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GOD AND THE MORAL ORDER

C. Stephen Layman

I argue that three theses about the moral order are defensible, that they do not beg the question of God's existence, and that they support theism over naturalism. The three theses are:

1. In every actual case, one has most reason to do what is morally required. (One has most reason to do act x if and only if the strongest relevant reasons favor doing x.)
2. If there is no God and no life after death, then there are cases in which morality requires that one make a great sacrifice that confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms).
3. If in a given situation one must make a great sacrifice in order to do what is morally required, but the sacrifice confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms), then one does not have most reason to do what is morally required.

("Sacrifice" is here used in a technical way to indicate a permanent and uncompensated loss of something that is in the agent's long-term best interests.) After arguing for these three theses, I claim that since theism can accommodate them and naturalism cannot, theism has a theoretical advantage over naturalism.

Skepticism about the value of moral arguments for theism is widespread among philosophers. But I maintain that there is a conjunction of theses about the moral order that increases the probability of theism. None of these theses begs the question of God's existence and each is, I believe, plausible upon reflection.

Prior to stating my argument, a number of preliminaries are in order. First, in this paper "God" means "an almighty and wholly good being." By "theism" I mean simply the view that God exists. I assume that a wholly good being is perfectly loving. I also assume that God would not order reality in such a way that being moral would disadvantage agents in the long run. And I assume that "the long term" likely involves life after death, given theism.¹

Second, I do not think the moral argument I am advancing can stand alone. Hence, in putting it forward, I assume either that other theistic arguments provide some significant support for the existence of God or that belief in God is properly basic.² Thus, I claim merely that my moral argu-



ment makes a positive contribution to a larger, rational case for (or defense of) theism.

Third, the argument I wish to advance is primarily an attempt to show that a certain body of evidence supports theism over *naturalism*. By "naturalism" I mean roughly the view that (a) whatever exists is material or dependent (causally or by supervenience) on material things and (b) material things are entirely governed by natural laws. There is no God according to the naturalist and no life after death. When we die, our bodies decay, and we cease to exist.

Fourth, my argument is designed to appeal to those who believe that there are irreducibly moral facts. I assume, for example, that it is a moral fact that *it is wrong to torture people for fun*. Some individuals or groups may deny or ignore this fact, but it remains a fact. (Analogously, it is fact that the earth is round, and this remains a fact even though it is denied by the Flat Earth Society.) In saying that there are *irreducibly* moral facts, I mean that the facts in question cannot correctly be identified with non-evaluative or non-normative facts, such as merely psychological or sociological facts. To illustrate, the fact that *murder is wrong* cannot be identified with the fact that *most humans disapprove of murder*.³

Fifth, my argument is meant to appeal to those who accept a fairly traditional understanding of what is morally right and wrong. I shall simply assume, for example, that lying, stealing, and killing are generally wrong, though I shall not beg any questions about cases commonly regarded as allowable exceptions. For instance, I shall assume that it is generally wrong to intentionally kill a human being, but I shall not beg any questions about the usual range of possible exceptions, e.g., killing in self-defense. Of course, some moral theorists reject what I here call a "fairly traditional understanding of what is right and wrong." To illustrate, some act-utilitarians find killing, stealing, and lying permissible in many situations in which these acts are traditionally considered wrong. In my opinion, ethical theories that justify killing, stealing, and lying in a much wider range of cases than is traditionally allowed are, for that very reason, highly problematic; but I shall not argue that case here. I can only say that those who reject a fairly traditional view about the wrongness of killing, stealing, and lying need read no further, for this paper is unlikely to be of any interest to them.

Sixth, in this paper, locutions such as "This is a moral duty" or "This is a moral requirement" express not merely *prima facie* moral duties but *ultima facie* moral duties. That is, when I say that an act is a moral duty (or that it is morally required), I mean that, in the situation in question, the act is what one morally ought to do *all things considered*. For example, if I say that one is morally required *not to steal* in a certain situation, I do not mean simply that there are some moral considerations against stealing that may be outweighed by other moral considerations in favor of stealing; rather I mean that, taking all morally relevant factors into account, one ought not to steal in that situation.

