

7-1-1991

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### Recommended Citation

Nelson, Mark (1991) "Naturalistic Ethics And The Argument From Evil," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol8/iss3/6>

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# NATURALISTIC ETHICS AND THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

Mark T. Nelson

Philosophical naturalism is the world view which tries to describe and explain all aspects of reality in purely natural, i.e., non-supernatural terms. Such a world view is a cluster of views usually including atheism, physicalism, radical empiricism or naturalized epistemology, and some sort of moral relativism, subjectivism or nihilism. In this paper I examine a problem which arises when the naturalist offers the argument from evil for atheism. Since the argument from evil is a moral argument it cannot be effectively employed by anyone who holds the denatured ethical theories which the naturalist typically holds. In the context of these naturalist ethical theories, the argument from evil fails to provide good reasons for either the naturalist or the theist to disbelieve in the God of theism. Obviously, this does not prove that naturalism is false, or that the argument from evil is unsound, but rather that certain naturalists' use of the argument has been misguided.

## *Introduction*

C. S. Lewis, in an account of his early life, reports of his late boyhood:

I was at this time living, like so many Atheists and Antitheists, in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with Him for creating a world. (Lewis, 1955, p. 115)

Lewis, of course, recognizes his error here: one cannot coherently believe that God doesn't exist and also be angry with him because he created a world. Other thinkers, however, seem to commit a similar error without even the mitigating excuse of adolescence. The error I have in mind consists in arguing for a form of philosophical naturalism in a certain way. In discussing this error I shall proceed as follows: I shall describe the philosophical naturalist, I shall identify her various views, including her views on the existence of God and the nature of ethics, and I shall argue that, given her view of ethics, her arguments about God are misguided.

This philosopher, whom I allege to be misguided, is perhaps best called a "naturalist;" she holds the world-view that reality is best described in purely natural, i.e., non-supernatural, non-transcendent terms. In fact, naturalism is really a cluster of views about both substantive and methodological issues: the



naturalistic or “scientific” account of reality in general, of humans in particular, of values and of judgment. Typically, this cluster includes physicalism (entailing mind/body monism), radical empiricism or “naturalized” epistemology, atheism or agnosticism, as well as some form of moral relativism or moral subjectivism. Such a view may also include commitments to nominalism and determinism.

Obviously, most members of this cluster can be, and have been, held independently of the others, yet, historically, these views seem to have had a natural affinity for each other. Jointly they constitute what William James called “tough-minded” philosophy, and they find adherents, or perhaps approximate adherents, in Lucretius, Hobbes, Hume, Russell, and Mackie. Tough-minded or not, there is a problem in certain arguments for this total view, but in order to show this, I shall need to single out two component views for examination first.

#### *Atheism and the Argument from Evil*

The first component view I shall examine is the naturalistic account of God and/or belief in God. The typical, thoroughgoing naturalist is, of course, not a theist. She may be an agnostic, claiming that there is no conclusive reason to suppose either that there is or that there is not a God, or she may be an atheist, claiming that there is in fact no God. I shall restrict my remarks to the second sort, the atheistic naturalist.

The reasons usually offered for atheism are manifold and familiar, including the naturalistic explanation of religious experience and belief, the claim that since science has successfully explained more and more of reality, the theistic hypothesis is increasingly superfluous, and the general claim that we lack any strong evidence for the existence of such a being as God. Of course, these reasons, even if cogent, do not suffice to establish that God does not exist; rather, they tend to remove positive reason for believing that he does. The careful atheist generally goes further, and argues that there are positive reasons to suppose that God does not exist, the most important of which is the argument from evil.

Well-known to most philosophical readers, the argument from evil finds its classic rhetorical expression in Epicurus, quoted approvingly by Philo, in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? (Hume, 1779, p. 198)

The argument implicit in Epicurus’ questions can be stated formally as follows:

- (1) If there were an all-good, all-powerful God, then there would be little or no evil in the world.
- (2) But there is much evil in the world.
- (3) Therefore, there is no all-good, all-powerful God.

