

God and Morality¹

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Prolegomena

The question of God and His relationship to morality occupies a prominent place in contemporary Christian apologetics; largely in the form of the moral argument for God's existence.² Such an argument asks the question of whether or how there could be morality in any sense without God. Specifically, the argument might focus on whether or how morality could be objective without God.³ This version would proceed: (1) If God does not exist, then objective morality does not exist. (2) Objective morality does exist. Therefore, God exists.⁴

Other questions, both philosophical and theological, also arise in an exploration of God and morality, including: what is it to be good; what is the distinction (if any) between good and moral good; what is sin; can we seek the good; and has God revealed any additional truths about morality besides what reason can discover.

In my attempt to answer at some of these questions, it is important that I am transparent from the beginning about my own philosophical orientation. I will be exploring these issues from

¹ A version of this paper (with the title "Does Morality Need God? The 'Yes' and 'No' Answer of Thomism") was given at the Evangelical Philosophical Society in Atlanta, GA on Nov. 18, 2015.

² I am indebted to Edward Feser for spurring on my interests in this topic with his "Does Morality Depend on God?" (<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/07/does-morality-depend-on-god.html>, accessed 02/09/24). I owe much of my thinking to his insights but I do not want to necessarily implicate him in everything I have to say in this paper.

³ One might argue that these two issues are really the same, since it would be difficult to distinguish morality without objectivity from abject moral relativism or even from moral nihilism.

⁴ For example, this is the form of the moral argument advanced by William Lane Craig. See <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-moral-argument-for-god>, accessed 02/09/24. It should become clear that, while I do not repudiate this form of the moral argument, I contend that it collapses vital premises that show how it is that in one sense, God *is not* necessary for morality (or morality's objectivity) and in another sense God *is* necessary for morality (or morality's objectivity)—hence the title of the EPS version of this paper referenced in note 1.

a Thomistic perspective, which is to say, from the philosophical commitments of Thomas Aquinas.⁵ It is my position that the philosophical realism of Aquinas gives the most thoroughgoing accounting of goodness, morality, and their relation to God available to sound reason.⁶

In order to understand Aquinas on morality vis-à-vis the question of God, it is necessary to look at Aquinas's doctrine of Natural Law (together with the metaphysics that his Natural Law view presupposes) within which it is nested.⁷ Once one sees how Aquinas's view parses out

⁵ Space constraints and purpose do not afford the opportunity to settle the debate over the viability of Aquinas's philosophy and its relevance to Christian thinking in general or to Evangelical Christian thinking in particular. The latter is especially noteworthy. No doubt Evangelical Christians will raise a number of objections stemming from the failings of Aquinas's theology vis-à-vis Evangelical theology. There is no doubt that Aquinas's theology (in certain places) differs significantly from Evangelical thinking and (in certain places) suffers because of it. The question, however, is whether those differences are essential to, or are the grounding for the philosophical doctrines that provide the contours of Aquinas's thinking on morality. In short, I think that they do not. Evacuating the distinctively Roman Catholic theological elements from Aquinas's thinking will not undercut the philosophical elements upon which his thinking on morality is built. For a treatment of how Thomistic philosophy can service Evangelical Christianity in general, see Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). For a treatment of how Thomistic philosophy can service Reformed Evangelical Christianity in particular, see Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Christian University Press, 1985).

⁶ To be fair, not all philosophers who would call themselves Thomists would subscribe to the school of Thomist thought to which I subscribe. Generally speaking, Aquinas's philosophy has variously been labeled as Classical Realism (which connects him with Plato and Aristotle), Moderate Realism (which connects him more specifically to Aristotle), Scholastic Realism (a term I learned from Edward Feser in his "Teleology: A Shopper's Guide" *Philosophia Christi* 12, no. 1 (2010): 142-159, republished in *Neo-Scholastic Essays* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2015); which distinguishes his Christian philosophy from that of Aristotle's), Philosophical Realism, Thomistic Realism, and Thomism. Contemporary Thomism is characterized by several schools of interpretation differing over a number of issues. I would label myself as an existential Thomist (not to be confused with the philosophical movement known as Existentialism). Existential Thomism insists upon a certain understanding of existence (Latin *esse*) and how the primacy of *esse* is the key to understanding the entire metaphysics of Aquinas. The current popularity of existential Thomism in North America is due primarily to the influence of the founder of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Etienne Gilson. For a look at the life, times, and works of Gilson see, Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984). For a critical study of Gilson's interpretation of Thomas see John M. Quinn, *The Thomism of Etienne Gilson: A Critical Study* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1971). For a rejoinder to the responses to Quinn's work together with a defense of Quinn's position see John D. Beach, "Another Look at the Thomism of Etienne Gilson," *New Scholasticism* 50 (1976): 522-528. For a more thorough examination of the range of interpretations among Thomists (to the end of defending existential Thomism) see John Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press).

