D I S C U S S I O N

On the Facts as We Know Them, Ethical Naturalism Is All There Is: A Reply to Matthew Flannagan

Richard Carrier

Abstract: In responding to Matthew Flannagan's rebuttal to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's argument that ethical naturalism is more plausible than William Lane Craig's Divine Command Theory of moral obligation (DCT), this author finds Flannagan incorrect on almost every point. Any defense of DCT is fallaciously circular and empirically untestable, whereas neither is the case for ethical naturalism. Accordingly, all four of Armstrong's objections stand against Flannagan's attempts to rebut them, and Flannagan's case is impotent against a properly-formed naturalist metaethic.

I have previously demonstrated in formal logic how and why moral facts follow necessarily from natural facts (and would do so whether or not a god existed).[1] There I also demonstrate that, all theory aside, in actual practice Christian theism cannot produce a coherently motivating account of moral obligations.[2] Any attempt to argue otherwise would have to respond to the facts and arguments set forth there. But here, Matthew Flannagan only responds to a single critique by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong of a single version of Divine Command Theory of moral obligation (DCT) defended by William Lane Craig.[3] So the reasons Flannagan is wrong actually go well beyond the issues he raises. But here I shall address only the latter. Nevertheless, it should be understood that all my responses are expanded and proved in my previous work, which already effectively refutes the thesis Flannagan attempts to defend.

1. Disconnect Between Theory and Fact

The first problem with any DCT is that we have no evidence that there even

---

Richard Carrier, Richmond, California, www.richardcarrier.info

is the requisite God, much less which God's commands are the commands of that God. There are hundreds of different ethical systems attributed to "God." This is so even within the umbrella of Christian theism; all the more so when we consider other theisms. Indeed, even within the Bible there is a vast plethora of not only contradictory moral advice, but many moral commandments that we now all deem fundamentally immoral, such as commandments to make and keep slaves (Leviticus 25:44–46) or force women into marriage (Deuteronomy 21:10–12, 22:28–29; Numbers 31:15–18), or the commandments to execute apostates and blasphemers (Deuteronomy 12:1–13:16, Leviticus 24:11–16), as well as rape victims (Deuteronomy 22:23–30) and gay men (Leviticus 20:13; lesbians are okay).[4] History demonstrates that morals change over time, and without special revelations from any god. That it is moral to let women vote and hold office (against the advice of the Bible: 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, 1 Timothy 2:11–15), or that it is immoral to keep slaves, are, for example, not morals we derive from the Bible, or any divine communication at all.

DCT is therefore unlivable, even if it were correct. It puts moral truth inside an inaccessible black box, the mind of one particular God, whom we cannot identify or communicate with in any globally or historically reliable or consistent way. We therefore cannot know what is moral, even if DCT were true. The supernaturalist is stuck in the exact same position as the ethical naturalist: attempting to ascertain from observable facts what the best way is to live. Should women be allowed to vote and hold office? Is slavery immoral? We cannot answer these questions with DCT. We can only answer them by modeling inside our imaginations our own ideal moral agent (the "God" of our own mental construction), applying that model to the discoverable facts of the world, and then asking it what's right. But we cannot demonstrate that the "God" (or "ideal agent") we have thus modeled in our mind or intuition is the "one true" God or not, except by appeal to natural facts that require no actual God to exist. Otherwise, we cannot know the God informing the intuition of Islamic suicide bombers is the *incorrect* God. It could just as well be the other way around.[5] Likewise, maybe the God who commanded slavery and the execution of apostates, blasphemers, homosexuals, and rape victims was the real God, and the God we imagine in our heads now (who, we're sure for some unspecifiable reason, abhors these things) is one we just made up.

DCT therefore cannot be the basis for any moral system, even if the God it imagines exists and has opinions in the matter of morality. That DCT-advocates just have to end up acting like ethical naturalists does not bode well for any contention that ethical naturalism is less plausible than supernaturalism. Indeed, presumably the God of any justifiable DCT would so order the facts of the world that ethical naturalism (when soundly and informedly pursued) would always successfully discern God's opinions in the matter of morality. After all, surely he would not so order the world as to *deceive* us in this matter (that would contradict the DCT requirement that God be "loving and just"). Yet those facts of the world would be the same

whether God made them or not. Thus it is unclear how DCT gets us any further in knowing the truth than ethical naturalism does already.

