

Objectively Wrong! An Aristotelian Response to William Lane Craig's Moral Argument for God's Existence

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Abstract: In this paper, I present a much-neglected Aristotelian response to William Lane Craig's popular moral argument for God's existence. I argue that a striking concession in Craig's work, when taken together with an Aristotelian understanding of morality, simply implies that the objectivity of moral values and duties is in principle independent of the existence of God. I end up by addressing the most promising theistic comeback to this Aristotelian response (an evolutionary debunking argument) and consider how an Aristotelian naturalist could respond. This, in turn, marks the way for the moral argument moving forward.

Keywords: William Lane Craig, Moral argument, God's existence, Aristotelian ethics, Philosophy of religion

1. Introduction

The content of our obedience –the thing we are commanded to do– will always be something intrinsically good, something we ought to do even if (by an impossible supposition) God had not commanded it.
C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (2015, 99–100)

William Lane Craig's preferred formulation of the moral argument, the one he finds "most convincing" (Craig 2008, 172), goes like this:

- (1) If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
- (2) Objective moral values and duties do exist.

(3) Therefore, God exists.¹

What is meant by “objectivity” in this context? We can get some clarity from Craig’s following words:

To say that there are objective moral values is to say that something is good or evil independently of whether any human being believes it to be so. Similarly, to say that we have objective moral duties is to say that certain actions are right or wrong for us independently of whether any human being believes them to be so. For example, to say that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it out thought that it was right, and it would still have been wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everybody who disagreed with them so that it was universally believed that the Holocaust was right. (Craig 2008, 173)

Hence, the notion of objectivity operative in Craig’s argument appears to be that of stance-independence: “To say that something is objective is to say that it is independent of what people think or perceive” (Craig 2008, 173). This is the understanding of “objective” that is generally assumed in the discussion of moral realism.² Accordingly, I interpret Craig to be arguing that God is the necessary metaphysical foundation for moral realism, understood as the claim that the objectivity of moral facts is stance-independent, true regardless of individual or collective human attitudes, preferences, and opinions.

Now, I think there is a sound and much-neglected Aristotelian response to this argument that undercuts Craig’s favored justification for premise (1). In a few words, I think an Aristotelian understanding of ethics can secure at least objective moral values apart from God, and arguably even objective moral duties. In this paper, I aim to present this response and show how a striking concession found in Craig’s work, when read with an Aristotelian understanding of morality, simply

¹ See, for instance, Craig (2008, 172) and Moreland & Craig (2005, 494). In another context, Craig puts the argument thus: “I am going to defend two basic contentions in this debate: I. If theism is true, we have a sound foundation for morality; II. If theism is false, we do not have a sound foundation for morality” (Craig 2009i, 31). A more modest formulation can also be found in Craig 2021, 31. The response I am going to lay out could also be used to counter these other forms of the argument. For instance, the Aristotelian naturalist could grant (I) without much problem but would strongly dispute (II).

² See, for instance, Huemer (2005); Shafer-Landau (2003, 15) and Wielenberg (2014). I thank an anonymous referee for calling my attention to this.

implies that objective moral values and duties are, at least in principle, independent of the existence of God.

I will end by considering the most promising theistic counter to the Aristotelian response (an evolutionary debunking argument) and lay down how the Aristotelian naturalist might address it. This, I hope, will make it clear that the debate should move towards how to best account not for the objectivity of moral values and duties, but for the reality of dignity, as a special kind of intrinsic and inalienable value shared by all rational beings.

To do this, however, I need to start by presenting the core principles and ideas of an Aristotelian understanding of morality, to get clear on what we are talking about. Hence, to that I now turn.

2. An Aristotelian Understanding of Morality

2.1. The Aristotelian Foundation of Ethics

At the beginning of his famous *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), Aristotle calls attention to the fact that we, humans, act in all kinds of ways to achieve several goals. But, he reasons, not everything that we pursue can we pursue it *for another thing* (i.e., as a means), for then “this would go on indefinitely, and desire would be vain and empty” (NE, I, 2, 1094a 20–21; my translation).³ There must be, then, some *final* end, some supreme good that has intrinsic value for us and that we pursue exclusively because of itself, and not as a means to achieve something else. Such an end he calls *eudaimonia* (NE, I, 4, 1095a 18), which roughly translates as “flourishing” or “the good life.”⁴

³ Unless otherwise noted, like in this case, the translations are by J. A. K. Thomson (2004).

⁴ There has been a lot of discussion as to how best translate *eudaimonia*. The common translation “happiness” seems, ironically enough, an unhappy one, given the psychological tone the word has come to acquire, connoting a state of “happy” feeling (see MacIntyre 1984, 148; Ackrill 1980, 24; Adler 1996, 131–144; Ross 1995, 198). This, in turn, leads to many objections to happiness being the ultimate end of human action that only ever prove that such a translation is an unfortunate one. When Philippa Foot writes, for instance, that “Happiness is not the universal aim of action,” because “brave people choose great and immediate evils, such as certain death, in order to rescue or defend others” (Foot 2010, 82), she illustrates just this very point. If understood, instead, in the sense of “the best possible life” (Ackrill 1980, 24), remarks such as these have no force. For, as Aristotle himself notes, he who bravely faces a certain death instead of cowardly fleeing from performing his duty is indeed choosing the best for himself (NE, IX, 8, 1169a 12–1169b 2). Tragic as it may be to lose one’s life, a life that ends with a brave virtuous act of self-sacrifice is certainly better than one which continues a bit longer at the price of cowardice. Hence, other translations seem more accurate: “realization,” “completion,”

Because of this, if one had to describe what ethics consists of for Aristotle, they would be hard-pressed to find a better description than *the science of the good life*—the rational discipline that studies how to fulfill human nature. This means that one of the metaphysical presuppositions of Aristotelian ethics, without which the entire enterprise collapses as a rational enquiry, is the idea that human beings have a certain nature oriented towards a certain end. Ethics, then, is the philosophical discipline that studies *what* this end is and *how* can it be realized or fulfilled. Those actions and dispositions that help humans achieve the end they have according to the kind of being that they are will be *good*, whereas those that make them depart from it will be *bad*. Put differently, to the extent that an individual realizes such an end in his life, actualizing what is in potency in his nature, he becomes a *good* human being: he *succeeds* or *flourishes* as such. To the extent, on the contrary, that he does not, he *fails* at life: he becomes a *defective* human, living and behaving in ways a human being is not supposed to live and behave.

Notice, then, the following. In Aristotle's mind, that which explains and grounds moral values and their objectivity is a very special kind of metaphysical foundation, one made up of the following duality: *nature* and *end*, or to put it in other words, *essentialism* and *teleology*. Let's call this the Aristotelian Foundation. It is *because* the Aristotelian Foundation is true—*because* human beings have a certain objective nature oriented towards a certain objective end—that we can say, objectively, that certain human actions are *good* (conducive to such a natural end), while others are *bad* (contrary to such an end and destructive of it). And this is so in the stance-independent sense of "objective" mentioned above: good actions are good and evil actions are evil independently of what people think or perceive, because human nature is what it is also independently of what people think or perceive.

