

Introduction to Philosophy Part II

Course Syllabus

Philosophy II is to be given for degree students in regular and extension classes. In this course, the remaining main areas of philosophy such as philosophy of religion (the existence of God and the problem of evil) philosophy of axiology (Ethics, living together in societies, and beauty) will be discussed and examined. The materials provided are believed to facilitate students with basic philosophical elements that are worth of consideration in studying philosophy with a Christian background on preliminary level.

Section I – Philosophy of Religion

- **The Existence of God:** Do We Need Proof?; Arguments from Cause and Effect; Miracles and Experiences of God; Arguments from Order and Design; Arguments from Existence;
- **The Problem of Evil:** Defining the Problem; God's Power and Goodness; What Is Evil?; The Soul-Making Theodicy; The Free-Will Argument ;

Section II - Philosophies of Value: Axiology

- **What Is Good Life? Ethics:** - Setting Priorities; Duty-Based Ethics; When Context Matters; Consequences: Utilitarianism and the Greater Good; Is Selfishness a Virtue? Consequences and Egoism; Virtue and a Happy Life; Christian Virtue
- **Living Together in Societies: Social and Political Philosophy:** - The Development of Governance; Ways to Govern Society; Social Contracts; Capitalism and Communism; Contemporary Economic Debates; The Bible and Money
- **What Is Beautiful?: Philosophy of Art:** - A Question of Value; Art and Rational Truth; Art and Feeling; What Is Art?

Course Materials: The course note will be provided before the beginning of each section. In addition, study documents that are written by well-known philosophers in the history of Western philosophy will be given at the early beginning of the class. Students are strongly encouraged to read them all thoroughly, critically and reflectively. They are, however, required to select one article in which they are interested, write their commentary views in not more than two pages, and submit by the end of the course.

Type of exam: Students will be provided list of questions related to each topic discussed in the class to study and prepare themselves for the exam. On the exam day, a student will choose three questions out of the list and give the answer in a separate paper.

Result: Result will be given based on student's class participation and interaction, the two pages commentary views and the final exam.

Grading: 96-100 = A+; 91-95 = A; 86-90 = A-; 81-85 = B+; 76-80 = B; 71-75 = B-; 61-70 = C; 51-60 = D; 50 = F

Section 3: Philosophy of Religion

Chapter 5: The Existence of God

What to Get from This Chapter:

Christians disagree over how important or convincing rational arguments for God's existence are.

Cosmological arguments argue that the existence of the world requires the existence of a Creator.

Miracles and religious experience have been key verifiers of Christian faith from the beginning.

Teleological arguments claim that the complexity of the world requires the existence of an intelligent Designer.

Moral arguments claim that an ingrained sense of right and wrong requires the existence of a Creator of morality.

Ontological arguments claim that our very ability to conceptualize the Most Perfect Being entails the existence of that Being.

1. Do We Need Proof?

People always have reasons why they believe in the existence of God, even if they are not fully conscious of them. Various philosophers have offered their own suggestions—some positive, some negative. Augustine (354–430) thought we were made for God, and so our hearts would be restless until we found peace in him. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) argued it was because people wanted a father figure powerful enough to keep them safe from the world. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) thought God was a projection of all the best virtues of humanity taken as a whole. Meanwhile, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) thought God was an idea the weak used to gain power over those stronger than them.

In chapter, we learned about the genetic fallacy. Even if some skeptics turn out to be right about the *reasons* some people believe in God, it would not disprove the existence of God. The genetic fallacy confuses *why* someone believes something with the veracity of *what* that person believes. This chapter discusses arguments about *whether* God exists not *why* people believe in God's existence.

For some people, deciding whether God exists seems to be a question of personal benefit: Why should I believe in God? What's in it for me? But if God exists as something other than an idea in our heads, if God is an actual Being who thinks and acts regardless of us, it doesn't really matter whether God's existence is to our advantage. If God exists, God exists, whether it is convenient for me or not.

Other people sincerely disbelieve (**atheists**) or doubt (**agnostics**) God's existence. They may not be more immoral than those who say they believe in God. Indeed, many atheists live very "Christianly." Some people disbelieve or doubt the existence of God because their heads simply cannot "see" it, not because they are trying to run away from God.

In the rest of this chapter, we look at some of the classic arguments for the existence of God. Not all Christian thinkers believe such arguments are necessary or even helpful. We have already encountered some of these issues in chapter 2, where we discussed “Faith and Reason.” Is belief in God really a matter of blind faith rather than argument? Can we actually prove God’s existence by reason, or will we find that rational argument comes up short? Does rehearsing the classical arguments contribute more to doubt than to faith?

Some voices would say so. The branch of Christian philosophy that traditionally defends Christian faith using rational arguments is called **apologetics**. Although the word *apology* has taken on the sense of telling someone you are sorry for something you have done, an apology in this context means a defense by way of argument. The writing known as Plato’s *Apology*, for example, is a presentation of Socrates’s trial, during which Socrates *defended* himself in argument before the men of Athens.

Some Christians in the past have put a high premium on the likelihood of reason leading you to believe in God.¹ C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), for example, aimed in several of his writings to show not only that Christian faith was reasonable, but that reason virtually compels a person to such faith.² Another popular Christian author of the late twentieth century, Josh McDowell, wrote *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*³—the title suggesting that an objective consideration of the facts not only allows for faith but in fact demands it as the clear conclusion. As we will see, Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274) argued in the medieval period that the existence of God could be rationally demonstrated by observing God’s effect on the creation.⁴

We have also seen in chapter 2 that some Christian thinkers object to the idea that God’s existence is provable through Christian reason. Indeed, some believe the attempt to prove God’s existence through reason is dangerous or even antithetical to faith. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) claimed that “If I can understand God objectively, I do not have faith.”⁵ Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) is known for saying that “the heart has reasons that reason can’t know,” implying that faith ultimately is not a matter of rational proof.⁶ In more recent times, individuals including William Placher have playfully suggested that Christians should be “unapologetic” about their faith.⁷ To them, to orient

¹ Louis Pojman in fact quotes a Roman Catholic statement from Vatican I (1870): “If anyone says that the one and true God, our creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty with the natural light of human reason by means of the things that have been made: let him be anathema.” *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987), 1.

² The two best-known are *Miracles and Mere Christianity*.

³ Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life, 1979); and newer editions.

⁴ Some more recent apologetic works include the almost instant classic, Lee Strobel, ed., *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); R. C. Sproul, *Defending Your Faith: An Introduction to Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Faith and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 2.2. All paraphrases of Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* began with the translation by H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1992).

⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 277.

⁷ 9. William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), e.g., 12.

oneself around rational proofs of Christian faith is something like corrupting God's thinking by subordinating God's thinking to flawed human reasoning.

You will have to decide which approach you think is more correct. The approach we take in this study is that faith in God is not irrational, even though human reason probably cannot *prove* the existence of God. Christians have traditionally believed that we come to faith only because God initiates a relationship with us and enables us to respond to him. The starting point for our faith is thus not proof of God's existence, but that God has come to us, and we have responded accordingly. Even more important, the God we might be able to prove by rational argument is not yet the Christian God, for Christians have historically believed that Jesus Christ stands at the heart of who God is. From a Christian standpoint, any understanding of God that does not view his identity through the lens of Jesus Christ is thus at least an incomplete understanding of God.

2. Arguments from Cause and Effect

One of the oldest and best-known arguments for the existence of God is the **cosmological argument**, particularly the cause-effect version of it. Cosmological argument is the argument that God must exist in order to explain where the world came from. It basically argues that "something cannot come from nothing," therefore something must have caused the world to exist. It must have had a Creator, a supreme cause. Most have also heard a common response: then where did God come from? We will address this objection below.

Over the centuries, various thinkers have used various kinds of cause-effect arguments to try to prove God's existence. Some seem to work better than others. I propose the following version of the cosmological argument:⁸

1. The universe seems to have had a beginning. We apparently can trace a chain of causes and effects in the physical world back to a point "in time."
2. We currently have no scientific explanation for that beginning. We have no explanation for what "caused" or began the process of creation.
3. It is reasonable to suggest that something "beyond" this universe, some non-universe force, caused that beginning.

As many Christian thinkers have pointed out, whatever the cosmological argument leaves us with, it is not yet the *Christian* God. At most it suggests a very powerful Creator. Indeed, the form of the argument we have made above does not even imply a Creator that is *all* powerful! Nevertheless, the argument seems to make sense and implies that belief in a "Creator" is perfectly reasonable. The atheist at present has no alternative explanation for why the universe "suddenly" decided to

⁸ The word *time* in the argument is not exactly appropriate, given that time as we know it would not exist "before" the beginning. The beginning would have been both the beginning of space and time. *Before* is thus a highly metaphorical term, the literal meaning of which we do not know

begin.⁹ He or she must instead have faith that science will one day discover such an explanation or that such an explanation exists even though we have no access to it.

We most associate the cosmological argument with **Thomas Aquinas**, who in his *Summa Theologica* advanced five proofs for God's existence. The first three are versions of the cosmological argument. We will consider the first two now and the third in the next section.

It is clear and obvious to our senses that some things are in motion in the world. Now anything that moves is moved by something else . . . And if the something else that moves it is moving, it must be moved by something else. This situation cannot go back infinitely . . . So we must eventually arrive at a First Mover, unmoved by anything else. And everyone understands this Mover to be God . . .

In the world of senses, we find a succession of efficient causes. We do not find any instance where something is the efficient cause of itself. Then it would have to exist before itself, which is impossible. Now it is impossible that such efficient causes could go back infinitely . . . Therefore, we must admit the existence of a First Efficient Cause, to which everyone gives the name, "God."

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.q.2 a.3¹⁰

Here we see two arguments, one from motion and one from cause. Aquinas's argument from motion is basically a Christianized version of an argument made some 1,500 years earlier by Aristotle. In the world, we observe one thing moving another. Aristotle could not imagine that this process of one thing moving another could go back forever, so he suggested a "First Mover" that was not moved by the world but gave the world its first "push" to get started. This form of the argument has not convinced many people in recent times. For example, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) set out the law of inertia several hundred years after Aquinas. According to this rule, a body in motion tends to stay in motion, while a body at rest tends to stay at rest. No doubt to Aristotle and Aquinas, it appeared that something had to keep pushing in order for an object to move; they were not really aware of friction. But theoretically the motion of the world could go back infinitely.¹¹ If an astronaut throws a ball into space, it will continue at the same speed forever unless it runs into some other force. David Hume (1711–1776) made a similar objection to Aquinas's arguments. How do we know that the motion cannot go back infinitely?

By contrast, the argument we advanced above is a form of the argument from cause, corresponding to Aquinas's second argument. When expressed as a proof, as Aquinas expressed it, it argues that for every effect there must be **an "efficient" cause**. An efficient cause is the thing that directly causes something else to happen. Aristotle, on which Aquinas based much of his philosophy, set

⁹ Again, the word + is highly figurative here, because there would not have been any time, at least in this universe, prior to the beginning.

¹⁰ All paraphrases of Aquinas in this book start from *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans., revised by D. J. Sullivan (Chicago: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1952).

¹¹ However, we will argue in a moment that Newton's second law of thermodynamics implies a beginning to the universe for different reasons.

out four basic causes, some of which we might not really consider to be causes today.¹² The idea of an *efficient* or immediate cause, however, continues to make sense to us. In modern times, William Lane Craig has especially advocated this argument by drawing from the *kalam* argument of certain Muslim philosophers.¹³ If something has a beginning, it must be the effect of a cause.

It seems unwise to make this statement with such certainty, since we scarcely know how causation exactly works, especially with universes as a whole. However, assuming the universe had a beginning, it certainly seems rational to suggest that something caused it to begin. This explanation seems more reasonable than the suggestion that it did not have a precipitating cause.

We must also dismiss the simplistic response: then where did God come from? The form of the cosmological argument we are making applies to things we observe *within* this universe. *In this universe* effects generally have causes.¹⁴ When we make this statement, we imply nothing about whether creators of universes such as this one must have causes. By the rules we have laid down, any Creator stands “beyond” or “outside” the creation in essence. To observe rules within the creation thus says nothing about the rules of the Creator.

Although it is foolish to base one’s belief in God on the current state of scientific thinking, it does no harm to mention that science currently favors a beginning for the universe. We mention just two reasons. The first has to do with the “mass” of the universe, the amount of stuff in it. Every bit of matter as we know it has a certain gravitational pull.¹⁵ Theoretically if the universe had enough matter in it, the universe might one day stop expanding and collapse on itself. If that were the case, someone might suppose that the history of the universe is simply an endless cycle of expansion and collapse leading to another expansion (the so-called oscillating big bang theory).

But astrophysicists do not currently think that the universe has enough mass for that to happen. They believe the evidence currently points to a single beginning to the universe. Christians do not have to agree with all the particulars of current astrophysics to enjoy the secular conclusion that the universe had a beginning. At least for the moment, science has refuted David Hume, who thought it just as possible that the universe did not have a beginning.

A second argument has to do with the fact that the universe is constantly in the process of cooling down. Newton’s second law of thermodynamics observes that the workings of the world inevitably turn various forms of energy into heat. The long and short of it is that things tend to disorder from order over time. There is no such thing as a machine that can go on forever without putting more energy into it. The work you do now eventually dissipates as friction and heat, never to be recovered.

¹² See p. 36 above. The other three were the (1) material cause (the stuff out of which the thing caused is made), (2) the formal cause (having to do with the nature of the thing caused), and (3) the final cause (strangely having to do with the consequences of what is caused)

¹³ William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*(New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979).

¹⁴ It is true that discoveries on the quantum level have significantly muddled the water here. Apparently some things can happen on that level without apparent causes. The universe as a whole of course at least seems to exist on a diametrically opposite scale.

¹⁵ Newton’s law of universal gravitation.

Eventually, at least if things continue as they are, the universe will cool down to absolute zero. The energy in the universe will convert to heat and all the heat will spread out evenly throughout the universe until everything is cold, cold, cold. By the same token, the universe could not be infinitely old or else the heat would have already dissipated. This fact points to a beginning, and thus David Hume is foiled once again.

Of course we should never base our faith on the “God of the gaps,” the God whom we bring into some gap in our understanding.¹⁶ History since the scientific revolution has witnessed Christian after Christian staking their faith on some unexplained aspect of science. And history has witnessed those gaps getting filled in time and time again. So the cosmological argument does not prove the existence of God. But it does suggest that, at least with regard to the matter of causation, it makes more sense to believe in a Creator than it does not to.

