

**VALUE AND VIRTUE IN A
GODLESS UNIVERSE**

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INTRODUCTION

Director M. Night Shyamalan's (2002) film *Signs* is remarkable in that it is simultaneously a story about an attempted invasion of the earth by extraterrestrials and an examination of religious faith. The main character is Graham Hess, a modern-day Job who has lost his faith as a result of his wife's tragic death. At one point in the film, Graham and his brother Merrill are watching news reports about the activity of alien ships. Graham makes the following speech:

People break down into two groups when they experience something lucky. Group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign, evidence, that there is someone up there, watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck. Just a happy turn of chance. I'm sure the people in group number two are looking at those fourteen lights in a very suspicious way. For them, the situation is fifty-fifty. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own. And that fills them with fear. Yeah, there are those people. But there's a whole lot of people in group number one. When they see those fourteen lights, they're looking at a miracle. And deep down, they feel that whatever's going to happen, there will be someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope. See, what you have to ask yourself is, what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky?¹

Graham's remarks do an excellent job of characterizing the two sides of an ancient debate. In the contemporary Western philosophical scene, the two parties to this debate are typically theists on the one hand and atheists or naturalists on the other.

The central project of this book is an examination of the ethical implications of *naturalism*. It is essential, therefore, that I offer some account of what I mean by that term. The central component of naturalism is the claim that no supernatural entities exist, nor have such entities existed in the past, nor will they in the future. I could spill a lot of ink trying to develop philosophically precise analyses of the concepts of *natural* and *supernatural*. Fortunately, I do not believe this is necessary for my purposes. I think our intuitive grasp of the sorts of entities that might reasonably be characterized as supernatural is sufficiently clear and includes the God of each of the three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as well as nonphysical souls of the sort posited by Descartes and others. Naturalism entails that none of these things exists. As I understand it, naturalism also implies that death marks the permanent end of conscious experience for the one who dies: There is no afterlife or reincarnation in a naturalistic universe.

Naturalism in my sense does not, however, include certain stronger theses that are sometimes associated with the term. It does not, for instance, include the claim that all facts are scientific facts, or that all truths can be stated in the language of science. Specifically, naturalism leaves open the possibility that there are ethical facts that are not reducible to physical or scientific facts. Some versions of materialism entail that ethical facts, if there are any, are in this way reducible. Though such versions of materialism would not be inconsistent with naturalism, in my view they are false. My version of naturalism also does not imply that there is no *a priori* knowledge. The brand of naturalism I hold is primarily an *ontological* thesis. In a naturalistic universe, there is no God, no afterlife, and no immortal soul.

On the positive side, naturalism includes a story about how human beings came into existence. The basic elements of the story are described by the contemporary Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga (2000) as follows:

We human beings arrived on the scene after . . . billions of years of organic evolution. In the beginning, there was just inorganic matter;

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somehow, and by way of processes of which we currently have no grasp, life, despite its enormous and daunting complexity at even the simplest level, arose from nonliving matter, and arose just by way of the regularities studied in physics and chemistry. Once life arose, random genetic mutation and natural selection, those great twin engines of evolution, swung into action. These genetic mutations are multiply random: they weren't intended by anyone, of course, but also were not directed by any sort of natural teleology. . . . Occasionally, some of them yield an adaptive advantage; their possessors come to predominate in the populations, and they are passed on to the next and subsequent generations. In this way, all the enormous variety of flora and fauna we behold came into being. Including ourselves. . . .²

Although Plantinga's skepticism about the truth of this story peeks through in his account of it, the description is accurate. According to naturalism, then, human beings came into existence through a combination of necessity and chance. What is notably absent in our naturalistic origin is the operation of intelligent design. According to my version of naturalism, intelligent design played no role in the formation of the natural universe. I will not affix any particular cosmological theory to naturalism. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that naturalism denies that the universe or anything in it was created by God, gods, or any other supernatural being.