Here is a peculiarity of this approach to moral philosophy. Sometimes it is thought that "good" must mean something radically different, almost equivocal, depending on whether somebody is talking about morality or anything else. Aristotle's insight is that this is not so. To him, moral evaluations are but a special case of evaluation in general, and so, one can determine what a good human being is in broadly the same way one can identify what a good shield is—by how well the thing one is evaluating conforms with what it is supposed to be or do, that is, with its *form* (essence) or *function* (end), respectively. Goodness has the same core meaning throughout the whole natural world: "obedience to nature—the actualization of a thing's essential potencies, the fulfillment of its appetites"

"flourishing" maybe capture the most of it, despite the third's metaphorical nature. Monte R. Johnson's (2005, 221) "human success" also appears to get to the core of it.

(Oderberg 2020, 44).⁵ And hence we find Aristotle comparing the good man to the good harpist (*NE*, I, 4, 1095a 16) and other Aristotelians like Aquinas, the bad man, who lacks virtue, to the bad eye, which lacks the power to see well (*Summa Theologiae* [ST], I, q. 5, a. 3, ad2).

The so-called “moral” good, then, is not some separate and autonomous realm, somehow disconnected from our other uses of the word, but a special case of the good in general. As Edward Feser says, “the moral order is a part of the larger natural order” (Feser 2021, 272). And so, an action is morally good to the extent it helps a rational and free agent to flourish as the kind of thing that he or she is, actualizing or completing him or her *as a human being*. To achieve *eudaimonia* is to actualize one’s full potential as a human being, to be truly what a human being is, to realize one’s essence. In a sense, thus, from an Aristotelian perspective ethics is the discipline that explains what human beings should do to *become* what they already *are*.

Now suppose there were no human end or nature. In such a case, Aristotle would have no legitimate basis to distinguish, as he does, between *real* and *apparent* goods (for instance, in *NE*, III, 4, 1113a 14–23). As he claims, although all people seek the good in everything they do, the truth is that not everybody gets it right all the time. Sometimes, what *seems* good to somebody is not *really* good after all, but only good concerning some low transitory desire they may have. However, this distinction only works if there is a natural end to which humans are oriented by nature, so that they essentially will it or desire it in everything that they do. Only under that assumption can the moral philosopher distinguish between those things that *really and truly* help a person attain such a goal and those that only do so *in appearance*. Without a natural human end, nothing would be good or bad for human beings in an objective sense—“good” would simply be that which suited the arbitrary ends a given individual may propose to himself, and “bad” that which opposed them.⁶

⁵ See also Stump (2003, 67); Osborne (2020, 43–44); Johnson (2005, 289); McCabe (2009, 21–22).

⁶ A similar point would extend to Aristotle’s distinction between virtue and vice. To Aristotle, a virtue (an excellence, *areté*) is a kind of habit or acquired disposition that makes something and its action good at doing what it is supposed to do. But this, again, presupposes the Aristotelian Foundation (essentialism + teleology), since for something to be made “good” at what it does, it must have some end to which it is oriented that serves as a criterion for judging its performance as *excellent* (virtuous) or *defective* (vicious). There is no way to even guess whether a conglomerate of metal parts works well, for instance, until someone reveals to me that it is supposed to be a *watch* and thus tell time. Hence, if there were no natural human end, the distinction between virtue and vice would collapse into a mere historical, cultural, or personal contingency. No disposition to act in one way rather than another could count as *really* virtuous nor vicious, in an objective sense. Such a judgment

Hence, to drive the point home, from an Aristotelian perspective objectivity in the moral realm depends upon the truth and stability of a concrete metaphysical fact: that human beings have, objectively speaking, a certain nature, oriented towards a certain end that is its fulfillment. Without a given human nature and *telos*, all moral evaluations would ultimately become subjective. There would be no objective third-person standard, independent of contingent desires, opinions, and societal norms, concerning which to judge the different actions human beings carry on in their lives. No way to tell that this agent is a good man, for there would be no kind “man” to work as a stable criterion of evaluation.

2.2. *But Wait, the Naturalistic Fallacy. . .!*

Though it is not the purpose of this paper to *defend* Aristotelian ethics, it might be useful to pause at this point to address a common objection to it. This will allow us to probe even deeper into the peculiarities of an Aristotelian understanding of morality (the relevance of this excursus will become apparent later). The objection I have in mind is that of the naturalistic fallacy: that it is not possible to derive a moral claim (an *ought*) from a metaphysical statement (an *is*). The Aristotelian, I have said, wants to find the good human beings *ought* to pursue in an analysis of what kind of beings they *are*. Thus, it is claimed, the Aristotelian falls prey of this fallacy.

The answer to this objection allows us to see another peculiarity of an Aristotelian approach to ethics—its ability to explain the *categorical* force of moral norms without positing anything more than *hypothetical* imperatives (see, for instance, Feser 2015, 314–315; MacIntyre 1980, 60; Koons 2000, 272). A hypothetical imperative is one of the form “If you want X, you ought to do Y”—for instance, “If you want to remain healthy, you ought to eat your vegetables.” Its force depends upon the acceptance of the condition, so that if someone were not to care about remaining healthy, he would likewise feel no obligation to eat his or her vegetables. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, are supposed to be somewhat different, of the non-conditional form “You ought to do Y,” *period*—for instance, “You ought not to lie”. Its normative force is felt as unconditioned, such that it should be obeyed no matter what.

Now, the Aristotelian explains why imperatives of this kind have such a categorical force without having to posit that they are, in essence, anything different from a special type of hypothetical imperative. Suppose the Aristotelian Foundation

would entirely depend on how the particular subject of the disposition felt about it concerning his or her own subjective goals.

is true and humans, as any other being, are naturally oriented to their own good or perfection, such that they necessarily and essentially desire it and aim at it in everything that they do. Then, the Aristotelian says, the force of a categorical imperative really stems from an implicit necessary antecedent condition, of the kind "If you want what is good, perfective, flourishing for you, *then*. . .". Indeed, given that everybody *does* want and *cannot but want*, by nature, that which is good, perfective, flourishing for him, the necessary truth of this implicit antecedent carries over to the consequent ". . .you ought to do Y" whenever they are truly connected, giving it its characteristic categorical and seemingly unconditioned force. And so, the Aristotelian claims that, in truth, *all imperatives are hypothetical* but that some have categorical force *because* the implicit condition of the antecedent is necessarily true for any human being.⁷

Now, with this exploration into the nature of categorical imperatives, the process of deriving an *ought* from an *is* appears quite straightforward, natural, and unproblematic. Consider the following reasoning:

- (i) Murder is contrary to human flourishing. (Or: Love of neighbor is a necessary component of human flourishing).
- (ii) All human beings necessarily want their own flourishing.
- (iii) I am a human being.
- (iv) I ought not to murder. (Or: I ought to love my neighbor).

