

Notes on Linville's "The Moral Argument"

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Reference: Mark D. Linville, "The Moral Argument," chapter 7 in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012 (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1444350854/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_asin_title_o05_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1). "The Moral Argument" is available as a free download at <https://appearedtoblogly.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/linville-mark-22the-moral-argument22.pdf> It is also available at http://evansig.org/SSpecific_Articles_CC.html

This document is not a review of "The Moral Argument," but rather a few notes that may prove to be useful in understanding it.

The moral argument, as used by Linville, is an argument for the existence of God based on the reality of morality. That is, given that objective morality among humans, the concept of right and wrong, is real, how is it to be explained? Where does it come from? In the opening of "The Moral Argument," Linville quotes Nietzsche: "Morality 'has truth only if God is the truth – it stands or falls with faith in God' (Nietzsche 1968, p. 70)." [*Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*] Continuing: "The moral argument for the existence of God essentially takes Nietzsche's assertion as one of its premises: if there is no God, then 'there are altogether no moral facts.'" (p. 392 in "The Moral Argument")

Linville indicates that his chapter, "The Moral Argument," contains "two essays, each a relatively independent version of the moral argument. The first, 'An Argument from Evolutionary Naturalism (AEN),' argues that theists can, where naturalists cannot, offer a framework on which our moral beliefs may be presumed to be warranted. . . . The second essay, 'An Argument from Personal Dignity,' argues, first, that something like the Kantian notion of human or personal dignity is implicated by the sorts of moral beliefs with which we begin moral reflection. . . . Second, theists can, where naturalists cannot, offer a worldview that accommodates the notion of personal dignity." (392)

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It may be something of a shock to many readers that the actual existence of some form of objective morality is questioned, and in some cases even denied, by scholars. But this has been studied since the beginning of The Enlightenment, where scholars have attempted to establish a universal, objective, morality without reference to God. Surely science, that is, naturalistic science, can discover and specify such a morality without reference to God or any religion, or so it was thought by some. The book, *Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality*, by James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky, Yale University Press, 2018 (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0300196288/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_search_asin_title?ie=UTF8&psc=1), traces the history of this tragic quest. My review of this book may be found in *Modern Reformation* (<https://modernreformation.org>), vol. 29, iss. 5, 2020, pp. 54-57, available at http://evansig.org/SSpecific_Articles_CC.html. What makes this quest especially tragic, is that our society, and especially of our system of legal courts assumes that all sane people know the difference between right and wrong. What if you did not believe that there was any objective basis for basic morality? When telling the truth would be painful or costly to you, could you be counted on to tell the truth? What implications could this have for politics and our legal system? As Christianity seems to lose its influence on our society, and more and more believe morality is subjective at best, what might be the consequences for society?

1. An Argument From Evolutionary Naturalism

In An Argument From Evolutionary Naturalism, Linville indicates that some noteworthy scholars do not believe that there is such a thing as any objective morality. He quotes Ruse & Wilson: “ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes in order to get us to cooperate” (Ruse & Wilson 1989, p. 51) [The evolution of ethics, *New Scientist* 17, 108-28] (393).

1.3 Epistemological arguments and the Dependence Thesis

Linville asks the question: “what reason have we for supposing that the mechanism responsible for those judgments [based on human moral beliefs] are *truth-aimed*? What reason have we for supposing that the Dependence Thesis is true? . . . if God exists and has fashioned the human constitution with the purpose of discerning moral truth, then we have reason to embrace the Dependence Thesis.” (407) The “Dependence Thesis” simply holds that moral beliefs are, or should be, objectively true.

2.5 Personal dignity and worldview assessment

“It is not the aim of this chapter to settle these complex issues in the philosophy of mind. But we have seen a glimpse of the difficulty that confronts the naturalist in attempting to account for conscious moral agents. Consciousness is either eliminated altogether, reduced to the physical, or held to be emergent and irreducible. But eliminativism is altogether implausible and of dubious coherence, reductionist programs seem doomed to failure, and property dualism cannot account for mental causation and consciousness.” (437)

“Generally speaking, it is difficult to see how conscious and autonomous persons could be engineered from Big Bang debris – particularly when the would-be engineer is truant.” (438)

2.7 Personal dignity: some dead ends

Linville quotes from Kai Nielsen, a philosopher who didn’t think that respect for persons, an important concept in morality, required support from religion but only needed ego. But if ego fails in the final analysis, “we must simply decide what sort of person we shall strive to become” (Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, Prometheus Press, 1990, p. 125). (441)