This version of the argument is clearly valid, so comment on the truth of the premises is in order. The case for premise (2) is generally regarded as straightforward, and is based on the empirical observation of things such as natural disasters, war, human cruelty and the moral judgment that these things are bad or evil.<sup>1</sup> The case for premise (1), on the other hand, is generally regarded as a little less straightforward. Few thinkers would regard (1) as self-evident; at any rate, it is fairly clearly not a truth of logic, in that its denial is not a logical contradiction.<sup>2</sup> Rather, (1) is to be taken as the conclusion of another argument, also suggested by Epicurus' questions:

- (4) If there were an all-good God, he would want there to be little or no evil in the world.
- (5) If there were an all-powerful God, he could bring it about that there were little or no evil in the world.
- (6) Therefore, if there were an all-good, all-powerful God, he would want, and be able, to bring it about that there were little or no evil in the world.
- (7) Anytime an agent wants it to be the case that X, and is able to bring it about that X, then it is the case that X.
- (8) Therefore, if there were an all-good, all-powerful God, there would be little or no evil in the world.

Obviously, this is not a sound argument, since (7) is false.<sup>3</sup> No doubt the argument can be revised and qualified, but for simplicity's sake, I will leave it in its unqualified form, especially since the above-mentioned defect is irrelevant to the present discussion, and the point I wish to make would apply to most revised versions as well.

The point I wish to make concerns (4) in particular, the claim that an all-good God would want there to be little or no evil in the world. The sense of this claim is that God wouldn't *be* all-good if he didn't want a world with little or no evil in it. That is, he would somehow fail *morally*, if he didn't want such a world, or if he wanted a world with lots of evil and suffering in it. This failure could be understood as a failure to perform some duty, or perhaps in some other way, say, as a failure to exhibit some crucial virtue such as love. However this failure is to be understood, (4) must be construed as an essentially *moral* premise, and both those who accept premises like (4) and those who reject them seem to agree on this. Theodist Richard Swinburne, for instance, states that

The theodist will claim that it is not morally wrong for God to create or permit the various evils, normally on the grounds that doing so is providing the logically necessary conditions of greater goods. The antitheodist denies these claims by putting forward moral principles which have as consequences that a good God would not under any circumstances create or permit the evils in question. (Swinburne, 1977, p. 82)

Similarly, antitheodist J. L. Mackie treats premises like (4) as essentially

moral premises, and criticizes attempts to judge God's goodness according to principles different from the principles of ordinary human goodness. Mackie approvingly refers to James Mill, who

looked upon religion as the greatest enemy of morality, 'above all, by radically vitiating the standards of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.' In effect God is being *called* good, while at the same time he is being described as bad, that is as having purposes and acting upon motives which in all ordinary circumstances we would recognize as bad.... (Mackie, 1982, p. 156)

In sum, then, the argument from evil as I have represented it here is an essentially moral argument in that at least one of its premises is itself a moral judgment or is based on a moral judgment.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, so is every other version of the argument, so far as I know.

#### *Naturalism and Ethics*

Having characterized the argument from evil as an essentially moral argument, I wish to examine the "fit" between this pre-eminent argument for atheism, and the view of morality ordinarily associated with philosophical naturalism. I turn, then, to a brief discussion of the naturalistic picture of morality.<sup>5</sup>

The naturalistic picture of morality—and of value generally—is largely derivative from other aspects of the naturalistic world view, especially from naturalistic views on science. Generally, the naturalist supposes that what he thinks of as the "scientific" picture of the world is largely correct, at least more correct than any other picture of the world, so in the event of conflict between what he takes to be the claims of science and the claims of some other source or discipline, the claims of science win.<sup>6</sup>

To this view on science, the naturalist adds a view on the nature of morality, the view that if morality were to work the way it has been traditionally conceived to work, the world would have to contain certain unusual things.<sup>7</sup> Mackie, for instance, insists that

If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from everything in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else. (Mackie, 1977, p. 38)

As soon as the naturalist realizes that her naturalistic, scientific picture of the world does not have room for such *sui generis* moral entities, she usually concludes that morality cannot be the objective, universal and necessary affair that it was once taken to be.<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Harman owns up to this conclusion explicitly when he notes that

