

A Secular Morality and a Transcendent Set of Ethics:  
How We Can Be “Good Without God”

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**Abstract:** One of the most pressing questions in western philosophy is “can we be good without God?” This question expresses an anthropocentric concern for establishing a morality and transcendent set of ethics outside of a divine fiat. This paper explores those concerns with a rebuttal of the Thomist concept of Moral Law as found in his *Summa Theologica* and argues that humans function morally with no need for divine revelation. A brief framework for preventing relativism in ethics and empirically establishing morality via the work of Michael Shermer and Sam Harris constitutes the rest of this paper.

**Keywords:** morality, secular, ethics, Nielsen, Thomism

“But it is truly a sin to go on fixating on our petty little differences over territory, sexual morality, and other theological minutia while failing to acknowledge that there can be no *greater ethical failure* than allowing any of our differences—**religious or secular**—to make [the destruction of our home]...one day truly come to pass.”<sup>1</sup>

When considering the various human-caused travesties in the last few centuries or so, one notices that they all involve people being divided up into factions and causing suffering and pain against those who represent other factions. Now, it would be foolish to state that religion is the sole cause of all these factions and travesties but it certainly does play a part in contributing to the various ideologies that fuel these factions and divisions among humanity. There are scholars such as Karen Armstrong and Diana Eck whose principle work is to get adherents of various religions to have dialogue and find common ground with each

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Epstein, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 150

other, such as the practice of compassion and other encompassing values and virtues that all religions share.<sup>2</sup> However, it is the opinion of this author that what we need most, along with the above-mentioned dialogue, is a secular morality and an ethical system that does not place emphasis on religion or god but rather on the cooperation, thriving, and happiness of humanity.

As expected, there are theoretical obstacles to overcome to accomplish such a feat. The primary obstacle is St. Thomas's idea of Natural Law that points to a Law-Giver, i.e. God. God dictates all law that cannot be known naturally via revelation and thus dictates how humans should live.<sup>3</sup> Kai Nielsen has an adequate argument against this idea and it will be discussed later in the essay. Once the idea of a Natural Law emanating from God has been properly dealt with, the idea that one can have a transcendent ethical code without God will be expounded on with the help of Michael Shermer, and in conclusion, this will be followed with a discussion on Sam Harris' work on the science of morality. Therefore, it is the thesis of this paper that one can have a secular morality and a transcendent set of ethics; moreover, that humans can and should be good without "god."

Many Christian writers and thinkers including C.S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity* support the idea of Natural Law as stated by Thomas Aquinas. Lewis opens his book with a story about the knowledge of inherent fairness or "a rule of

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<sup>2</sup> One can see Eck in action at [pluralism.org](http://pluralism.org), a website that represents the project she is the director of at Harvard University, which promotes dialogue and understanding between the religions of the world, especially in the U.S.A. Armstrong, who is a prolific author, has recently written a book called, "The Case for God," in which she argues that religion has its respective place in society among the human functions and ways of knowing. Armstrong is also active in the "Charter for Compassion" project sponsored by TED. See <http://charterforcompassion.org/site/> for more information.

<sup>3</sup> As laid out by Aquinas in his tome, *Summa Theologiae*, I-IIae.91, via <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2091.htm> on November, 13th, 2013.

fair play,” that he says most people know about and expect others to know of it as well.<sup>4</sup> He notes that unlike laws of nature like gravity or biological laws, this law is the “Law of Human Nature” and humans are free to disobey it.<sup>5</sup> He concludes by stating that there are two fundamental “truths” with regards to the Law of Human Nature: “...that Human Beings...[think] that they might ought to behave a certain way...and secondly, that they do not in fact behave that way.”<sup>6</sup> However, this law and the desire to follow is what Lewis will use to point to the existence of God, namely that there is an objective law given by an objective Law-Giver and the pressure to follow it is evidence of God at work in the Universe ala the argument given by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>7</sup>

In Kai Nielsen’s book, *Ethics Without God*, the entire first forty pages or so are dedicated to refuting the Thomist idea of Natural Law. Nielsen establishes the idea as the following: “...the ultimate grounds for the moral law must be found in God, for there can be no laws without a lawgiver and where moral laws are concerned, God alone has the power and right to issue commands to his subjects.” Following this passage, he notes that Jewish and Christian moralists are in extensive agreement upon this point.<sup>8</sup>