2. FALLACY OF CIRCULAR ARGUMENT

But DCT is much worse off than even that. At the very heart of what I shall call the Flannagan thesis is a fundamentally circular argument. The Flannagan thesis imagines that, in effect, if God is a "necessarily existent, all-powerful, all-knowing, loving and just, immaterial person who created and providentially orders the universe," then what he concludes is morally right would indeed be morally right.[6] That may be sound, but it's circular, because it presumes (without argument) that "loving and just" decisions are morally right.

Some of the other attributes claimed of God are apposite, because, of course, to judge rightly one must be informed (hence the advantage of being all-knowing) and if God arranged the facts of the universe, then he would of course know the best way for us to navigate them to our best ends. But his being all-powerful, necessarily-existent, and immaterial are not required for his moral advice to be correct. In fact, one must presume an additional attribute (something like "all-wise") so as to be certain God will take into account the fact that *we* are not all-powerful, or all-knowing, etc., and therefore what would be sound moral decisions for him would not be so for us. Generally someone who has no experience with being powerless and vulnerable and in the dark about most facts is going to be the least able to give us sound moral advice. But if we imagine God can overcome that limitation and "put Himself in our shoes" when deciding what moral advice to give us, then we can get past that problem.

But the first problem remains: why are "loving and just" decisions moral? DCT cannot answer this question. It therefore fails to ground moral truth. To successfully argue that "loving and just" decisions are moral requires (i) appealing to the consequences of "loving and just" decisions and the consequences of "unloving or unjust" decisions, and then (ii) appealing to which of those consequences the *moral agent* prefers. But DCT can accomplish neither, except in exactly the same way ethical naturalism does. Therefore, DCT reduces to ethical naturalism in practical fact. It therefore cannot be an improvement on it.

Taking the second task first: if an agent honestly would prefer all the consequences of "unloving or unjust" decisions (even to the point of preferring an eternal burning in hell, or enduring the eternal disappointment or absence of God, or feeling hollow and purposeless and unloved and unliked—whatever the consequences are purported to be), then there is no meaningful sense in which "loving and just" decisions are, for them, the moral thing to do. Because the moral is that which one ought to do above all else. By definition no imperatives can supersede moral imperatives, other than other moral imperatives. That is all that makes an imperative "moral," as opposed to just any other kind of imperative. But if, for exam-

ple, a moral agent prefers to burn eternally in hell (or whatever the consequences), then whatever will ensure *that* is what is moral—for them. So we have to assume all human beings share the same ultimate desires for their existence. For example, that we all want to avoid hell (or avoid disappointing God, or whatever it is that is supposed to motivate us). But that is an empirical claim to fact, one that can be scientifically verified or disconfirmed. It is therefore a fact more at home in ethical naturalism than supernaturalism. We don't need to know whether DCT is true in order to ask and find out what people most want from life when rational and fully informed. The ethical naturalist is already doing that.

Which brings us to the first task: ascertaining what all the actual consequences are (of "loving and just" decisions, and of "unloving or unjust" decisions). Here the DCT advocate can claim there are facts to consider that are supernatural, for example the existence of a God to disappoint, or the existence of hell (or any eternal afterlife at all). This at least allows DCT to *conceptually* differ from ethical naturalism. But in practice this theory does not work. Because we have failed to empirically observe any of these requisite facts. We do not know if an afterlife exists, or who gets to live there, or for how long, or whether it's nice or awful, or whether certain behaviors in this life make any difference to our living conditions in the next. We do not know which God exists and therefore we do not know what any actual God there may be wants or feels or thinks, or what disappoints or enrages Him or what He will reward or punish.

No consistent empirical observations have established any of these things (again, all we have is rampant and chaotic and unresolvable disagreement, across both time and space). Therefore we have no reliable data to work from. The only reliably consistent data we are able to get ahold of is all *natural* data. Thus, it would seem, even if God exists, he has so arranged the world that only ethical naturalism can work. The DCT advocate should therefore become an ethical naturalist and be done with it. For it is only by appeal to observable natural facts that we can actually demonstrate that "loving and just" decisions are best for us and therefore supersede all other imperatives and are therefore moral. And no God is then needed to derive moral obligations therefrom.