Seventh, I shall frequently use the locution "x has most reason to do y." A person has "most reason" to do something, in my sense, when the weightiest or strongest reasons favor doing that thing. So, if an agent has most reason to do act A, then taking all relevant reasons into account (e.g.,

prudential, moral, and aesthetic reasons), they on balance favor performing A. And I assume that “the balance of reasons” is not a merely subjective notion; agents can make mistakes in weighing up reasons for and against an action. For example, in my view, a person who thinks that moral requirements are typically outweighed by personal whims would be making a grave mistake.

Finally, I shall use the word “sacrifice” in a somewhat technical way to indicate a *permanent, net loss of something that is in the long-term best interests of the agent*. So, for present purposes, the word “sacrifice” indicates a permanent loss to the agent, not a temporary one; moreover, it indicates a loss that is not “made up for” in the long run. Of course, as the term is ordinarily used, sacrifices are often temporary and/or compensated, so let me provide some examples of a sacrifice in my sense. Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that there is no life after death, and hence that this earthly life is the only one we’ve got. On this supposition, if one gave up one’s eyesight permanently and this loss was not compensated in any way, then one would have made a sacrifice in my sense of the term, indeed a great sacrifice. Similarly, if a person who is not poor were to give up all of her material goods, and this loss was not compensated in any way, she would have made a sacrifice in my sense of the term, presumably a great one.

I. The Argument Briefly Stated

In this section I will state my argument. My intent is to summarize the basic intuitions that give the argument its plausibility. In the next section I will consider some important objections to the argument and amplify some key points.

My argument has three main premises. ⁴ Premise (1) is this: *In every actual case one has most reason to do what is morally required*. In other words, in every actual case, if a person is morally required to do some act, then (taking all relevant reasons into account) the balance of reasons favors performing that act. Why think (1) is true? Consider an actual case in which someone has performed an action that you initially find quite puzzling or odd. Then imagine that you become convinced that in performing the action the person was doing his or her moral duty. The act was morally required. Would you not assume that the action was fully justified on this basis? Most of us would and most moral theorists (theist or non-theist) would agree. If an act is my moral duty, then I have overriding reason to perform it. In short, premise (1) is part of our pre-theoretical conception of morality. And thus, if we take an Aristotelian approach to philosophy, (1) is among the appearances to be saved.

We can, however, say a bit more in favor of (1): If one does not always have most reason to do what is morally required, then why should one be moral? In a given case, considerations of prudence, aesthetics, and/or etiquette may conflict with moral considerations and one faces the question, “How should one act?”, where the “should” is not moral but may be interpreted along the following lines: “Which alternative course of action is backed by the strongest or weightiest reasons?” And if we grant that a certain course of action X is backed by the strongest or weightiest reasons,

then from a rational point of view X should be done. Moreover, if we agree that the best reasons sometimes favor immoral actions, and yet we give our full allegiance to morality, then our allegiance to morality is irrational in the sense that it involves acting on inferior reasons. But I presume that most of my readers give morality their full allegiance and do not regard this allegiance as involving such irrationality. So, I assume that my readers will find themselves strongly inclined to accept (1).

Before going on, however, I should point out that premise (1) is *not* the claim that one has most reason to do what is morally required in every *logically possible* case. In other words, I have not claimed that (1) is a necessary truth, I have merely claimed that it is true. And I shall soon describe some *logically possible* cases or situations in which it seems to me that the agent would not have most reason to do what is morally required. I regard these cases as *merely* logically possible—I myself do not think that cases combining all of the relevant features occur in the actual world. However, those who are convinced that there is no God and no life after death may be inclined to regard cases of the relevant type as actual, and this may raise questions about premise (1). I shall return to this matter in section II, but for now I will simply make three assertions: (a) since we are discussing an argument for God's existence, I take it that the non-existence of God is not properly assumed in evaluating the truth of my premises, (b) I hope to show that each of my three main premises is either embedded in our pre-theoretical conception of morality or defensible via argument (or both), and (c) my overall strategy is to argue that theism has a theoretical advantage over naturalism because theism can accommodate my three main premises while naturalism cannot.