In this book I will not argue for the truth of naturalism. My project instead will be a conditional one: Let us suppose that naturalism is true. What are the ethical implications of such a view? Does it imply, for instance, that human life has no meaning, or that nothing is right or wrong? Does it imply that we should be entirely selfish, and that it is irrational or pointless to try to help our fellow humans? Is there such a thing as virtue in a naturalistic universe, and if so, what is it? These are the sorts of questions I will address, in the course of which I will discuss the arguments and views of certain Christian writers. I will sometimes draw attention to areas of contrast or similarity between my naturalistic view and the Christian view. I focus on Christianity primarily because it is the religious outlook with which I am most familiar. This book is, in part, a response to arguments made by certain Christian philosophers who sometimes seek to refute naturalism by claiming that it has all sorts of nasty

ethical implications. Naturalism has been variously accused of implying nihilism, relativism, hedonism, or egoism. I will rebut these arguments.

Before turning to the main task of the book, however, I would like to provide a brief, two-part account of why I am not a Christian. The first part is a very brief psychological explanation of why I do not accept the truth of Christianity. The second part is a brief defense of the claim that it is reasonable for me to persist in my nonacceptance.

Although I was raised in the Lutheran tradition and confirmed into the Lutheran church, the doctrines never really took. I was always at least a bit skeptical of the Christian version of the origin of the universe and of humans, and of its supernatural claims about Jesus. Large parts of the story just sounded made up to me. When I got a bit older I studied the mythologies of various cultures in school, and it seemed increasingly clear to me that Christianity was simply a myth that was widely accepted in my own culture. The notion that it was actually true did not seem plausible.³

I need also to defend the claim that it is reasonable for me to continue to withhold belief in the truth of Christianity. There are, broadly speaking, two related types of argument that might make it irrational for me to persist in my rejection of Christianity.⁴ First, there are the various philosophical attempts to prove the existence of God. A proper discussion of these arguments is a huge task and is well beyond the scope of the present work. All I can do here is record my conviction that all such arguments are unsuccessful. None of them makes a convincing case for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect creator. Indeed, many of these arguments, even if entirely successful, would still fail to establish the existence of such a being. This is because many of these philosophical arguments fail to provide any reason at all for believing that an omnipotent, omniscient creator of the universe also would be morally perfect. The two exceptions of which I am aware are the ontological argument and some types of moral argument. But these exceptions, I think, are defective for other reasons.

One venerable type of philosophical argument is the so-called design argument.⁵ Design arguments generally start with an empirical

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observation about the natural universe that allegedly indicates the operation of intelligent design at work in the universe. Although some versions of the design argument are undermined by evolutionary theory, not all are, and this kind of argument remains, in my view, the most interesting of the theistic arguments for God's existence. The contemporary "fine-tuning" argument is, for instance, worthy of serious attention.⁶ But design arguments, like so many others, give us no reason at all to think that the intelligent designer of the universe would be morally perfect. Indeed, the arguments tell us nothing at all about the moral characteristics of the designer. In connection with this point we should notice the differences between the following three propositions:

1. Intelligent design played some role in the formation of the natural universe.
2. The universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being.
3. The Christian God exists, and the various Christian claims about history and about Jesus are true.

The gaps between propositions (1) and (2) and between (2) and (3) are large. One can certainly accept (1) without accepting (2). In his classic work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the great atheistic eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume (1998a) has the character Philo reach the following conclusion on the basis of his observation of the mixture of good and evil in the universe:

There may *four* hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: *that* they are endowed with perfect goodness; *that* they have perfect malice; *that* they are opposite and have both goodness and malice; *that* they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles; and the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable.⁷

Hume hits the nail right on the head here. It is hard to see how observation of the distribution of good and evil in the universe could suggest the presence of a morally perfect creator. A morally indifferent creator or source seems to be the most probable hypothesis based

on the available empirical evidence about how good and evil are distributed. Perhaps this evidence could be outweighed by sufficiently compelling grounds for believing in a morally perfect creator. But I know of no such grounds. One can also accept proposition (2) without accepting (3). Indeed, proposition (2) is common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Now, the philosophical arguments I have alluded to, even if successful, would establish *at most* proposition (2), and it is still a long way from there to proposition (3). Even if philosophy could establish proposition (2), something more would be needed to take us to Christianity. This is where the second kind of argument enters the picture.