Now that we have finished discussing cause-effect as an argument for the existence of God, it might be interesting to *assume* God’s existence and ask what the notion of cause-effect might imply about God in relation to the creation. Let us assume by faith, for example, that God in some way created the world “out of nothing,” *ex nihilo*¹⁷ in Latin. Jews and Christians increasingly believed that God created the world out of nothing from about AD 200, when a group known as Gnostics argued that matter was intrinsically evil and that it had existed eternally alongside God.¹⁸ The Jewish and Christian response was to affirm that God had not only formed matter but had created it out of nothing.

If God created the universe out of nothing, then God must have enough power to create it. In other words, the idea that God created the world out of nothing would seem to imply that God is all powerful or **omnipotent** in relation to the universe. The implication is that God has the power to do anything that is possible to do with the creation. Of course Christians have historically affirmed that God is all powerful without having to follow any line of reasoning such as this one. It is at least interesting to note that the idea of God being all powerful fits with the idea that God created the world out of nothing.

3. Miracles and Experiences of God

Most people do not believe or disbelieve in God because of their assessment of the evidence. Indeed, it is not even clear that people believe or disbelieve in God because of their experiences. Two people can have nearly identical experiences and interpret them completely differently. The same experience that deepens one person’s faith in God may lead to deeper doubt for the other.

¹⁶ A phrase used by Kenneth Miller in reference to basing your faith on something that science has not yet explained. *Finding Darwin’s God* (1999; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2007). Historically, many such gaps have eventually found themselves filled in by science!

¹⁷ Creation *ex nihilo*: creation of the world “out of nothing”.

¹⁸ It is highly debated by scholars of the Old Testament whether the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1–2 originally had creation *ex nihilo* in view. Apart from it, we do not find a possible reference to such creation until the first century BC in a Jewish writing (2 Maccabees 7:28). However, it is even debated whether 2 Maccabees has creation out of nothing in mind.

Nevertheless we must reckon religious experience a far more potent “proof” of God’s existence for most people than any rational argument one might offer. In a sense, such experiences are a type of cause-effect argument for God, by which a person reckons the existence and involvement of God in the world as the best explanation for an event that happens to him or her. **Miracles**¹⁹ seem to fall into a similar category of argument for God’s existence. A miracle is something that does not seem explicable given the normal operation of cause and effect. It is something that seems beyond “natural” explanation, requiring a “supernatural” cause.

David Hume, the famous skeptic, argued in his book *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that no amount of eyewitness testimony could justify belief in a miracle.²⁰ A further argument Hume made had to do with the consequences of relying on experiences of God and eyewitness testimony to miracles. Considering that most religions have claimed miracles and experiences of their gods, he said, we would have to conclude that all religions are true. But since these same religions contradict each other, we have no reason to consider the experiences or miracles of *any* of them to be legitimate.

Perhaps the best-known response to Hume on these sorts of issues has been that of **C. S. Lewis**. In his book *Miracles*, Lewis argued,

Now of course we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely “uniform experience” against miracles, if in other words they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*²¹

In other words, even if the overwhelming majority of professed experiences of God and reports of miracles were false, it could not disprove the legitimacy of *all* such claims.²²

It seems almost impossible to prove or disprove whether or how often genuine miracles or experiences of the “divine” might take place. Such experiences can be highly convincing to the individuals involved, but the legitimacy of one person’s religious experience is rarely apparent to someone else. And it has become increasingly difficult in a quantum world to determine what the precise boundaries might be between what is “natural” and what is “supernatural,” indeed, if even this distinction makes any sense at all. A person who recovers from cancer might very well do so

¹⁹ Miracle: an event that is not explicable on the basis of normal scientific, cause-effect reasoning. “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. Because firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against the possibility of a miracle is . . . as absolute as any argument from experience we could possibly imagine”. David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 10.1. This is a paraphrase of Hume’s own original 1748 English wording.

²⁰ Hume’s argument is somewhat peculiar given that he was known for arguing that because we can consider things true only on the basis of direct experience, we cannot prove that an effect is indeed caused by the event that came before it. So it is remarkably inconsistent for him to suggest that the absence of the experience of a miracle by one person up to a point in time might in any way count as evidence for what others have experienced or of what might be experienced in the future.

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947: repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 162.

²² A recent treatment of miracles in the New Testament is Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

because of a precise combination of material causes and effects brought on by chemotherapy, all of which could in theory be accounted for scientifically. On the other hand, God may very well “fiddle” regularly with quantum particles here and there.

Religious experiences will thus play varying roles in an individual’s faith. Hume was at least right to point out that people of all religions claim to have experiences of the divine, and almost all religions would point to various miracles as proof of their legitimacy. Christian tradition would say that people have faith because God “invites” them, and they respond appropriately.²³ But this confidence seems to be something deeper than some specific religious experience. It would not seem as Christian to see (1) specific experiences *or* (2) reason as the ultimate basis for faith; rather, they are varying paths by which God as the true underlying cause can draw people of varying personalities to faith in him.

Clearly miracles and religious experiences play a very important role for Christians. The Gospels tell us that Jesus was someone who did “signs and wonders.” Even the non-Christian Jewish historian Josephus records that Jesus did startling deeds.²⁴ The ancients categorized Jesus in part as a miracle worker. Regardless of how skeptical you are, the burden of proof is squarely on anyone who would deny that Jesus did things that observers categorized as miracles.

Similarly, the early-Christian Paul, in the face of opposition in the city of Corinth, reminded this church that he had performed miraculous deeds when he was with them (2 Cor. 12:12)—a very foolish thing to say if he thought they might disagree with him. And the author of Hebrews refers back to signs and wonders that accompanied those who brought the message of salvation (Heb. 2:4). We have to conclude at the very least that the followers of Jesus and indeed the early Christian leaders themselves did things that their audience considered miracles. Many believers throughout the past two thousand years—and many today—continue to give witness to events they cannot explain as normal occurrences.

Of course the most important miracle of all is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. No reputable historian—not even an atheist—would suggest that Jesus was not a real person who lived and died in Palestine some two thousand years ago. Nor is there any serious debate over the question of whether he died by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. True, about once every generation someone on the fringe tries to push the idea. But no rational consideration of the evidence gives a second thought to such a shoddy (careless) suggestion. The evidence is overwhelmingly conclusive against such idle speculation.

For example, most scholars recognize the high probability that the non-Christian Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus both referred to Jesus as a historical individual who died during Pilate’s administration.²⁵ Even more definitive is the evidence from the writings of the early-Christian Paul. It is universally agreed that the early-Christian Paul wrote the New Testament letters of Galatians and 1 Corinthians. In Galatians in particular Paul claims to have met with “James, *the Lord’s brother*” in Jerusalem three years after he became convinced Jesus was the

²³ Christian traditions of course disagree on the degree of human freedom involved in that response.

²⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.63–64.

²⁵ See Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63–64; and Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

Messiah (Gal. 1:19). It is the virtually unanimous conclusion of biblical scholarship that this meeting took place *less than ten years after Jesus's crucifixion*. Regardless of whether you agree with what Paul thought about Jesus, it boggles the mind to imagine how one might reasonably argue that Jesus was not a real person.

At that same time, Paul claims to have met with Peter, the same person that all the New Testament Gospels depict as a key follower of Jesus while he walked the earth. In 1 Corinthians 15:5 Paul says Peter (also called Cephas) was the first person to whom Jesus appeared alive after his death, information it is reasonable to assume Peter shared with Paul back then, *less than ten years after the crucifixion*. Paul makes all these claims in the context of people who oppose him, people who disagree with him on various matters and would love to undermine his truthfulness and authority. In short, it would require a conspiracy theory of novelistic proportions to conclude that Jesus was not a real person. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how one could make a reasonable case that Peter did not make a real claim to have seen Jesus alive after he had died.

It seems beyond reasonable doubt that Peter—and many others whom Paul mentions as eyewitnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8—were convinced they had seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion. Other individuals would claim to be the Jewish Messiah and would die at the hands of the Romans. No religions have survived in relation to them. No Jew would have expected the true Messiah to die, let alone at the hands of the Romans. It is hard to imagine anything but a vastly demoralized group of Jesus followers after the crucifixion. Certainly none of these facts prove the historicity of the resurrection, but they certainly argue that many of those who followed Jesus believed they had seen Jesus after he died.

It is also more than reasonable to conclude that Jesus's body was unaccounted for in the days after his death. For example, when Matthew tells of rumours about “what really happened” to Jesus, he tells us that those who disbelieved thought his followers had stolen his body (Matt. 28:11–15). In other words, their argument *against* Jesus's resurrection assumed that Jesus's body was not available. Matthew indicates that the rumour about the disciples' stealing Jesus's body was current at the time he was writing. We cannot prove how far back this rumour went in time, but it does show that even some who disbelieved accepted an empty tomb.

Although Paul is not explicit about Jesus's body, he seems to assume continuity between the physical body that dies and the spiritual body that rises (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:44). The “perishable” body puts on imperishability; the mortal puts on immortality (1 Cor. 15:53 NIV). Because Paul considers Jesus's resurrection and believers' future resurrection to be similarly categorized (e.g., Phil. 3:21), it is reasonable to think he believed Christ's resurrection body to be the transformed version of Jesus's earthly body and thus that Jesus's earthly body was no longer on earth. And he surely would not have thought such a thing if the location of Jesus's body was known.

We have no reason to doubt traditions that point to violent martyrdom for many of these early Christians. Peter and Paul in Rome, James in Jerusalem—according to tradition almost all of the primary followers of Jesus died for their beliefs. We do not have to prove all of these claims to show that key early believers were so convinced they had seen Jesus after his death that they were willing to die rather than change their stories.

If you believe in the possibility of resurrection, the evidence points strongly to Jesus as an example. Obviously if you do not allow for such a possibility, you will find some other way to account for an empty tomb and convinced eyewitnesses. But for those with faith, it is more than reasonable to believe God raised Jesus from the dead.

4. Arguments from Order and Design

A second set of arguments for the existence of God has to do with the order of creation. If one finds a watch, **William Paley**²⁶ (1743–1805) famously suggested, one automatically assumes there must have been a watchmaker. You do not think for one moment that the watch has just happened to come about by chance. So it is with the order of nature, Paley suggested. Something like an eyeball is complex enough to suggest it must have had a designer. The argument that an intelligent Designer must exist to explain the order and complexity of the world is called the argument from design or the **teleological argument**.²⁷

Much has happened since the 1700s when Paley made this argument from design, an argument that he was not the first to make by any means. Interestingly, David Hume had already made some fairly significant arguments against the argument even before Paley's more widely read book. For example, Hume questioned exactly how good an analogy the watchmaker example is. How do we know that design works on the level of universes the way it works with watches?

Then of course in the 1800s, Charles Darwin (1809–1882) argued that complexity was simply a matter of chance evolution, where more-complex forms of life tend to dominate over time because such organisms are better equipped to survive than less-developed ones. Because belief in evolution became so widespread in the twentieth century, most philosophers came to reject the teleological argument for the existence of God altogether.

The late twentieth century also saw the rise of **chaos theory**.²⁸ Chaos theory suggests that, while it is unlikely that any *specific* instance of order would come about randomly, it is mathematically a virtual certainty that order of *some* kind will occur by chance over time. "You couldn't do that again if you tried," but by accident every once in a while "truth is stranger than fiction."

Advocates of the teleological argument have not stood still either. Intelligent design theory has argued that there is "irreducible complexity" in the world that cannot be explained strictly on the basis of chance or undirected evolution.²⁹ Similarly the English philosopher **Richard Swinburne** (b. 1934), while accepting evolution, has argued that even evolution proceeds according to certain laws. He argues that there are "laws of nature" that embody a design to the universe. Why do things

²⁶ Suppose I find a watch on the ground, and I ask how the watch came to be there. I would never think . . . that for all I knew, the watch might have always been there . . . Rather, at some time, at some place or another, an artificer or artificers must have made the watch . . . Every indication of design that existed in the watch exists in the works of nature. The difference in the case of nature is that it is even greater design, in a degree which goes beyond all calculation. William Paley, *Natural Theology*. Paraphrased from Paley's 1802 edition in English.

²⁷ Teleological argument: an argument for the existence of God that suggests the existence of an intelligent Designer is necessary to explain the complexity and order in creation.

²⁸ Chaos theory: the idea that pockets of random complexity tend to develop as a virtual mathematical certainty.

²⁹ E.g., Michael J. Behe, William A. Dembski, and Stephen C. Meyer, *Science and Evidence for Design in the Universe* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000).

consistently fall down instead of up? Why is it that “for every action there is an equal and opposition reaction”? He would say that the fact that the universe operates according to laws leads to the question of a Designer who created those laws and put them in play.

The universe is characterized by vast, all-pervasive temporal order, the conformity of nature to formula, recorded in the scientific laws . . . The orderliness of nature is a matter of the vast uniformity in the powers and liabilities of bodies throughout endless time and space . . . Science cannot explain why all bodies do possess the same very general powers and liabilities.

Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*³⁰

Although it is often discussed separately, we here discuss another argument for God’s existence, namely, the **moral argument**³¹ for God’s existence. It also is usually based on the idea that there is a certain design or structure to the world that requires the existence of a particular kind of Designer. The argument typically goes something like this:

1. At various times, humans exhibit a strong sense of right and wrong that goes beyond personal advantage or “natural” explanation.
2. Some “supernatural” cause must thus have placed this moral impulse inside us.

Immanuel Kant³² (1724–1804) was one of the first to make this kind of argument. Kant believed that a moral law was part of the rational fabric of the universe. It is something that is entailed by rationality itself, and we can determine the right course of action by following logic. Beyond this moral structure, Kant believed we also make a mental connection between acting morally and the greatest possible happiness. This connection, Kant said, has no basis in this world, because acting morally in this world often does not lead to happiness.³³ Therefore, he argued, a God must exist beyond this world both who has created this connection in our minds between morality and reward and who will also bring about such reward in the next life.

Many people do indeed believe that everyone has a basic sense of right and wrong built into them, a kind of universal conscience. Aside from serial killers and psychopaths, it seems reasonable to many people to think everyone deep down really knows what they should or should not do. However, if there is a common core of human conscience, it is probably limited to certain basics. We find significant variety among what various humans have found morally obvious depending

³⁰ The quote is from Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1979) as quoted in Louis J. Pojman, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987), 41, 42.

³¹ Moral argument: the idea that the fundamental human sense of right and wrong cannot be explained without recourse to a moral Creator.

³² Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. Paraphrased from Kant’s conclusion to the work as translated by T. K. Abbott in *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1883). We know that men [sic] find themselves under a moral law, which they did not make, and cannot quite forget even when they try, and which they know they ought to obey. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (1952; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 23.