⁷ My take on Aquinas's doctrine of Natural Law is a fairly common one but is not without its critics. What I have in mind are the current controversies like those generated by the thinking of John Finnis, Joseph Boyle, and Germain Grisez regarding whether and to what extent the metaphysics of Aristotle and Aquinas play into the theory or application of Natural Law. For example, John Finnis says "It is simply not true that 'any form of a natural law

regarding such notions as good and moral good, one will begin to see that the question of God's relationship to morally is not as straightforward as the above syllogism might suggest.

Why Natural Law?

Natural law theory stands in contrast to other ethical theories in a number of ways. These various ethical theories can differ in how they regard the nature of morality. Generally, ethical theories define themselves in terms of the nature of human actions as such. They understand the nature of moral obligations in terms of the nature of acts. Deontological theories (mainly associated with Immanuel Kant) see moral obligations in terms of duty. The good ought to be done for its own sake. In contrast, utilitarian theories see moral obligations in terms of the consequence or *telos* of actions. For example, hedonistic theories see the goal of actions to be aimed toward pleasure. Aiming toward one's own pleasure is an egoistic hedonism. Utilitarianism would aim at pleasure (or utility) for the greatest number.

In contrast to those ethical theories that define moral obligations in terms of *actions*, natural law theory understands the goodness of actions in terms of the *actor*. The good is defined in terms of that which actualizes the perfection (or being) of the essence or nature of a thing. Moral obligations are defined in terms of what actions aim toward actualizing the perfection of the human being understood in terms of the nature of the human as human. Such theories run from secular, in terms of which the *telos* of the human is confined entirely to this life, without

theory of morals entails the belief that propositions about man's duties and obligations can be inferred from propositions about this nature.' Nor is it true that for Aquinas 'good and evil are concepts analysed and fixed in metaphysics before they are applied in morals.'" [John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 33] Here, Finnis is quoting D. J. O'Connor, *Aquinas and Natural Law* (London: 1967), p. 68 and O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 19. With Robert George entering the discussion, there is now a controversy about the controversy in as much as George argues that their critics have misunderstood them when the critics accuse them of denying that these metaphysical doctrines are the grounding for Aquinas's view of morality and Natural Law. See Robert P. George, *In Defense of Natural Law*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a treatment of a salient part of the history of Natural Law theory see Pauline C. Westerman, *The Disintegration of Natural Law Theory: Aquinas to Finnis* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). While these controversies are not the topic of my paper, it should become evident on which side of the debates I come down.

any prospect of a Creator or an afterlife (such was the thinking of Aristotle) to Christian, in terms of which the *telos* of the human is understood to include both this life and the life to come, considering throughout who we are as humans created by God and what our ultimate purpose is in knowing God.

Despite these obvious differences, there remains none the less quite a bit of common ground between many secular and Christian virtue theories. Though Christian virtue theories are further informed by Scripture, in the minds of many Christian thinkers in this regard, the notion of what constitutes virtue for a human being overlaps extensively with many secular theories. It is this common ground that can serve as the basis for an ethical theory that gives rise to a public morality for humans as such. Moral obligations can then be seen as binding on humans irrespective of whether they are Christians. Recognizing that morality can make its demands on human beings irrespective of one's personal religious (or philosophical, or political) persuasion is characteristic of (though certainly not confined to) the natural law tradition. It comes even closer to a natural law perspective when it maintains that this morality (even if only vaguely considered) is something the public law is more or less obligated to track.

Philosopher Joseph Koterski illustrates a key element here in his lectures on Natural Law Theory. The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles, in his *Antigone*, tells the story of two brothers who were killed, one in noble defense of his country and the other in disgrace. Creon, King of Thebes orders the celebrated burial of the noble brother while denying the other brother any burial at all—leaving his body also in disgrace to the mercy of the animals. Antigone, the sister to the brother defies the king's orders and goes to bury her brother, arguing that her duty is to a higher law than the dictates of the human king.