Premises (i), (ii), and (iii) are all premises of fact, *is*-statements. But from them, one can easily derive an *ought*-conclusion, (iv). As a practical reasoning, this is perfectly legitimate because it is mediated by a necessary desire that any human being, *qua* human being, has—the desire for his own flourishing.⁸ In the strictest of senses, what one *ought* to do is not to be found in what one *is* but in what one *wants*. However, given that there is a necessary desire in human beings connected to or grounded in

⁷ This, allow me to say as a sidenote, represents a double theoretical advantage for an Aristotelian understanding of ethics. First, the Aristotelian can *explain* the perceived categorical force of many moral imperatives. They are felt as categorical and unconditioned *because* they are perceived as directly connected to a necessary and natural desire which is always there, as an unconditional condition, so to speak. This is best than offering *no* explanation as to why categorical imperatives are categorical. But second, this account allows for greater simplicity, for the Aristotelian reduces theoretical complexity by explaining the sense and experience of moral obligation in a way that unifies categorical and hypothetical imperatives together. This gives us a simpler and more explanatory account of practical reason than if we had a brute distinction between two radically different kinds of imperatives and no clue as to the source of the categorical force of one of them. But I digress... back to the main point!

⁸ See Simpson (1987, 65–67) and Koons (2000, 272) for similar points and examples.

what they *are*, such a desire serves as a bridge that closes the gap between *is* and *ought*. If (a) I necessarily *want* my own flourishing, and (b) given the *facts* of human nature, murder is contrary to human flourishing (or love of neighbor a necessary condition of it), then (c) I *ought* not to murder (or I *ought* to love my neighbor).

Hence, once the Aristotelian Foundation is in its place and its effects on the understanding of categorical imperatives made clear, no naturalistic fallacy is to be found in is-ought reasoning. And with this clarified, we are now finally ready to address William Lane Craig's moral argument.

3. Morality Without God in an Aristotelian World

Recall the simple formulation of the argument:

- (1) If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
- (2) Objective moral values and duties do exist.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.

Given that the Aristotelian readily grants premise (2), what is most relevant for my purposes here is Craig's justification for premise (1). Notice that the point of the argument is *not* that atheists (or non-theists more generally) cannot act morally, or that they cannot recognize moral values and duties without belief in God. As Craig forcefully remarks: "My argument is that theism is necessary for there to be moral goods and duties, not that it is necessary for us to discern the moral goods and duties that there are" (Craig 2009ii, 169).⁹ It is not, hence, that there is no objective good or evil if one does not *believe* in God, but that there is no objective good or evil *if God does not exist*, even if one were to believe He did:

[I]n the absence of God, that is, if God does not exist, then morality is just a human convention, that is to say, morality is wholly subjective and nonbinding. We might act in precisely the same ways that we do in fact act, but in the absence of God, such actions would no longer count as good (or evil), since if God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist. (Moreland & Craig 2003, 490)

But why think this? Some may be tempted to argue thus. God is that necessary and supreme Being without which nothing else would exist; being Pure Existence Itself, God grants existence to every contingent reality and sustains it in being at all

⁹ See also Moreland & Craig (2003, 492) and Craig (2008, 175–176). Andrew Loke makes the same point in Loke (2023, 28).

and every moment. Hence, if God does not exist, nothing else exists or can exist — and so, by extension, if God does not exist, no human act could be morally good or evil, right or wrong, because there would be no human acts, since there would be no human beings. But surely this is not what Craig has in mind. As evidenced by the quote above, Craig is envisaging a world in which we still exist as human beings, acting in the same ways we do in the actual world, but in which our actions lack any objective moral properties, precisely because of there being no God. God, then, is thought of as some kind of *proximate* or *direct* foundation of morality, without whom morality itself immediately collapses and disappears, despite everything else remaining the same.

Now, in Craig's view, the objectivity of moral *values* is grounded in God's essential and necessary character (in His nature as Loving, Caring, Just, etc.), while the objectivity of moral *duties* is grounded in God's will (in His commands). As Craig writes:

On a theistic view, objective moral duties are constituted by God's will or commands. God's moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commandments which constitute our moral duties or obligations. Far from being arbitrary, God's commandments must be consistent with His holy and loving nature. Our duties, then, are constituted by God's commandments, and these in turn reflect His essential character. On this foundation we can affirm the objective rightness of love, generosity, and self-sacrifice, and condemn as objectively wrong selfishness, hatred, abuse, and oppression. (Craig 2021, 31)¹⁰

But then, argues Craig, with God out of the picture, without an absolute standard of the Good to refer to and a transcendent Lawgiver to impose moral laws unto us, any *objective* distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, disappears. Good and evil, right and wrong become subjective, "dependent on what human persons think or perceive" (Craig 2008, 173). In Craig's words:

On a naturalistic view, moral values are just by-products of socio-biological evolution. [. . .] As a result of socio-biological pressures, there has evolved among *homo sapiens* a sort of "herd morality" which functions well in the perpetuation of our species in the struggle for survival. But on the atheistic view, there doesn't seem to be anything about *homo sapiens* that makes morality objectively true. If the film of evolutionary history were rewound and shot anew, very different creatures with a very different set of values might well have evolved. By what right do we regard our morality as objective rather than theirs? (Craig 2008, 174–175)

¹⁰ See also Craig 2008, 182 and 2010, 131–132.

Now, let's bracket for the moment the evolutionary aspects of this objection and focus on the claim that, given atheism, there doesn't seem to be anything about human beings that makes morality objectively true. This may well be true under the most common forms of naturalism today. But it seems to me that, considering what was explained in *Section 2*, the Aristotelian naturalist has a ready and powerful response to this accusation that allows him to retain the objectivity of moral values and duties even if God does not exist. For remember the core of Craig's argument: keep every fact about human beings and their nature intact *but* remove God out of the picture—objective moral values and duties will disappear too. However, this will certainly not work against the Aristotelian. For, given Aristotelianism, if human beings have a nature oriented towards certain ends (and, above all, to its fulfillment), *that* is all that is required to ground the objectivity of moral values and duties. An action will be objectively morally good if it promotes my flourishing and objectively morally evil if it detracts from it, *regardless of the existence of God*. Indeed, that is all that “X is morally good/evil” means to the Aristotelian!

Thus, if the Aristotelian Foundation is true (if human beings have a nature oriented towards a certain end), then *that* is the proximate and direct foundation of morality. There is no need, at least in principle, to appeal to any separate, absolute, and transcendent standard of the Good. Suppose human beings have an objective nature, objectively oriented towards certain ends. In that case, there will inevitably be actions which, objectively, will promote human flourishing (and thus be objectively good) and actions which, once more, objectively, will hinder human flourishing (and thus be objectively evil), *independently of the existence or non-existence of God*. Hence, to the Aristotelian you can remove God out of the picture—if we get to keep our nature and end, we get to keep objective moral values, period. If human nature is what it is independent of what people think or perceive, then which actions are good or bad (conducive to human flourishing) is also independent of what people think or perceive.