3. FLANNAGAN'S DEFENSIVE CASE AGAINST ARMSTRONG

Thus already we can conclude Flannagan's project is doomed. We could honestly conclude here and not bother critiquing his case further, since everything he argues is moot in light of the above facts. But nevertheless, his remaining errors should be catalogued and corrected. Flannagan's case consists of two parts: one being a rebuttal to Armstrong's case against DCT (Flannagan's defensive case), and one being a rebuttal to Armstrong's case for ethical naturalism (Flannagan's offensive case). I shall treat each in turn.

Flannagan summarizes Armstrong's "four objections" to DCT as follows:

Philo

> First, that Craig's DCT makes morality arbitrary. Second, that Craig's DCT
> entails the possible permissibility of rape. Third, Craig's DCT makes moral-
> ity infantile, and fourth that Craig's DCT entails moral skepticism.
> Armstrong contends these arguments refute not just Craig but any theistic
> account of ethics.[7]

I'll examine each in turn.

Flannagan's attempt to deny that DCT-based morality is arbitrary simply fails to address the point raised, which is that either there is a moral ground for the commands God makes or there is not, and if there is, it will remain that ground without DCT, therefore DCT is not needed; whereas if there is not, then God's commands have no moral ground.[8] For example, DCT cannot answer the question "Why is God's command to execute apostates moral?" It therefore fails Moore's "open question" in the grounding of moral facts.[9] Since it is logically possible for God to be evil or indifferent or morally alien to human values, it cannot be arbitrarily assumed that what God says is in fact best for us. That he once supposedly commanded us to execute apostates and rape victims only verifies the point. How do we tell a moral divine commandment from an immoral one? How is it that we now know the divine command to execute apostates is immoral? Not by using DCT.

Thus, when Flannagan assumes that 'if' God has motivational reasons such as concern for the welfare of others for issuing the commands he does, 'then' God's commands are not arbitrary, he is ignoring what Armstrong means by "arbitrary." Why are commands resulting from a concern for the welfare of others "moral" commands? Why should we heed them? Really, only if we ourselves care about the welfare of others. Which is an appeal to a fact independent of God. Which will be sufficiently motivating for us *without* a god. Therefore DCT cannot ground morality, except in the arbitrary fact of what some god likes. Which is not by itself demonstrably moral.

The irony is that Flannagan almost gets this point in his next rebuttal, yet it eludes him even there. In challenging Armstrong's claim that DCT can justify rape, Flannagan responds that this is true "only if it's possible for an all knowing, loving and just person to command rape," which Flannagan concludes "is unlikely" and even were it to occur, and if we were adequately informed, we would agree rape in that unusual case would be loving and just.[10] I concur with Flannagan. But this rebuttal assumes rape is immoral for reasons *other* than that God commands it. Flannagan is therefore rebutting not Armstrong here, but his own DCT. For Flannagan's rebuttal to make sense, it must be the case that all loving and just decisions are moral (to the extent that they are also wise and informed). But if that's the case, it's the case whether God exists or not. Therefore, this is not DCT. And Armstrong, of course, was rebutting DCT, not the virtue ethics Flannagan is here retreating to.

We would still have to answer the question "Why are all loving and just decisions moral?" But Flannagan does not explain how DCT does that, which brings us back to Armstrong's first objection. Of course, in any event, if DCT is only true for a loving and just God, then if God were shown *not* to

be loving and just, DCT cannot justify morality—by Flannagan's own reasoning. But even if we could somehow prove that a God exists *and* that that God was loving and just *and* that God commanded us to do something (three propositions, I already noted, that there is no reliable evidence for), how would we know that obeying such a command was *moral*? We would have to *first* verify the conclusion that all loving and just decisions are moral (to the extent that they are also wise and informed), and then ascertain whether the action God is commanding us to do (rape, in this hypothetical case) is loving and just (and also wise and informed). But the latter is what ethical naturalists already do (determine if an action is in fact in accord with some goal or virtue), while the former is something DCT cannot do.