In WWII, the Nuremberg trials posed an interesting challenge. While the Allies had no doubt that the Nazis should be tried for the wrongdoings, it was not clear on exactly what basis

such a trial could be conducted. The Allies—Russia, Great Britain, France, and the United States—could not legally try them on the basis of Allied law since the defendants were not citizens of any of those countries, and thus could not be accused of breaking their laws. But neither could the Nazis be tried on the basis of German law, since none of their war activities were illegal by German law. Hitler made sure of that. As such, the tribunal indicted the Nazis for "crimes against humanity." Martin Luther King, Jr., when he suffered unjustly in jail for his efforts to extend civil and human rights beyond where there are being acknowledged in his day, appealed to the Natural Law as a moral code that transcended the law of men.

One concern arises over how the discourse on public morality is sometimes framed in the categories of "biblical" or "Christian" morality. While morality certainly *is* Christian in as much as it finds its grounding ultimately in the God of the Bible who created human beings, framing the discussion on public morality with unbeliefs in these terms tacitly implies that, as long as one is not a Christian, one is under no obligation to accede to these "biblical" or "Christian" moral values. What is needed is a way to show our fellow human being that such public moral obligations apply to all irrespective of one's religious commitments. Thus, when calling (for example) the prohibition against murder biblical or Christian, we do not merely mean that murder is wrong only in case you are a Christian or only in case you acknowledge biblical authority.

Consider this contrast. As Christians, we do not require, or even expect, the unbeliever to be baptized or to partake of the Lord's Supper, both of which are certainly biblical and Christian values and actions. However, we certainly do expect the unbeliever to be publicly moral, for example, in his obedience to the laws against murder. So, then what makes the difference? If the Bible teaches both that we should not murder and that we should, for example, observe the Lord's Supper (making them both biblical), why is the one obligatory for everyone and the other

obligatory only for Christians? Upon what is this distinction based and how is it recognized and defended? One enduring answer to these questions is that the natural law pertains to such moral issues that apply to human beings as human beings and is knowable (to some degree or another) by human reason whereas Christian obligations obtain only in case one becomes a Christian.⁸

Comments on Natural Law Theory

Let us begin to sneak up on the topic at hand by briefly summarizing Aquinas's Natural Law Theory, touching on a few additional points in his metaphysics that are themselves presupposed in his Natural Law Theory. It is only in this context that his understanding of morality can be understood. For Aquinas, Natural Law finds itself being one part of four aspects of law, working here with a somewhat loose understanding of law in terms of how God relates to His creation.

Eternal Law

Eternal law is God's providential working of the universe. It is the plan by which God governs His creation. Though the universe is not eternal in itself, both the universe and God's

⁸ In a podcast, William Lane Craig responded to me that it is not the case that we do not expect the unbeliever to be baptized (<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-god-necessary-for-morality>, assessed 02/09/24). He argued that since we do think that the unbeliever is obligated to believe the Gospel and, further, that anyone who believes the Gospel is obligated to be baptized, it follows that the unbeliever is obligated to be baptized. But Craig is missing a subtlety here. What I am getting at is there are moral obligations that obtain for the Christian *as a Christian* that do not obtain for the non-Christian *as a non-Christian*. Clearly there is an obligation for the Christian to be water baptized that does not obtain for the non-Christian *in exactly the same way*. One is direct (or immediate) and the other is indirect (or mediate). There is a direct moral obligation for the non-Christian to become a Christian and only in that case is there an obligation to be water baptized. His moral obligation to be water baptized is mediated through his first becoming a Christian. Now contrast this with murder. The prohibition of murder (i.e., the obligation to not murder) obtains for both the Christian and the non-Christian *in exactly the same way*. It is not the case that the non-Christian is morally obligated to first become a Christian and only in that case is morally obligated not to murder. His obligation is immediate, just like the Christian's. What, then, is the difference between the obligation to be water baptized and the obligation to not murder? Why is the obligation to be water baptism different for the Christian and non-Christian and the obligation to not murder not? My point is that the contours of this difference tracks (in certain relevant ways) the contours of a Natural Law theory of morality.

law to govern it are eternally in the mind of God as the One who foresees and foreordains them, as Rom. 4:17 hints.⁹