And a similar reasoning will apply to moral duties. It is true that some authors of Aristotelian persuasion have suggested that the concept of moral obligation only makes sense in a theistic context. Thus, they say, the Aristotelian non-theist should just abandon it.¹¹ This, though, may be too quick of a concession. Indeed, as I explained above, the Aristotelian Foundation also provides us with a solid enough way to understand the experience of moral obligation and its categorical force. In the words of Edward Feser:

¹¹ Most famously, Anscombe (1958, 13–15). See also Mark C. Murphy (2009, 129). For challenges to this, see Diem (2017, 271–286) and Pigden (1988, 20–41).

The hypothetical imperative (1) *If I want what is good for me then I ought to pursue what realizes my natural ends and avoid what frustrates them* is something which follows from the [Aristotelian-Thomistic] metaphysics of the good. By itself, it does not give us a categorical imperative because the consequent will have force only for someone who accepts the antecedent. But that (2) *I do want what is good for me* is something true of all of us by virtue of our nature as human beings [. . .]. These premises yield the conclusion (3) *I ought to pursue what realizes my natural ends and avoid what frustrates them*. (3) does have categorical force because (2) has categorical force, and (2) has categorical force because it cannot be otherwise given our nature. (Feser 2015, 315)

Again, if God does not exist but, still, human beings retain a nature oriented towards certain ends, then they will also retain a natural and necessary (essential) desire for their own good. And it will be the implicit presence of that natural desire that would ground the categorical and obligatory force of moral imperatives, when confronted with something which is either necessarily tied to the human good (like caring for one's offspring) or necessarily opposed to it (like adultery). If an action, for instance, is never flourishing-promoting but always contrary to the human good, then it is always bad and one *ought* never to do it (because one necessarily desires one's own good).

An important worry arises at this point. If, under Aristotelianism, moral imperatives bind us *because we desire to flourish*, then moral duties cannot be said to be "objective" in the stance-independent sense operative in Craig's argument. After all, whether a moral *ought* is valid strictly depends upon an attitude human beings have, regardless of whether this attitude is inescapable or not. If, *per impossibile*, human beings did not desire their own flourishing, no moral obligation would befall upon them.¹²

I think this is correct, but the Aristotelian should not worry too much about it. In the end, not much is lost, and it can still be maintained that a given moral imperative is true independently of people agreeing with it or not. Human nature is what it is independently of what people think or perceive, and certain actions are necessarily required for or opposed to human flourishing, also independently of what people think or perceive. Hence, given the necessary human desire to flourish, people *ought* to perform or refrain from said actions, independently of what they otherwise think or perceive. Maybe this makes moral duties not objective in the technical sense operative in Craig's argument, but it sounds strange to call them subjective instead. Hence, the Aristotelian could claim moral duties are still "objective" in an important sense that is sufficient for responding to Craig's challenge. They are objective in the

¹² I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this.

sense of being inescapable: no human being can escape being subject to a moral imperative simply by thinking it does not apply to him. Given the facts about human nature and the necessary human desire to flourish, a given moral imperative is true “independently of whether any human being believes it to be so” (Craig 2008, 173).

With this framework, God’s commands are, for the Aristotelian who is also a theist, more like a manual of instructions, whose purpose is to tell a user how to operate with a given instrument in order not to break it. God, being omniscient, knows what the human good is in a more perfect way than humans do. And so, he issues His commands as guidelines that illuminate what man must do to achieve his flourishing, or minimally what he must avoid at all costs to not forfeit it altogether. But just as the ultimate ground of the manual’s force and value is the nature of the instrument in question, the ultimate ground of the mandatory force of God’s commands is human nature itself. God commands us not to commit adultery *because* such an action harms us and goes against the human good, our own flourishing, which we deeply and most truly desire.¹³ But if, *per impossibile*, God commanded us to do something that went against our flourishing, our nature, it would not (it could not) have any obligatory force upon us, just as an instruction manual that actually conduced to the destruction of its object could have no force upon someone who wanted to maintain it intact.

Now, Craig seems to be aware of this overall Aristotelian response to his argument. For instance, he writes: “It seems that the atheistic humanist must simply insist [. . .] that whatever contributes to human flourishing is morally good and whatever detracts from human flourishing is bad and take that as his explanatory stopping point” (Craig 2008, 177),¹⁴ which is more or less what I have just proposed. But it seems to me Craig’s rejoinder to this is predicated on a misunderstanding of what the Aristotelian is claiming. He usually considers the proposal of taking human flourishing as an explanatory stopping point “premature because of its arbitrariness and implausibility” (Craig 2008, 177).¹⁵ Regarding its arbitrariness, he rhetorically asks: “Given atheism, why think that what is conducive to human flourishing is any more valuable than what is conducive to the flourishing of ants or mice? Why think that inflicting harm on another member of our species is wrong?” (Craig 2010, 138). And in another context:

¹³ As Aquinas writes, “in divine law, there are some things which are commanded *because they are good* and others prohibited *because they are bad*” (ST, II-II, q. 57, a. 2, ad3; my italics).

¹⁴ See also (Craig 2009ii, 176–177).

¹⁵ For similar points, see also, Craig (2009i, 31) and (2010, 138–140).

We can limn prudential value for guinea pigs that will be characterized by objectivity, universality, and normativity, but we shall not therefore imagine that the flourishing of guinea pigs is morally good or that anyone has a moral obligation to abet it. Why is a preferential treatment of human flourishing not a case of speciesism, an unjustified bias in favor of one's own species? (Craig 2009ii, 177)¹⁶

After my treatment of Aristotelian ethics, though, it should be clear what is wrong with this response. Given an Aristotelian framework, it cannot be arbitrary to take human flourishing as that which determines what actions are morally good or bad for human beings because *that* is the end human beings necessarily and naturally seek in all that they do—just as all other living substances seek, of necessity, their own species-specific goods. That's a teleological framework no human being can escape from, given Aristotelianism. Even the evildoer does so *sub specie boni*, under the aspect of the good, under the (radically mistaken) impression that *that* is what his flourishing demands of him. Hence, human flourishing is not an elective end of our action, one we can choose to seek or not, and hence one we would need a reason to pursue to avoid being arbitrary. Human flourishing *just is* that to which human beings are ordered by nature, and hence the ultimate good that justifies and drives all human action, even unconsciously.

Sure, guinea pig flourishing will be that good towards which guinea pigs are ordered (again, the good is species-relative). But given the facts of human nature, it is simply not the case that promoting the flourishing of guinea pigs is a necessary condition of human flourishing. In that case, no moral obligation can be attached to that activity for humans, and neither can be moral goodness *per se*.¹⁷ However, given those same facts of human nature, it is the case that promoting the flourishing of other fellow human beings (especially certain close ones, like relatives and friends) is part of our flourishing conditions. Hence, we feel morally obliged to do so, and it is objectively morally good for us to do it but objectively morally bad for us to unjustly harm or mistreat others.

As for his second criticism, that taking human flourishing as a stopping point is implausible, Craig writes:

¹⁶ The same objection can be found in Bagget & Walls (2016, 130), echoed in Loke (2023, 30).