Premise (2) is as follows: *If there is no God and no life after death, then there are cases in which morality requires that one make a great sacrifice that confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms).* The following case—let us call it the “Ms. Poore case”—is offered in support of premise (2). Suppose Ms. Poore has lived many years in grinding poverty. She is not starving, but has only the bare necessities. She has tried very hard to get ahead by hard work, but nothing has come of her efforts. An opportunity to steal a large sum of money arises. If Ms. Poore steals the money and invests it wisely, she can obtain many desirable things her poverty has denied her: cure for a painful (but nonfatal) medical condition, a well-balanced diet, decent housing, adequate heat in the winter, health insurance, new career opportunities through education, etc. Moreover, if she steals the money, her chances of being caught are very low and she knows this. She is also aware that the person who owns the money is very wealthy and will not be greatly harmed by the theft. Let us add that Ms. Poore rationally believes that if she fails to steal the money, she will likely live in poverty for the remainder of her life. In short, Ms. Poore faces the choice of stealing the money or living in grinding poverty the rest of her life. In such a case, I think it would be *morally* wrong for Ms. Poore to steal the money; and yet, assuming there is no God and no life after death, failing to steal the money will likely deny her a large measure of personal fulfillment, i.e., a large measure of *what is in her long-term best interests*.⁵

I believe that the Ms. Poore case offers intuitive support for premise (2).

However, some may reject (2) on the grounds that *virtue is its own reward*, and hence we are *necessarily* compensated for our *morally required* losses because moral virtue is a great enough benefit to those who possess it to compensate fully for any losses it entails. Now, I do not doubt that virtue is a benefit to those who possess it. But the suggestion that *perfect* virtue is *necessarily* a great enough benefit to its possessor to compensate fully for any loss it entails strikes me as highly implausible. Consider the following thought experiment.⁶ Imagine two people, Mr. Gladwin and Ms. Goodwin. Mr. Gladwin is a morally lukewarm person who happens to be regarded as a paragon of virtue. He is admired by most people, prosperous, loved by his family and friends, and enjoys his life very much. Ms. Goodwin on the other hand is genuinely virtuous—honest, just, and pure in heart. Unfortunately, because of some clever enemies, Ms. Goodwin is widely regarded as wicked. She is in prison for life on false charges. Her family and friends, convinced that she is guilty, have turned against her. She subsists on a bread and water diet. Leaving God out of the picture for the moment, which of these two people is better off? Which is more fulfilled assuming there is no God? Surely it is Gladwin, not Goodwin. And note that even if virtue is of value for its own sake, it isn't the *only* thing of value.⁷ In particular, freedom is valuable too. Suppose the warden agrees to release Ms. Goodwin if and only if she commits one morally wrong act. Perhaps her accounting skills enable her to help steal some money for the warden. Now, it seems to me that if there is no God and no life after death, it could easily be in Ms. Goodwin's long-term best interest to act immorally in this sort of case. The choice is roughly between life-long misery and an action that is immoral but produces relatively modest harms. So, it does not seem *necessarily* true that the rewards of *perfect* virtue compensate for the rewards of wrongdoing; nor does it seem *necessarily* true that being *perfectly* virtuous is in the agent's long-term best interest. I conclude that the cases of Ms. Poore and Ms. Goodwin provide strong intuitive support for (2).

