

**§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology**  
**Lecture 22**  
**The Moral Argument's Conclusion**

Last week I was at Ohio State University for a Veritas Forum which turned out to be unexpectedly significant. I had a debate scheduled with an atheist philosophy professor at OSU named Kevin Scharp. The subject was “Is there evidence for God?” I thought like most of these Veritas Forum events that this would be a sort of friendly dialogue where we would each speak for 15 minutes and then we would have a moderated conversation.

Well, I have not experienced such ferocity in a critic since I had those dialogues with Lawrence Krauss in Australia. Kevin Scharp had prepared very, very well for this dialogue. He made a point of letting me know before the event began that he had listened to all eight years of our Reasonable Faith podcasts – all of them! He was familiar with the debate with Sean Carroll, with Alex Rosenberg, as well as other material. He had PowerPoints and charts to show. He went a mile-a-minute, and attacked not only the six arguments that I presented in my opening statement but all the other arguments I’ve ever presented anywhere! So it was really a very good contest. Many people have asked me, “What would it be like if you were to have a debate with someone who really took the time to prepare?” Well, this is your chance to find out because this is going to be on YouTube as soon as it’s edited. I think that it will be a great tool for dissecting and talking about, hitting the pause button, replaying, thinking about it. It was a very substantive discussion. I will say something more about the content of it later on in the class today because I want that to be part of the podcast because we can benefit from Scharp’s critique of all of my arguments.

Today we are going to wrap up our discussion of the moral argument for God’s existence. The last time we looked at a defense of premise (2) that objective moral values and duties exist and responded to some objections to that premise. In particular, the objection from evolutionary psychology which says that because our moral beliefs are the product of evolution, and evolution (or natural selection) is aimed at survival value, not at truth, we can have no confidence in the truth of our moral beliefs and therefore could not be justified in believing premise (2).

I responded to this in a three-fold way. First I pointed out that, in fact, there is no plausible coherent socio-biological account of our moral beliefs. This defeater really does not exist, and we shouldn’t let people bluff us by asserting that it does.

Secondly, I pointed out that the objection assumes that atheism is true and therefore begs the question. Yes, if God does not exist then our beliefs are shaped by a mechanism that does not aim at truth but mere survival. In fact, that is the first premise of the argument – if God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist. But the atheist

cannot be justified in simply assuming that therefore God does not exist. If God does exist then he might well guide the evolutionary process so that we would arrive at moral beliefs that are for the most part true as well as have survivability. So the objection that because our moral beliefs have evolved – they are aimed at survival not at truth – presupposes the truth of atheism, and that begs the question.

Finally, number three, I argued that the objection is ultimately self-defeating. All of our beliefs on naturalism are the product of evolution and therefore are selected for by their survival value, not for their truth. That would include the belief in naturalism itself. So the objection is self-defeating – it contains within itself its own defeater.<sup>1</sup> You cannot be rational in affirming naturalism because if naturalism is correct all of your beliefs are unreliable including your belief in naturalism. This is, of course, Alvin Plantinga's famous evolutionary argument against naturalism.

So I do not think that the objection to the second premise from socio-biology or evolutionary psychology is a good one.

We finished our class last time by talking about an objection, or a concern, that someone raised based upon the subjectivity of our moral experience. Since our moral experience by definition is subjective, doesn't that mean that moral values and duties are subjective? And I suggested that that doesn't follow. My experience of the physical world around me is subjective – feeling certain things, seeing certain things, hearing or smelling certain things. Those are all subjective experiences. But that doesn't mean that the external world of objects which I experience is therefore subjective. The object of experience can be objective and real and mind-independent even if the experience itself is something that is by definition subjective.

I want to share with you a letter that I received the day after our Defenders class. I want to emphasize that this letter does not come from a beginner – a novice. This comes from the man who is responsible for transcribing all of our Defenders podcasts. He has been doing this for years. He has transcribed all of Defenders 2 and each week he does another lesson in Defenders 3. So this is a person who has a good grasp of apologetics material. But listen to what he writes.

Bill,

Just wanted to give some feedback on Defenders and suggest you add something to your moral argument premise 2 presentation when you talk about this in the future to clear up a confusing matter. Now, realize I've read and listened to your material on this countless times over the years. Yet, I've been misunderstanding this for a long time now (and in a similar way Michelle seemed to be). I have to

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<sup>1</sup> 5:06

believe this is something a lot of people are confused about. It was the confusion equating the words "experience" and "subjective" - specifically equating "moral experience" to "subjective morality".