¹⁷ Taking care of a herd of guinea pigs might be a *morally* good activity given certain conditions, but certainly not because of anything to do with guinea pigs *qua* guinea pigs. It might be morally good because taking care of non-rational animals in general may have a place in a good human life, or because it might be one or the only available legitimate means to provide for my family, or because it can be a way to exercise and develop certain flourishing-conducive virtues (like care, patience, commitment, responsibility...), etc.

Atheists will sometimes say that moral properties like goodness and badness necessarily attach to certain natural states of affairs. For example, the property of badness necessarily attaches to a man's beating his wife. The property of goodness necessarily attaches to a mother's nursing her infant. Atheists will say that once all the purely natural properties are in place, then the moral properties necessarily come along with them. Now given atheism this seems extraordinarily implausible. Why think that these strange, nonnatural moral properties like "goodness" and "badness" even exist, much less somehow get necessarily attached to various natural states of affairs? I can't see any reason to think that, given an atheistic view of the world, a full description of the natural properties involved in some situation would determine or fix any moral properties of that situation. (Craig 2010, 139)

Once more, this can certainly be strange and implausible in the most common forms of atheism today. Still, it is just what follows naturally from the Aristotelian framework, which consists in a more enriched view of nature than the typical atheist materialistic view. For the Aristotelian, a complete description of the natural properties involved in some situation would include facts such as "Mary is fulfilling her flourishing-conditions as a human mother" and "Peter is detracting from his flourishing-conditions as a human husband." Given an essentialist-teleological metaphysics, and in reference to rational agents, those just imply facts about moral goodness and moral badness without any need to appeal to God. So, Craig's responses to an Aristotelian non-theistic foundation of morality do not work, for they do not grapple sufficiently with what the Aristotelian is claiming. In a sense, we might say that the *prima facie* force of Craig's first premise stems from centuries of anti-Aristotelian natural and moral philosophy.

In a way, Craig wants to say that morality needs some kind of reference point to be objective, and that such reference point is God: "On classical theism God's own holy and perfectly good nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions and decisions are measured. [. . .] He is the locus and source of moral value" (Moreland & Craig 2005, 491). Hence, without God, all moral claims would be mere subjective opinions. But the Aristotelian has an objective reference point whose existence, for all Craig has shown, is independent of God: human nature itself, with its teleological and natural orientation towards certain goods. Hence, given the Aristotelian Foundation, there is a satisfactory explanation and grounding for the objectivity of moral values and duties—there is an objective moral standard, whether God exists or not. Some actions are objectively morally good and others objectively morally evil, whether one thinks so or not (i.e., stance-independently), because human nature and its flourishing conditions are what they are objectively, whether one thinks so or not (again, stance-independently). If someone thinks, for

instance, that human flourishing is found in a life centered around sensitive pleasures, the Aristotelian will claim that he is objectively mistaken, given the facts about human nature.

And here is where the Aristotelian non-theist can use to his advantage a striking concession that can be found in Craig's work. In response to Mark C. Murphy, Craig writes:

I am inclined to agree that prudential value is independent of God in the sense that, given naturalism, it would be possible to give an accurate account of what it would be for a human being to flourish. Obviously, such an account would be vastly different from the theistic account, which sees the knowledge of God as the key to human fulfillment. But on the supposition of naturalism, it would seem to make sense to speak of what would make human beings well-off, just as it would make sense to speak of what would contribute to the flourishing of animal species. (Craig 2009ii, 177)

With this, it seems to me, Craig has conceded to the Aristotelian naturalist all he needs to ground the objectivity of moral values and duties—he has conceded that, if God did not exist, human beings would still have a nature oriented towards certain ends, and that it would still make sense to speak, in an objective way, of human flourishing. And, from an Aristotelian point of view, *that's all one needs* to have objective moral values and duties. Thus, Craig concedes the debate to the Aristotelian when he grants that “prudential value is independent of theism” and that, hence, “it makes sense to speak of what, on atheism, is in an organism's best interest or conducive to its well-being” (Craig 2019ii, 182).

Sure, Craig goes on to criticize Murphy's attempt to ground moral value in prudential value, and Murphy might not be the best representative of the Aristotelian position, that's neither here nor there. For instance, Craig writes the following:

Even if there were, on atheism, moral values and duties (which is moot), moral value and prudential value fall apart and are often in head-on collision. Acting morally will then not make prudential sense. In the absence of moral accountability, life thus becomes, in the language of French existentialists, absurd. One has moral value pulling in one direction and prudential value tugging in the opposite and no way to decide rationally which choice to make. By contrast, on classical theism moral value and prudential value may seem temporarily out of joint but are ultimately harmonious, so that adopting the moral point of view makes good prudential sense, even if it involves worldly sacrifice. (Craig 2009ii, 182)

Again, whether this line of response succeeds against Murphy's position is not the issue here. But clearly, this attempt by Craig to break apart prudential value and moral value will not move the Aristotelian. For here is the true insight of an Aristotelian ethics: that, when it comes to human beings, prudential value *just is* moral value, and vice versa. There is *never* a case in which acting morally is against one's own *true* self-interest, one's own *true* good. And this is why prudence (*phronesis*) was the chief *moral* virtue for Aristotle—that habit of practical reason which enabled a person to truly see the human good and its demands in a concrete situation, and act upon them. Taking once more Edward Feser as an example of a prominent Aristotelian-Thomist philosopher, he puts it thus:

[T]he “old” natural law theory, given its Aristotelian-Thomistic foundations, does not draw the sort of rigid distinction between matters of ethics and matters of practicality, good mental and physical health, etc., that modern theorists tend to draw. Ethics, for Aristotelians, Thomists, and other classical thinkers, is a matter of *how to live well*, in *all* aspects of life. Anything that enters into living well—from avoiding stress to avoiding disease to avoiding murder and adultery—is part of the moral life, broadly construed. (Feser 2015, 408)

And this is why Craig's concession that it makes sense, on atheism, to speak of what it would take for human beings to flourish is fatal for his argument once Aristotelianism is brought to the table. For the Aristotelian construes ethics as the pursuit of flourishing, of the good human life. And hence, if one grants that, without God, it would still make sense to speak in an objective sense of the good human life—that, even if God did not exist, human beings could still have a nature oriented towards certain ends—, by that same token one grants that an Aristotelian understanding of moral values and duties would still be true (*objectively* true) even if God did not exist.

Put differently, suppose an Aristotelian theist ended up discovering the ultimate apodictic proof against the existence of God. Such a person may have acquired a definite reason to stop being a theist, but that alone will be insufficient for him to stop believing in objective morality. Assuming human beings have a nature oriented towards certain ends, that is enough for morality to remain objective. Whether God exists or not has no more bearing, for the Aristotelian, on the question of whether some action is objectively morally good or evil for me to do than on the question of whether some food is objectively healthy or unhealthy for me to eat. Again, under Aristotelianism, moral facts are grounded in stance-independent facts about human nature, and hence are as objective as facts about health or other natural aspects of a given species. And so, given the Aristotelian Foundation, the existence of God does

not affect the objectivity of moral truth, no more than it affects the objectivity of medical truth. All that is needed for moral values and duties to be objective is a nature with a certain constitution and flourishing conditions—if I have *that*, it makes no difference if it turns out, in the end, that God does not exist.¹⁸

This, plausibly enough, may be part of the reason why Aristotle himself seemingly never felt the need to appeal to any absolute and transcendent standard of the Good, let alone to anything remotely divine, in order to speak of moral issues in an objective sense. But more curious, this also appears to be the position of even a committed classical theist like Aquinas. In the context of discussing whether the order of love will remain unaltered in Heaven (*ST*, II-II, q. 26, a. 13), Aquinas argues that, when it comes to love of neighbor, the blessed will love more those closer to God, because God will be to the blessed the whole reason for loving. But, in response to an objection, he makes a surprising qualification: “God will be for each the whole reason for loving because He is man’s good. For if, for an impossible supposition [*per impossibile*], God were not man’s good, He wouldn’t be man’s reason for loving” (*ST*, II-II, q. 26, a. 13, ad3).