Nielsen also notes that some adherents of this idea depart from other religious thinkers when they claim that humans still have “a natural capacity to

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<sup>4</sup> C.S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2000 [1952]), 3

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 2000, 4

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1-28

<sup>8</sup> Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God*, Revised Ed., (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 25

distinguish good from evil” despite the sin from Adam and Eve.<sup>9</sup> In order to short circuit this conversation about Natural Law that points to a divine law-giver, Nielsen writes that Aquinas insists that our moral obligations rest on our natural sense of morality and in a more removed sense, the providence of God. Also, Aquinas maintains that the ultimate source of “God’s goodness” is his “reason and not his will.”<sup>10</sup> Nielsen’s rebuttal of the previous two points will now be discussed.

The first point of Nielsen’s argument against Thomistic Natural Law is that humans have a natural sense of good and evil. However, he asks that if we state our natural inclinations are towards good and reason, then how do we objectively know that all of our natural inclinations are actually good and reasonable? Features such as “cruelty, vanity, love of power, acquisitiveness” are not good and seem to be natural inclinations that most humans have.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, how can we know that natural inclinations are ways of knowing anything about the universe, other than that we naturally feel certain ways about certain actions and ideas? Nielsen insists that the Thomists agree with him here and they answer that this is where the providence and revelation of God comes in to provide further law to act upon.<sup>12</sup>

The second major point of the Thomist argument is that the goodness of God rests upon his reason and not his will; reason is likewise the source of morality and the font of ethics. Nielsen mentions that humans want to know that the source of

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<sup>9</sup> Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* 1990, 25. Those who would argue against humans having any “natural” sense of good and evil would include John Calvin or at least his followers, who claim that humans are totally “depraved” because we have been infected with the sin of Adam and Eve. C.S. Lewis would be on the side that we can naturally know some good and evil so he would be in the latter league that Nielsen mentions.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Nielsen, *Ethics Without God*, 34

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 30-32

these laws and commands are good because they are rational and reasonable in lieu of being issued by some “divine Caligula” in the sky.<sup>13</sup> But, Nielsen asks, how do we know—or did Aquinas know—that the ultimate measure of human law and action is reason? How do we know that it is based on rational principles and not just a custom or an uninformed preference that has developed over time?<sup>14</sup> Nielsen agrees that reason should be the basis of law but reality tells him that this is not always so. It is agreed upon that Aquinas and the Natural Law Moralists who follow him expect to agree upon a certain set of “stipulative definitions that would rule out the possibility that there would be a law that would be merely a divine fiat.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, if humans are to know that the divine commands issued from the Divine Lawgiver are good and to be followed, have we not already made a decision about what is good? That is, if we already know what good is and have made a judgment about what good is and how it should be acted upon (something that should be done), then humans are, in fact, the “measure of all things.”<sup>16</sup> In short, if God chooses the “good because his reason informs him that it is good” and humans have to judge this decision by “our own lights” then we already have a standard of “good” that exists outside of God and humanity.<sup>17</sup> Thus, a standard of “good” is already established without “God.”

So “if humans are the measure of all things,” then how did we get this ability to “measure?” From whence did it come and for that matter, from whence did

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Nielsen, 28

<sup>16</sup> Nielsen, 30-31

<sup>17</sup> Here a slight nod is made to the discussion of “good” and “God” as laid out in Plato’s *Euthyphro* (10a).

humans come? Michael Shermer argues that humans are the results of evolution and that as humans evolved, so did their morality and code of ethics. Shermer writes that his "...thesis is that morality exists outside of the human mind in the sense of being not just a trait of individual humans; but a human trait; that is, a human universal."<sup>18</sup>

Shermer states that if one thinks that humans created morality and ethics, then one is an empiricist but it was not us but our ancestors who created these "moral sentiments and behaviors." We simply adjust these standards according to our cultural preferences and the needs of the species at the given time. Thus, we have a transcendent morality that can lead to a transcendent set of ethics that does not have a divine basis but at the same time it is not based on the relativism of our given culture.<sup>19</sup> Shermer states that "Transcendent Empiricism" also has the advantage of being able to be tested and proven/disproven in a scientific lab, thus avoiding supernaturalism and all of the implications that supernaturalism brings among human beings.<sup>20</sup>

Shermer's argument rests on 8 points: Moral Naturalism, An Evolved Moral Sense, An Evolved Moral Society, The Nature of Moral Nature, Provisional Morality, Provisional Right and Wrong, and Provisional Justice, and Ennobled Evolutionary Ethics.<sup>21</sup> Moral naturalism is defined above as an "evolved moral sense" developed as a response to feeling good for doing certain things because they were beneficial