The above cases also help to support premise (3): *If in a given case one must make a great sacrifice in order to do what is morally required, but the sacrifice confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms), then one does not have most reason to do what is morally required.* Further support for this third premise comes from the following principle: *It is always and necessarily prudent to act so as to promote one's long-term best interests.* And therefore, making a great sacrifice (where a sacrifice is an *uncompensated* giving-up of something that is in one's long-term best interests) is not prudent. Premise (3) makes explicit what the cases of Ms. Poore and Ms. Goodwin strongly suggest, namely, that *when considerations of prudence and morality clash, if the prudential considerations are truly momentous while the results of behaving immorally are relatively minor, then morality does not override prudence.*

There are, I recognize, multiple barriers to the acceptance of (3). I shall make two brief comments here and leave more technical issues for the next section. First, it may be helpful to note that if God exists, there will be no genuine conflicts between prudence and morality. The reason is this: to act immorally is to sin; to sin is to alienate oneself from God; and it is never in one's long-term best interests to alienate oneself from God. Accordingly,

the situation envisioned in the antecedent of premise (3) could not be actual if God exists, for in doing one's moral duty one prevents a very great harm to oneself, namely, alienation from God.

Second, it might be claimed that (a) acting immorally even just once will ruin one's character and (b) to ruin one's character is to incur a great loss; hence, one always has most reason to act morally. The problem with this objection to premise (3) is that (a) is manifestly false. For one's character can be summed up in terms of traits (e.g., being fair, being responsible, being wise, being loving, etc.), each trait being a tendency to act in a certain way. But many or even most people can do something wrong *in what they regard as a rare special case* without thereby altering significantly the basic behavioral tendencies associated with their traits of character.⁸

We have, then, three premises, each of which is plausible on reflection and none of which begs the question of God's existence. Let us now examine the logic of the situation:

Premise 1. In every actual case, one has most reason to do what is morally required.

Premise 2. If there is no God and no life after death, then there are cases in which morality requires that one make a great sacrifice that confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms).

Premise 3. If in a given case one must make a great sacrifice in order to do what is morally required, but the sacrifice confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms), then one does not have most reason to do what is morally required.

Premises (2) and (3) imply the following sub-conclusion:

4. If there is no God and no life after death, then in some cases one does not have most reason to do what is morally required.

But (4) and (1) combine to yield:

5. "There is no God and no life after death" is false, i.e., either God exists or there is life after death (or both).

Given (5), one can still avoid the conclusion that God exists by arguing that there would be (or at least might well be) a life after death *in which the best interests of morally virtuous persons are realized* even if God does not exist. This move is not, however, open to the naturalist. So, let us consider some objections that, if correct, would prevent us from arriving at step (5).

II. Objections and Replies

Objection 1. Your argument presupposes that, on pain of irrationality, one needs some non-moral or prudential reason to do what is morally required; but this presupposition is false. In fact, to be genuinely morally virtuous, one must do the morally right thing simply because it is right.

Those who do the right thing for an ulterior, prudential reason are, from a moral point of view, substandard.

Reply. My argument does not involve this presupposition. Granted, from the moral standpoint, one should do the right thing for moral reasons. But what if there are possible situations in which the weightiest reasons favor doing something *besides* what's morally required? On the assumption that agents can find themselves in such situations, it would seem that agents are rationally justified in doing something other than what's morally required. So, I'm not suggesting people should behave morally for ulterior motives, I'm raising the question whether they "should" behave morally at all in certain hypothetical situations. (The "should" in scare quotes does not express the dictates of morality, but the dictates of rationality, i.e., what one *should* do is what one has the weightiest reasons to do). Let me elaborate briefly.

Assuming that conflicts between morality and prudence occur, I agree that moral reasons *can* outweigh prudential ones. For example, suppose ten children will die a very painful death if I don't help them, but helping them will produce a very slight *net* decrease in the satisfaction of my long-term best interests. Such cases are not actual, in my view, but if they do occur, then it seems clear to me that the moral reasons would outweigh the conflicting prudential ones. And so, in such cases, I would have most reason to act morally even though prudence runs contrary to morality.