This, I think, indicates Aquinas has in mind the Aristotelian Foundation as the sole proximate and immediate foundation of morality. It is because man, by his nature, is oriented towards God as his ultimate end that God can be man’s reason for loving. But if, *per impossibile*, God were not man’s ultimate good (say, because human nature was not ordered towards God), then God could not be man’s reason for loving, despite being God himself. One wonders, thus, whether Aquinas could have gone even further in affirming that (a) If, *per impossibile*, God were contrary to man’s good, man ought to hate God; (b) If, *per impossibile*, God were to command something unjust, something which went against the human good, man ought not to obey God; or even more to the point, (b) If, *per impossibile*, God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would still exist (provided, again, man has a teleologically oriented nature).

Once more, suppose God can be removed from the picture or disconnected from man’s good leaving human nature intact. Because of this, the result is that, still, many things (actually, mostly the same as before) would continue to count as objectively good or evil, right or wrong, under an Aristotelian understanding of ethics. But in such a case, what follows is that God is not, in fact, the immediate and proximate foundation of morality, without which it would inevitably collapse. We can’t do the same, though, the Aristotelian argues, with human nature itself. If, *per*

¹⁸ Though keep in mind the qualification made above about how moral duties are objective under Aristotelianism.

impossibile, human beings did not have a nature, *then* objective moral values and duties would not (and could not) exist. Nothing could be objectively good or bad for a being that lacked a nature and, subsequently, had no flourishing conditions. In other words, hold everything else equal, except for the existence of God—there would still be objective moral values and duties. Hold everything else equal, *even the existence of God*, except for us having a nature oriented toward certain ends—there would be *no* objective moral values and duties.

What this all means is that, for Craig to defend premise (1) of his argument against the Aristotelian non-theist, he needs to defend a linking-premise: *If God does not exist, human beings do not have a nature oriented towards an end*. If it could be substantiated that we could only exist with a nature oriented toward certain ends if God exists, then the truth of premise (1) and the soundness of the argument would have to follow for the Aristotelian, though in a more indirect and roundabout way than Craig appears to intend. In essence, this would be a reduction of the moral argument to the cosmological or teleological argument. But that is a topic for another time.¹⁹

4. Is Sharon Street a Blind Alley?

4.1. *The Aristotelian v. the Evolutionary Debunking Argument*

An easy rejoinder to what has been said until now would consist in questioning the consistency of being an Aristotelian naturalist or atheist. Some might wonder whether Aristotelianism and naturalism can produce any drinkable beverage even if mixed with caution.²⁰ Though an interesting and worth-exploring line of reply, this would take us away from the moral argument. Hence, I want to evaluate whether there is any other avenue open to the theist from within the family of moral arguments to keep the discussion going. To my mind, the most promising of these is some kind of evolutionary debunking argument.

This is a variety of moral argument that has gained a lot of attention in recent literature that tries to establish a tension between naturalism, evolution, and moral

¹⁹ A possibility would be to move from the moral argument to Aquinas's Fifth Way, that pretends to link things having ends to the existence of God. I have defended a somewhat novel interpretation of Aquinas's Fifth Way in Gel (manuscript). Patrick Flynn takes a similar approach in Flynn (2023, 151–173).

²⁰ That they can't is Lloyd Gerson's contention in *Platonism and Naturalism* (Gerson, 2020). Gerson understands Aristotelianism as part of a broad family of Platonic-inspired philosophies. Also, some might argue that naturalism and teleology are in tension, though there have been atheists and non-theists who have questioned this. See, for instance, Nagel (2012) and Goff (2023).

realism. In essence, it is an argument from moral knowledge: the idea is that, given naturalism and evolution, there is no guarantee that our moral judgments conform with moral truth. Hence, the naturalist who accepts evolution should either be a moral anti-realist or deeply skeptical about his or her own ability to access the truth value of moral claims. Craig himself appears to gesture towards an argument of this sort, and it seems natural to think that the point could be pressed further to force a response from the Aristotelian naturalist. As quoted above, Craig writes:

On a naturalistic view, moral values are just by-products of socio-biological evolution. [. . .] As a result of socio-biological pressures, there has evolved among *homo sapiens* a sort of “herd morality” which functions well in the perpetuation of our species in the struggle for survival. But on the atheistic view, there doesn’t seem to be anything about *homo sapiens* that makes morality objectively true. If the film of evolutionary history were rewound and shot anew, very different creatures with a very different set of values might well have evolved. By what right do we regard our morality as objective rather than theirs? (Craig 2008, 174–175).

Philosopher Sharon Street, who gave the first influential defense of this line of argument, called attention to the fact that “the forces of natural selection have had a tremendous influence on the content of human evaluative judgments” (Street 2006, 113). Indeed, it is extremely plausible to assume that different evaluative tendencies “can have extremely different effects on a creature’s chances of survival and reproduction” (Street 2006, 114).²¹ Suppose some living being X experienced a natural unreflective tendency to think of its own destruction or the killing of its offspring as good. Such a creature would have disappeared early in the evolutionary process, and the genes encoding these bizarre evaluative tendencies would not have been perpetuated. It is important to understand, though, the following:

The influence of Darwinian selective pressures on the content of human evaluative judgments is best understood as *indirect*. The most plausible picture is that natural selection has had a tremendous *direct* influence on [. . .] our “more basic evaluative tendencies”, and that these basic evaluative tendencies, in their turn, have had a major influence on the evaluative judgments we affirm. [. . .] [H]ad the general content of our basic evaluative tendencies been very different, then the general content of our full-fledged evaluative judgments would also have been very different, and in loosely corresponding ways. (Street 2006, 119–120)

²¹ Being a naturalist herself, Street proposed embracing moral anti-realism because of the argument, but other authors have used essentially the same reasoning to the detriment of naturalism. See, for instance, Linville (2012; 2020; 2021) and Bogardus (2016).