But the light bulb finally went on for me when I heard you explain this in the following way (I've not heard you put it quite like this before, maybe I just missed it). You said: "Obviously my experience is subjective. That is what experience is! But the \*object\* of the experience isn't therefore subjective." You only needed to say those three sentences - now I finally get it! What I think needed to be explicitly explained when going over premise 2 is this distinction between the moral experience itself and the OBJECT of that experience. It is implied in your analogy with the five senses and the physical realm, but for dolts like me you have to spell it out :) Seeing a chair with my eyes is just as much a "subjective experience" as sensing that murder is wrong - but that does not mean the OBJECT of those experiences are subjective (murder is objectively wrong just as the chair is objectively real even though I had a subjective experience of both). It all makes sense now.

Knowing this also helped with the "flat Earth" analogy Michelle brought up. I finally realized that this wasn't a question about subjective vs. objective at all, but rather was merely dealing with INCORRECT versus CORRECT belief regarding an objective truth. Just as flat-Earthers had an incorrect belief regarding the objective truth of a round Earth, so too the slave traders of the 18th century held an incorrect belief regarding the objective truth that slavery is wrong.<sup>2</sup>

P.S. tell Michelle "thank you" for me. I hope she doesn't feel she was asking a question no one else cared about - because it was the one I was waiting for and the answer was definitely helpful (to me anyway). It solves a nagging problem for me because I never fully "got it" until now.

It just goes to show that when you've got a question, it is probably something that somebody else is bothered by as well. So don't be afraid to speak up.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* It is interesting that the Chinese character for "soul" is "Devil-says" – two characters: "devil" and "says." That gives us an understanding that the fall of man when they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil . . . our soul has realigned from "God says" to "Devil says." It is all about alignment issues – our subjectivity and the objective truth is an alignment issue.

*Dr. Craig:* Very nice. That is nicely said. Our subjective beliefs can be misaligned, can't they? Or they can be correctly aligned with the objective truth about these matters which is supplied by God himself – his nature and his commands that express that nature.

*Student:* It is interesting that that was brought up because I was wanting to ask a question concerning humanity's history. We know that humanity is separated in different cultures and things like that. Today when we find tribes in other countries we find that certain acts that they do are horrific so, for example, tribes that practice cannibalism and things like that. I was wanting to ask that question. If we separated so much but we believe that objective moral values exist then I am guessing you answered my question. We have a subjective experience of those moral values so therefore different cultures are unaligned correctly with those morals.

*Dr. Craig:* That's right. And it is no part of the moral argument to say that our moral faculties are infallible any more than our sense faculties are infallible. You see water on the highway ahead on a hot day and it turns out to be a mirage. The stick in the jar of water looks bent but you know it is not. There are optical illusions and auditory illusions. So it is no part of the moral argument to say that our moral perceptions are infallible. This is especially true when you think of the sinfulness and the fallenness of man. It is no wonder that people would be involved in perverse practices given their alienation from God and their estrangement from him.

Nevertheless, I am told by anthropologists that the commonality of the moral codes among the peoples of the world is really quite striking. They may differ in ways in which these fundamental values come to expression culturally, but at root there is a large dimension of commonality. Take cannibalism, for example. From what I've been told, tribes in New Guinea, for example, that practice cannibalism agree with the Christian ethic that you should love your neighbor as yourself. Therefore they would never cannibalize a member of their own tribe. But they just didn't regard people in other tribes as neighbors. These were foreigners or strangers and so they could be subject to cannibalism. They were enemies. But there was the underlying value of loving your neighbor as yourself. Similarly, a value like modesty is probably universal but in some cultures a woman's going bare-breasted is not immodest, but in others just showing her bare arms is considered to be immodest or showing her earlobes is immodest. So there can be different cultural expressions of underlying commonalities, I think.

*Student:* Another thing is that concerning . . . we have that many cultures or many places share commonalities in their morals, but what about the punishment when they go against those morals? For example, in some countries if someone murders then they put them to death.<sup>3</sup> But in countries like here you might be put to death or you could be in prison for

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<sup>3</sup> 15:00

fifty years or things like that. In other countries, in some Muslim countries, for being immodest you get harsh punishment, but yet here which is more liberal we don't get any punishment at all.

*Dr. Craig:* That is obviously a reflection of people's different conceptions of what constitutes justice and what would be an appropriate punishment for the crime.

I would say, however (and here is a caution), especially in Western society, many people have given up the idea of retributive justice all together. When a criminal is punished it is not to pay him back for his crime. It is either to reform his character so that he gets better, or it is to sequester him in jail so that he can't hurt anybody else. But the purpose of the punishment is not retributive. That would obviously affect what sort of punishment would be doled out for different sorts of criminals.

*Student:* Something I've learned reading Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastics: experience doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is not like you just have experience simpliciter. Experience is always experience of something. It is essentially intentional. It is outward directed. So when you are having a moral experience, what are you experiencing? You are pointing outside already. It seems that the very claim of moral experience seems to imply some sort of . . . if you don't believe in objective moral values, what is it you are experiencing?