³³ Indeed, in Plato’s *Republic*, Plato has a character named Thrasymachus argue to Socrates that it is ideal to be able to get away with doing evil while everyone else thinks you are good.

on when and where they have lived. Most cultures have a sense that mothers should protect their children and that incest on this level is abominable. But common morality among humans is somewhat limited to these sorts of things.³⁴

C. S. Lewis's account of the argument may be a little more forceful than Kant's. For Lewis, the specifics of right and wrong are not as important as the fact that humans feel strongly about right and wrong in the first place, whatever the specifics. Some will find this argument persuasive, and others will not. An evolutionary biologist, for example, might attribute such drives to instincts deeply ingrained in our brains that contribute to our survival as a species.

But we do not think it is necessary to prove God's existence. The approach of this particular book only expects that God's existence will likely prove to be reasonable. Is it reasonable to suggest that the basic "laws" of nature and the complexity of the world come from a supreme Designer? Yes is surely the obvious answer. We have no reason to believe that the evidence at any one time will *demand* this verdict. Indeed, those who take this approach to evidence may end up creating more doubt for themselves than certainty.

So let us end our discussion of design in the creation by posing the issue the other way around. If we assume that God designed the universe *ex nihilo*, what can we likely infer about God's attributes? With regard to God as the cause of the universe, we concluded that God must be all powerful—omnipotent—with regard to the creation, since God made it out of nothing. We must conclude that God, as the Designer of the universe out of nothing, is all knowing or **omniscient** with regard to the design of the universe. This argument does not necessarily seem to entail that God must know everything that *actually* happens or will happen (although Christians have historically believed these things). But it implies that God knows the entire design of the universe and thus all its potentialities.

This line of argument says nothing about what God might do with such knowledge. But it does imply a few interesting things about what God knew about the creation when creating it. People sometimes try to apply the particulars of *human* knowing to God that probably do not apply. For example, we as humans often distinguish knowing something in one's head and knowing it by experience. But if God created everything out of nothing, then God knows everything in as full a manner as anything can be known. God does not need to become human to know what it is like. Indeed, God does not have to sin or be evil to know what it is like. If God created the world out of nothing, then God created the possibility for all these things and knows them better than any human ever could. God thus can learn nothing by becoming human, nor does God learn anything on the cross, experientially or rationally. Such knowledge is implied from the notion of God as Designer of the world from nothing.

5. Arguments from Existence

³⁴ As with psychopaths, we can allow for the possibility that there are sick cultures that are unhealthy and dying. The Ik people of Uganda would seem an excellent candidate. See Colin Turnbull, *The Mountain People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), although his method has been questioned.

We want to consider two final arguments for the existence of God that are sometimes made in relation to the idea of existence itself. The first is often associated with the cosmological argument and was Aquinas's third argument for the existence of God, sometimes called the **argument from necessity**³⁵ or contingency. Aquinas's argument runs something like the following:

1. Some things have only a *possible* existence: it would be possible for them not to exist.
2. If everything was of this sort, then it would be possible for there to be a point when *nothing* existed.
3. But if there were a point when nothing existed, then nothing could come into existence.
4. Therefore there must be at least one *necessary* Being, which we call God.

This argument made much more sense in the time prior to the scientific age. If, as we are now taught in high school, matter can neither be created nor destroyed, it would seem that we could use this argument to consider matter to have a necessary existence, at least from our current point of view.³⁶ We can think of God as the only necessary Being to be sure, but it seems difficult to prove it given where we stand.

A final argument for the existence of God is the **ontological argument**³⁷, first put forward by Anselm (1033–1109). We might summarize it as follows:

1. We can imagine the greatest possible Being; the greatest possible Being can exist in our thoughts.
2. But a Being that exists in the world is greater than one that exists only in the mind.
3. Therefore, the greatest possible Being must exist in the world as well as in the mind.

Immanuel Kant, who believed in God, rejected Anselm's argument as incoherent. He argued basically that Anselm's argument mixed two different kinds of claims: one was about the world, and the other was about ideas. Mixing the two together was like mixing apples and oranges or playing two different games on two different fields. The premises do not connect to each other.

One thing that helps us understand Anselm—and Descartes, who later advanced a similar argument—is to realize that he tended toward the idealist end of the spectrum where reality is closely related to ideas. For Descartes, for example, if you could conceive of something clearly and distinctly, it was in all likelihood true.

³⁵ Argument from necessity: the argument that if all entities had only a possible existence then conceivably nothing might exist. Since something does, there must be at least one Necessary thing.

³⁶ Whether this notion is true on the quantum level is another question. The quantum level is when we get down to a level smaller than the atom.

³⁷ Ontological argument: the argument that if we can conceive of the greatest possible Being, it must also therefore exist.

In more recent times, **Alvin Plantinga**³⁸ has advanced some new versions of the ontological argument.³⁹ One of his chief claims is that belief in God is “properly basic.” Belief in God is so fundamental to life that we cannot imagine a universe without a God. Even those who think they do not believe in God must presuppose God’s existence in all their thinking. The existence of God is thus a part of making our way through life, comparable to our believing that other people and objects actually exist or that other people have minds as we do.

6. Conclusion

No argument would seem to prove beyond any doubt that God exists. Nevertheless, the arguments of this chapter tell us it is reasonable to believe in a Creator. Science has no explanation for *why* anything exists even if it has become very good at describing *how* things exist. And whether one accepts evolution or not, the laws and patterns of the universe exhibit an order that might easily be explained by way of an intelligent Designer. In the end Christians have traditionally believed that God more *makes* his existence known to us than that we find God through the evidence of the world. Faith in God is a warranted personal belief.

In his *Pensées*, the philosopher Blaise Pascal once suggested that the decision to believe in God was like a wager everyone was forced to take in life, often called **Pascal’s Wager**. He argued that if you bet in favor of God’s existence, you stood to gain everything if you proved to be right. On the other hand, you stood to lose nothing if you proved to be wrong. He thus considered the choice for belief an infinitely better wager. This wager is not a proof or argument for God’s existence. It is simply a reason why an unsure person might choose to live in faith rather than disbelief. Many Christians resonate with this idea. They find that their faith in God fills their lives with meaning and purpose. They are content to live their lives in faith even though they are not able to prove God’s existence. Even so, we would argue that faith in God’s existence is perfectly reasonable.

³⁸ Pascal’s Wager: a thought experiment proposed by Blaise Pascal in which a person has to wager in life whether to believe or not to believe in God. He proposed that belief in God was a much better bet than choosing not to believe in God.

³⁹ Alvin Plantinga, e.g., in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); also *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000).

Chapter 6: The Problem of Evil

What to Get from This Chapter

The problem of evil is the question of how a good and all-powerful God could allow evil to continue to exist in the world.

Some philosophers have altered their sense of either God's power or goodness to address the issue.

Moral evil is evil that results from the choice of a being; "natural evil" refers to pain and suffering that is a consequence of nature.

The soul-making theodicy suggests that pain and suffering can be good because they can help us grow and thrive as humans.

The free-will theodicy suggests that a world in which beings can choose to do good or evil is a better world than one where we are forced to do good.

1. Defining the Problem

Perhaps no one has put the problem of evil so succinctly as Archibald MacLeish in his play *J.B.*, about Job in the Bible. In the script, the character who represents Satan taunts, "If God is God, he is not good. If God is good, he is not God."⁴⁰ What the character is saying is that if "God is God," if God is all powerful and can do anything, God must not truly be good. Surely a good God, so the argument goes, would do away with evil, if powerful enough to do so. By the same token, if "God is good," then—so the argument goes—presumably God is not powerful enough to do away with

⁴⁰ Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.* (1956; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 10.

evil. He must not be “God.” This conundrum is traditionally called the **problem of evil**⁴¹. Throughout history, any group that believed its gods were powerful—and loved them—has struggled with this question in the face of defeat or suffering. It is no coincidence that MacLeish expressed this issue by way of the biblical book of Job. Job is a righteous person who does everything that God requires of him (e.g., 1:8). Indeed, it is exactly this point that Job’s “friends” dispute. They believe that Job must have done something wrong to bring such suffering on himself (e.g., 4:7).

But when God shows up at the end of the story, he rebukes Job’s friends for their insistence that Job is suffering as a punishment for his own sin (42:7). No sin on Job’s part has brought on his sufferings. We, the audience of Job, know that Job was being tested by “the Satan” to see if Job would be loyal to God. But Job never learns it in the book. One point of Job is that the righteous can suffer even though they have done nothing to deserve it.

We should not be too quick to dismiss the argument of Job’s comforters. Their logic is indeed found in other parts of the Old Testament. In Joshua 7, when Israel loses in battle against the city of Ai, the explanation is that defeat was caused by the sin of someone named Achan in their company. Once the offender is stoned and purged, Israel is victorious against the city.

This approach to suffering is a part of what is sometimes called deuteronomistic theology, since it is expressed so well by the book of Deuteronomy, especially chapter 28. If Israel would keep God’s commandments, it would be blessed. But if Israel would not keep God’s commandments, it would suffer. This theology of history permeates the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, as well as other books of the Hebrew Bible. These books give us one side of the biblical equation.

Yet other parts of the Old Testament, such as Job, wrestle with this theology, especially on an individual level. Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2 both record a saying in Israel from the time of Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 BC: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jer. 31:29). The generation that went into captivity was punished, *not for their own sins*, but presumably for the sins of their parents:

All this came upon us,
though we had not forgotten you;
we had not been false to your covenant.
Our hearts had not turned back;
our feet had not strayed from your path.
But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals;
you covered us over with deep darkness!

Psalm 44:17–19 NIV

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel argue that God will no longer punish descendants for their parents’ sin. Rather, the person who actually does the sin is the one who will die (e.g., Ezek. 18:4).

⁴¹ Problem of evil: the question of why evil exists if God is both good and powerful enough to stop it.

Greek philosophers also wrestled with this issue. Allegedly, the philosopher **Epicurus** (341–270 BC) put the question this way: “Do the gods want to prevent evil, but are not able? Then they are impotent. Are they able, but not willing? Then they are malevolent. Are they both able and willing? Then why is there evil?”⁴² But Christians probably wrestle with this issue more than most other religions because Christianity has such a heightened sense of God’s love for the creation. Perhaps the first verse that any Christian child learns is John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Christians also have a heightened sense of God’s power and of God already having begun the process of taking care of evil. We believe he has started this process by sending Jesus to die for the sins of the world. So why does evil still linger on so powerfully? Why do genocides continue to take place with no sign of abatement? This is the problem of evil, the topic of this chapter.

2. God’s Power and Goodness

Various thinkers have addressed the problem of evil by adjusting their view of God’s power or God’s goodness. For example, Jewish thinkers such as Harold Kushner and Walter Kaufmann preferred to think of God as willing but unable to prevent the Holocaust. For them, God is good but not powerful enough to eliminate such evils from the world. Similarly, **process theology**⁴³ sees God evolving and developing along with the world. Thinkers who hold this philosophy think that God might very well get to the point someday where he can put a final end to suffering and pain. But God is not quite there yet. Process theologians usually see the world as part of God’s body.⁴⁴ They might say that God is developing just as the world is evolving.

Most people who believe in God, however, are not as likely to question God’s power. The notion of God as powerful seems to be one of the most fundamental understandings of what a god is. More often than not, explanations for the problem of evil address the question of God’s goodness rather than God’s omnipotence.

In the preface to his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) boasted that even at age thirteen he was already preoccupied with the problem of where evil came from. “My solution to the problem at the time was to give God the honor of being the father of evil.”⁴⁵ Nietzsche of course did not believe in the existence of God. He is known especially for the statement “God is dead; we have killed him.”⁴⁶ As distasteful as we might find Nietzsche’s

⁴² The quotation comes from the third-century Christian, Lactantius, in a work called *De Ira Dei*. Lactantius claims to be quoting Epicurus.

⁴³ Process theology: an approach to reality that sees God evolving and developing along with the world, which is usually thought to be a part of God (panentheism).

⁴⁴ See chapter 8 for more on panentheism.

⁴⁵ Paraphrased from the foreword of Nietzsche’s book in English translation, *A Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Hausmann (London: Macmillan, 1897), 10:4.

⁴⁶ The phrase first appeared in Nietzsche’s 1882 book *The Gay Science*, but subsequently became better known from the madman in his slightly later work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The quotation “God is dead” is usually taken out of context. In *Zarathustra*, a madman proclaims God’s death to a group of individuals celebrating that God was no longer around to judge them. The madman tries unsuccessfully to warn them that chaos will inevitably ensue in a world where people no longer believe in God. In some respects Nietzsche was thus a prophet of the twentieth century with its Holocaust and other atrocities.

flamboyant disregard for Christianity, we must take seriously at least one aspect of his thought on the origins of evil.

If God created the world out of nothing, then he must at least be *indirectly* responsible for the existence of evil. God made the world in such a way that evil was possible. He may not be the *direct* cause of evil. He may not be the *direct* cause of everything that happens in the universe. But God created a universe where such things can and do happen. If God is entirely good, it raises the question of why he would do so.

Christians believe that God is sovereign, king, over the creation. God does not have to fight against evil, as in some dualistic systems with two supreme beings, one good and one evil. Christianity is not like Zoroastrianism, where the good being Ahura Mazdā struggles eternally with the evil being Ahriman. Yet God does not prevent evil from happening, despite the fact that he is capable of doing so. If God is entirely good, why doesn't he prevent it or stop it for good?

Despite the fact that Christians believe God created the possibility of evil, we find different Christian approaches to *how* evil came about in the world. On the one end of the spectrum are certain extreme forms of **Calvinism**⁴⁷ that believe God directly orchestrates all the evil of the universe. Calvinism is a branch of Christianity that took its departure from John Calvin in the 1500s. We will discuss Calvinism more extensively in chapter 10. In its most extreme form, “hyper-Calvinism” believes God caused Satan to rebel against him, while also making the first human, Adam, to sin. In his great “mercy,” however, God now causes relatively few people to be saved—all of whom God caused to be sinful in the first place.

To be fair, **John Calvin**⁴⁸ himself did not teach that God had orchestrated the “fall” of Satan or the original sin of the first human, Adam. Rather, Calvin believed that it was possible that Adam might not have sinned against God as he did. But *after* Adam sinned, all humans subsequently have been born into the world “totally depraved,” unable to do any good at all in their own power.⁴⁹ People will unavoidably do evil unless God directly causes them to do good.

However, in the most extreme form of Calvinism, God has determined on a microlevel everything that happens, has happened, and will happen in the universe, as in Islam. Accordingly, no real claim is given that God loves anyone but those toward whom he shows favor. At the same time, “good” might be defined as whatever God does. Anything God does is good because that is the definition of good.⁵⁰ If God causes one of his favored ones to die of painful cancer, then that is good because God has done it.