The second kind of argument is a historical argument for the truth of the Christian claims about Jesus. This kind of argument is based on various bits of empirical evidence, including, for example, the testimony of the gospel writers and others, as well as archaeological evidence. This argument involves an *inference to the best explanation*. The suggestion is that the best explanation for the various bits of relevant evidence is that Jesus really did perform various miracles, He really did rise from the dead, and, most importantly, He really was the son of God. This kind of argument recently has been defended by Lee Strobel (1998) in his popular book *The Case for Christ*.

Hume (1998b) discusses this kind of argument in his essay "Of Miracles." He lays down the maxim that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."⁸ Hume's maxim is concerned exclusively with testimony, but his basic point can be extended to all kinds of historical evidence. I think Hume is directing us to consider the relative probabilities of two scenarios. He is suggesting that we should ask ourselves, in the case of any alleged miracle, whether it is more likely that a miracle actually occurred or that the evidence for the miracle has a purely natural explanation. Hume's suggestion is that, at least when the evidence in question consists of testimony of some kind, the latter possibility is *always* more probable than the former. He concludes that "no human testimony can have such force as to

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prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any . . . system of religion.”⁹

Hume’s remarks suggest the following position: To evaluate the adequacy of historical arguments for the truth of various Christian claims about Jesus, we must compare the probabilities of two scenarios. The first is that the Christian claims are true. The second is that there is some purely natural explanation for the various bits of relevant historical evidence. What I will call “the Humean Position” is that in every case the second scenario is the more likely one, and hence no historical argument for the truth of Christianity can succeed.¹⁰

The twentieth-century Christian apologist C. S. Lewis’s (2001c) book *Miracles* is a response to Hume’s essay. The [opening chapter](#) of that book contains the following passage:

Many people think that one can decide whether a miracle occurred in the past by examining the evidence ‘according to the ordinary rules of historical inquiry’. But the ordinary rules cannot be worked until we have decided whether miracles are probable, and if so, how probable they are. For if they are impossible, then no amount of historical evidence will convince us. If they are possible but immensely improbable, then only mathematically demonstrative evidence will convince us: and since history never provides that degree of evidence for any event, history can never convince us that a miracle occurred. If, on the other hand, miracles are not intrinsically improbable, then the existing evidence will be sufficient to convince us that quite a number of miracles have occurred. *The result of our historical enquiries thus depends on the philosophical views which we have been holding before we even began to look at the evidence. This philosophical question must therefore come first.*¹¹

Lewis notes that the historical argument depends on a “philosophical question,” which is, how likely is it that miracles occur in our universe? Hume and Lewis agree, then, that whether the historical argument can succeed depends on how likely it is that miracles occur in our universe. The Humean Position is that miracles are extremely unlikely – so unlikely, in fact, that for any alleged historical miracle, it is more likely that the relevant evidence has a purely natural explanation than that the miracle actually occurred. And I think that

position is correct. It is important to see that I am not arguing that no miracles have ever occurred; rather, I am arguing that, even if such miracles have occurred, it is not rational for us to infer that they have occurred based on historical evidence. Historical evidence can *never* be powerful enough to counterbalance the extreme improbability of such events. Moreover, in the particular case of Christianity, both the quantity and the quality of the available historical evidence are a matter of debate. For instance, in her book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong (1993) writes:

We know very little about Jesus. The first full-length account of his life was St. Mark's Gospel, which was not written until about the year 70, some forty years after his death. By that time, historical facts had been overlaid with mythical elements which expressed the meaning Jesus had acquired for his followers. It is this meaning that St. Mark primarily conveys rather than a reliable straightforward portrayal.¹²

Still, the fundamental problem with the historical argument is a philosophical one. The issue of the quality of the historical evidence for the truth of Christianity is something of a red herring. *No* evidence of this sort could make it rational to infer that the alleged miracles actually took place.