...a 'naturalist' as I am here using the term is not just someone who supposes that all aspects of the world have a naturalistic location in this way, but rather someone who takes it to be of overriding importance in doing moral philosophy to attempt to locate moral properties. My claim is that, when one takes this attempt seriously, *one will tend to become skeptical or relativistic*. (Harman, 1984, p. 34; emphasis added)

Now, perhaps not all naturalistic approaches to ethics must be skeptical or relativistic. Perhaps, it may be suggested, it is possible to begin with the naturalist's picture of the world and constraints on methodology and still end up with a workable, objective and non-relativistic ethical theory. Indeed, it may be possible, but I, for one, am not sanguine about its chances, and the history of philosophy is fairly littered with failed attempts at such. Most of us are familiar, for instance, with the litany of complaints which has been lodged against Mill's alleged proof of his principle of utility, and I personally am inclined to agree with Sidgwick's gloomy judgment that utilitarianism cannot be reconciled with rational egoism without recourse to some transcendent aspect of reality. Obviously, utilitarianism is just one example and personal confession is no substitute for argument. I can't argue the point here, so I will merely record my doubts about successful, non-relativistic ethics born of philosophical naturalism. In any event, I will confine my remarks to relativistic or non-objective naturalistic theories of morality.

Anyway, if the naturalist cannot regard morality as something objective or universal, she will, naturally enough, regard it as something subjective or relative, created rather than discovered, or perhaps even a colossal mistake altogether. Either way, morality turns out to be very different from what the ordinary person thinks it is, and when the ordinary person makes a moral judgment, she does something very different from what she thinks she is doing.

The naturalist's account of what morality and moral judgment turn out to be can vary, and will depend to a certain extent on other aspects of the total world view in question. I shall lay out what I take to be three important naturalistic treatments of morality, beginning with a version of moral relativism.

Moral relativism is, of course, notoriously difficult to frame in a way that is neither self-contradictory nor trivially true. Perhaps the clearest and most forceful interpretation of relativism is "code relativism," of the sort defined by Harman.<sup>9</sup> According to code relativism, since there is no place in the world as described by science for objective values, moral judgments can't sensibly involve, or be about, such things. Consequently, moral judgments or value judgments are best understood as expressing the customs, ideals, or expectations of a particular group or person. Every moral judgment, then, is implicitly relativized to the code of some group or person, much the way that every traffic law, for instance, is relativized, or makes references, to the laws of some state or country. That is, just as the claim "Right-hand turns on red are legal" is better interpreted

as, "Right-hand turns on red are legal according to the laws of (say) Virginia," so the moral claim "Humility is good," is better interpreted as "Humility is good according to the traditional Judeo-Christian code."

Obviously, on this view morality is neither universal nor necessary, since theoretically there can be divergence between codes on virtually every point. The same thing can be good according to one code and bad according to another, and there can be no code-independent moral adjudication between codes. The code relativist can still make moral judgments, but when these judgments range over someone holding a different code, the holder of the other code need not care about the judgments or regard them as binding her. So, if the code relativist catches Smith doing X, and points out that, "Anyone who does X violates her duty according to code C," Smith may respond, "That may be, but according to code S, which I accept, doing X does *not* violate some duty."

The code relativist may force Smith to stop what she was doing, or persuade her to stop, but there is no code-independent way in which Smith was just "plain, old wrong," and no way which Smith need morally to accept. The "bite" of moral criticism, therefore, is seriously weakened, but so far as I know, both the champions and the critics of code relativism recognize this implication.

More radical, perhaps, than code relativism is the second naturalistic account of morality which I shall examine, moral subjectivism. Like the code relativist, the moral subjectivist assumes that there is no place in the world as described by science for absolute values, and similarly concludes that moral judgments and value judgments must be about something else. According to the moral subjectivist, however, such judgments do not express codes so much as personal feelings or attitudes.<sup>10</sup> Bertrand Russell seems to have held such a view when he said,

...when we assert that this or that has 'value,' we are giving expression to our own emotion, not to a fact which would still be true if our personal feelings were different. (Russell, 1935, p. 242)

So, moral judgments are relativized to the speaker's attitudes in much the same way as statements of taste are. Just as the judgment "This cheeseburger is great" is better understood as the exclamation "I heartily approve of this cheeseburger!," so the judgment "Humility is good," is better understood as the exclamation "I approve of humility!"