What I question is the rationality of doing what's morally required if the gains (for all affected) are relatively minor and the long-term disadvantages to the agent are momentous. In such hypothetical cases it seems to me that the strongest reasons do not back morality. Thus, my argument draws attention to the fact that certain metaphysical views are demoralizing, in the sense that they make acting on weaker reasons the price of moral virtue in some instances. It may be useful to illustrate this point with a rather far-fetched metaphysical view: Suppose a very powerful Deity is in control of the universe but the Deity particularly delights in ensuring that those who do their duty for duty's sake fare very poorly as compared to the self-serving phonies, the morally lukewarm, and the wicked. And suppose the free agents are well aware of these grim metaphysical facts. In such a situation it seems to me that the free agents would often lack overriding reason to do their moral duty. Again, my point is not that people should do the right things to get a reward; rather, my point is that in certain hypothetical situations people lack overriding reason to do the right thing.

Objection 2. The cases you describe in support of premises (2) and (3) are bound to be taken by the naturalist as evidence against premise (1). Also, by attacking or qualifying the thesis that *virtue is its own reward*, you have undermined the only ground a naturalist has for accepting (1). Thus, although your premises may be logically consistent, your argument is dialectically flawed; in effect you give the naturalist good reason to reject premise (1).⁹

Reply. First of all, my moral cases (i.e., Ms. Poore, Ms. Goodwin) provide evidence against premise (1) *only* on the assumption that there is no God and no life after death. But one can hardly make this assumption and give the argument an open-minded run for its money; it is after all an argument

for God's existence! So, if the naturalist regards my moral cases as evidence against (1), the naturalist is begging the question, and the dialectical error is on the naturalist's side.

Second, I doubt that many people accept (1) on the grounds that *virtue is its own reward*. I doubt that (1) is typically accepted on the basis of an argument at all. Rather, when certain questions are posed, we simply find that we are presupposing (1). To illustrate, consider an (admittedly contrived) moral theory: *one is always morally required to do what is best for others*.¹⁰ On this theory, the agent's interests are irrelevant to morality—the agent must do what is best for others regardless of the cost to himself. But suppose a significant sacrifice on my part would only marginally improve someone else's lot, e.g., Sue's minor headache can somehow be relieved if I give up my annual two-week vacation. This moral theory seems to demand that I give up my vacation. Well, why not accept this theory of morality? One good reason seems to be this: it fails to give self-interest its due, and thus yields a situation in which *alleged* moral requirements are overridden by self-interest. The point, of course, is not that self-interest does override morality, but rather that the overridingness of moral reasons is presupposed in our moral theorizing. And of course, we bring this presupposition to our moral theorizing because it is deeply embedded in our pre-theoretical conception of morality.¹¹

Third, the appeal to *virtue is its own reward* is not the only possible defense of premise (1). As noted previously, if (1) is false, then immoral actions are sometimes backed by reasons as strong as (or stronger than) those backing the moral alternative. But if immoral actions are sometimes backed by reasons as strong as (or stronger than) those backing the moral alternative, then the institution of morality lacks rational authority. That is, the system of morality does not have blanket endorsement from the rational point of view—only parts of it do. And even if those parts are very large, this consequence is not something most of us can readily accept.

Objection 3. Some moral theorists, in company with Kant and R.M. Hare, claim that moral reasons necessarily or by definition override all others.¹² If such views are correct, then premise (3) must be false. For if moral reasons necessarily override all other kinds of reasons, then there can be no situation in which one lacks most reason to act morally; but (3) presupposes that such situations are possible.

Reply. No dictionary defines "morality" in terms of overridingness. So, those who *define* moral reasons as overriding ones are offering a *theory* and we need evidence for the theory. Similarly, the claim that moral reasons *necessarily* override all others is not obvious, and it won't do to argue for it in an inductive fashion by citing cases. The problem with such an inductive approach is that it runs afoul of the very sorts of cases that serve as the focus of this paper. The hypothetical cases described in section I cast doubt on the claim that "It is *necessarily* true that moral reasons are overriding." So, the situation seems to be that most of us find ourselves believing that, in every actual case, moral reasons are overriding; but—unless we take for granted certain highly controversial metaphysical theses (see the response to objection 5 below)—we lack good reason to think that "Moral reasons are overriding" is a *necessary truth*.