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, what are you experiencing? Notice the word that he used – intentionality. That is a technical term that is worth adding to your vocabulary if you don't know it already. This is the “of-ness” or “about-ness” of something. Thoughts have intentionality. I can think “of” my wife, or I can think “about” my summer vacation. His point is that subjective experience exhibits intentionality as well – it is an experience of something else. So there is an object of that experience.

*Student:* I know you kind of touched on this in your newsletter, but it has to do with defending a premise. You were saying you were going into how, as long as you can show that there is a greater probability that is correct rather than incorrect, then you can use that as a way to prove that it is true. I am just wondering if you could expound on that because . . . I guess I know the person you debated must have brought that up. But I was wondering about that myself.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, I will when I finish this argument. Then I am going to reflect on the objections raised by Professor Scharp.

*Student:* I just wanted to touch on the idea that evolution caused moral fiber within the human. It seems to me if really we are saying survival of the fittest is the origin of our moral standard, it doesn't seem at all to add up. For example, in certain species of fish they eat their young as a means of survival. In fact, that helps the population of the fish.

But I can't think of any example in human culture where they would eat their young as a normal course of a day's events. It just seems there is so many examples where if you are looking at only survival of the fittest so many behaviors would be the norm that are not the norm. It just speaks again to something beyond just that objective of survival.

*Dr. Craig:* I think you are right to challenge this. In the article that I quoted from by Jeffrey Schloss, he particularly looks at evolutionary explanations of altruism where someone does some self-sacrificial act for a person or organism that is not its own progeny and therefore has no evolutionary interest whatsoever in it. Yet, altruism has evolved among human beings. How do you explain that in purely evolutionary terms? Jeff says there is no explanation in the literature that effectively explains the value of altruism.

*Student:* I do think in most cultures if a mother dies it is common for another woman to assume the responsibilities of the mother and not just let the infant die.<sup>4</sup>

*Dr. Craig:* That would be altruistic behavior because she has no genetic investment in that other woman's child.

*Student:* In fact it would be quite a burden as we all know.

*Dr. Craig:* Right. Exactly. It actually places a burden on her. That is true.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's draw our conclusion. From the two premises of the argument it follows that God exists. The moral argument complements the contingency and cosmological and design arguments by telling us about the moral nature of the Creator and Designer of the universe. It gives us a personal, necessarily existent being who is not only perfectly good but whose nature is the standard of goodness and whose commands constitute our moral duties. So it really rounds out the case for theism in a way that the other arguments do not.

I have to say that in my experience the moral argument is probably the most effective argument for the existence of God. I say this somewhat grudgingly because my favorite is the cosmological argument. But the fact is that cosmological and teleological arguments don't really grab people where they live. You can dismiss or ignore the cosmological evidence for the beginning of the universe or the fine-tuning of the universe, but the moral argument on the other hand is not so easily brushed aside. Every day you get up you answer by how you treat other people whether you think there are objective moral values and duties. It is an unavoidable question.

In answer to the question that we began with several weeks ago – can we be good without God? - I think the answer is “no.” We cannot truly be good without God, but if we can in some measure be good then it follows logically that God exists.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I’d like to try to point out that it seems like the moral argument . . . our obligation is God’s character and nature. Therefore, for him to be just he has to make a way for us . . . because you wouldn’t hold somebody accountable to being something they are not. That is what he is doing for a fallen nature. Therefore, for him to still maintain the moral obligation means he has provided a way to us for us to partake of his nature and be transformed.

*Dr. Craig:* I think this does have intimate connections with the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of the atonement where you have the demands of God’s justice need to be met but then also his love which would bring reconciliation.

### **END DISCUSSION**

In our closing minutes, let me say something about the critique that Professor Scharp offered at Ohio State University of my arguments for God’s existence. It was a very odd critique because for the most part he didn’t attack any of the premises in the arguments. Instead, what he argued is that all of the arguments – all ten or so of them – suffer from what he called “weakness.” That is to say, they don’t inspire sufficient confidence for belief in God. It wasn’t that they have false premises or are illogical, it is just that they’re weak. They don’t give you sufficient confidence for belief in God.

Now, why did he think that? It had to do with the criteria that I give for what constitutes a good deductive argument. Does anybody remember what I said the criteria are for a deductive argument to be a good one?

*Student:* You had described how you weren’t looking for it to be absolutely 100% guaranteed by all to say this is absolutely true. Just that it was more plausible than implausible. And the premises had to follow.

OK, very good. Excellent. A good deductive argument needs to be logically valid (that is to say, from the premises the conclusion follows by the rules of logic).<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the premises need to be more plausible than not. The premises need to be more plausible than the negation of those premises. If those conditions are met then I said you have a good argument.