⁴⁷ Calvinism: a Christian system of thought that emphasizes God's sovereign control and direction of the world.

⁴⁸ No seemingly random ability, action, or movement exists in creatures that is not governed by God's secret plan, with the result that nothing happens, except what God knowingly and willingly decrees. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.16.3, John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. All Calvin quotations in this chapter are paraphrased from the 1845 English translation of Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008).

⁴⁹ Calvin did not originate the idea of total depravity. The doctrine, rather, originated with Augustine in the early 400s. Both Calvin and Augustine believed that they had found this idea in the writings of Paul in the New Testament, especially Romans, although Paul arguably teaches universal sinfulness, not absolute sinfulness.

⁵⁰ This line of reasoning is called a tautology, where a statement is true by definition and thus does not really say anything. Everything God wills is good, because good is defined as whatever God wills.

This approach to God's "goodness" seems to make little sense of the idea of *good* or *love*. The normal understanding of *love* involves genuine desire for the benefit of the beloved. But in these forms of Calvinism, God makes people do things that anger him and then shows his "justice" by punishing and destroying them. Others God makes do things that anger him, and then he shows his great "love" and "goodness" by not punishing them. But since someone must be punished, he punishes his Son, Christ, instead.

Whatever this god is, it seems dubious that it is the God of Jesus or the bulk of the New Testament.⁵¹ We would, in contrast, make a distinction on some level between God's directive *will* and God's permissive will. **God's directive will**⁵² relates to things that God directly causes. **God's permissive will**,⁵³ on the other hand, relates to things that God does not stop, things that God allows to take place.

The hyper-Calvinist perspective makes *everything* a function of God's directive will. In our opinion, it seems difficult to consider such a god good in any meaningful sense of the word. Most forms of Christianity, however, including mainstream Calvinism, allow at least some place for God's permissive will.⁵⁴ Most would not make God directly responsible for all the evil that has ever taken place in a directive sense (cf. James 1:13–14). Rather, they would try to explain why God has allowed evil to take place despite his goodness.

3. What Is Evil?

If we are going to ask why God allows evil to exist and occur, we need to define exactly what it is in the first place. At this point, someone might suggest a very "theological" definition, maybe that evil is anything that does not conform to the will of God or glorify God. This person might then suggest that it is not really evil when bad events happen to people, because every one of us is a sinner who has done wrong and deserves judgment. Indeed, someone might even argue that God's love shows itself in the fact that God does not simply obliterate the whole world.

Perhaps that is the right answer. But it does not fit very well with the way we normally talk about love or about what is good. We certainly experience things like cancer, catastrophes, and senseless violence as bad events that often at least seem out of character with the normal definitions of love and what we would expect a loving God to do or allow.

On a most basic human level, we categorize things as "good" or "bad" by whether they bring us pleasure or pain, benefit, or harm. Such pleasures and pains can quickly come into conflict with one another. The pleasure someone gets from a night of drinking might issue in a painful headache

⁵¹ Only one chapter of the New Testament comes anywhere close to sounding like this perspective, namely, Romans 9; this chapter, however, has much more to do with Jews and non-Jews than with God determining what *individuals* will be saved. Paul's missionary practices assumed that anyone might be saved. See chapter 10 for more extensive discussion of this issue.

⁵² God's directive will: when God directly causes something to happen in the world.

⁵³ God's permissive will: when God allows something to happen in the world but does not directly cause it.

⁵⁴ Not much, however, even in mainstream Calvinism. In mainstream Calvinism, God's permissive will applies only to the choice of Adam in the Garden of Eden and perhaps Satan's choice whether or not to sin.

the next morning. By the same token, the pain of pulling out a splinter might avoid the greater pain of a later infection.

In this “street-level” discussion, evil is not a thing, like a piece of coal. It is a description of something that happens. People sometimes talk about evil as if it were a thing, as if there were such a thing as “pure evil.” Christians from time to time have even talked about our having an “evil nature,” a thing inside of us that might be removed or need to be suppressed. But evil would not seem to be a matter of something you could look at or remove from a person surgically. In that sense, God did not create a *thing* we call “evil.” He created the possibility of people committing evil *actions*, but God probably did not create evil *things*.

Other Christians have considered evil to be the absence of a thing, the absence of good. **Augustine** (354–430) said that there was no *efficient* cause of evil but only a *deficient* cause. Some *thing* does not cause evil but rather the absence of some thing brings about evil, namely, the absence of good.

You should not try to find an efficient cause for a wrong choice. It is not a matter of something present but of something missing . . . We understand darkness and silence . . . These are not things we perceive present but things that are not there to perceive . . . We never see darkness except when we stop seeing . . . silence can only be perceived by not hearing.

Augustine, *The City of God* 12.7⁵⁵

Thus we have Augustine’s observation from his *Confessions*, cited in the previous chapter: “You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you.” For Augustine, the absence of God’s presence results in evil. If something was entirely evil, it would completely cease to exist altogether. So to Augustine, even Satan must still have at least a little good in him, or he would cease to exist!

Augustine may have a helpful thought here, if we take his words to mean that people do evil because they are lacking something. However, if we take his language straightforwardly, he seems to treat good as a thing, which seems to commit the same basic error as those who treat evil as a thing.

It seems more accurate and helpful to think of *good* and *evil*⁵⁶ not as nouns but as *adjectives*, as descriptions of intentions and motives rather than as things themselves. Paul says of eating foods, “I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean” (Rom. 14:14, NIV). We might infer from Paul’s discussion of when to eat and when not to eat certain things that immoral action is primarily a function of *context*.

For example, to have sex is not sinful in itself, as an act. However, it becomes a sinful action in various contexts, such as if you have sex with someone who is not your spouse. The Bible does

⁵⁵ All quotations from Augustine in this book are paraphrased on the basis of the translation by Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, 14 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

⁵⁶ Evil is an act of will whose objective is inappropriate given its context.

not even treat killing as an evil action *in itself*. The Bible never prohibits killing in battle or as an act of capital punishment. It is rather the context of such killing that makes it evil.⁵⁷

Some Christians have wondered how it is that Adam, the first human in the biblical story, could have been tempted when he was a perfect human. Certainly the text of Genesis does not raise this question, but it nonetheless provides a good way to help us work out our thinking on these issues. If we approach evil as a matter of context, we can still account for Adam's temptation even though he has no evil drive inside him. His drive, uncorrupted by sin, is to excel and to learn. What was wrong was not the drive, but the context in which Adam expressed that drive, namely, toward something he was forbidden to eat.⁵⁸

We might even suggest that if a particular action is wrong in every circumstance, it is so only because no context exists in which the action could be considered right. Thus the action itself would still not be intrinsically wrong, but the action would be wrong *in every context* in which it might be done. When we approach the question of evil from this perspective, God does not directly create any evil in the world. The world God created was thoroughly good and might in theory have remained thoroughly good. Yet at the same time God created the possibility that morally neutral actions might take place in the wrong contexts, thus making them evil because of the decisions of humans and other created beings. So it is certainly true that pleasure and pain seem to be "good" and "bad" on a street level. Yet it is not clear that in themselves they map directly to good and evil. Pleasure is not always truly good, and we should distinguish between **moral evil**⁵⁹ as a matter of intention and pain as a consequence of nature. **Natural "evil,"**⁶⁰ which I would not even call evil, refers to adverse events or situations that create pain and misfortune, but that do not happen because of some person or being's intention. For example, a person trips and breaks her leg. That person experiences pain and inconvenience, but one might argue that no person or being has caused it. Of course it is possible that some angel or demon, that Satan might directly cause people to break their legs. If so, then we would not categorize such an event as natural "evil" but as *moral* evil, where moral evil refers to the consequences of some *being's* bad intentions. But if no person, human or supernatural, caused her to break her leg, then we might better call it "suffering" rather than evil.

Is what is right loved by the gods because it is right, or is it right because the gods love it?

Plato, Euthyphro10a

We might put Plato's question this way: "Is good, good because God says so? Or does God say it's good because it's good?" In other words, is "the good" something that is absolute beyond the gods, to where we might judge the gods themselves by its standard? If Zeus kills an innocent

⁵⁷ Some Christians would of course argue that the new covenant works itself out in a way that makes it always wrong to kill today. Someone might argue that it is impossible ever to kill with a right attitude and thus that Christians must not kill anyone under any circumstance.

⁵⁸ Not all Christians take the story of Adam literally, although Christians have historically.

⁵⁹ Moral evil: bad events that occur because of human or "supernatural" intention.

⁶⁰ Natural "evil": bad events that occur apart from human or "supernatural" intention, perhaps better called natural pain or suffering.

person, is he guilty of murder in the same way an ordinary Greek would be considered a murderer? Or is such a killing “good” simply because Zeus himself has done it?

Philosophers have raised the same question in relation to the Christian God. In Genesis 22 God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. God does not go through with it, but the question arises: if God commands you to kill your son, has God commanded you to do something immoral? Should you disobey him to do what is right?

The view that considers good to be anything God says is good is called the divine command theory. So if God commands the Israelites to kill all the women, children, and animals of Jericho, then that command must, by definition, be good. On the other hand, most Christian thinkers throughout history have believed that God’s nature is good, such that God in effect could never make a truly evil command. Such a command would be contrary to his nature, and thus no possible world exists where God truly commands evil. You can never be disobeying God when you refrain from evil, and you will never be obeying the true will of God if you do evil.

4. The Soul-Making Theodicy

A **theodicy** is an explanation of God’s justice in the light of the existence of evil. Two primary theodicies have emerged over the course of Christian history: the **soul-making theodicy** and the **free-will theodicy**. The earlier of these two shows up in the writings of **Irenaeus** in the late 100s and has been advanced in various ways in recent times by individuals including John Hick and C. S. Lewis.⁶¹ The basic idea is that suffering and pain help us grow up, make us better people. They improve our souls and are thus soul making.

Because Irenaeus was apparently the first Christian to suggest in any detail something like this approach to the problem of evil, the soul-making explanation is sometimes called the Irenaean theodicy. Irenaeus argued in this way:

Someone might say, “Then why didn’t God make humanity perfect from the beginning?” Tell this person that . . . everything is possible for God. But created things must be inferior to him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin. It is not possible for things created recently to become uncreated. But since they are not uncreated, they obviously fall short of the perfect . . . So it was possible for God himself to have made humanity perfect from the beginning, but humanity could not receive this perfection, since humanity was still infant . . .

If humanity had no knowledge of the opposite, how could it have instruction in what is good? . . . Just as the tongue understands sweet and bitter by tasting them, the eye can tell between black and white because of seeing and the ear recognizes distinctions in sounds by hearing. The mind is the same. Its experience of both good and evil gives it the knowledge of what is good, and it becomes more tenacious to preserve the good by obeying God.

⁶¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001); John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1966).

We might compare this approach to exercise or weight training. Anyone who has been on bed rest, even for several days, knows how quickly muscles atrophy. Inactivity makes us weaker. Conversely, exercise builds muscle by “tearing down” the weaker muscle then replacing it with stronger muscle fibers. The soul-making theodicy thus pictures a world that functions like a jungle gym. As we face obstacles, we get better, stronger. What we call evil may actually be good for us, like liver or spinach. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Gen. 50:20 NIV). C. S. Lewis⁶³ also, at least in the period before the painful death of his wife by cancer, spoke of suffering as something God uses to make us grow.⁶⁴

What are we to make of this theodicy? On the one hand, it is true that not all pain is ultimately bad. Sometimes pain can lead to greater happiness, like an unpleasant shot that helps you get over a serious illness. Of course recognizing pain’s potential payoff is usually of little comfort when we are in the middle of the suffering. Nevertheless, we can find some truth even in Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous saying that “what does not kill me makes me stronger.”⁶⁵

From a philosophical standpoint, it is not clear that death in itself is evil or even that suffering is. They are usually undesirable to us, to be sure. But it is not clear that they are evil. As unreassuring as it is, it is quite possible that the problem of evil sometimes looms larger to us than it should, because we do not have a good sense of the overall picture or of what is ultimately of greatest importance. We think our individual lives to be more significant than they really are in the vast scheme of things. We exaggerate the significance of our pains and pleasures.

And we should probably point out that our insignificance becomes infinitely greater if there is no God. If there is no God, then—while we may become infinitely significant to ourselves—we turn out simply to be biological machines meaninglessly concerned with our own fortunes and circumstances. If undirected, atheistic evolution is the ultimate explanation of what a person is, then there is no goodness—or evil—to the world at all. The fittest survive, the weak get eaten, and neither outcome really matters one way or another beyond the feelings of the few, insignificant animals involved.

Certainly it is the fallacy of subjectivism to think that something is true just because it is convenient for me. Yet the existence of God would seem to be the only hope for suffering having any real meaning at all beyond ourselves and those who care for us. Ironically, while the continuance of

⁶² All quotations from the ante-Nicene church fathers in this book are paraphrased on the basis of the translation by Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

⁶³ [Pain] is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 91. 18. Although C. S. Lewis never states this in his books, it fairly captures his early thinking and appears in the 1993 movie *Shadowlands* written by William Nicholson. We are like blocks of stone out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men [sic]. The blows of his chisel, which hurt us so much, are what make us perfect. *Shadowlands*. The perfected being whom God is seeking to create. However, this is not taking place . . . by a natural and inevitable evolution, but through a hazardous adventure in individual freedom . . . If, then, God’s aim in making the world is the “bringing of many sons to glory” [Heb. 2:10], that aim will naturally determine the kind of world that He has created. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 256.

⁶⁴ See n. 14. In *A Grief Observed* (1961), written after watching his wife die from cancer, Lewis seemed less enthusiastic about the answer he had given earlier.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (1889).

suffering raises the strongest objections to the idea of a God of love, it is only the notion of God's love for the world that makes suffering significant at all beyond the chemical reactions in the brains of a half dozen *Homo sapiens*.

When we think of the soul-making theodicy, we are especially thinking about the potential of *natural* "evil" to lead to positive outcomes, although the same concept could apply just as well to the effects of moral evil. We should remind ourselves again that there are different perspectives on whether God directs such natural evil or allows it. From one Christian point of view, God directly causes hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornados, car accidents, and fires. From another, God allows these things to happen as the natural outworking of the laws of cause and effect that God placed into the universe. Sometimes a frame of metal going one direction collides with a frame of metal going another, and the people in these cars get hurt. From this approach, the question is why God did not *stop* the cars, not why God caused them to collide.

But why would God design a world that works this way in the first place? Even if God does not orchestrate hurricanes to kill people, why did God create a world that creates hurricanes by the laws of cause and effect? Could not an all-powerful God have made a world where growth could take place without the inordinate amount of suffering that has taken place in this world over the course of history?