Objection 4. Kantians argue that *whenever an agent acts immorally, she acts on a maxim that she cannot consistently will to be universal law*. But it is irrational to act on a maxim one cannot consistently will to be universal law; hence, one always has most reason to act morally; therefore, premise (3) is false.

Reply. My reply is twofold. First, the Kantian thesis is in fact highly dubious. Consider the case of Ms. Poore. How should we describe the maxim she is acting on? Presumably along the following lines: *Whenever I find myself in a circumstance in which (a) I am very poor but not destitute, (b) I can easily steal a large sum of money with impunity from a very rich person, (c) I will doom myself to enduring and wretched poverty by not stealing, and (d) I will inflict little harm by stealing, I shall steal*. Why can't Ms. Poore consistently will this maxim to be universal law? The clauses of the maxim ensure that it can be applied only rarely. And I see no conceptual difficulties regarding theft (or the institution of private property) if we contemplate a world (similar to the actual world but) in which all relevantly situated persons act in accord with the maxim. And although Ms. Poore might not *like* to have money stolen from her if she were rich, she might nevertheless be *willing* to have anyone in her current circumstances act in accord with the stated maxim, and willing to take a chance on being stolen from in the event that she herself should become rich. Perhaps a few Kantians (certainly not Kant himself) will agree with all this and adopt a revisionist morality that allows stealing (lying, etc.) in the cases I've described. But since such revisionism runs contrary to my settled judgment of the cases, I do not think it provides the naturalist with a cost-free response to my argument.

Second, suppose we grant that *if one acts immorally, one acts on a maxim one cannot consistently will to be universal law*. Does it follow logically that one has most reason to be moral? Not clearly. For one may have very strong reasons to make a special exception in one's own case. And even if making a special exception in one's own case is always immoral, it may sometimes be rational.¹³ One can imagine Ms. Poore saying, "Even if I cannot consistently will that all possible agents in my situation commit theft, the fact is relatively few people will ever be in my situation and in this case there's just too much at stake for me personally in doing the moral thing."

Objection 5. Not only naturalists but many theists must reject your argument, namely, those theists, very common in the Christian tradition, who hold that God exists necessarily, is necessarily perfectly morally good, and is necessarily omnipotent. Let us call these theists "classical theists." According to classical theists, it is not logically possible for there to be a situation in which an agent makes a great sacrifice (which involves a permanent and uncompensated loss of something in the agent's long-term best interests) in order to do something morally required. For a perfectly good and omnipotent Deity would not set up a moral order in which doing one's duty is contrary to one's long-term best interests. Moreover, such a Deity exists in every possible world and is perfectly good and omnipotent in every possible world, according to the classical theist. Hence, your argument countenances situations that are simply not possible according to the classical theist.

Reply. First, since I am arguing for God's existence, it would hardly be dialogically appropriate for me to begin by assuming that God cannot fail

to exist. Moreover, the classical theist herself can grant the possibility that God doesn't exist *for the sake of the argument*. So, I don't think my argumentative strategy is necessarily in conflict with classical theism.

Second, the classical theist should accept all three of my premises: Premise (2) obviously has an impossible antecedent given classical theism ("If there is no God . . ."). Hence, by a familiar principle of modal logic, classical theists should regard (2) as a necessary truth. Premise (3) is also necessarily true given classical theism, for reasons alluded to in objection 5: A perfectly good God would never set up a moral order in which doing one's duty is contrary to one's long-term best interests and such a God exists in every possible world, according to the classical theist. Hence, the situation envisaged in the antecedent of (3) is impossible, and (3) itself is necessary. Finally, classical theists should accept premise (1), but deny my claim that (1) is contingent. Since immoral behavior is sin, sin alienates one from God, and alienation from God undermines personal fulfillment, I presume prudence never trumps morality if God exists. Hence, one always has most reason to act morally, if God exists. Moreover, God exists in every possible world according to the classical theist (and is both perfectly good and omnipotent in every possible world). Of course, this way of arguing for the *necessity* of premise (1) is not available to the naturalist or indeed to any type of non-theist.