By retreating from commands to virtues, Flannagan simply moves the goal posts. Why does "being loving and just" make God's commands moral? It cannot be because God commands it. That would be circular, and would lead to the very problem of Armstrong's second objection: if God can command that, he can command the opposite just as easily (and declare that being unloving and unjust is moral). Likewise if we rested on the happenstance of what character God just happened to randomly have (as if being cruel and unjust would become moral as soon as we discovered God was cruel and unjust). One therefore needs some *independent* reason to reject an unjust and unloving God's commands, a reason other than "what God commands is moral." In other words, a reason *other* than DCT. That is why DCT is incapable of grounding morality.

Regarding Armstrong's third objection, that DCT infantilizes moral agents, Flannagan predictably insists that on DCT "fear of punishment does not make the action wrong," but then he is left with no explanation of what *does* make an action wrong—what, that is, that is not *already* true on ethical naturalism.[11] Such a defense is also disingenuous, since I am not aware of any DCT advocate who is actually a universalist (i.e. who believes everyone will enjoy eternal paradise), and when you remove all the punishments from the theology of any DCT advocate, it becomes very difficult to comprehend why anyone should care about the commandments of their God. Thus, what Flannagan *claims*, and what DCT advocates actually *think*, are very divergent in my experience. Every time a DCT advocate has ever threatened or warned anyone of hell (or even just the loss of heaven) in reference to their behavior, they expose what they *really* think the ground of morality is: the fear of consequences.

I have demonstrated elsewhere that the ground for morality must be motivational (the consequences of moral behavior must actually be what the moral agent would most want, if he or she knew better).[12] Armstrong might agree. But in any event, his point about infantilization is not the point Flannagan is responding to. Flannagan thinks he means something to do with children obeying parents (and therefore we can build a comparable analogy to adults obeying God that does not infantilize). But that's not the point. Adult moral reasoning is based on actually *caring* about the people affected by our actions and thus *wanting* to do good, as opposed to actually

Philo

not wanting to do good but begrudgingly doing it anyway to avoid punishment (or get paid). Though these still both reduce to a reward-punishment system, the former is far more mature—and far more secure (you will trust, and like, the former person far more than the latter, and rightly so).

DCT *in practice* (regardless of what claims are made of it in theory) interferes with the development of this mature form of moral reasoning, by not basing moral motivation on the compassion of the agent (and their own reasoning and observation), but on the commands of a third party (God) who supposedly knows better. DCT thus abrogates moral reasoning, and all too often becomes an excuse not to engage in it (we just do what God commands; we don't think about whether that's actually good or right). It also replaces an agent's own compassion with the hypothetical compassion of a hypothetical being constructed in the imaginations of certain supposed religious authorities. Though one can *theoretically* avoid these defective forms of moral reasoning on DCT, in practice DCT is not very successful at it. That Christianity has endorsed slavery and war and mass torture and murder as moral only verifies the point. When it comes to actual adult decision-making, ethical naturalism works far more consistently, because it *requires* the agent to engage their *own* moral reasoning and to motivate their behavior on their *own* compassion for others (and not someone else's). A child will do what God says. But an adult asks why what God says is the right thing to do. And DCT cannot answer that question.

Armstrong's fourth objection is similar to the one I opened with (that DCT makes morality unknowable), although phrased differently enough that Flannagan was able to make a straw man out of it. But even that straw man Flannagan fails to knock down. Flannagan claims we can discover that x is moral by some means other than ascertaining what God has commanded, and that it can still be the case that x is moral because God commands it. But this is not true, or at least not true in any relevant sense. If we can verify that x is moral by virtue of some property p, then all we need in order to ground the morality of x is p. We then have no need of God commanding it. DCT is therefore false—even if God commands x. Thus, Flannagan's rebuttal only ends up disconfirming DCT. We call that an "own goal."

Of course, Armstrong's actual point was that DCT can't work because we can't ascertain p. He charitably assumed a DCT advocate would not shoot his own foot, like Flannagan did, by conceding that x can be justified by p without p being a command from God. Because DCT is only true if p is a command from God. Otherwise, morality is not grounded in God's commands, but in something else, whatever p is.[13] And the problem with DCT requiring p to be a command of God is that we then cannot discover what p is. We therefore cannot discover what is moral. The ethical naturalist is obviously in a far better position here, as they base morality on observable, verifiable facts. DCT does not.