Again, morality turns out to be neither universal nor necessary, since personal feelings can and do vary widely on virtually every point. The same thing can be approved of by one person and disapproved of by another, and there can be no feeling-independent moral adjudication of feelings. The moral subjectivist can, of course, still make moral judgments, but as before, when they range over a person with different feelings and attitudes, that person will

not necessarily care about these judgments or regard them as binding on her. So, if the moral subjectivist catches Smith doing X, and exclaims, "I disapprove of X," Smith may respond, "That's somewhat interesting, but *I* approve of X." As before, the moral subjectivist may be able to get her to stop, but there is no feeling-or-attitude-independent sense in which Smith is wrong, nor any which she need morally to accept. Again, the bite of moral criticism is seriously weakened, and again, this implication is recognized by both the friends and foes of moral subjectivism.

More radical still than either moral subjectivism or code relativism is the third naturalistic approach to morality which I shall consider, moral nihilism. The moral nihilist agrees with both the code relativist and the moral subjectivist that there are no objective values, but concludes that since moral judgments and unavoidably about objective values (or involve them), moral judgments are, strictly speaking, false. In fact, moral nihilism is called the "error theory" by one of its chief proponents, J. L. Mackie, who writes

Moral skepticism must, therefore, take the form of an error theory, admitting that a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language, but holding that this ingrained belief is false. (Mackie, 1977, pp. 48, 49)

So, according to the moral nihilist all, or nearly all, positive moral judgments are false in the way that certain other categories of judgment which refer to non-existent things are false. That is, the judgment "Humility is good" is just as false as the judgment "Phlogiston is abundant," and for a similar reason. Clearly, the moral nihilist cannot make positive moral judgments at all, and if she catches Smith doing X and is tempted to judge Smith's doing X as morally wrong, she had better restrain herself, since on her own view, the only things that could possibly command the sort of assent requisite for a moral judgment simply do not exist. In sum, moral criticism loses its bite altogether on this view, and moral nihilists and their critics alike recognize this fact.

#### *Naturalistic Ethics and the Argument From Evil*

Having surveyed what are perhaps the three dominant naturalistic treatments of morality, I think that the conclusion I wish to draw is by now obvious: the philosopher who accepts any one of these approaches is in no position to offer or take the argument from evil as a strong reason for atheism. The argument from evil is an essentially moral argument in that it relies on at least one moral judgment as a premise or as a reason for a premise, but each of these three naturalistic treatments of morality undercuts the use of any such moral premises.<sup>11</sup>

Consider, according to these three views, the status of

- (4) If there were an all-good God, he would want there to be little or no evil in the world

According to the code relativist, (4) is better read as

- (4\*) If there were a God who was all-good according to code C, he would want there to be little or no evil in the world.

and simply reflects (presumably) the speaker's code. Yet, code C is not necessarily the same as the theist's code (let alone God's); moreover, if this is so, there need be no code-independent reason for the theist (or God) to hold code C.<sup>12</sup> So, if code C is not the theist's code, then the conclusion of the argument from evil is of little concern to the theist. At most, the argument from evil, when offered by the code relativist, yields

- (3\*) Therefore, there is no all-powerful God who is all-good according to code C;

that is, that an all-powerful God, all-good according to the *relativist's* code, doesn't exist. This does nothing to show that an all-powerful God, good according to the *theist's* code, does not exist, or that the code relativist should not believe in *that* God, and certainly is nothing for the theist to be alarmed about.

Similarly, according to the moral subjectivist, (4) is better reinterpreted as

- (4\*\*) If there were a God of whom I completely approved, then he would want a world with little or no evil in it

and merely expresses the attitudes or feelings of the speaker. Yet, if the attitudes or feelings of the theist differ on this point from those of the moral subjectivist—as we might expect—then this limits the significance of the argument from evil. At most, it yields

- (3\*\*) Therefore, there is no all-powerful God of whom I (the subjectivist) completely approve.