III. Completing the Argument

If my argument up to this point is any good, then it has given some support to step (5), i.e., the thesis that either God exists or there is life after death (or both). However, (5) could be true even if God does not exist; for it may be that there is no God but there is a life after death in which the best interests of the morally virtuous are realized. So, in this section I wish to complete my moral argument for theism by defending the following premise:

6. It is likely that if there is a life after death in which the long-term best interests of the morally virtuous are realized, then God exists.

If premise (6) is defensible, then if it is conjoined with premises (1) through (3), we have an argument that lends positive support to theism. In defending (6), I shall rely on two assumptions. First, I shall assume that there is no life after death given naturalism. Second, I shall assume that the two best theories of the afterlife centrally involve either theism or reincarnation.

Given that reincarnation occurs, each person's soul is transferred to another body at some time after death. So, given reincarnation, there is life after death. And given the doctrine of karma, one's degree of moral virtue determines one's circumstances in the next life. Indeed, if the law of karma governs the universe, the more nearly one lives up to the demands of morality, the better one's circumstances in the next life.¹⁴ Thus, the traditional Hindu doctrines of reincarnation and karma combine to yield a cosmic moral order.

Of course, a doctrine of reincarnation could be combined with theism, but we are here concerned with versions of reincarnation that are in logical

competition with theism, i.e., views that deny the existence of any sort of personal Deity. And it seems to me that such views are self-undermining, for the complexity of the moral order they postulate provides good evidence of an Intelligent and Moral Designer. Consider: given that reincarnation and karma hold in the absence of any Deity, the universe is governed not only by physical laws but by impersonal moral laws. These moral laws must be very complicated, for they have to regulate the connection between each soul's moral record in one life and that soul's total circumstances in its next life, including which body it has and the degree of happiness (and/or misery) it experiences. Accordingly, these laws must somehow take into account every act, every intention, and every choice of every moral agent and ensure that the agent receives nothing less than his or her just deserts in the next life. Now, the degree of complexity involved here is not only extraordinarily high, it is also complexity that serves a moral end, namely, justice. Such complexity can hardly be accepted as a brute fact. *Highly complex order serving a moral end* is a phenomenon that legitimates appeal to an intelligent cause. And if the order is on a scale far surpassing what can reasonably be attributed to human intelligence, the appeal to divine intelligence is surely justified. Thus, the moral order postulated by non-theistic reincarnation provides evidence for theism.¹⁵

To sum up, even if reincarnation occurs in accordance with the principle of karma, the nature of the postulated moral order lends support to theism. Therefore, it seems likely that if there is a life after death in which the ultimate fulfillment of the morally virtuous is realized, then God exists. And this thesis, together with the argument of section I, provides at least some positive support for the proposition that God exists.¹⁶

Seattle Pacific University

NOTES

1. Here is a sketch of an argument linking theism and life after death: A wholly loving God would care deeply about the fulfillment of human creatures and would not leave human creatures frustrated and unfulfilled if he is able to provide the means of fulfillment. Yet, as virtually everyone will admit, in this earthly life, the deepest yearnings of human beings are not fulfilled, and many human beings have led lives characterized by frustration. An almighty God is surely able to provide the means of fulfillment by providing human creatures with a form of existence after death in which their deepest yearnings can be satisfied. So, if God exists, life after death seems likely.

2. A belief is *properly basic* if it does not need to be based on other beliefs in order to be rational or warranted. Note that, even if belief in God is properly basic, arguments for God's existence are not necessarily rendered pointless; for even when a proposition is already known or rationally believed, independent lines of support can still have a significant confirming role. For a defense of the thesis that belief in God can be properly basic, see Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (New York: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16-93 and Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 167-198.

3. Though I shall not discuss the issue in this paper, I believe that severe problems result from the denial of moral facts. See David Brink, "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Argument from Disagreement and Queerness" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984): 111-125. This article is anthologized in Louis Pojman, ed., *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, second edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), 469-476. For a well-known rejection of moral facts, see J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 15-49. I should also note that my assumption that moral facts cannot be identified with non-evaluative (or non-normative) facts is incompatible with certain (I think rather extreme) versions of the divine command theory, e.g., versions claiming that *moral wrongness* is identical with *being forbidden by an all powerful being*. On the other hand, my assumption is compatible with divine command theories that identify *moral wrongness* with *being forbidden by a morally good or loving Deity*.