As the transcendent Creator by whose power the entire creation comes into and remains in existence, God superintends everything that comes to pass. Aquinas says, "It is evident, granted that the world is ruled by Divine Providence ... that the whole community of the universe is governed by Divine Reason. Wherefore the very Idea of the government of things in God the Ruler of the universe, has the nature of a law. And since the Divine Reason's conception of things is not subject to time but is eternal, according to Prov. vii, 23, therefore it is that this kind of law must be called eternal."¹⁰

Not surprisingly, Christians have various understandings of the details of this superintendence. While there are interesting and profound and important questions surrounding this issue of how God superintends His creation, how Natural Law fits within the framework of the Eternal Law is (in some respects) indifferent to the answer to these specific questions. It is enough that one realizes that the Eternal Law is God's ultimate sovereignty and authority over His creation.

Natural law

Within this context, the Natural Law can be understood as the participation in Eternal Law by rational creatures by virtue of being rational. Aquinas explains

It is evident that all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, in so far as, namely, from its being imprinted on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts

⁹ "As it is written, "I HAVE MADE YOU A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS" in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;" (Translation, *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

¹⁰ *Summa Theologica* (sometimes translated '*Theologiae*' and hereafter abbreviated as ST) I-II, Q 91, art. 1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981).

and ends. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law.¹¹

This term 'natural' requires a closer analysis which I will undertake in due course.¹² For the time being, let me make several observations. We see from Aquinas that the Natural Law is that aspect of the Eternal Law whereby the Creator governs and guides the actions of humans such that, when obeyed, it leads humans to their proper end. It remains to be seen exactly why such actions are regarded as moral. It also remains to be seen what it means to talk about proper ends of humans. The thing to note here is that the truths of the Natural Law are discoverable by reason irrespective of whether the human is in a saving relationship with God, or, for that matter, whether the human even acknowledges the existence of God. Knowledge of these truths is a matter of creation not re-creation. The (perhaps to some) startling implication of this is that, inasmuch as such actions are moral, then morality is something in which, in some robust sense, even non-Christians can participate.

Human Law

More narrow still from the Eternal Law to the Natural Law is Human Law. For Aquinas, Human Law is a particular application of Natural Law to local communities. It seeks to implement regulations of human behavior stemming from truths knowable from the Natural Law. "Just as, in the speculative reason, from indemonstrable principles, we draw the conclusions of the various sciences, the knowledge of which is not imparted to us by nature, but acquired by the efforts of reason, so too it is from the precepts of the Natural Law, as from

¹¹ ST I-II, Q 91, art. 2.

¹² See "What Is Natural about the Natural Law? beginning on p. 10.

general and indemonstrable principles, that the human reason needs to proceed to the more particular determinations of certain matters. These particular determinations, devised by human reason, are called human laws, provided the other essential conditions of law be observed."¹³ Aquinas observes that the human reason can only participate in that Eternal Law according to human reason's own mode; and then only imperfectly. The divine reason is infinite but human reason is finite. Thus, there is no pretense that this trickle down from Eternal Law to Natural Law to Human Law is infallible.

Divine Law

The narrowest of the four aspects of law is the Divine Law. It is the revelation of God's law through Scripture to believers (if I may put a Protestant spin on this otherwise Catholic thinker). While the Divine Law certainly overlaps with the Natural Law, Divine Law will contain laws and precepts that pertain only to those who are in a saving relationship with God.

But what need is there for the Divine Law? If the Eternal Law is grasped to the degree it can be by human reason (the Natural Law) which is then applied to particular situations (Human Law), what is left for the Divine Law to do for human beings? This trajectory from the Eternal Law through the Natural Law to the Human Law is toward the human being's end naturally speaking. But for Aquinas, the goal or *telos* of human life is not something that is merely natural. There is a difference between mankind's "natural end" and what the Christian understands as mankind's ultimate end (purpose) which is knowledge of and communion with God or, as the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms would have it "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." The latter, according to Aquinas, cannot be obtained naturally but only by supernatural grace.

¹³ ST I-II, Q91, art. 3.

What Is Natural about the Natural Law?