It does nothing to show that a God of whom the theist approves does not exist, or that the moral relativist should not believe in *that* God, and again, is nothing for the theist to worry about.<sup>13</sup>

According to the ethical nihilist, premise (4) is in even worse shape than it is according to the other two positions we have examined. According to moral nihilism, all positive moral claims are false, so (4) is false, pure and simple. The implications of this point are also simple: since a proof should contain no false premises, the moral nihilist cannot regard this argument as a proof of atheism, since on her own view it is unsound and shows nothing at all.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

This conclusion, therefore, seems inevitable: the naturalist (or anyone else) who holds any of these three accounts of morality—or of value generally—cannot take or offer the argument from evil as a reason to disbelieve in the existence of the God of the theist. In fact, as we have seen, the moral nihilist cannot take the argument from evil as yielding any religiously interesting conclusion at all.<sup>15</sup>

Before closing, a few comments and qualifications are in order. First, this argument obviously does not apply to all naturalists. It does not apply to those naturalists who are agnostics rather than atheists. It does not apply to those atheists who believe in the non-existence of God for reasons other than the argument from evil. It does not apply, finally, to those naturalists who can consistently offer a non-relativistic, non-subjectivistic ethical theory according to which they support some premise such as (4). Earlier in this paper I gave admittedly short shrift to non-relative, non-subjective and non-nihilistic naturalistic ethical theories. Note that even if such things are possible, it doesn't immediately follow that (4) will be true on such a theory. One would have to develop such a theory and draw out its implications in order to decide whether (4) was among them.

Second, it may be worth reconsidering the possibility that a version of the argument from evil could be offered which neither contains, nor depends on, any premises which are moral judgments. Still, it is difficult to imagine how it would even begin, since if the aim of the argument from evil is to show that an all-good all-powerful God does not exist, the argument seems indelibly moral or evaluative from the outset.

Third, while not taking the argument as a reason for atheism itself, the naturalist can still try to offer the argument as an *ad hominem* argument that anyone who holds the non-relativistic ethical theory that the theist in fact holds should reject theism.<sup>16</sup> That is, even if the naturalist does not *believe* premises (1) and (2), she can argue that the theist must (or at least *does*) hold them and that these jointly entail (3), which conflicts with theism. Since few theists these days deny (2), the real issue is whether the naturalist can show that the theist must, or does, accept (1). In the present context, this boils down to whether the naturalist can show that the theist must, or does accept (4), and this is a tall order. While *some* theists do accept (4) or ought to, given their other philosophical commitments, it is by no means obvious that all do or even should, since, for theists, the acceptability of (4) depends to some extent on the truth about morality, and even among theists there is considerable disagreement about just what this is. In sum, it's not as if the naturalist can point to a definite set of moral propositions which all theists must share and say, "See! These commit you to (4)!" And the theist should be wary of letting her critic pin some definite moral theory on her, since it may be difficult to say what moral theory a world view commits us to, except from a vantage point "inside" it, as it were.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the theist might well regard the ability to "handle" the problem of evil as a condition of adequacy for any theistic theory of morality. Finally, such an *ad hominem* argument does not satisfy the conditions for a disproof of the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. Of course, some orthodox Christian thinkers such as Augustine seem to have denied just this, insisting that evil does not, strictly speaking, exist, since it is a privation of being. Still, these thinkers could reformulate (2) to claim that there exist many things which suffer a severe privation of being. Also, it is worth pointing out that Augustine need not be interpreted as claiming that evil does not exist, but rather that evil is not a *thing*.

2. See Plantinga (1974), pp. 7-65.

3. I can want to do X and be able to do X, but not do X, simply because doing X may be incompatible with doing Y, which I want to do more. Of course, any sophisticated version of the argument from evil would be framed so as to avoid these difficulties.

4. For my purposes, I shall, simplistically perhaps, define a moral argument as one whose conclusion is a moral judgment, or which has among its premises at least one moral judgment. A moral judgment is a judgment about what things, actions, or persons are morally good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious.

5. By "naturalism" in ethics, I do not specifically intend the meta-ethical thesis that the terms of moral discourse can be defined in purely non-moral terms, though this thesis could be one example of the overall naturalistic approach to morality discussed here.

6. Of course, the theses of naturalism and the claims of current science are not identical. One can be a scientist without being a naturalist, or *vice versa*.