If we had consistent access to God's commands (and could reliably verify that he was, for example, "loving and just" and not, say, unloving and unjust), then DCT *might* be able to compete with ethical naturalism. But

Philo

look around. That's plainly not the world we live in. Ethical naturalism is all we have left. Flannagan's analogy of laymen identifying water without recourse to molecular instruments only verifies the point: God's commandments are more like faeries than water. Water is consistently, reliably identifiable across all cultures and all historical time. The will of God has never been. Not even remotely. Flannagan's rebuttal to Armstrong thus again makes Armstrong's point for him. A rebuttal that proves your opponent's point is, well, not really a rebuttal.

4. Flannagan's Offensive Case against Armstrong

Flannagan's defense of DCT against Armstrong thus fails. Completely. He then moves on to attack Armstrong's own ethical naturalism. Here I have more to agree with, as I also believe Armstrong fails to properly ground moral facts, but in the way most modern philosophers do (so he is in good company). Armstrong only demonstrates that his ethical naturalism is more enactable than DCT, and on that point he is right. But the question still remains, "Why should we enact that moral system, rather than some other?" I answer that question in my own work.[14] I also there demonstrate that this is the same answer a theist must adopt, and therefore they cannot claim to have a better ground for morality than I do (or anyone does). The question of "What is moral?" then reduces to what the facts are that we can reliably confirm (e.g., whether a God exists, is loving and just, and has moral advice, or whether all we have is the world we live in and one brief shot at life).

Part of the problem is the vagueness with which Armstrong breaks down different senses of the term "objective" in respect to moral facts being "objective" facts. Objective facts are facts that are true regardless of what we believe. We can therefore have false beliefs about them. Fully subjective facts, on the other hand, can never be false, even in principle. Someone else can have false beliefs about what *our* subjective thoughts and feeling are, but we cannot believe falsely that we believe *x* when we believe *x*. That would be a self-contradiction, except insofar as we distinguished conscious from unconscious beliefs, or immediate from enduring beliefs, but even that reduces unconscious or enduring beliefs to objective facts *about ourselves* (about which we can then possibly be wrong, as in consciously believing we are not a racist when in fact we maintain many racist beliefs). The same analysis pertains to desire. We can want something (like sex) while at the same time (even if we aren't thinking about it) want something else more (like happiness), and thus the desire for the latter could, if we reflected on the facts of the matter, trump the other desire. Thus "we want sex" can be objectively false (we really wouldn't want sex in the circumstances at hand if we thought about it), even at the same time that it is subjectively true (we are only experiencing the desire at the moment for sex).

When we understand these distinctions, to say "the wrongness of an action does not depend on whether we think or want it to be wrong" is too

Philo

ambiguous, since obviously all wrongness depends ultimately on what we think and want (whether we want the world to be a better place; whether we think compassion should guide our conduct; whether our potential victims want to be harmed; etc.). In fact, it is logically impossible for any moral system to be at all motivating without appealing to something the agent actually wants—by definition. Otherwise agents would have no motive to comply, and all moral systems would then be a dead letter, every one as false as the next. If it is true that I have no more reason to comply with God's commands than I do with the Devil's, then there is no meaningful sense in which God's commands are any more moral than the Devil's.

I thoroughly demonstrate that point in my previous work, coming to the conclusion that, regardless of whether morality is natural or supernatural, humanist or theist, it is still *always* the case that:

> "*S* morally ought to do *A*" means "If *S*'s desires were rationally deduced from as many facts as *S* can reasonably obtain at that time (about *S*'s preferences and the outcomes of *S*'s available alternatives in *S*'s circumstances), then *S* would prefer *A* over all the available alternative courses of action (at that time and in those circumstances)."[15]

That means even on DCT we have to already care about God's commands for them to have any moral force. Otherwise they are no different from the commands of just anyone whatever. Likewise in choosing among the different "Gods" and their different sets of commands, among all the sects and religions of the world. Why is one moral and not the other? Even if we could reduce the problem to just finding out which God actually exists and what they actually think, we still have to answer why that actual God is to be obeyed. For as even Flannagan appears to admit, if the God that actually exists is unloving and unjust, then that God's commands are not moral, and DCT fails. Thus, all moral systems come down to what the agent most wants, what sort of world they most want to live in and enact with their own choices.

