)

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As I say, then, atheism *per se* is not a direct threat to the very possibility of morality. Someone who denied the existence of God but accepted Aristotelian essentialism could have grounds for accepting at least part of the natural law. So too could someone who endorsed an atheistic form of Platonism (if there could be such a thing). But to opt for a *completely anti-essentialist and anti-teleological* view of the world -- one which holds that the natural order is entirely mechanistic and that there is nothing beyond that order -- is, the A-T philosopher would argue, to undermine the possibility of any sort of morality at all. For it entirely removes from the world essences and final causes, and thus the possibility of making sense of the good as an objective feature of reality. (See *The Last Superstition* for details.) And since modern atheism tends to define itself in terms of such a radically anti-teleological or mechanistic view of the world, it too is to that extent incompatible with any possible morality.

UPDATE: Frank Beckwith comments on Dougherty [here](#).

Posted by Edward Feser at [7:43 AM](#)

69 comments:



Anonymous said...

But doesn't human nature necessarily have its origin in God?

If so, then the difference between A-T theists and non-A-T theists seems to be just an intermediate step.

No God -> no human nature -> no morality

vs.

No God -> no morality

Or to argue from a second, slightly different angle, I note the following statement of Dr. Feser's:

"Rather, what threatens it is the mechanistic or anti-teleological (and thus anti-Aristotelian) conception of the natural world that modern atheists are generally committed to.."

But there is no possibility whatsoever for an Aristotelian conception of the natural world to be true and God not to exist. Hence,

No God -> no teleology -> no morality

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