Scharp attacked this by saying, *Suppose that the premises are more plausible than not so they give you a 51% confidence in the truth of the premises. That is not enough to*

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<sup>5</sup> 25:09

*engender confidence to believe in God.* If you have only 51% confidence that God exists, that is not enough to believe in God. So the arguments are all too weak, in his view, even if they are successful.

What is wrong with that response? A couple of things.

When I said that for an argument to be a good one it had to be logically valid and its premises need to be more plausible than not, I was setting a minimum for what an argument needs to be to be a good one. I wasn't in any way suggesting that the arguments that I offer have premises that are merely 51% probable. What I am saying is that they are at least that. I would say that these premises in many cases are extremely probable. So this just sets a lower threshold for goodness of an argument. But it isn't [*inaudible*] premises that are only 51% probable. Think of the premise that "if the universe began to exist, the universe has a transcendent cause." I think that is 100% probable. That has a probability of 1, I would say. I couldn't imagine why he thought that I was doing anything more than setting a minimum floor for what constitutes a good argument.

Moreover, and here is the second point, in a deductive argument the probability of the premises taken together is not equal to the probability of the conclusion. Rather the conclusion will be at least as probable as the premises. It will be equal to or greater than the probability of the premises. Even if the premises are only 51% probable, that doesn't mean the conclusion is only 51% probable. It means a conclusion is at least 51% probable. I would say in the arguments I gave it is considerably more than that.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I know, with arguing over the Internet, I just find that people who are really dogmatically committed to a position can find some way to harmonize, some way of absolutely forcing the facts to fit their worldview. You can, of course, resort to some hardcore *ad hoc* harmonization. But that doesn't rescue your argument. It doesn't mean that therefore you are right or you have been proven correctly. People just don't get that.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that is quite right. What was odd to me is that he didn't dispute really the cogency of any of the arguments. On his view, it seems to me, I had demonstrated that it is at least 51% probable that God exists. Here is an atheist who thinks that it is probable that God exists. The title of the debate was "Is there evidence for God?" The answer would be "yes," and he would admit it. It was really odd.

*Student:* Two things. You could probably add to the good argument its explanatory value which would enhance the probabilities.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that would be relevant to an inductive argument, but here I am talking about a good deductive argument. I think this is all you need for a deductive argument to be good. If you've got these two things then you should accept the conclusion.

*Student:* The second thing would be: then he is at less than 50% for believing you should be an atheist.

*Dr. Craig:* Yeah, that's right. Atheism is improbable on his view. Atheism is probably false.

*Student:* I think it is interesting – didn't you say he is a philosophy professor?<sup>6</sup> The simple things that you pointed out as far as a deductive argument are pretty much the standard. That is with people being in philosophy at all, whether a Christian or otherwise. I think that is why so many non-Christian philosophers have actually given respect for your arguments and the way that they have to attack your premises because if your premises are true then it follows. He just basically says philosophy isn't OK.

*Dr. Craig:* These are not strange criteria. These are, as you say, the standard sorts of criteria.

*Student:* Basically he is attacking his own field. That's the way it looks like to me.

*Dr. Craig:* I think he misunderstood me. I can't prove that, but I think that he did not understand I was setting a minimum floor for the argument to be good. He thought I was claiming that my arguments have premises that are merely more plausible than not. But obviously a premise can be more plausible than not by being 70%, 80%, 95%. All of those meet the standard.

*Student:* For me, you are not basing your belief in God on just one of these arguments. Let's just say it was only 51%. And then you add to it another one that is 51%. Now you are at maybe 75%. A third one you are at 85%. By the time we get to ten arguments we are at 99.9999%.

*Dr. Craig:* Do you hear what he is saying? I didn't think of this in the dialogue, so I didn't say it. But afterwards, this is exactly right, and it occurred to me. Timothy McGrew, who is a professor of philosophy at the University of Western Michigan, emphasizes that even deductive arguments that, say, make God's existence 20% probable (that's all, just 20%), if you accumulate these arguments – 20%, 15%, 30%, 35% - pretty soon, as you say, the cumulative probability of these independent arguments is way over 50%. This is the way a cumulative case is built in a court of law, isn't it? No single piece of evidence might be enough to convict beyond reasonable doubt, but when you put all of the cumulative evidence together then it can be beyond reasonable doubt that the accused is guilty. So the very fact that I got around ten arguments, each of which increases the probability of God's existence, would, I think, make it very plausible to think that this does give you great confidence that God exists.

## **END DISCUSSION**

We are out of time. Next time we will wrap up our discussion of natural theology by looking at the famous ontological argument for God's existence.<sup>7</sup>