I have been freely using the term 'natural' and its cognates. The terms 'nature' and 'natural' have a number of usages. In more technical and philosophical contexts 'nature' refers to that metaphysical constituent of a thing by virtue of which it is the thing that it is. In this way, it is similar to the terms 'essence' or 'substance'. David S. Oderberg defines essence as "an objective metaphysical principle determining [a thing's] definition and classification. Such principles are not mere creatures of language or convention; they belong to the very constitution of reality."¹⁴ To be sure, such metaphysical realism has fallen on increasingly hard times since the Middle Ages.¹⁵ It remains, nevertheless, the philosophical backdrop within which the 'natural' of 'Natural Law' gets its meaning. As Edward Feser has observed, "It is widely assumed that the analysis and justification of fundamental moral claims can be conducted without reference to at least the more contentious issues of metaphysics. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Aquinas, for whom natural law ... is 'natural' precisely because it derives from human nature, conceived of in Aristotelian essentialist terms".¹⁶ Natural law is "natural" because, as a theory about morality, it defines morality largely (but not exclusively) in terms of human nature. As such, it has nothing to do with the idea that somehow we can discern morality by an examination of "nature" or from mere physical reality.

¹⁴ David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), x.

¹⁵ Some realists might argue that there is cause for hope for philosophical realism in as much as certain contemporary philosophers are beginning to champion versions of it. In addition to the Oderberg text cited in note 14, one might consider these works as hopeful signs: Edward Feser, ed. *Aristotle and Method and Metaphysics* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Plagrave Macmillan, 2013); John Peterson, *Introduction to Scholastic Realism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999). In addition, many contemporary Thomist are celebrating the works of Edward Feser, including *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneword, 2010); *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2014); *Neo-Scholastic Essays* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2015) as well as his prolific blogging at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com>. Historically, of course, there are numerous works championing Thomistic realism. See my bibliography at www.richardghowe.com/index_htm_files/BibliographyonClassicalPhilosophy.pdf.

¹⁶ Feser, *Aquinas*, 174.

Several important metaphysical doctrines are tied up in Aquinas's understanding of nature in general and human nature in particular; much of which he adopted from Aristotle but with his own critical metaphysical additions and modifications.¹⁷ For Aquinas (as with Aristotle) the nature of a thing not only is that metaphysical constituent of a thing that makes the thing what it is, but it also sets that thing on a trajectory of development.¹⁸ As a living thing grows and matures, it does so, if unimpeded, towards its proper end or goal or *telos*. Aquinas understands this development to be the actualizations of perfections that exist potentially in the thing by virtue of its nature. This is easy to see in living things. An acorn grows into an oak tree. In so growing and developing, the potentialities within the acorn, by virtue of the nature it has, are actualized; aiming the plant towards its proper end, achieving greater and greater perfection. But (for reasons that are beyond the scope for this paper) for these potentials to be actualized is to say that they are made to be or to exist. The move toward a thing's proper end (i.e., the move towards a thing's perfection) is a move to the realization of being or existence itself. As the plant grows it actualizes more and more of the perfections of being up to the limits of and according to the contours of its nature as an oak tree.

¹⁷ The most important innovations are Aquinas's notion of existence (*esse*) and his notion of the essence/existence distinction. He deals with these in works such as *On Being and Essence* [Trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968)], *Truth* [Trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt, 3 vols. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994)], *On the Power of God* [trans. English Dominican Fathers (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004)], and the *Summa Theologiae* [cited in note 10]. For a summary of Aquinas's thinking on these notions, see my "Aquinas on Existence and the Essence/Existence Distinction" available at http://richardghowe.com/index_htm_files/EssenceExistence.pdf. Important secondary sources include: Dominic Bañez, *The Primacy of Existence in Thomas Aquinas: A Commentary in Thomistic Metaphysics*, trans. by Benjamin S. Llamzon (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966); Maurice R. Holloway, *An Introduction to Natural Theology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959); Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); George P. Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955); John Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (cited in note 6); Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); and Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1963) and his *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1968).

¹⁸ I am doing two things here in this unpacking: excluding artifacts and limiting myself to living things.

What about human beings? To be sure, just like the acorn to oak tree, a human aims at a *telos* as it grows from zygote to adult. But, for Aquinas, human perfection is more than just the human reaching his physical ends. Because of the difference between a human and an oak tree, the human contains a greater level of the perfections of being up to the limits of and according to the contours of human nature. The most important expression of human perfection is that which makes humans distinct from animals. It is that the human has a rational soul.