Linville notes that “The latter is an odd thing to say in a book promising to secure a place for ethics without God. First, plenty of egoists have decided to be nasty. Plato’s Glaucon [Glaucon was Plato’s older brother] left no doubt that, were he to be so ‘powerfully placed’ – in this case, by possession of a ring that renders its wearer invisible – he would rape, pillage, and plunder by day and then sleep like a baby by night. Indeed, Glaucon thought that anyone granted such a power who continued to work for justice would be universally regarded as an idiot. But, further, if moral values are embraced by ‘subscription,’ then the values themselves are a facade. The structure of one’s system of values rests upon the arbitrary choice itself.” (441) In the current

society of the USA it may well be that many, perhaps most, think that human beings are basically good, but that is not the teaching of the Bible, nor Glaucon.

Whereas Hunter and Nedelisky in *Science and the Good* trace the quest for the foundations of morality from the Enlightenment to the present without reference to God, and conclude that no such foundations have been convincingly found leading some to moral nihilism, Linville establishes that theism naturally and easily provides those foundations. It should be noted that theism has been established, following Linville, to provide the foundations for morality, but not specifically Christianity. One may think, on an initial reaction, this to be a weakness, but it actually is not. The argument made by Linville is based on Natural Theology and does not specifically refer to the Bible nor Christianity. Therefore, the argument is open to all, is available to all, regardless of nationality, ethnic origin, or anything else. It is part of what is called General Revelation, revelation available from nature and the conscience of man, and therefore all are accountable by it. The Apostle Paul, in Romans, tells us such: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” (Romans 1:18-23, ESV) Paul continues in chapter one of Romans and through chapter three establishing that all are guilty before God, whether they have God’s Word in written form or not. Modern writers have made a similar point, such as J. Budziszewski in *What We Can’t Not Know* (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00EDG3HYS/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_bibl_vppi_i20, for reviews: <http://evansig.org/BBooks.html>) and *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B002R0JXJU/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_hsch_vapi_tkin_p1_i1, for reviews: <http://evansig.org/BBooks.html>). This is just one example of where Christianity has a good answer to one of life’s important questions, and those committed to materialism do not.

Phillip E. Johnson, in one of his most important books, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education*, InterVarsity Press, 1995 (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0830816100/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_bibl_vppi_i5), a review: (<http://evansig.org/RReviews/Johnson3.pdf>), argues that the prevailing philosophy in our society is naturalism, and that this philosophical naturalism is without intellectual merit and is destructive to the proper pursuits of science, law, and education. Our society is tolerant of Christians only so long as they remain marginalized and hold their religious beliefs to

themselves; Christianity has no place in the public arena, and certainly not in any of the sciences, law, or education.

Thomas K. Johnson, in his book, *The First Step in Missions Training: How our Neighbors are Wrestling with God's General Revelation*, 2014 (for a free download of this book:

[https://www.bucer.org/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/Buecher/WoT_1 - Thomas K. Johson - General Revelation.pdf](https://www.bucer.org/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/Buecher/WoT_1_-_Thomas_K._Johson_-_General_Revelation.pdf)) endorsed by Gerald R. McDermott, Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, Daniel Ellenberger, Nancy R. Pearcey, Ron Kubsch, William Wagner, and David VanDrunen, makes the argument that being aware of the importance of Natural Theology (or General Revelation) and knowing a little about it and the impact it has on all of us and our neighbors is a first step in evangelism. For an alternative download link for the book, click [here](#).

In Johnson's article "The Rejection of God's Natural Moral Law: Losing the Soul of Western Civilization," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 2019, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 243-252 (for a free download: <https://theology.worldia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ERT-Vol-43-No-3-July-2019.pdf>), Johnson begins by saying "The rejection of God's natural moral law in Protestant theology in the twentieth century is, in my assessment, one crucial reason why Christians lost the battle for the soul of Western civilization."

Whereas Christians have been marginalized by our society and we have more-or-less allowed it to happen and been excluded from the public square, perhaps because we felt inadequate intellectually to stand against it, or perhaps being preoccupied with personal evangelism, it is now refreshing to see more and more highly educated and gifted Christians reengage society in academic circles. This development is in part a reaction against losing "the soul of Western civilization" and wanting to be salt and light for the good of the church and all society. By God's grace, may it continue.