4. My premises are partly inspired by a quartet of theses discussed in David O. Brink, "A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality," ed. James E. Tomberlin, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 6 *Ethics*, 1992 (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1992), 1-26.

5. In discussing this case with various philosophers, I have found that certain ways of elaborating the case make it more convincing to some. (A) For example, to some it might make a difference if Ms. Poore steals the money partly to enrich the lives of her children (e.g., by providing them with better clothing, food they enjoy, etc). I welcome such elaborations, but with this proviso: it is essential that the elaborations not be such as to give Ms. Poore a moral duty that plausibly overrides her duty not to steal. For example, if she steals the money to pay for expensive surgery needed to save the life of one of her children, it would be at least plausible to suppose that her duty to preserve life overrides her duty not to steal. I have presented the case simply as one in which *momentous prudent concerns compete with the moral duty not to steal*. (B) Details about Ms. Poore's emotional life can make a difference in how one responds to the case. For example, if she is going to be wracked with literally unending and intense guilt for stealing the money, then it presumably is not to her advantage to steal it. But there is no need to suppose that Ms. Poore has this type of sensitivity. We may imagine her to be a person who is clear-headed, who realizes that she is in a very special sort of moral situation, and who is not going to berate herself for performing the action that is backed by the strongest reasons.

6. This thought experiment is borrowed in its essentials from Richard Taylor, "Value and the Origin of Right and Wrong," in Louis Pojman, ed., *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1989), 115-121. For some interesting, brief reflections on the difficulty of showing that it is in everyone's best interest to be virtuous, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 43-45. Also see, Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 201-220.

7. Thus I leave open the disputed question whether the virtues are good merely as means to an end, e.g., that being fair is not good for its own sake, but good as a means to harmonious and rewarding relationships with others.

8. For an interesting set of reflections confirming the main point of this paragraph, see Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102-103. ("You may know that if you always did this sort of thing your identity would disintegrate, . . . , but you also know that you can do it just this once without any such result," p. 102.)

9. I am indebted to Eleonore Stump for helping me to phrase this objection in a clear fashion.

10. The example is borrowed from Sarah Stroud, "Moral Overridingness and Moral Theory," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998), 170-189.

11. Here perhaps is the place to note that some ethicists have rejected the thesis that moral requirements always override all other considerations. See, for example, Philippa Foot, "Are Moral Considerations Overriding?" in *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 181-188. The argumentation in Foot's essay seems to me unconvincing, however. For example, Foot points out that people who care about morality will sometimes say things of this sort, "It was morally wrong to do X but I *had to* do X to avoid disaster for myself, my family, or my country." But it seems to me that this sort of statement does not prove even that the speaker believes that the moral reasons are overridden by other reasons. After all, a smoker may say, "I know that the best and strongest reasons favor not smoking, but I *had to* light up anyway." Notoriously, we humans often feel we "have to" do things that are backed by inferior reasons.

12. For a helpful discussion of conceptions of morality and overridingness, see Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 9-33.

13. See, e.g., Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 157-173.

14. According to traditional Hindu thought, if one is *perfectly* moral, one deserves *moksha* (salvation), i.e., deliverance from *samsara* (the cycle of birth and death). This deliverance is generally equated with a kind of oneness with ultimate reality.

15. The main point of this paragraph is borrowed from Robin Collins, "Eastern Religions," in Michael J. Murray, ed., *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 206.

16. I wish to thank Terence Cuneo, Jeanine Diller, Paul Draper, Evan Fales, Peter Forrest, Douglas Geivett, Phillip Goggans, Kenneth Einar Himma, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Robert Koons, Mark Murphy, Stephen Porter, and Eleonore Stump for thoughtful comments on various earlier drafts of this paper.