Aquinas argues that a human's perfection pertains to this aspect of us most importantly. Why is this so? Again, following Aristotle, Aquinas maintains that that which determines what the proper end for the human is, will have to do with that which is properly (i.e., uniquely) human. Because we have a rational soul, a human is able to be the "master of his actions" inasmuch as his actions "proceed from a deliberative will." Aquinas explains:

Of actions done by man those alone are properly called human, which are proper to man as man. Now man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions. Wherefore those actions alone are properly called human, of which man is master. Now man is master of his actions through his reason and will; whence, too, the free-will is defined as the faculty and will of reason. Therefore those actions are properly called human which proceed from a deliberate will.¹⁹

More pointedly, humans have free will and, thus have the capacity (again, unique among sensible creatures) to choose a course of action that either perfects or does violence to the nature and can choose toward or choose in opposition to advancing along this trajectory towards one's proper end.²⁰ This point is key. It is precisely because humans have this capacity of deliberation that we are moral creatures. Freedom of the will is a necessary condition for morality as such.

¹⁹ ST, I-II, Q1, art. 1.s

²⁰ In opting for free will, Aquinas is not taking sides in what we now recognize as the Calvinist/Arminian debate. In Aquinas, there are two ways for an agent to be causally related to an event or a thing. God is the primary cause of the existence (*esse*) of creation and creatures are secondary causes of things existing in a certain way. It is the difference between causing something to *be* and causing it to be *thus*. As such, his notion of free will be somewhat more robust than the notion of free will one might find in that debate.

Good and Moral Good

Another point that has been latent throughout is how Aquinas understands 'good'. I have not yet addressed the notion of 'good' because it was necessary for me to get out the preceding points before Aquinas's understanding of 'good' could make sense. Let me begin by noting that, in Aquinas, "moral good" is a subset of "good." We use the term 'good' in a wide range of ways; we talk about a good meal, a good car, a good team, a good person. While Aristotle himself seems to have disagreed, Aquinas maintained that there is something common among all these uses of the term 'good'.²¹ A good x is, as George Klubertanz says, "that which is perfect according to its kind."²² An x is a good x when it has all the perfections that an x *ought* to have by virtue of being an x. The good is that toward which all things aim. As I have said, as a thing actualizes its potentials towards its *telos*, those actualizations are the perfections of its being. Achieving its good is acquiring more being. This means that, for Aquinas, 'being' and 'good' are convertible. (This is why, by the way, that God is good. He is good because He is infinite being.)

Moral good is a narrower concept. Morality has to do with a human choosing an action that perfects the human towards what a human *ought* to be by virtue of the kind of thing a human

²¹ Aristotle says "The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one Idea." [*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 6, 1096^b25, trans. W. D. Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 940] I do not take Aristotle to mean that there is no one thing towards which all actions ultimately aim. He says as much in this very context in his discussion of the good being finality. "We call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else." [1097^a34] It remains, however, that Aristotle fails to metaphysically account for what happiness is. Granted that happiness is the *telos* of human actions, he never seems to account for this beyond the fact that humans are what we are by virtue of our Form. As far as it goes, Aristotle could say nothing else given that he does not have a higher category than Form in his metaphysics. Aristotle says "So, too, there are many senses in which a thing is said to be, but all refer to one starting point" and then goes to connect all things that are said to be to substance. It will take Aquinas's notion existence (*esse*) and his understanding of the convertibility of 'being' and 'good' to ultimately make sense of the common notion of the term 'good'. See Jan A. Aertsen, "The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas," *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 449-470.

²² George P. Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 199.

is, i.e., because of his nature. What is morally good for a human to do is tethered explicitly to what it is to *be* a human. We can see, therefore that not only is morality unique to humans among sensible creatures, but it also follows that God is not a moral being. This is so because God does not choose a course of action to perfect Himself as He aims at a *telos*. God does not have a *telos* and cannot be perfected because He already is infinite being itself—*ipsum esse subsistens*; substantial existence itself.