For these reasons, many Christian philosophers would suggest that the soul-making theodicy is inadequate in itself as an explanation for why a loving God created a world that grows in this particular way. This observation leads us to the more dominant theodicy, the so-called free-will theodicy of Augustine. We should not presume, however, that we will ever find a full explanation that leaves us with no questions at all. Even biblical figures such as Habakkuk, Job, and various psalmists had questions about the ways of God. At the end of this chapter, we will inevitably conclude that we must ultimately decide whether we have faith in God's goodness and power. This side of eternity, we will not likely find an entirely satisfying answer to the question of why God allows so much suffering.

5. The Free-Will Argument

The most popular explanation for the existence of evil is the free-will⁶⁶ theodicy. The basic thrust of this explanation is that a world in which humans have relatively free choice is better than a world in which they do not. But if people have free choice to do good or evil, then some will make bad choices, and evil will result.

The one who is usually credited for this argument is Augustine, although Augustine's version of it was a little more nuanced than our explanation. For Augustine, it was the first human, Adam,

⁶⁶ Free will was how we could do evil, and our suffering evil [in consequence] is [God's] righteous judgment . . . God is the greatest and highest good, and he has created these lesser goods. Both Creator and created are all good. Where, then, did evil come from? . . . I asked what sin was, and realized it is not a substance, but a perversion of our will, bent aside from you, O God. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.5, 7.7, 7.22. The first evil act of Adam's will . . . was a falling away from the work of God . . . not a substantive act itself . . . The effect of that sin was to subject human nature to all the process of decay that we see and feel, and consequently to death also. Augustine, *The City of God* 14.11–12

who had the free choice to do good or evil. Because he chose to disobey, the entire world became “fallen.” Although Adam was free to choose, we are not free to choose good today.⁶⁷

The strength of Augustine’s understanding of **the Fall**⁶⁸—Adam’s choice for evil and the subsequent evil that has followed—is that it explains both the existence of moral and natural evil. On the one hand, the choices of Satan and Adam to sin were free-will choices.⁶⁹ God did not make them sin, and they had the freedom *not* to sin if they had so chosen. God is thus not directly responsible for the origins of evil. Satan and Adam are.

On the other hand, because of Adam’s sin, the argument goes, all humans now are born **totally depraved**.⁷⁰ They do not have free will and are not able to do any good in their own power. Because of their inherent evil, they inevitably do many things that do not deserve God’s favor. God is thus under no obligation to do good to anyone, and anyone God *does* “save” is saved exclusively by an act of mercy and love.

At the same time, the natural world “fell” with Adam. There were no earthquakes, tornados, or paper cuts in the Garden of Eden. These are also a by-product of Adam’s free choice. Augustine thus explained the origins of natural evil by way of Adam’s moral evil. Later thinkers such as John Calvin (1509–1564) and John Wesley (1703–1791) built on Augustine’s system in divergent ways. Calvin passed along Augustine’s thought largely as it was: God does not choose to condemn those who are damned directly, because they were already condemned by their own actions.⁷¹ But in his love and mercy, God chooses to save some.

By contrast, Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) and John Wesley did not believe Calvin’s picture of God matched with God’s character as portrayed in the Bible. A God who arbitrarily chooses some can hardly be said to love the world (John 3:16) or to want *all* to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). So Arminius and Wesley suggested that God’s grace gives us all a chance to be saved, even though we are still unable to save ourselves. We will address these thinkers again in chapter 10.

We should mention that the systems of Augustine, Calvin, Arminius, and Wesley are all thoroughly ensconced in the Western Christian tradition. The idea of total depravity, which originated with Augustine, is more a feature of Western than Eastern Christianity. Christians before Augustine, as well as the Eastern Christian tradition, did not absolutize human fallenness to quite the same degree as did the later Western tradition. In this respect, the understanding of human sinfulness in Eastern Christianity perhaps comes closer to that of Paul in the New Testament, who thought of human sinfulness as our enslavement to evil powers in this world more than as some evil nature within us. (Some translations, such as the 1984 *New International Version*,

⁶⁷ Although Augustine believed we are still free to choose evil, since evil for him was a turning from good.

⁶⁸ The Fall: the event when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, with the subsequent entrance of death, evil, and suffering into the world.

⁶⁹ Some debate exists over whether Augustine believed God to have predestined Satan’s sin. See Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 64, where Hick discusses Augustine, *The City of God* 12.

⁷⁰ Total depravity: the idea that humans are unable to will or do any good at all in their own power.

⁷¹ Some of Calvin’s followers became *double* predestinarians who believe that God chooses both those to be saved and to be damned. We also mentioned earlier in the chapter some who believe God predestined both Satan and Adam to sin.

render the Greek word *flesh* as “sinful nature,” but this is more a reflection of Western theology than of Paul’s thinking.) Further, Paul taught that God’s Holy Spirit could free us from these powers in this life (e.g., Rom. 8:2; Gal. 5:16).

We might synthesize these thinkers into a free-will theodicy that looks something like the following: God created a universe in which it was better to be able to choose the good freely rather than be forced to choose the good. Unfortunately Satan and Adam made the wrong free-will choice. As a result, the world was corrupted both naturally and spiritually. The default state of humanity and the world is enslavement to sin.

Yet because God loves the whole world, he graciously is willing to empower all to choose the good. One day God will restore the creation to its pre-fallen state of complete human freedom. But in the meantime, the gracious empowerment of God’s Holy Spirit makes possible the same free choice either for or against God, the same choice Adam had before the Fall.

Certainly we should not think that the free-will theodicy answers all our questions about evil. Why, for example, has God waited so long to reset the creation to its pre-fallen state? It cannot be so that he can save more, for time only adds individuals—both to be saved *and* to be damned. From a traditional understanding of salvation, additional time would only add to the overall number of the condemned, while diminishing the percentage of the saved.

An even more significant question is why God set the world up this way in the first place, and whether he *had* to do so. **Gottfried Leibniz** (1646–1716) thought that God’s setup of the world was the best possible one. He did not think God could have created anything but the best of all possible worlds, and this world is it. He did not mean to say that the specific way life turned out for us was always the best possible scenario or that every event that took place was the best thing that could happen. What he meant was that this was the best possible *way* for God to set up the world. In *Theodicy* he wrote:

The best plan is not always the one that tries to avoid evil. It may turn out that *the evil is accompanied by a greater good*. . . an imperfection in the part may be required for a greater perfection in the whole. In this position I have followed that of St. Augustine, who has said a hundred times that God has permitted evil in order to bring about good, a greater good. And I have followed Thomas Aquinas, that allowing evil tends toward the good of the universe . . .

The ancients called Adam’s Fall a *felix culpa*, a happy sin, because it brought as a consequence the incarnation of the Son of God, who has given to the universe something nobler than ever would have come to be among creatures except for it.⁷²

Leibniz’s argument certainly appeals to the democratic sensibilities of the West. Would we rather marry someone who freely has chosen to love us or someone who was forced to obey us? Would we rather a robot love us because it was programmed to do so, or would we like to have someone

⁷² The quotation is paraphrased from “Abridgement of the Argument Reduced to Syllogistic Form,” in *The Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, trans. G. M. Duncan (New Haven, CT: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1890).

choose us among other possibilities? Because a world of choice seems better to most of us than a world of force, the free-will explanation for evil tends to make sense to us.

Yet surely God is smarter than we are. Could not God create a world where it was better not to have free will than one where it was better to have free will? And do we actually have free will at all (a question we will take up again in chap. 10)?

The question of evolution also has implications for Augustine's theodicy. If a Christian believes in theistic (God-directed) evolution, that person can hardly believe that physical death entered the world through Adam or that "natural evil" is a consequence of Adam's sin. Such individuals might still be able to account for the existence of evil caused by human (or animal?) choice. But they would need to turn to something like the soul-making theodicy to explain the existence of natural evil, if they did not feel compelled to develop a more far reaching reappraisal of what constitutes evil.⁷³

Theistic Evolution and the Problem of Evil

One of the strengths of Augustine's free-will theodicy is the way that it accounts for natural evil. Why is it that, in nature, the most vicious and cunning of animals tend to thrive, while the weak tend to get eaten? Why do the most virtuous of people get cancer, die in earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, and floods? The free-will theodicy suggests all the apparent inequities of nature are a consequence of Adam's sin.

One of the challenges for a theistic evolutionist—someone who believes God has directed the process of evolution—is to account for these sorts of things. A theistic evolutionist might believe that an Adam existed, perhaps the first *Homo sapiens* with a soul or the first human on whom God somehow imprinted his image. They might even believe that spiritual death entered the world through Adam's sin. But a theistic evolutionist will need to have millions of years of animal death, pain, and suffering long before Adam. Further, many theistic evolutionists today do not take the Adam story literally but rather as a poetic expression of the human condition.

Some of the earliest objections by Christians to evolution did not derive so much from perceived conflicts with the Bible. For example, William Jennings Bryan, who argued against evolution in the famous 1925 Scopes Trial, opposed evolution because of what seemed to him its philosophical implications. Indeed, in the decades before Bryan, some of the richest and most powerful Americans subscribed to a kind of "social Darwinism."

Following Darwin's idea of the "survival of the fittest," they took their success as an indication that nature had "selected" them. And with this view came the corresponding sense that it was perfectly appropriate for them to ignore, run over, and in general "eat" any of the weak or less powerful who got in their way. We see this same philosophy in Adolph Hitler's approach to those he considered inferior, the ease with which he eliminated the infirm, and those whom he thought corrupted the purer race.

⁷³ For example, someone might argue that evolution, while it involves great pain for individuals, nevertheless works toward the betterment of the living creation as a whole.

If we assumed that the evolutionary dynamics of nature are not a result of human sin or the sin of Satan, then would we have to conclude that God created the world with these dynamics? Did God create a world where the fittest survive, not because they love their neighbors, but precisely because they can beat their neighbor for the food or because a male can impregnate more females than his rival, perhaps including his rival's mate? To say the least, these considerations would invite some rethinking of what good and evil are, as well as of what it would mean to say that God is love. We will discuss some of these issues further in chapter 8, "Science and Faith."

6. Conclusion

The "problem of evil" is the question of why a good God would allow evil and suffering to continue in the world. Throughout the chapter, we have hinted that we ultimately must rely on our faith in God's goodness, despite what we see and experience around us. The rhetorical question Abraham put to God in Genesis 18:25 sums it up well: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (NIV). The answer for the Christian is an unequivocal yes. We have little reason to believe in the existence of a god who is not all powerful. And the alternative to believing in a good God is not a friendlier world. The person who throws out faith in God because of evil and suffering ends up with no hope at all.

Accordingly, because we believe that God is good, we must assume that everything that happens ultimately fits with his goodness in some way. Even though we often cannot understand why God does not stop evil and suffering, we assume that he is in control and loves us. Part of the solution is to recognize that our understanding of things is extremely limited. We can never see the big picture to the extent that God does.

The soul-making and free-will theodicies make sense as well, even if they do not account fully for the issue. Not all pain is bad. To some extent, we as a culture may be spoiled by the technological and pharmaceutical advances that allow us to avoid displeasure. It also makes sense that a world in which we are *free* to choose the good is a better world than one in which we *must* choose the good, which of course means that some individuals will choose to do evil. God does not always cause what happens in the world directly. Some things he more allows to happen, than specifically commanding them to happen.

None of these explanations eliminates the necessity for faith. Kierkegaard reminds us as usual that we are foolish to think we could understand all the workings of God. A quotation of Blaise Pascal from the previous chapter applies as well here: We can't understand anything about God's actions in the world unless we accept the principle that he wanted to blind some of us and enlighten others. God wants to move our will rather than our intellect. Perfect clarity in understanding would help our intellect but handicap our will.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 566, 581⁷⁴

Perhaps Pascal here assumes that human beings are more rational than they are, that they generally take the course of action that is most reasonable. Nevertheless, he highlights the fact that whatever equation we come up with to explain evil, one of the most significant elements will be faith.

⁷⁴ The paraphrases and numbering of Pascal quotes are based on the 1897 French edition compiled by Léon Brunschvicg. Cf. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976).

Chapter 9: What Is a Good Life? Ethics

1. Setting Priorities

Ethics⁷⁵ is the area of philosophy that has to do with how to live in the world.¹ Hardly any area of philosophy is more directly applicable to “real life” than ethics, because it deals with the kinds of decisions we have to make both in the long and short term. Should I do something that benefits me but hurts others? Should I live for the pleasure of the moment, or should I focus more on long-term happiness or on being a good person in general?

We can approach ethics from two basic perspectives. Probably the more widely used approach in the Western world today is **act-based ethics**.⁷⁶ Act based approaches to ethics predictably focus on *doing*—what we should or should not do, how we should act. The other approach is more interested in *being*—what sort of people we should be or become. **Virtue-based ethics**⁷⁷, as it is called, is more focused on things like character, motives, and true happiness rather than on whether specific actions are right or wrong.

Virtue-based and act-based approaches to ethics are not completely unrelated to each other. Some would argue that consistently choosing to act in a certain way is precisely what it means to “be” virtuous. Indeed, is not consistently acting in a certain way precisely what it means to “be” something? And a person’s actions usually say something about a person’s character or happiness. So which approach we take is more a matter of emphasis than a choice of one to the exclusion of the other.

We also find at least three different kinds of act-based approaches to ethics. (1) **Duty-based ethics**⁷⁸ focuses specifically on actions that are universally—some would say intrinsically—right or wrong.² Such things are wrong in themselves whether or not they cause something else bad to happen. (2) By contrast, **utilitarianism**⁷⁹ focuses primarily on the consequences of actions.³ The right course of action is what brings about the “greatest good for the greatest number.” (3) **Egoist**⁸⁰ approaches to ethics ask, what’s in it for me? The “right” course of action is what will most benefit me. In many respects, the egoist approach would seem to be the current default ethic of the West, whether consciously or unconsciously. As we will see in chapter 12, it is the fundamental theoretical basis of the American economic system and any capitalist society.

The problem with all ethical theories is the complexity of life. Life is filled with no-win situations. For example, what happens when two different duties come into conflict with each other? What were those who hid Jews during World War II to do when Nazis searched their homes? Should

⁷⁵ Ethics: a branch of philosophy that asks how we best live in the world.

⁷⁶ Act-based ethics: ethics oriented around what we should do or not do.

⁷⁷ Virtue-based ethics: ethics oriented around who we should be or not be.

⁷⁸ Duty-based ethics: an act-based approach to ethics that focuses on acts that are universally right or wrong in themselves (e.g., lying, stealing).