Moral error then arises from people having false beliefs about what the actual consequences are of adopting certain moral views and conclusions, or having false beliefs about what they would actually most want if they thought about it. Like, for example, thinking that being unloving or unjust will work out best for themselves overall, when probably in fact it won't. "That it won't" describes an objective fact of the universe; "that you then would prefer not to do that" describes an objective fact about you. Moral facts remain ultimately subjective only in the sense that it is, after all, what you would prefer that decides what is right or wrong. But you have to get all the facts right even to know what you really prefer, much less what actions will most efficiently procure it for you. Thus, moral facts are essentially objective facts. Because we can have false beliefs about them; and what makes those beliefs false, are facts about us and the world, facts *other* than what we just happen to want or think or believe at any given moment.

Once we realize this, we will understand that moral truth requires (i) ascertaining what the facts actually are (what are the actual social, personal, physical, psychological, external and internal consequences of the compet-

ing options before us; what the nature of ourselves and the world actually is; and what it is that we actually will want most from life overall) and (ii) reasoning from these facts, without fallacy, how best to achieve what we most want. In my previous work I have shown that cultivating in ourselves the virtues of compassion, reasonableness, and honesty is the result we end up with when we analyze in this way the actual facts we can confirm. And moral behavior then results from our increasingly virtuous and informed instincts.[16] DCT cannot do any of these things. But ethical naturalism can.

As Flannagan describes DCT (summarizing Robert Adams):

> The reason to comply with social requirements [etc.] becomes stronger if the demand is a reasonable one. This reason becomes stronger again if the person who makes the command is a just person who loves us and is committed to our welfare. It becomes stronger still if the person is significantly more informed about the matter in question than we are. The commands of God, a perfectly rational, omniscient just and loving person, then provide supremely weighty reasons for compliance.[17]

Notice how inept this is as a plan for ascertaining what the moral facts are. I agree it would be great if we had an omniscient advisor whom we verified in some reliable way really loves us and is committed to our welfare, and if we could actually have a reliable, consistent, and unambiguous conversation with them about what they advise we do. But no one has that. Not even the Christian. Not only can we not verify *any* omniscient advisor exists, much less one we are sure cares about us, *we have no way of knowing what their advice is*. Thus, their existence is useless. It is therefore not relevant. Even if God exists, indeed even if a *loving* God exists, this is of no use to us in ascertaining what is and is not moral. Because He simply isn't consistently or reliably telling anyone.

So all we have left is the ethical naturalist's best alternative: an increasingly well-informed moral agent who cares about herself, and a body of advisors who care about her (crowdsourced knowledge, tested and accumulated from past to present). That's the best you get. You don't have access to an omniscient advisor. So you have to make do. And that means caring about whether you have enough information (about yourself and the world), and caring how to make the information you get more reliable, and caring whether you are reasoning from that information without logical fallacy or cognitive error. That's the only way to get closer to the truth in matters of morality. Phoning God simply isn't an option.

What Flannagan conceals (artlessly, in my opinion) is that his conclusion of "supremely weighty reasons for compliance" entails compliance *with some specific set of commands*. He is thus trying to sneak in some manmade morality through the back door. Maybe the Ten Commandments or some more elaborate Evangelical agenda, or maybe one of the Catholic moral systems, or maybe the moral beliefs of the Quakers, or the Shakers, or the Copts, or the Mormons, or a liberal Episcopalian moral code, or the fully-Torah-observant morality of the first Christian apostles Peter and James, or . . . you get the picture. The shear number of options, actual, historical, and poten-

tial, is vast beyond reckoning. So, with which moral commands do I have supremely weighty reasons for compliance?