No: Morality Does Not Need God in Order to Be Objective

Let me now directly address the issue before us. In what sense can morality be objective without God? First, both the Thomist and the standard apologetic view agree that God is not epistemologically necessary for morality. All agree that it is possible for an atheist to know that it is wrong to murder. This is so even when the atheist cannot fully understand *why* it is wrong.²³

Second, because mankind's good is defined primarily in terms of the perfection of his nature, what is good for him will be good for him as a matter of fact. Now, to say this much still does not distinguish Aquinas's view from the standard apologetic view inasmuch as everyone would agree that being virtuous is good for a person's soul and will contribute to human flourishing collectively speaking. What I think the Thomist might resist is when the standard apologetic approach is worded in such a way as to suggest that these objective goods cannot be regarded as goods by the atheist. Along these lines, if someone remarked that this was a good knife because it had such a sharp blade, what sense would it make for another to say "Who are you to say that a knife ought to have a sharp blade?" The question is nonsensical as a matter of

²³ This point is continually missed by atheists and general audiences who listen to debates on God and morality. Michael Shermer, after having summarized the moral argument for God thus "humans are moral beings and animals are not. Where did we get this moral drive? Through the ultimate moral being—God" goes on to misunderstand the argument by concluding after his analysis "Apparently you *can* be good without God." [Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God*. Second Edition. (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2000), 98]

principle. Whatever it is to be a knife, then to be a good knife is to possess all those perfections that a knife ought to have by virtue of being a knife. By analogy, certain questions like "Who are you to say that I (as a human) ought to do this certain action?" The question can be nonsensical as a matter of principle. (I am not suggesting that one could not come up with a question that makes perfect sense like "Who are you to say that I ought to listen only to country music?") But when it comes to many of the human virtues like honesty, fidelity, and courage, it is not as though we have not been having this conversation for over 2,500 years as to what constitutes a good person. For Aquinas, I think it is fair to say that the oft referenced sentiment in Dostoevskii's novel just is not true.²⁴

Consider how this might compare to our relationship to other aspects of reality. Gravity is a real thing. It affects the Christian and the atheist alike. As such, it is objective. It does not matter whether the atheist realizes *why* there is gravity or, for that matter *how* it is that gravity affects us. It is enough that it does, and the atheist cannot help but know this. In a similar way, morality is real. It affects the Christian and the atheist alike. As such, it is objective. It does not matter whether the atheist realizes *why* there is morality (or, for that matter *how* it is that morality affects us). It is enough that it does and the atheist cannot help but know this. What is more, it is precisely because morality is objectively real that Natural Law Theory can serve as a viable approach to issues of public morality in the midst of religious or philosophical diversity.

Last, if Aquinas is right that free will is a necessary condition for morality, then any philosophy of human action that includes a sufficiently rich notion of free will can have morality,

²⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point, 1990). The translation says "'But,' I asked, 'how will man be after that? Without God and the future life? It means everything is permitted now, one can do anything?'" [<https://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei-volkov-dostoevsky/> accessed 02/09/24] Compare the Constance Garnett translation: "'But what will become of men then?' I asked him, 'without God and immortal life? All things are lawful then, they can do what they like?'" [*Great Books of the Western World*, Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed. in chief (Chicago: William Benton Publishers, 1952), vol. 52, p. 312.

at least in principle. It should be noted that Aristotle's god, despite the fact that his arguments for god's existence are picked up by Aquinas almost verbatim, bears little resemblance to the God of Christianity. Thus, for all intents and purposes regarding the current project, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is an ethics without God, or at least without a god that any classical Christian would recognize.²⁵ To suggest that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not an objective morality in any sense of the term seems, to me, to be clearly false.

Yes: Morality Does Need God in Order to Be Objective

One way in which morality would need God in order to be objective is the way anything would need God in order to have any attribute. It needs God before it can even exist. Morality has to do with human actions. Being a morally good person includes choosing those actions that perfect the human along the trajectory of and towards his proper *telos*. The human only has that *telos* because of his nature and he only has that nature because it was created by God. Without God's creation, there would not exist any humans to be morally good. In so many words, a discussion about whether morality needs God in order to be objective amounts to a discussion of cosmological argument, specifically Aquinas's *Secunda Via*—his Second Way.