⁷⁹ Utilitarianism: an act-based approach to ethics that looks to consequences and focuses on what will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number.

⁸⁰ Egoist ethics: an act-based approach to ethics that looks to consequences and focuses on what will most benefit me.

they lie or surrender the Jews? What if someone is trying to harm your family and will almost certainly succeed unless you harm him? Is it okay to kill when your life is in danger or when someone else's life is in danger?

Axiology⁸¹ is the study of what is valuable in life. It actually covers not only ethics but the philosophy of art and everything in this section of the textbook. Real life necessitates that we prioritize our values so that we know what to do when our values come into conflict with each other. We have no other option. It simply is not possible to consider every right or wrong an absolute, as something we must do or not do without exception. Whether we realize it or not, we all operate with a certain "hierarchy of values," so that when two of our values come into conflict with each other, we trump one with the other.

Christianity has always been concerned with both who a person is and what a person does. To be sure, different groups throughout history have leaned in one direction or the other, some toward the importance of the heart and others toward the importance of proper action. Yet only the most extreme Christian groups would deny either "faith" or "works" entirely as a part of Christian life.

On balance, Christianity has historically placed a greater emphasis on "who you are" than on "what you do." Even the Roman Catholic Church of today sees faith as the primary element in our relationship with God, despite the faith-versus-works debate of the Reformation in the 1500s.⁴ Both Jesus and Paul seemed to focus more on the heart than on one's concrete actions, and those books of the New Testament that do put significant emphasis on works (e.g., Matthew and James) do so within the context of the heart. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he replied,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Matthew 22:37–40

This teaching in Matthew is echoed in Paul (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14), James (2:8), and 1 John (4:7–8). It has echoed throughout Christian history as the essence of a Christian ethic (e.g., in Augustine). The "love God and neighbor" command is thus the bedrock of a Christian ethic. These twin commands are the most absolute of Christian duties, for no conceivable situation would create an exception where it was not appropriate to love God or one's neighbor. Similarly, these two values can never come into conflict if they are properly understood.

These two Christian absolutes thus trump all other Christian values, as we will see in the next section. For example, Jesus himself made an exception to the rule not to work on the Sabbath in the light of his disciples' hunger (Mark 2:21–28). When his opponents questioned him, he did not reinterpret the Sabbath rule, as if plucking grain were not really working. His argument is rather that the situation calls for an exception to the rule not to work on the Sabbath.

⁸¹ Axiology: the study of what is valuable, another way of viewing ethics.

With a basic sense of what the Christian priorities are, we are set to look at the main ethical theories we have just mentioned. The next section looks at duty-based ethics from a Christian perspective, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the scope of human duty. Which Christian duties are absolute? Which ones are universal but have exceptions? Which ones are relative to culture and personal conviction? The fourth section of the chapter examines utilitarianism and when “the ends justify the means,” if ever. Then we briefly look at egoist ethics and the extent to which we should live for our own advantage. The last two sections end with a look at virtue-based ethics and what Christian virtue might look like.

2. Duty-Based Ethics

Duty-based ethics focuses on actions that are universally right or wrong—some would say intrinsically right or wrong. For example, most cultures consider it wrong to kill for no reason those within your group. Most would also consider it wrong to steal from your family, even if it would be to your own personal advantage.

Most cultures consider it *good* to help those closest to you when they are in need.

The word *duty* might seem inappropriate for such actions, since we often want to act in this way. One would hope it is a pleasure to act lovingly toward those close to you. Nevertheless, in philosophy we can call such behavior “duties,” because we are asking if it would be morally wrong for us to do otherwise. In Christian theology we speak of **sins of commission**⁸², when we do something wrong, and **sins of omission**⁸³, when we do not do something good that we should do.

The bigger philosophical question is *why* these are duties. Is it simply a matter of culture? Is it only that our cultures find it abhorrent to steal from parents or harm someone who has nurtured and protected you? Or is there something that makes values like these universal or even exceptionless absolutes? For example, is it something biological, something about the way we evolved as animals? Is it something God created inside us, inside our “souls” or perhaps something within our brains?

Some would argue that core rights and wrongs are absolutes. An absolute right or wrong is one that is *always* right or wrong *without exception*. At the same time, many Christians use language of absolutes in an imprecise way. People often call something an *absolute*⁸⁴ when they really mean that something is *definitely* right or wrong.

But if you can think of an exceptional situation to some principle or action, even one, then by definition it is not an absolute. For example, many Christians are opposed to abortion, exception the case of rape or when the life of the mother is in danger. By definition, therefore, these Christians are not “absolutist” when it comes to the issue of abortion.⁵ Similarly, when Jesus made exceptions to the fourth commandment on keeping the Sabbath, he showed that he was not an absolutist in relation to that command.⁶

⁸² Sins of commission: wrongs a person does by doing something.

⁸³ Sins of omission: wrongs a person does by not doing something (see James 4:17).

⁸⁴ Absolute: in ethics, a principle of action that applies in every situation, time, and place. Relative: in ethics, a principle of action that varies depending on the situation, time, or place.

Several famous philosophers have been absolutist when it comes to ethics. For example, Plato believed that if something was morally right or wrong, one must always either do or not do it. The most memorable illustration of Plato's ethic is the story of **Gyges's ring**.⁷ Gyges was a shepherd who found a ring that could make him invisible. So he placed himself among certain delegates to the king and then proceeded to have an affair with the king's wife, who then plotted with him and killed the king. The question posed in Plato's story is whether we should do the right thing even when we will not get caught.

Plato's answer is that we should. His reasoning is that a person is happy only when the whole person is healthy and each part—soul and body—is doing what it is supposed to do. Plato thus did not believe that a person like Gyges would be truly happy. The person might not have any physical consequences for such actions, but he or she would not be soul healthy for doing them.⁸

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is certainly one of the best-known absolutists in history. You might remember from chapter 4 that Kant believed we had certain built-in categories of thinking that help us process the content of our senses. He believed that this reasoning “software”—to use a contemporary metaphor—could also help us determine right and wrong.

Just before Kant, **David Hume** (1711–1776) had argued that there was no clear connection between facts (things that happen in the world) and values (the moral values we assign to those events). Kant's idea of built-in categories was his attempt to deal with Hume's argument. Kant acknowledged that we have no basis *in our experiences* for saying that happenings are right or wrong. We can say only that some events or actions bring us more or less pleasure, more or less pain. But if it gives someone pleasure to cause someone else pain, we have no experiential basis for saying the inflictor *should* not gain personal pleasure in that way.⁹

Kant's “mind software” is his solution to Hume's fact-value problem⁸⁵. In our minds we can reason to universal law, to what is “categorically” necessary for us to do or not do. This is **Kant's categorical imperative**.⁸⁶ An imperative is a command, something that you must do, that is your *duty* to do or not to do. The word *categorical* means that these imperatives are absolute, without exception; it applies to everything in that category. For Kant, if something is right or wrong, it is always and without exception right or wrong.

Kant's attempt to put his categorical imperative into words proved to be a struggle over the years. His best-known formulation translates something like the following:¹⁰

Only put into practice that ethical principle that you at the same time would consider to be a universal law.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

⁸⁵ Fact-value problem: the difficulty of finding an intrinsic connection between the “facts” of the world and the “values” we assign to them.

⁸⁶ Categorical imperative: Kant's idea that if something is a “must do,” an imperative, then it is always something you must do, without exception.

What Kant is saying is that a “maxim,” an ethical statement, is truly an imperative only when it is always and everywhere an imperative. In other words, if something is right or wrong, it will always be right or wrong.

Countless ethicists have raised questions about such a sweeping sense of ethical absolutism, and they did in Kant’s day as well. Indeed, Kant himself tried more than once to restate what he was saying in more acceptable terms. For example, at one point he said that his categorical imperative amounted to treating people as “ends in themselves.”

What did he mean? If something is a “means to an end,” it is a stop on a journey to somewhere else. It is an **instrumental good**. For example, nurses have to study chemistry at some point. But for them the study of chemistry is not **an end in itself**, an **intrinsic good**, despite how much they might enjoy blowing things up in a lab. Nurses study chemistry in hopes that it will make them better nurses, that they will have some background context for understanding how one aspect of the human body works. Studying chemistry is thus a means to an end.

It is usually considered problematic in ethics if someone believes that **the end justifies the means**. A person who believes that the end justifies the means believes that if the goal is good, it does not matter what path one takes to get to that goal. For example, World War II may have ended earlier than it would have because we dropped an atomic bomb on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One might argue that fewer people died by dropping the bomb than if we had not.

But in this case, did the “end” (the goal of ending the war) justify the “means” (destroying two cities and thereby killing men, women, and children who were simply going about their daily business and not actively fighting the United States). It is a matter of debate. Are those uninvolved in the fighting of a war “guilty” because they are associated with the enemy? Was it appropriate for the Allied forces in World War II to “carpet bomb” German cities not only to destroy factories, but to demoralize the Germans as a people, killing thousands of women and children who were not involved in the fighting?

When Kant said that people are ends in themselves, he implied that you must not harm or do wrong to a person as a means to achieve some other end. And he suggested that this principle basically defines his categorical imperative. But does it, really? For example, we might argue that Kant’s absolutism, because it does not allow for exceptions, actually makes “rules” more important than people. You might argue that in Kant’s ethic, his rule is an end in itself, and people are merely a means to that end.

Let us say that you lived in Holland during World War II and were hiding Jews in your apartment. Then let us say that some Nazi soldiers came to your door and asked if you were aware of any Jews hiding on your block. Kant’s categorical imperative would seem to say that, if it is wrong to lie, then it is always wrong to lie under any circumstances. Kant would seem to say that you cannot lie about the Jews being hidden.

Some believe that this is the case. However, it is difficult to see how following this maxim categorically makes people an end in themselves. If you tell the truth, “Yes, I know of Jews hiding on this block,” you will likely find that both you and any Jews hiding in your apartment are about

to suffer quite dramatically, perhaps even die. So Kant's ethic seems to make the maxim the end in itself rather than people.

In another attempt to clarify his categorical imperative, Kant said that it amounted to the **Golden Rule**⁸⁷: "Do to others what you would have them do to you."¹¹ Again, it is hard to see that this is anything like an accurate representation of Kant's ethic. If I were a Jew hiding from Nazis, I might be quite happy for you to lie to the Nazis at your door about my whereabouts, and I might do the same for you.

In the end, is it far more virtuous to consider the majority of ethical maxims as universally true, *but with possible exceptions*? Certainly the two great ethical commands are exceptionless absolutes: love God and love neighbor. It is difficult to imagine any situation where the right thing to do would be not to act in a manner consistent with love of God or love of neighbor. But the New Testament norm, as well as the norm in Christian history, seems to consider ethical norms as being universal and timeless, yes—but not as being exceptionless and thus not as being absolutes.

The topic of lying is a good case study. Most Christians would be comfortable with the idea that it is wrong to lie no matter when or where you have lived in history. However, we can question whether this ethical maxim is an *absolute*, that is, whether it is an imperative to which we should never under any circumstances make an exception. The Bible does not treat this ethic as exceptionless. You might remember the logical fallacy from chapter 3 called "circular reasoning." Circular reasoning is where you assume your conclusion in your argument. Some arguments that treat biblical teaching as exceptionless commit this fallacy.

Take the following argument: How do you know that it is always wrong to lie without exception? Because the Ten Commandments say, "You will not bear false witness."

We will leave aside the fact that this commandment was originally about perjury rather than lying in general.¹² Nevertheless, this answer does not address the issue. The question we are asking is whether these commandments were meant to be absolutes. We are asking about the scope of the command, not whether the command is a command. The commandment itself says nothing about this question, about whether there would be exceptional situations where God would want you to bear false witness.

We do find instances of lying in the Bible. Certainly we must be careful not to assume that a biblical narrative's description of an action of a biblical hero corresponds to a divine or scriptural endorsement of that action. Nevertheless, the book of Joshua seems to look favorably on the prostitute Rahab because she lied to protect the Israelite spies at Jericho (Josh. 6:25). In other words, in this particular case, Joshua seems to consider it not only allowed but commendable to lie. Old Testament stories like this one must be read in the light of all Scripture and not simply applied straightforwardly to today, but here we have an instance where the biblical text seems to consider it better to lie than not to.¹³

⁸⁷ Golden Rule: Do to others what you would have them do to you.

Our point in this chapter is not to commend lying—not at all! Almost all Christians would agree that truth telling is a universal value that applies in all times and all places (cf. Col. 3:9). We are suggesting that this ethic is a good candidate for a maxim that is universally valid *but not exceptionless*. Lying is universally wrong, but not an absolute in situations where a higher value conflicts with it, such as when a life is at stake. Most lies are self-serving, and the Bible gives no justification for that kind of lie.

3. When Context Matters

As we have argued, many use the word absolute in reference to values that we would more accurately call **universal rights and wrongs**⁸⁸ that have rare exceptions. Far more biblical commands operate on this level than as exceptionless absolutes, and many even address specific situations. The books of the Bible were not written to be philosophy textbooks but to address particular audiences with their particular concerns.

For example, Paul's letters are not in the form of legal documents, with his ethical charges written so that there are no exceptions. In 1 Corinthians 6, he says that it is a shame for Christians to take other Christians to a secular Roman court and that it would be better to lose out than to do so. But did he mean this as a timeless absolute, to where there would never be any situation in history where a Christian might appropriately take another Christian to court? We can at least wonder whether he intended his words to have that sort of scope.

Another example of an ethical position that is universal in scope, but not exceptionless, is the imperative that "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1). This value is universal, but it is not absolute. So we find Peter and John deliberately disobeying the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, saying, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge" (Acts 4:19).

These two passages are easy to fit together from a Christian perspective. It is universally a Christian principle to obey those in authority over you, unless that authority commands you to do something that contradicts a higher Christian value. So if the conflict is between obeying God and obeying the higher authority, you should obey God.

We find similar misconceptions on a popular level about what ethical or **moral relativism** is. For example, people commonly define relativism as not believing in *any* right or wrong. But that position is actually called **moral nihilism**⁸⁹. A relativist *does* believe in right and wrong. They simply believe that it is relative to either the person or culture.¹⁴

It is important to recognize that *everyone* is relativist on some issues, just as everyone makes exceptions on some issues (even Kant, no doubt). Christians are absolutist on the two love commands, and they have a universal ethic on many other issues. But we will surely find other issues on which each individual Christian must form his or her own convictions, his or her own sense of what God requires of the individual. Convictions are instances of relativism.

⁸⁸ Universal rights and wrongs: as we are defining them, ethical duties that are universal and timeless, but not exceptionless.