At this point, the argument appeals to what Mark D. Linville (2012, 403) has called *Darwinian counterfactuals*, which shed light on how the basic moral intuitions of human beings would have been different had they evolved differently. The point is that “[w]e might [. . .] easily imagine all sorts of counterfactual moralities where conscience bids acts that, from our present perspective, are outright atrocities” (Linville 2020, 59). Darwin himself pondered such scenarios:

If [. . .] men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters, and no one would think of interfering. (Darwin 1882, 99)

Alongside Darwin’s bees, Linville (2012, 397; 2021, 169) asks us to consider a pack of rational wolves, who philosophize about unquestionable loyalty and obedience to the alpha as supreme moral values, while despising equality as a perversion of the true moral norms. Hypothetical examples such as these abound. Human beings take great care of their children (and normally feel obliged to do so) for an unusual number of years relative to the rest of the animal kingdom. Frogs and all kinds of fish just produce their offspring and abandon them immediately without any second thoughts. Presumably, a species of rational frogs or fishes would still do the same and feel no remorse because of it.

Street herself entertains the possibility of human beings evolving along the line of lions (feeling an urge to experience the killing of competing offspring as good, under certain circumstances), bonobos (with an unreflective tendency to turn to sexual relations in all kinds of circumstances with all kinds of partners), or the social insects (experiencing a totalitarian devotion for the common good, in detriment to one’s own individual self). “Presumably”, she writes, “in these and other such cases our system of full-fledged, reflective evaluative judgments would have looked very different as well, and in ways that loosely reflected the basic evaluative tendencies in question” (Street 2006, 121).

Once these Darwinian counterfactuals are established, the question is pressed: in the face of this proliferation of counterfactual peer-disagreement, why should human beings think that *their* moral judgments are the true ones? What reason do they have to think *their* morality is any truer than all those other counterfactual moralities? Why think *they* are right in claiming that equality, monogamy and caring for one’s offspring are morally good whereas complete submission, promiscuity and child-abandonment are morally bad? Though I would very much like to see more discussion in the literature as to whether Aristotelian ethics faces an evolutionary

challenge, I think the Aristotelian can offer two distinctive responses to it. These, in turn, will open the way for the future discussion of the moral argument moving forward.

4.2. *First Aristotelian Response: Bite the Bullet*

Recall that, according to an Aristotelian view of nature, each living being has a concrete essence or nature, teleologically oriented towards certain ends. That to which a given being tends to is its good, and that which aids him in achieving its specific good is also good to it. But this means that to different natures, we must attribute different goods. In other words, an analysis of the good, the Aristotelian claims, needs to be species-specific or species-relative. As Aristotle himself stated, “what is wholesome or good is different for human beings and for fishes” (*NE*, VI, 7, 1141a 22–23), which is why “there is no one wisdom that is concerned with the good of all animals, but a different kind for each species” (*NE*, VI, 7, 1141a 31–32), just as there is not one medicine alone for all of them but many.

But then, the Aristotelian could argue, given that the good is species-relative, it follows that the *moral* good would also have to be species-relative, on the supposition that several rational species existed. And hence, what is morally good or bad for a human being might not necessarily be morally good or bad for a rational wolf, a rational bee, a rational frog, etc., precisely because we would be dealing with different underlying natures. This, it seems to me, is just what follows from nature and end being the proximate foundation of morality, and so I think the first available response to the Aristotelian naturalist here is simply to bite the bullet—embrace the Darwinian counterfactuals and insist they pose no problem in his theory for the objectivity of moral values and duties, or for moral knowledge.

This is also how I read Aquinas. After all, to Aquinas, the principles of the natural law are formed from the several ends and inclinations present in human nature. Reason finds itself, so to speak, in a given nature, pulled towards several ends, and judges which actions are right or wrong depending on whether they accord or not with the pursuit of the complete and integrated good (the flourishing) of *this* specific nature it is a part of. The principles of moral reasoning just are those ends and tendencies inscribed into human nature, which reason does not choose, but simply discovers as given. To Aquinas, practical (and hence, moral) reason is primarily

instrumental, in the sense that the ultimate ends are not chosen after rational deliberation but given to us by nature.²²

The Aristotelian philosopher, then, should simply agree with Mark D. Linville when he writes that “we do not reason *to* our basic moral predispositions; we reason *with* them. They function in the manner of moral First Principles, and they are conferred as part of our evolutionary heritage. And, as Darwin thought, they *might* have been different” (Linville 2020, 80).²³ Yes, if human beings had (counterfactually and, must I say, counterpossibly) evolved along the line of wolfs, bees, frogs, etc., they might have arrived at a very different evaluation of what constituted their flourishing-conditions, precisely because their nature and natural inclinations (reflected in their “basic moral predispositions” or “evaluative tendencies”) would have been very different themselves. But this need not mean, *per se*, that *that* counterfactual moral evaluation would have been wrong or that our actual one is. Each one, the Aristotelian will say, is true or false relative to the specific rational nature one is talking about. In other words, (i) if human beings had evolved differently, they would have a different nature; (ii) if they had a different nature, their flourishing would also be different; (iii) if their flourishing were different, the moral claims that applied to them would be different too.

Is the Aristotelian, then, conceding that morality is wholly subjective? No, on the contrary. It is true that, in this picture, some things which human beings in the actual world consider deeply morally wrong would only be so *for them*, not necessarily for any other rational species, with a different underlying nature. However, moral truths continue to be objective, only that they are as species-specific as claims about health or the good in general. This hardly means that there is no objective moral truth when it comes to *human* behavior, any objectively good way for human beings to behave.

Hence, all moral claims should be understood with an implicit clause referring to the rational species in question. If a being *A* is of rational species *S* (if he has *this* specific nature), then *this* set of moral propositions objectively applies to *A*—for instance, the moral truth should not be thought of exactly as “Parents ought to care

²² As he puts it elsewhere: “Because the good has the reason of an end, and the bad the contrary reason, it follows that everything to which man has a natural inclination, reason will naturally apprehend it as good and, in consequence, as something to be pursued, while the contrary as bad and to be avoided. Which is why the order of the precepts of the natural law follows the order of natural inclinations” (*ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2).

²³ In another context, Linville complains that, in such a case, “Moral reasoning would then appear to be *means-end* reasoning, where the ends have been laid down for us by natural selection” (Linville 2012, 403). But that moral reasoning is, essentially, means-end reasoning, where the ends are fixed in us by nature is *precisely* what the Aristotelian claims moral reasoning to be.

for their offspring," but "*Human* parents ought to care for their offspring." Surely, nobody tends to think this way because, as far as anyone knows, human beings are the only rational animal on Earth, and so the only being to which moral reasoning and propositions can apply. But again, if we equip naturalism with Aristotelian tools, I'm not sure why the naturalist should have a problem here.²⁴ One and the same physical act could be morally good and obligatory for rational species *A* and morally bad and prohibited for rational species *B*, without compromising the objectivity of moral values and duties altogether.²⁵

4.3. *Second Aristotelian Response: I'd Rather Keep my Teeth, Thank You*

Though the previous approach is, to my mind, consistent with an Aristotelian understanding of morality, it might prove too sturdy a bullet to bite. Indeed, some Darwinian counterfactuals might be more disturbing to think about than others.²⁶ Would it be *truly* morally good, even obligatory, for a species of rational bees to commit siblicide or filicide under certain circumstances? Would a rational lion be violating his own *true* good if compassion moved him to spare his enemy's offspring?