Second, it is not only the case that God is the creator of all the elements that make morality actual, but God is also the director of the teleology of all things in His creation. In Aquinas, God's relationship to the creation is that He has caused it to come into being and that

²⁵ Aristotle's forty-seven or fifty-five unmoved movers bear little resemblance to the God of classical theism in that they are neither personal nor creators. Nevertheless, Aristotle does argue for a single first mover. "So the unmoved first mover is one both in definition and in number." [*Metaphysics*, Λ (12), 8, 1074b35, trans. W. D. Ross, in McKeon, p. 884] This concurs with his earlier conclusions about God. "Life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God. ... It is clear from what has been said that there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. It has been shown also that this substance cannot have any magnitude but is without parts and indivisible. ... It has also been shown that it is impassive and unalterable." [*Metaphysics*, Λ (12), 7, 1072^b27-1072^a11, trans. W. D. Ross in McKeon, pp. 880-881]

He sustains the creation in existence at every instance of its existence. But none of this excludes the reality of secondary causes within creation. By the same token, even though the *telos* of all things is by virtue of the respective natures of those things (which is to say, they have inherent teleology), it is also the case for Aquinas that all things have an extrinsic teleology, being directed to their proper ends by God who superintends all of His creation. This is Aquinas's *Quinta Via*—his Fifth Way.²⁶

Third, the precepts of morality take on their strongest obligatory aspect when they are understood to be the commands of God. Not only ought we act in certain ways because it perfects our being, but God, being the Creator and Superintendent of all his creation has commanded us to act in such a way as to not only facilitate our own flourishing, but also to effect the flourishing of the human community and, by extension, to fulfil our role in our relationship with the rest of His creation. These goals are what God has intended for us. Given the fact that He is our Creator and Sustainer, He has the authority to demand our obedience. This is the nature of law as "a rule and measure of acts whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting" as it manages certain behaviors such that, as these behaviors are repeated and become habits, they develop into the virtues. Aquinas goes on: "A private person cannot lead another to virtue efficaciously, for he can only advise, and if his advice be not taken, it has no coercive power, such as the law should have, in order to prove an efficacious inducement to virtue. ... But this

²⁶ "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." Feser, "Does Morality Depend on God?" referenced in note 2. See also his "Teleology: A Shoppers Guide" in *Neo-Scholastic Essays* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2015), 28-48.

coercive power is vested in the whole people or in some public personage, to whom it belongs to inflict penalties."²⁷

Fourth, it is sometimes not clear to us what some of our moral obligations might be. While a great deal can be discerned from understanding our natures, God's Special Revelation supplements our moral data base. This is especially needed given the fact that we are fallen and can find ourselves often explaining away what otherwise might clearly be our moral duty.

Fifth, all of us have experienced the fact that merely knowing what is the right thing to do does not mean we have the power to live the right way. Romans 7 and 8 attest to the fact that, without God's Holy Spirit, we will find ourselves ultimately incapable of living right.²⁸

Last, we know from Special Revelation that our *telos* is not confined to the natural end within this life. We also have a supernatural *telos* of eternal life in communion with God. But this ultimate purpose is only achievable because of God's grace.

Conclusion

In order to sufficiently address Aquinas's understanding of morality, it was necessary to show how this understanding relates to the broader question of his Natural Law Theory. Further, it was necessary to discuss other metaphysical doctrines such as 'nature', 'teleology', 'free will', 'good', and 'moral good'. The sense in which morality did not need God had to do with the epistemology of morality, the objectivity of human good, and free will. The sense in which

²⁷ ST I-II, Q90, art. 3, ad. 3. This helps distinguish between what God commands and why God commands it and goes toward answering the false dilemma of the Euthyphro Dilemma. As Edward Feser observes "We need to distinguish the issue of the *content* of moral obligations from the issue of what give them their *obligatory force*. Divine command is relevant to the second issue, but not the first." ["God, Obligation, and the Euthyphro Dilemma," <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/10/god-obligation-and-euthyphro-dilemma.html> accessed 02/09/24, emphasis in original]

²⁸ It is interesting to notice how Aristotle comes up short in trying to explain how humans can still do what they know at one level to be the wrong action. It should remind the Christian of Romans 7. "It is plain, then, that incontinent people must be said to be in a similar condition to men asleep, mad, or drunk." [*Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 3, 1147^a17, trans. Ross, in McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 1041]

morality did need God had to do with the existence of morality, the teleology of morality, Divine commands, moral knowledge, moral power, and man's supernatural end.

Certainly there is much more that needs to be said regarding Aquinas's view of morality. Each one of the metaphysical points that give rise to his view need themselves to be more fully explained. It is hoped, however, that this brief summary will suffice to set the broader context in which those additional doctrines can be explored.