The very dependence that both Hume and Lewis point to is acknowledged by contemporary Christian philosopher William Lane Craig in his interview with Lee Strobel as it appears in *The Case for Christ*. Strobel and Craig are discussing the issue of whether Jesus was really resurrected from the dead, when Strobel asks Craig about various alternative theories that have been proposed. This provokes the following crucial exchange in which Craig speaks first:

"This, I think, is the issue," he said, leaning forward. "I think people who push these alternative theories would admit, 'Yes, our theories are implausible, but they're not as improbable as the idea that this spectacular miracle occurred.' *However, at this point, the matter is no longer a historical issue; instead it's a philosophical question about whether miracles are possible.*"

"And what," I asked, "would you say to that?"

"I would argue that the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead is not at all improbable. In fact, based on the evidence, it's the best

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explanation for what happened. . . . The hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead doesn't contradict science or any known facts of experience. *All it requires is the hypothesis that God exists, and I think there are good independent reasons for believing that he does.*"¹³

I, on the other hand, do not think that there are good independent reasons for believing that God (understood in the way specified by proposition [2]) exists. Hume, Lewis, and Craig all agree that the historical argument depends on the philosophical arguments; what they disagree about is the status of the philosophical arguments. Like so many debates, this one comes down to philosophy. Because I do not find the philosophical arguments convincing, I assign a very low probability to the occurrence of the alleged miracles and consequently find the historical arguments unconvincing. If there were a convincing argument for proposition (2), then perhaps sufficiently strong historical evidence could move us from (2) to (3). But without a good reason to accept (2), no amount of historical evidence can get us to (3).

What, it might be asked, is my naturalistic explanation of the various pieces of historical evidence for Christian claims about Jesus? If, for instance, Jesus wasn't really raised from the dead, what *did* happen? My answer is that I do not know, at least not in any precise way. The events in question took place roughly two thousand years ago and it may be the case that it is impossible to be certain exactly what happened based on the evidence available to us now. Hume wrote that "the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, then admit of . . . a violation of the laws of nature."¹⁴ When we add to this equation the propensity of humans to spread juicy gossip, the political and social situation at the time Jesus lived, and the message of hope offered by Jesus, we can begin to see how the Christian version of the life of Jesus might have become so widely believed. But I am afraid I cannot get much more specific than this.

Perhaps it will be objected that unless I can provide a sufficiently specific alternative explanation, it is irrational for me to reject the Christian explanation. But the principle underlying this

objection – that a given explanation can be rejected rationally only if there is a sufficiently specific alternative explanation available – is false. The style of inference known as “the inference to the best explanation” would be labeled more accurately “the inference to the best *and sufficiently good* explanation.” Some explanations are so bad that they can and should be rejected even if no detailed alternative explanation is available. And one way in which an explanation can be bad is by being extremely improbable. Reflection on some cases will reveal that this is so.

Tabloid magazines are filled with accounts of incredible events. For awhile, reported sightings of Elvis Presley abounded. Must we examine all the available evidence for such events and develop detailed alternative explanations before it is rational for us to reject the claim that the incredible event in question actually took place? Of course not. We do not need to interview the witnesses, inspect the physical evidence, and devise alternative scenarios to reject rationally the notion that Elvis really was spotted recently at a Blackjack table in Las Vegas. In a similar vein, I offer the following argument specifically for Christians. There are many religions in the world aside from Christianity. Many of these contain their own sacred texts and their own alleged prophets and miracles. Have you examined the historical evidence for such miracles and developed detailed alternative explanations of those miracles? If not, then you cannot consistently maintain that my failure to accept the historical argument for Christianity is irrational while simultaneously rejecting the miraculous claims of these other religions. In the words of Stephen Roberts, “[W]hen you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.”¹⁵

Moreover, ancient histories contain many accounts of supernatural occurrences. For instance, Plutarch’s (1960) account of the life of Themistocles contains the following description of an event that allegedly took place during a naval battle between the Greeks and the Persians:

At this point in the battle it is said that a great light suddenly shone out from Elusius and a loud cry seemed to fill the whole breadth of

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the Thriasian plain down to the sea, as though an immense crowd were escorting the mystic Iacchus in procession. Then, from the place where the shouting was heard, a cloud seemed to rise slowly from the land, drift out to sea, and descend upon the triremes. Others believed that they saw phantoms and the shapes of armed men coming from Aegina with hands outstretched to protect the Greek ships. These, they believed, were the sons of Aecus, to whom they had offered prayers for help just before the battle.¹⁶

Now, I don't have the slightest notion of what actually happened here, and I suspect you do not either. Yet it hardly follows that it is irrational for us to reject the hypothesis that the phantom sons of Aecus answered the prayers for help. Similarly, it is perfectly rational for me to reject the Christian supernatural claims about Jesus without having a detailed alternative explanation. The historical arguments for Christianity depend on the philosophical arguments for the existence of God. Because I do not find the latter convincing, I reject the former. This, in brief, is why I still am not a Christian.¹⁷

The structure of the rest of the book is as follows. In the [first chapter](#) I critically examine three arguments for the claim that if God does not exist, then all human lives are meaningless. I suggest that all three arguments fail and that at least some human lives can be meaningful even if God does not exist. The [second chapter](#) includes a critical examination of a fourth argument for the claim that without God, all human lives are meaningless. This argument, if successful, would show that if God does not exist, there are no ethical facts at all. After refuting this argument, I consider a more modest suggestion that is sometimes called "Karamazov's Thesis" after some remarks by Alyosha Karamazov in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. This is the claim that if God does not exist, then all actions are morally permissible. I argue that this more modest suggestion is false as well, and I outline what I take to be the truth about the relationship between God (if He exists) and ethical truth. This account implies that there are ethical truths even if, as I believe, God does not exist.

In the [third chapter](#) I consider the position that without God, while we may have certain moral obligations, we have no particular reason

to care about what our obligations are. This position relates to the ancient question of why we should be moral. I outline one theistic response to this question based on the notion that there is a divine guarantee of perfect justice. I also discuss a few possible responses to the question that are consistent with naturalism. I endorse one of these, a Kantian answer, and argue that the question of why we should be moral can be answered even in a naturalistic universe. The chapter concludes with a critical examination of a few moral arguments for God's existence, including Kant's (1997) moral argument from the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

The [fourth chapter](#) focuses on virtuous character in a naturalistic universe. Specifically, I consider whether there is room for humility, charity, and hope in such a universe. I argue that there is, and say a bit about what form these virtues might take without God in the picture. Naturalistic versions of these three virtues would, of course, differ from Christian versions, and I examine some areas of contrast between naturalistic humility, charity, and hope, and their Christian counterparts. In latter sections of the chapter I examine our situation in the universe if naturalism is true, and consider what our attitude toward that situation should be. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the importance of the ancient Platonic quest for a reliable way of making people virtuous, and I propose one way that quest might be pursued in a naturalistic universe.

In the [fifth](#) and final chapter I consider the suggestion (which goes back at least as far as Plato) that we should try to inculcate acceptance of certain supernatural claims not because they are true but because widespread acceptance of such claims would have good consequences. I argue that the Old Testament contains certain elements that make any system of belief that includes them a poor candidate for promulgation on such grounds. The chapter and the book ends with a discussion of the question of whether naturalism is a creed we can live by. My answer, in brief, is that naturalism is a creed that some can live by and some cannot. However, whether it is a creed we can live by and whether it is true are two different issues. It may be that naturalism is a truth that many people cannot accept.

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The overarching goal of the book is to say something interesting about what ethics might look like without God. In earlier chapters I am concerned primarily with showing that there can be ethical truths of various kinds even if God does not exist. In later chapters I am concerned primarily with exploring what some of these ethical truths might be. Another way of putting this is to say that earlier chapters are concerned with the *existence* of ethics without God, whereas later chapters are concerned with the *nature* of ethics without God.