Indeed, these considerations seem to contain the seed of a different kind of evolutionary debunking argument, one specifically aimed at Aristotelian naturalism. Classic evolutionary debunking arguments raise an epistemological challenge against moral realism—i.e., that, given naturalistic evolution, moral skepticism should follow. Aimed against Aristotelian naturalism, though, evolutionary considerations should simply lead to the realization that moral values and duties are species-relative—a conclusion with implications so absurd and

²⁴ Though theism might then predict a more unified and uniform moral order, on the assumption that different rational species exist throughout the universe. Naturalism, instead, would lack any organizing principle to avoid widespread and irresolvable moral chaos and conflict between rational species. Perhaps the former is more desirable in some theoretical sense, so maybe there is an argument here to explore.

²⁵ Aquinas, once more, apparently would have to agree. He writes: "In natural things, a good act is that which is convenient to the agent's nature, a bad act one which is not convenient to the agent's nature. Hence it happens that *one and the same act is judged in different ways if compared to different agents*. For this that is moving upwards, if compared with fire, is a good act, because it is natural to it. But if compared with earth, it is a bad act, for it is against its nature" (*De malo*, q. 2, a. 4; my italics). Building a hypothetical on Aquinas's example, it seems, then, that he would have to agree with the following: that if fire and water were rational and free agents, one and the same physical act (moving upwards) would be morally good and obligatory for fire and morally bad and prohibited for water.

²⁶ Michael Ruse (1985, 67) theorizes about an extraterrestrial intelligent species which did not consider immoral actions that were physically indistinguishable from what we would call rape.

morally repugnant so as to count as a strong *reductio*. Is it really acceptable to think there could be rational beings subject to moral norms radically different (and maybe even opposed) to the ones binding for humans?²⁷

I would concede that more thought needs to be put into this question, but tentatively I would say it depends. Assuming the advent of reason doesn't imply, *per se*, any substantive change in the nature of the creature in question, I think the Aristotelian should simply bite the bullet and accept that this is what follows from his or her metaphysical and ethical framework. Even a committed Aristotelian-Thomist like Feser, while (obviously) recognizing that torturing babies for fun cannot possibly be good for humans given their natures, ponders that "[p]erhaps God could make creatures of *some* kind for which torturing babies for fun would be good" (Feser 2021, 278). That's disturbing to think about, given that we can't but imagine it from the particular standpoint of our nature and its flourishing-conditions. Still, nothing in it appears absurd or incoherent once the Aristotelian framework is taken into account.

But very plausibly, the nature of a rational bee would *not* be qualitatively the same as the nature of its most immediate non-rational bee ancestor, precisely because of the one being rational and the other not. And here is where a second and more digestible response presents itself to the Aristotelian naturalist. For rationality comes with its own set of tendencies, ends, and goods, and so with demands of its own. Thus, a rational mother bee, while feeling a deep instinctual urge towards killing her fertile daughter, might end up recognizing that, while such an action would have been called for had she and her daughter been *mere* bees, in actuality filicide is in deep and stark conflict with some other good of a superior kind to which she is oriented because of being rational. Thus, through cultural progress and rational reflection on the *true* flourishing of rational bees, the infanticidal impulses would end up being regarded as remnants of a non-rational era, to be strongly opposed through the virtue of self-control. Just as humans already have done in History and continue to do (or at least ought to do) with many of their own inherited animal impulses.

However, what could this superior good consist of? It is hard to see any other option besides the ability to conform oneself and one's actions to the value of things around us, which reason would help us detect and recognize. Under this view, it could be said that *any* rational creature, independently of its evolutionary origin, is endowed with some kind of intrinsic and inherent value, *dignity*, based on the sole

²⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this difference between the classic evolutionary debunking approach and the kind of evolutionary debunking argument that could be levered against Aristotelian naturalism.

fact of it being rational. Such dignity would command a special kind of respect, and certain actions against rational creatures (like murder, rape, torture. . .) would be intrinsically bad in the sense that they would always violate such dignity and thus constitute grave failures of reason on the part of the agent committing them. Some of these creatures, because of their evolutionary origin, might have a harder time abiding by these guidelines. Still, their true flourishing as rational creatures would command them to be followed—and so, for any rational creature, it would be bad (i.e., contrary to its true good) to treat other rational creatures in a way that violated their dignity.

This would provide the Aristotelian naturalist with a way to ground the universality of at least some of our moral intuitions when it comes to dealing with persons. After all, if pressed, surely most of us would want to say that the murder, rape, or torture of any *rational* creature would be wrong, be it a human being, a rational lion, or a rational bee. Hence, and to sum up, it seems that the naturalist can escape William Lane Craig's moral argument if he adopts Aristotelianism, but that when it comes to evolutionary debunking arguments the options are either biting the bullet or granting dignity to all rational creatures. The first option appears consistent, though troubling. The second has the reverse characteristics—it is less troubling, but consistency issues might arise if dignity is introduced into a naturalistic world. Indeed, if the second route is taken, the question now becomes how naturalism can accommodate such a mysterious kind of value and the faculty (reason) that is supposed to detect it; and not just that, but how can it make their actual emergence in cosmic history more probable than a mere coincidence of astronomic proportions. This, as I advanced at the beginning of the paper, marks the way for the moral argument moving forward—the theist must leave the objectivity of moral values and duties behind and move on to a moral argument from personal dignity.²⁸

5. Conclusion

I have shown how an Aristotelian framework can help the naturalist resist William Lane Craig's moral argument for the existence of God. Given that what is morally good or bad for an agent is determined by its flourishing, and this is in turn determined by the nature of the agent in question, under Aristotelianism there would still be objective moral values and duties even if God did not exist, provided human beings continued to possess a certain nature oriented towards certain ends.

²⁸ For an example, see Linville (2012, 417–448).

If the Aristotelian is correct, the fact that an action X is morally good or bad for a human being to perform is something objectively true simply by virtue of human beings being the kind of substances that they are. Thus, such a thing would remain true even in the absence of God. In other words, it is not God's existence that grounds the objectivity of moral values and duties but the fact that human beings have a concrete nature with its own objective (stance-independent) flourishing-conditions.

I have also shown how Craig himself essentially concedes the argument to the Aristotelian, in admitting that prudential value is independent of theism and that it would still make sense to speak of human flourishing even if God did not exist. That admission *plus* an Aristotelian understanding of morality simply yields the objectivity of moral values and duties without needing to appeal to God as its transcendent and absolute source.

Lastly, I have explored the most promising theistic comeback to the Aristotelian challenge, in the form of an evolutionary debunking argument. Here, I have put forward two options for the Aristotelian naturalist—either bite the bullet and concede different (and even contradictory) moral claims might be true for different possible rational species; or else recognize some kind of common universal value to all rational creatures, regardless of their evolutionary origin, which would ground the truth of some set of common moral claims. The first path is *prima facie* consistent, but troubling. The second path is less troubling, but *prima facie* beset with questions and potential consistency problems for naturalism. And so, the road is clear and open in front of us—ahead lies the next frontier for the moral argument.²⁹

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