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Shermer, *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 18

<sup>19</sup> Shermer, *The Science of Good and Evil*, 2004, 19

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Shermer, 19-21

(moral) or feeling bad for doing other things because they were detrimental (immoral) to the species as they evolved over time.<sup>22</sup> An Evolved Moral Society is defined as “the more social and cultural human needs and moral feelings that are largely under cultural control.” That is, the individual, moral feelings that apply to the larger part of the hierarchy (society) are determined by human culture. Shermer defines the Nature of Moral Nature as the ability that most humans have to do the right thing for themselves and for others but sometimes, humans do the wrong thing for themselves and others. Religion was the first attempt at codifying the moral nature to keep people in check but it not need be the only one.<sup>23</sup> Provisional Morality states that “moral principles are provisionally true—that is, they apply to most people in most cultures in most circumstances most of the time.”<sup>24</sup> The other “provisional” terms fall under similar definitions as Provisional Morality. The last point is about Ennobling Evolutionary Ethics, which is defined as “the moral sense that transcends individuals and groups and belongs to the species. Moral principles exist outside of us and are products of the impersonal forces of evolution, history, and culture.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Evolutionary Ethics states that our morality and values are beyond us because they are a product of natural, “impersonal forces” and can be established on such a basis with added modification from society.

Sam Harris has a similar viewpoint to Shermer. Instead of continually deriding religion in his work on philosophical and practical grounds, Harris

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 19-20

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 20

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>25</sup> Shermer, 21

obtained a doctorate in neuroscience from UCLA and decided to propose a constructive solution to a problem he saw in the world: how to have an empirically verifiable set of ethics and a secular morality. After completing his doctorate, Harris proposed that science can determine morality and a set of ethics based on common human values and experiences.<sup>26</sup>

Harris states that his principle claim in the *Moral Landscape* is that there “are right and wrong answers to moral questions, just as there are right and wrong answers to questions of physics, and such answers may one day fall within the reach of the maturing sciences of mind.”<sup>27</sup> After establishing that moral truth may be attainable through the “sciences of mind,” he states that we can study “subjective (i.e. first-person) facts ‘objectively,’” that is dispassionately and open to counterarguments, etc.<sup>28</sup>

Harris’ principle tool for evaluating morality is what he calls the the moral landscape: “...given that there are...*real facts*...to be known about how conscious creatures experience the worst possible misery and the greatest possible well-being, it is objectively true to say that there are right and wrong answers to moral questions....”<sup>29</sup> On the landscape, there are many peaks and valleys; these peaks and valleys correspond to said states of suffering and well-being. The deepest valleys on the landscape represent the epitome of human suffering and the highest peaks represent the epitome of human well-being.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Harris states that he is

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<sup>26</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010)

<sup>27</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape* 2010, 28

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 30

<sup>30</sup> Harris, *The Moral Landscape* 2010, 1-22



going above and beyond Evolutionary Ethics because as he somewhat jokingly references, “if the dictates of evolution were the foundation of subjective well-being, most men would discover no higher calling in life than to make daily contributions to their local sperm bank.”<sup>31</sup> Therein, Harris’ argument rests on the contributions of neuroscience and philosophy: if we can measure the states of the brain when one is at maximum well-being and when one is at the deepest valley of suffering, then these “subjective” states can be related to objective measurements and we can correlate these measurements with the Moral Landscape in order to determine a set of ethics and a morality that maximizes the best possibility for each individual.

If humans are the “measure of all things,” then how do we not fall into cultural relativism? Shermer suggests the answer is that we have developed a set of transcendent ethics instinctually over the years as a species, and that a morality can be based on that. But how can this morality be measured to make sure that it is valid and effective? Harris suggests that neuroscience and other tools such as the Moral Landscape can be used to measure and establish such standards. While there are many objections to these ideas, I hope that it is not forgotten that the need for a secular morality and set of ethics is based on the ideal of human unity. The whole reason for taking up this subject is to examine the possibilities of establishing a standard that can be agreed upon by all humans, or at least those in the U.S.A, outside of religion and god. If this standard can be established, then perhaps the usage of ideologies—religious or secular—as powerful tools to destroy the human race and planet Earth can be stopped in the name of human unity.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 13

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