⁸⁹ Moral nihilism: a position that holds that "right and wrong" does not truly exist.

A “relative” in this context is a position that you affirm as definitely right or wrong *for you* but not necessarily for someone else. We can identify two levels. **Cultural relativism**⁹⁰ is the view that right or wrong is determined by the culture in which you are located. **Personal relativism**⁹¹ is the view that right or wrong is determined by you as an individual.

When Christians oppose relativism, they are usually opposing the idea that all right and wrong is a function of culture or the individual, even though a relativist position will be the correct one on some issues. The individuals with whom Socrates debated, the Sophists, were generally cultural relativists, and at least in one place the earlier Greek historian Herodotus (ca. 484–25 BC) points in this direction. Many cultural anthropologists today lean in this direction, because they are aware of the great diversity that exists among cultures.

Herodotus tells a story about the Persian king Darius asking a group of Greeks what he would have to pay them to get them to *eat* the bodies of their dead fathers.¹⁵ The Greeks said they would not do it for any amount of money. Then Darius asked a group from India called the Callatians what he would have to pay them to *burn* the dead bodies of their fathers. They were appalled and begged him not even to say such a thing. They of course *ate* the bodies of their dead fathers.

At the end of his tale Herodotus reaches the conclusion that “custom is king over all,” quoting a poet named Pindar. In other words, he was claiming that what you believe is right or wrong is mostly a matter of where you are from and what the customs of your location are. In fact, the word that is usually translated “law” in the New Testament also had the meaning of “custom” in the original Greek.

Although we may hear people talk about some universal sense of right and wrong that all people have built into them, the list of common ethical customs among the peoples of the world is not very long. Almost all cultures have customs about how to treat one’s children and parents, as well as about incest. It is generally considered wrong to murder an innocent person within one’s particular group or family.

But beyond this short list, we find immense ethical diversity. For example, it used to be the practice of Eskimo culture to let one’s elderly parents starve to death, because of the scarcity of food. The ancient Spartans and the Dobu tribe today encourage stealing among their own group to develop survival skills. Polygamy is not only acceptable in much of Africa today; it is even a sign of prosperity.

So they would not be lonely in the afterlife, wealthy Egyptian men used to have their wives and pets buried alive with their dead bodies. Similarly, it used to be the practice in India that a new widow was burned to death on the same funeral pyre as her husband, the practice of suttee. Previously in Japan, a wife accused, not necessarily guilty, of infidelity was expected to commit suicide to save her husband from the shame of the accusation.

Even in the Bible, we find instruction that most Christians would consider relative to the times and places of the Bible, but not applicable to us today. For example, we find the practice of levirate

⁹⁰ Cultural relativism: the idea that right and wrong is a function of the culture in which you are located.

⁹¹ Personal relativism: the idea that right and wrong is a function of one’s individual values and convictions.

marriage in the Old Testament (e.g., Deut. 25:5–6): If an older brother dies without a son, the younger brother is to marry the wife of his dead brother to raise up seed for him. Since polygamy was fully allowed at this time in Israel (e.g., Deut. 21:15–17), we should imagine the brother adding her as an additional wife rather than taking her on as his first wife.

In the New Testament, it seems that Paul is telling the women of the Corinthian congregation to wear a hair veil in public worship when they are praying or prophesying (1 Cor. 11:5). Part of the reason is perhaps so that they show proper respect for their husbands in the presence of other males, including putative “males” such as angels (11:10) and God “himself” (11:13).¹⁶ Some groups do follow practices today such as women wearing prayer bonnets or putting their (uncut) hair up in a bun. But it is questionable whether these practices function the same way that veiling did at Corinth. In short, most Christian women by their very practices infer that 1 Corinthians 11 is a teaching relative to ancient Mediterranean culture.

Interestingly, Paul in the New Testament seems to have a relativist approach to one of the Ten Commandments: to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Christians over the centuries have reconceptualized the Sabbath law in terms of Sunday and have generalized it to mean setting aside a day of worship to God. But the original meaning of this commandment focused on the Israelites not working on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.¹⁷ Paul’s writings, however, do not consider this Sabbath legislation binding on non-Jewish Christians (Rom. 14:5; Col. 2:16). If Paul considered it still binding on Jews, but not on non-Jews, then he by definition considered obedience to the fourth commandment relative to one’s ethnicity.

Are there some issues on which Christians are *appropriately* relativist today? It would seem likely. For example, Arab Christian women in the Middle East should probably cover more of their bodies in their cultural context than North American women would need to in order to be modest.¹⁸ Similarly it seems likely that North American Christian women should cover more of their bodies than Christian women from parts of New Guinea or Africa. Few Western missionaries return from these parts of the world without reaching these sorts of conclusions.

Many Christians also have “personal convictions” that they do not consider binding on other Christians. In other words, they believe that something is right or wrong for them as a Christian individual but not necessarily for other Christians. For example, many Christians believe that it would be wrong for them to drink any form of alcohol. At the same time, many of these same believers would affirm that there are other Christians who drink moderately and are no less spiritual for doing so.

These are instances of personal relativism, where a person considers something right or wrong on an individual basis. When we have a proper understanding of what absolutism and relativism really are, we can have ethical debates that are much more productive. Some Christian ethical discussion in the past has taken place with the assumption that if a person does not take an absolutist position on an issue or if a person takes a relativist position on an issue, that person is automatically right or wrong respectively.

But Christian ethics is not as simple as absolutism versus relativism. Christians will be absolutists on some principles. Christians will be relativists on other issues. On many principles Christians

will see a universal value that can have exceptional situations. One cannot simply dismiss a perspective by labeling it as relativist, and one cannot prove a perspective as Christian simply by labeling it as absolutist.

Labeling a position really says nothing about whether it is right or wrong. This way of thinking—“death by labeling”—exemplifies a number of the logical fallacies from chapter 3. For example, it can be a fallacy of diversion, where we change the subject from the real issue to an associated issue. It can be an example of the fallacy of composition, where because we find one example of “bad” relativism, we illogically generalize and say that all instances of relativism are bad. In the end, reaching sound ethical conclusions requires informed, intelligent arguments in which we weigh core principles against each other and consider the consequences of different courses of action.

Weighing ethical values requires us to get a sense of priorities, to establish a kind of hierarchy of values. For example, for the Christian, loving God and loving neighbor stand at the top of any such list as true absolutes. But below those absolutes are many universal values we hold that have exceptions: showing mercy, helping our family, telling the truth, submitting to those in authority, doing our best, and so forth. In practice, we must weigh values against values, also taking into consideration the potential consequences of an action.

4. Consequences: Utilitarianism and the Greater Good

The previous two sections looked at duty-based approaches to ethics. These are approaches that view ethics primarily through the lens of do’s and don’ts. We should do certain things, and we should not do other things. Where do those duties come from? For Christians, the most important ones come from divine revelation; God has revealed certain things as right and certain things as wrong. For others, those duties might exist for some other reason. Whatever their origin, a duty approach to ethics is an act-based ethic that formulates the right course of action in the interplay between potentially competing moral values.

However, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, there are other approaches to ethics. For example, if duty-based ethics focuses on our obligations and moral duties, another approach to ethics focuses on the *consequences* of various courses of actions. In reality, we take a mixture of these factors into account when trying to decide what to do.

At the beginning of the chapter, we mentioned two approaches to making ethical decisions based primarily on the potential consequences of those decisions. Utilitarianism asks what course of action is most likely to bring about the greatest pleasure or good for the greatest number. Egoism asks what course of action is most likely to bring about the greatest pleasure or good for me.

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was the father of modern utilitarianism. Certainly he was not the first utilitarian. For example, in the 400s BC, Mo Tzu in China argued that we should live in a way that advances the happiness of others, challenging the more passive virtue of Confucianism and Taoism. Nevertheless, in more recent times, especially in the Western world, we look to Bentham as the strongest and most influential proponent of utilitarianism as an ethical philosophy.

The 1700s were a time of social transition in Europe, culminating in the American and French revolutions. It was also the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, where those who used to work the land steadily migrated to cities to work in factories. We would consider the living and working conditions of such workers, including the use of child labor, abhorrent today. For example, children worked in coal mines, where their smaller size enabled them to get into smaller spaces. Children as young as four years old were compelled to work from before dawn to after dusk for a small fraction of normal wage, and they often did not reach adulthood.

Bentham's primary concern was to find a "scientific" way of formulating law and social policy. He devised a utilitarian theory based on what might bring the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people. For him, pain and pleasure was what ethics was all about. He and others like him were frustrated with what they saw as the artificial values of British society.

Bentham saw superstition and ignorance as the primary obstacles to putting a more rational system of law into place. For example, he was instrumental in founding the University of London, which was fully secular and admitted academically qualified students whether or not they were members of the Church of England. Upon his death, as part of his fight against what he saw as superstition, he bequeathed his estate to the university on the condition that his dead body be dressed in his clothes and be present for all university board meetings. After all, why be afraid of death when, in his opinion, there was no hell to fear? One can still see his body on display there today.

Bentham was quite calculating in the system he created. First, all that mattered was pleasure and pain. He invented the "hedon" as a single unit of pleasure. His goal was thus to quantify pleasure and pain, to turn experiences of pain and pleasure into numbers so that you could actually weigh one course of action against another. If you have a choice between two courses of action or two laws and have good reason to think that one course of action will bring about a greater total amount of pleasure in society than another, that is the course of action you should take.

In the calculation he insisted that all pleasures must count exactly the same. In fact, his system was later mocked as "pig philosophy," with the idea that the pleasure of a happy pig wallowing in the mud might count the same as the pleasure of helping someone in need or thinking an insightful thought. "Better the pig satisfied than Socrates dissatisfied," his position was caricatured.

For Bentham, therefore, creating the laws of the land and making political decisions was a matter of adding up the total pleasure a decision would make for the populace, subtracting the total pain it would bring, and then comparing the result of the calculation with the other potential decisions. The pleasure and pain of every individual in the populace counted the same, from child to woman to lord to king. He lived long enough to see the Reform Act of 1832 passed in England, which significantly extended the right to vote in England, as well as the parliamentary representation of the large cities of the Industrial Revolution.

At the same time, we can raise a number of questions about Bentham's system in any pure form. For example, what if the total amount of pleasure and happiness of a country would increase if you were to kill off an entire segment of the population? Chances are that the tribe or group you would kill is already unhappy, right? So could not Bentham's "utilitarian calculus" be used to justify

genocide? What if a new show called *Torture of the Week* brought immense happiness to a viewing audience, despite the immense displeasure of the tortured individuals?

It is also very difficult to know all the consequences of a future decision. A particular solution may generate its own problems and unintended consequences. For example, those who implemented “communism” in Russia and Eastern Europe in the early 1900s no doubt thought that a system where the state controlled how work and resources were distributed would create a happier society than one where people competed with one another for goods and services. But their historical experiment seems to have produced incredibly unhappy societies that started to turn around only after a more capitalistic system was reintroduced, based on competition.

Just after Bentham, **John Stuart Mill** (1806–1873) offered some critique and modification to the utilitarian system of Bentham, as well as to Adam Smith (1723–1790), the founder of capitalism. Mill was the son of a close friend of Bentham’s, James Mill; together they had started a political group they called the Philosophical Radicals. From John’s birth, James raised his son to carry on the torch of utilitarianism into the next generation. John could not associate with any children other than his own brothers and sisters. He started learning Greek at the age of three. He started Latin at eight. Throughout his teens he conversed and socialized with the leading economic minds of his day.

This first phase of John’s life culminated in a nervous breakdown at the age of twenty. When he emerged from this crisis, he had become his own man and could no longer accept Bentham’s utilitarianism without some modification. For example, Mill rejected the notion that all types of pleasures should count the same when one is trying to determine what course of action will have the greatest benefit. It is better to be an unhappy Socrates than a happy pig, Mill argued, meaning that some forms of happiness should count more than others.

Accordingly, Mill modified the greatest-happiness principle of Bentham. For Bentham, the principle strictly had to do with pleasure, and all pleasure counted the same. But for Mill, happiness is something more sophisticated than Bentham’s idea of pleasure. For example, Mill disagreed that the pleasure of playing the game of push-pin counted the same as the pleasure of reading poetry.²¹ To Mill, those who had experienced the pleasures of art and music usually recognized that these were more significant than more simple pleasures like playing a child’s game. He even supported the idea that university graduates should have a greater vote, because they usually had a better idea of what was in the best interest of society as a whole than those without such an education.

As questionable as this idea sounds to us today, Mill’s goal was to open the doors for any person—rich or poor, man or woman—to get an education. He was not in any way trying to perpetuate the class system of earlier days. Although he disagreed with Bentham’s sense that all pleasures counted the same, he was playing out Bentham’s sense that lack of education stood in the way of the greater good for society as a whole. The happiness of every individual counted the same, but he did not believe that every individual was equally informed about what was in his or her own best interest.

Utilitarianism has deeply impacted the modern world and in many respects seems like common sense to us today. We might assume that elected leaders and representatives in government should make decisions based on what will result in the greatest good for the greatest number, with everyone counting alike. But we also know that, in practice, politicians, political parties, states, regions, counties, and cities make decisions based on what is in their own best interest rather than in the best interest of others. Accordingly, systems of government usually try to balance out the competing interests within a society, as we will begin to see in the next section.

Also in the mix of modern governance are certain ideas concerning “ethical duties” such as those we have already discussed in this chapter. Many of them are embodied in our laws and constitutions. The Bill of Rights sets down certain ethical principles that provide boundaries that utilitarian considerations cannot cross. For example, no matter how much pleasure we might receive from grabbing and punishing someone we think committed a crime, the law of the land demands that we consider all individuals innocent until proven guilty. We are obligated to give suspects a fair trial, and the punishment cannot be cruel and unusual.

5. Is Selfishness a Virtue? Consequences and Egoism

Is selfishness a virtue? One hopes the immediate response of a Christian to this question is “no, of course not.” Did not Jesus and Paul say that the law was captured in the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; Rom. 13:9)? Did not Paul tell the Philippians to “do nothing from selfish ambition” (2:3)? How could we entertain such a thought for even a moment?

Of course, as we try to live out this idea of loving our neighbor as we would love ourselves, we might encounter some complications. Most of the world does not live by this ethic. The more common manifestation of human nature tries to get as much as it can for itself, without regard for others. Indeed, we unfortunately would find many who call themselves Christians who have little impulse to give to others. The much more common drive is to get as much as you can. If we do not take our own interests into consideration at all, others are likely to reduce us to nothing.