7. Robert Westmoreland has pointed out the need to distinguish between what I call naturalistic ethics and what may be called ethics which are compatible with philosophical naturalism. I take the difference to be this: what I call naturalistic ethics are ethical theories developed on the premise that value and obligation must first be "located" in the world of nature as revealed by science. On the other hand, ethics which are compatible with naturalism are ethical theories which, it is alleged, are compatible with the overall naturalistic picture of the world. These may include naturalistic ethics of the first sort, but may also include, interestingly, theories which purport to be compatible with virtually any metaphysics. For an example of this latter view, see Ronald Dworkin (1985), pp. 171-77.

8. For other examples of this naturalistic treatment of morality, see Harman (1977, 1984).

9. See especially Harman (1977). A similar version of relativism is developed and criticized by Jorge Garcia (1988).

10. I am lumping together under the general heading of subjectivism both classical subjectivists and classical emotivists. While I am aware of the significant differences between these positions, they share the relevant feature of believing that ethical judgments are best understood as expressing, being about, or being indexed to, the subjective states of humans.

11. In the foregoing discussion, I have tended to emphasize moral judgments concerning rightness and obligation. William Alston has pointed out that, in addition to judgments concerning moral rightness and obligation, the argument from evil usually involves evaluative judgments as well (e.g., premise (2)). These judgments are vulnerable to the same problem that I raise against those concerning rightness and obligation. For example, if a judgment about evil such as (2) must be relativized to the naturalist's code, then references to evil in (1) and (4) will have to be similarly relativized in order to keep the argument valid, but then (4) will become:

- (4') If there were a God all-good according to the naturalist's code, he would want there to be in the world little or no evil according to the naturalist's code

which, when plugged into the subsequent argument, does not yield a conclusion which touches the theist.

12. In fact, I should think it very unlikely that the moral code of a naturalistic relativist would be identical, or even largely similar, to that of a theist, especially of the traditional Judeo-Christian sort. This seems especially unlikely with respect to the issue at hand—the evaluation of world-makers, a category largely absent from naturalistic discussion.

13. Peter Geach makes a similar point in passing when he notes that “It is mere impertinence for someone who holds a non-cognitive view of our ascribing good and evil to persons or actions to pretend that on his footing there is any problem of evil at all. If my moral code, let us say, is a system of imperatives that I freely choose to promulgate, or if it amounts to saying ‘I approve of this and I hope you will too,’—then it is merely grotesque to imagine this sort of thing addressed to God. We have here a mirror image of the error that God *decrees* good and evil arbitrarily. Only of course if it were so, we should have to respect his decrees; and he needn't respect ours” (Geach, 1972, p. 39).

14. Of course, the thinking nihilist can dispense with anything so indirect as the argument from evil and assert that theism must be false, since it is on its face incompatible with nihilism. That is, if all positive moral claims are false, then it is false that there exists an all-powerful, all-good God.

15. All of this *does* yield the curious conclusion that one way the theist could avoid the argument from evil would be to establish moral relativism or moral subjectivism—though how a theist could regard these moves as acceptable is beyond me.

16. Here, I mean ‘*ad hominem* argument’ in the literal sense, that is, an argument aimed at some specific person, in this case the person who accepts theism and also a full-blooded, non-relativistic ethical theory.

17. In so saying, I do not mean to endorse a sort of theistic relativism or subjectivism. Rather, I mean only to suggest that a theist—particularly a theist within some particular religious tradition such as Judaism or Christianity—might reasonably suppose that “living out” that world view puts one in a better position to flesh out the antecedently unsettled details of that world view; better, that is, than that of one who is not living out that world view.

18. I wish to thank William Bracken, Richard Creel, Hugh Fleetwood, and Robert Westmoreland for numerous helpful comments and criticisms on this paper; Jane Holland and Pauline Brand Nelson for help in preparing the manuscript; and Hampden-Sydney College for a research grant supporting this project. I presented earlier drafts to the Virginia Philosophical Association, the American Philosophical Association, and the Society of Christian Philosophers, and benefited from the comments of many, including William Alston, James Arieti, Jorge Garcia, James Harris, David James, Penelope Mackie, John Marshall, Philip Quinn, and David Schrader.

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