Further, we find some Christians who do not “love” themselves at all. To be sure, Jesus was not addressing a “low self-concept” when he made the command to love your neighbor “as yourself.” The idea of “low self-esteem” is a fairly recent and Western psychological notion. But he probably was assuming you would want to be treated nicely. We do find many people who do not “feel” as if God loves them or that anyone could truly love them. As Christians, we believe God would have such people give higher value to themselves and their own interests!

It is only in this spirit that we as Christians can consider there to be any value to the ethical approach known as egoism, an approach that makes decisions based on what will bring about the greatest benefit to me as an individual. Like utilitarianism, it is an act-based ethic that focuses on the *consequences* of an action, rather than on ethical duties or principles. Its best-known proponent was **Ayn Rand** (1905–1982), whose book *The Virtue of Selfishness* has provided us with the title of this section.²²

Rand supported an ethical approach sometimes called *universal ethical egoism*. This is the idea that everyone should always do what is in his or her best interest. For example, Rand considered

altruism, giving to others when it brings you no clear advantage, to be immoral. Having immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1926, Rand was all-too familiar with the principles of communism⁹², and she thoroughly rejected them, moving to the opposite “libertarian” extreme. In true communism, people work for the greater good rather than for their individual benefit.

Rand’s egoism is thus based on the fundamental principle of **capitalism**⁹³: if everyone acts in his or her own self-interest, a system will evolve that maximizes the personal benefit to all individuals. Those with resources will get as much as they can from those who want them. At the same time, those who need resources will not pay any more than they must. If everyone acts in his or her own best interests, so the theory goes, the various self-interests will cancel each other out, and an optimal situation will develop for everyone.

As far as economic systems go, history seems in general to have vindicated the capitalistic system over the attempts at communism in the twentieth century in Russia and Eastern Europe. In reality, those experiments in communism were never even able to become fully communistic, because their governments had to orchestrate the system (i.e., they were socialist rather than truly communist). Human nature being what it is, most people simply are not wired to work for the good of others. In our default state, we are much more motivated when we are working in our own best interests than when we will not see any personal benefit from what we are doing.

However, it is equally clear that the idea that we should do only what is in our own self-interest is unchristian to its core. The fundamental Christian ethic is love, which by definition involves giving to others with no promise of personal benefit. Universal ethical egoism may be a good starting point for an economic system, not because it is God’s ideal, but because default human nature is not what it is supposed to be. It is “fallen,” corrupted, enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17; 7:5).

Christians thus find themselves in an awkward position. We as individual believers must love our neighbors and enemies, which means we must reject the values of ethical egoism. Acts 2:44–46 gives its ideal picture of Christian community, where “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” Yet we live in a world where few are motivated if they are not going to see any personal benefit to what they do, and most will take anything they can get from us if we will give it.

We thus seem forced to look out for our own interests to survive while valuing more the chance to give away as much as we can. We may make some concessions to egoism when it comes to certain economic systems, but it can never be our individual ethic. That is, we may make some concessions to *universal* ethical egoism, but we cannot be individual ethical egoists who treat the world as if

⁹² Communism: in theory, “from each according to his ability; to each according to his need,” a system in which everything is held in common, where everyone contributes as much as he or she can to society and takes only what he or she needs.

⁹³ Capitalism: an economic system by which individuals compete for resources; those with resources sell them for as much as they can, while those acquiring them pay as little as they must.

everything in it should be in our individual best interest. As Christians, our bias is supposed to be oriented around the interests of others more than around ourselves.

6. Virtue and a Happy Life

Because they are act-based ethics, all the approaches we have discussed so far in the chapter have focused on doing. For example, duty-based ethics focuses on things we must or must not do because they are forbidden or required. Utilitarianism and egoist ethics focus on making choices based on the potential consequences of our actions.

By contrast, virtue-based ethical approaches focus on being and what we should be. In other words, the focus is on our character and our motives. On the one hand, we should not think that virtue-oriented ethics are completely unrelated to act-based ethics. Surely a person demonstrates character by the way he or she acts. But a duty-based ethic is *oriented* around laws, around external do's and don'ts, while a virtue-based ethic looks more for what is “inside” a person, leading that person to act in certain ways.

Similarly, like utilitarianism, virtuous motives often involve certain goals, not least the greater good. So good consequences can also be an element of virtue-based ethics. Utilitarianism focuses almost *entirely* on consequences. It is a “consequential” or “teleological” kind of ethic. By contrast, a person of virtue might act in a certain way regardless of the consequences, perhaps in the name of honor itself.

Ethics in the ancient world generally operated on the assumption that if a person was virtuous, he or she would be happy. By happy, they did not mean flippantly happy, but satisfied, at peace, fulfilled. They called it **eudaimonia** (happiness), the “good life,” “the art of living well.” To be sure, ancient philosophers disagreed on some aspects of happiness and virtue. For example, some suggested you could not be fully happy unless you lived in a just society (Plato, Aristotle). Others believed you could be happy in any situation (Stoics).

As we've previously discussed, for Plato, a person was made up of three basic parts: a head, a chest, and an abdomen. Each of these three corresponded to a virtue. The virtue of the head was wisdom. The virtue of the chest, the location of the heart, was courage. Then the virtue of the abdomen, the location of the bowels, was self-control. The virtue of all three working in proper relationship to one another was justice or righteousness.

These four—wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice—were known as the **four cardinal virtues**⁹⁴ in the ancient world. For Plato, you could be truly happy only if you had these virtues in proper relationship to one another. People with *eudaimonia* would thus have the wisdom to know the right thing to do in each situation. They would have the courage to do what they knew they should do, regardless of the obstacles that stood in the way. They would keep passions in control

⁹⁴ The Four Cardinal Virtues Wisdom: knowing the right thing to do. Courage: being willing to do the right thing, despite obstacles. Self-control: controlling passions that would lead to doing the wrong thing. Justice: doing the right thing at the right time.

that might lead them astray and thus would act with justice in the world, doing the right thing at the right time.

Aristotle basically invented the word *ethics* in his work called the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Ethics for him was about developing a virtuous character that could lead to *eudaimonia*, true happiness. For him, the path to happiness begins with doing the right thing, with action. First, good teachers train you to do the right things. If we continue to do the right things, those actions will become habits. So becoming virtuous is about establishing good habits in how we live. Psychologists today tell us that he was actually on to something. As the saying goes, “motion brings emotion.”

This is a great insight. Perhaps we do not feel like forgiving someone but we know we need to. Perhaps we have stopped feeling love for a spouse, but we want to rekindle our marriage. If we play out the very actions of forgiveness and love, we may experience those feelings—if those patterns of behavior become a habit. There are no guarantees, but it often works.²⁵

So Aristotle believed that doing the right thing could lead to the habits of virtue. The habits of moral virtue, then, could lead to truly virtuous character, in which you did virtuous things by choice. Character for Aristotle meant that we consciously choose to do the right thing. Then character in turn leads to *eudaimonia*, happiness.

Happiness for Aristotle was the *summum bonum*, the highest good. All the other things you might desire, he claimed, you desire because you instinctively sense they will lead to your happiness. You pursue pleasure for this reason, because you believe it will make you happy. Aristotle also thought happiness comes from us living together in good communities as good citizens. He believed that humans are “political animals,” so we cannot be happy outside of living together in just societies. However, in the end he believed the greatest path to happiness was the contemplation of truth.

Another key idea that Aristotle espoused was the **Golden Mean**: “moderation in all things.” Unlike the Stoics, Aristotle did not believe emotions were bad or needed to be eliminated. Rather, our emotions and passions should be held in moderation. This insight is also very helpful advice for living. We humans tend to go to extremes. Aristotle suggests that the ideal is usually somewhere in the middle.

In chapter 12 we will see neither Plato nor Aristotle believed people could be fully happy unless they lived in a just society. For Plato, a government should mirror a properly ordered body. It should be ruled by philosophers directing courageous soldiers and a worker populace. For Aristotle, humanity is a “political animal,” built to live together in cities. A person could be happy in several different forms of state if its leadership was benevolent.

In contrast to Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics believed a person could be happy under any circumstances. The key was to eliminate all your emotions and passions. They called this state of mind *apatheia*, which was not “apathy” in the modern sense but being “passionless.” They believed that you should “love your fate” because the world was under the direction of a logical mind, the Logos.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, if the world is directed by Reason itself, by the Word, the Logos, then each one of us has inside a little seed of Logos, the “implanted word” (cf. James 1:21). The Stoics believed we have freedom to fight against the reason inside of us. But it is foolish to do so. We need to submit to the reason inside of us and accept the order of the world, to accept the direction of the divine Mind that orders everything. The Stoics thought contentment came through a process they called *oikeiosis*, coming to view your circumstances as your “home,” being content with the way things are.

Recent times have seen a shift in many circles back toward a more virtue-based approach to ethics. Alistair MacIntyre, in a landmark book called *After Virtue*, argued that the Western world has lost its ethical way. “We have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.”²⁶ For MacIntyre modern morality is a collection of incoherent, fragmented pieces that have managed to survive the virtue-oriented tradition of Aristotle.²⁷ Whether you agree with MacIntyre or not, he highlights key questions: Are good and evil real? Are virtues something real and “intrinsic” to life, built in to reality, if you would? Or are they simply a matter of human feeling or cultural perception?

Earlier in the chapter, we mentioned David Hume’s sense that an uncrossable gulf existed between “facts” and “values.” How do we get from “you killed someone” to “*you should not* have killed someone”? MacIntyre points out that a lot of ethical theory in the early twentieth century amounted to “you shouldn’t kill people because we don’t *feel* good about such things,” a theory of ethics called emotivism.

Christians believe that virtue and vice, good and evil, are bigger than simply how people feel. Some may say goodness and virtue derive from God’s nature. Others may say they come from God’s command.²⁸ Whatever the precise basis of significance, Christians believe that virtue and goodness are indeed significant. The final section of this chapter will try to flesh out even more what a Christian orientation toward virtue might look like.

1. Christian Virtue

Of the three main types of ethical theory—duty based, consequence based, and virtue based—we will not be surprised to find that the New Testament is primarily virtue oriented. We are not surprised because, as we have seen, ancient ethics in general was primarily virtue based. It is not that we do not find ethical duties in the New Testament—“Avoid sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3 NIV), for example. It is not that we do not find interest in consequences—“Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom. 14:19 NIV). It is only that the primary ethical interest is in virtues such as faith, hope, and love (e.g., 1 Cor. 13:13).

Accordingly New Testament ethics tends to focus more on a person’s character and motives than on his or her specific actions or the consequences of those actions. To be sure, we find enough commands and prohibitions in the Bible that some Christians do focus more on duties than character. For example, many Christians today focus heavily on exceptionless, ethical absolutes and despise any thought of ethical relativisms. By emphasizing such things, these forms of Christianity tend more toward a duty-based approach to ethics than a virtue-based one.

Another example of duty-oriented Christian thinking is when Christians process the death of Jesus primarily in legal terms. They think God is so bound by duty to punish wrongdoing that he himself could not possibly forgive any wrong against him unless someone from the guilty party pays him in full. Accordingly, Jesus must become human because a human must pay God back, and Jesus must suffer the full punishment of every single sin for which he atones.

Of course, the benefit is that we as individuals are forgiven our sins, so an underlying “duty-based” sense of God turns into a picture of God as very merciful and gracious. Because Jesus has paid the debt in full, believers are no longer judged at all on the basis of their actions. God’s judgment of us in his divine court is based solely on his consideration of Jesus. Nevertheless, the underlying thinking is still duty based. It is just that God assesses Jesus rather than us.

A more virtue-based approach might focus on God’s character as one of love, graciousness, and faithfulness.²⁹ It might invoke the Parable of the Prodigal Son as a better illustration of the character of God (Luke 15). In this story, there is no legal exchange or act of atonement. The father has the authority to forgive his son of his recklessness, not to mention the insult of asking for his inheritance before his father had even died. The father forgives because he loves the son and waives off justice—which of course greatly disturbs the older brother.

Indeed, although there is clearly duty language within the New Testament, the primary orientation of Jesus and Paul seems around a person’s heart and intentions. In Mark 7:18–23 Jesus says,

“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

This is a vice list, the opposite of a virtue list. Jesus is basically saying that virtue and vice flow out of a person’s character. To be clean or unclean is not so much a matter of external actions but a matter of what is inside a person.

Similarly, Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit being “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Gal. 5:22–23). This is a virtue list, and Paul says these things flow naturally from God’s Spirit being inside us. When Paul comes close to defining sin, he says that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). His sense of what sin is for a believer is thus not primarily a matter of violating a law but of a life that does not reflect the right character.

The New Testament does encapsulate the entirety of human duty into two commands, as we said earlier in the chapter: love God and love neighbor. These two duties indicate the appropriate motivations of a Christian’s character. The heart of a Christian should be one that is oriented around helping and not hurting all others in every way. In terms of God, the heart of a Christian should be one that does everything “for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Here many will try to sneak back in a more duty-oriented framework. Loving God, some might say, involves keeping this list of laws for their own sake. Perhaps so, but some strong cautions are in order. First, loving God never contradicts loving our neighbor or enemy. It is not—"I must love my neighbor unless he is a homosexual, for love of God requires me to hate homosexuals." The love of God does not work this way but reinforces the love of my neighbor and enemy. It hopes for the redemption of my enemy even if my enemy is seeking to harm me.

Love of God also contradicts an inordinate focus on myself. It requires me to shift from myself being the focus of all my actions to God and his desire for the greater good. I cannot excuse selfishness or actions done in private simply because they do not harm my neighbor or enemy. A heart oriented toward God is a heart that is not oriented around myself.

2. Conclusion

In this chapter we looked at various forms of act-based ethics, as well as virtue-based ethics. Virtue-based ethics looks at what a person should be in order to be a happy, satisfied human being. Act-based ethics are of two basic types. Duty-based ethics is focused on rights and wrongs, the actions a person should or should not do. Utilitarian and egoist ethics focus on the consequences of a person's actions, whether it be what brings about the greatest good for the greatest number or the greatest good for me, respectively.

However, in the end we suggested that a virtue-based, character-oriented approach to ethics fits most naturally with both Scripture and historic Christianity. The most fundamental absolutes of Christianity are a matter of the heart and of intention, namely, that we love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus and the New Testament tell us that if a person will love both neighbor and enemy, then that person will have met all the requirements of Scripture.

In that light, the clearest path to a fulfilled life is a life fully surrendered to God and a life in which we look out for the true benefit of others. It is not a life of jealousy or getting ahead by harming others. The "end" does not "justify the means" when our path to accomplish something brings harm to others or undermines our service to God. But in most other circumstances, the goal of truly loving God and others will often cause us to make exceptions to other rules. Love is the absolute. The way it plays out is relative to context and circumstance.