Ultimately, whichever one you have in mind, we can show that those commands came from men, not God; men who have been frequently, disastrously wrong, and whom history has proven have never been anything like reliable in this matter. Thus, no matter which system of commandments we picked, we would not be complying with an omniscient and loving superbeing, but with what some fallible and "sinful" men *thought* an omniscient and loving superbeing would want—men we'd have to choose at random, from among countless disagreeing parties. Unless we decided which to choose based on our moral intuitions, but then we are not living according to DCT, but according to ethical subjectivism, whereby what we feel is right, is right. Claiming it comes from God is then just a dodge, a way to pretend our ethical subjectivism is morally objective. We thus place ourselves in the place of God, and conceitedly imagine our intuition is His. It is absurd to claim *that* is a better way to ground morality than ethical naturalism. It just isn't.

Ironically, Flannagan unknowingly verifies my core premise when he affirms that the reason to follow a moral commandment "becomes stronger . . . if the person who makes the command is a just person who loves us and is committed to our welfare." This is an appeal to self-interest: the moral is what an ideal observer would recommend who was committed to our welfare. Thus, our welfare is our motive, and the ground of all morality . . . even in Flannagan's worldview! No God needed. Perhaps you can say he is qualifying this with his interest in the ideal agent being "just," but that either is false (we would *not* deem it more reasonable to follow the advice of a person if they were just) or is yet another appeal to self-interest. For if we deem it more reasonable to follow the advice of a person if they are just, then we have clearly concluded that that would be best for us. But if it's best for us, it's best for us. We do not need a God to think that or tell it to us. It remains true whether God exists or not.

Thus, DCT is false. And only ethical naturalism can make any practical sense of morality. We have no access to the kind of ideal agent Flannagan wants there to be. We only have access to the substantially less perfect "ideal agents" we can model in our own heads, ideal agents we can make more informed over time, and improve in their compassion for us over time, and improve in their ability to reason well, and in their sense of justice, and so on. In other words, all we have is our own moral reason and the facts of ourselves and the world, as best we can make them out. In the end, ethical naturalism is all we've got.

Notes

1. Richard Carrier, "Moral Facts Naturally Exist (and Science Could Find Them)," in John Loftus, ed., *The End of Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), pp. 333-64, 420-29.

Philo

2. Carrier, "Moral Facts," pp. 335–39.

3. Matthew Flannagan, "Is Ethical Naturalism more Plausible than Super-naturalism? A Reply to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong," *Philo* 15, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2012), pp. 19–37.

4. For a longer list of examples of immoral commandments (and immoral decisions made by the "Biblical" God) see Richard Carrier, "The Will of God: 24 Evil Old Testament Verses" at https://sites.google.com/site/thechristiandelusion/Home/the-will-of-god. Heading off attempts to deny this fact, see: Hector Avalos, "Yahweh Is a Moral Monster," in John Loftus, ed., *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), pp. 209–36, and Valerie Tarico, "God's Emotions: Why the Biblical God Is Hopelessly Human," in Loftus, *End of Christianity*, pp. 155–77. For con-tradictory commandments, just ask whether we are to follow God's commandments in the Old Testament (as orthodox Jews do) or in the New Testament (as Christians do). One cannot do both.

5. This is a pervasive problem for theism generally: see John Loftus, *The Outsider Test for Faith: How to Know Which Religion Is True* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013) and Loftus, *Christian Delusion*, pp. 25–106.

6. Flannagan does not claim credit for this, but cites several others having developed versions of it before him: Flannagan, "Is Ethical Naturalism more Plausible," p. 19.

7. Flannagan, "Is Ethical Naturalism More Plausible," p. 20.

8. Flannagan's handwaving about the meaning of the word "makes" is thus com-pletely off point (Flannagan, "Is Ethical Naturalism More Plausible," pp. 20–22). When Armstrong says "reason [r] is what makes rape morally wrong" he simply means "r is the reason rape is morally wrong." Thus "r is what makes rape morally wrong" simply means "rape is morally wrong when r." God is in the same position as any other moral agent: looking for a reason why he should declare an act immoral. What answers this question for God, answers the same question for any other moral agent. God is therefore super-fluous. And if morality is not to be arbitrary, God cannot say "because God commands it" is r; therefore rape cannot be wrong because God commands it.

9. See Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 51–63 (with p. 3 and p. 35, n. 2). For how ethical naturalism resolves Moore's Paradox, see Richard Carrier, *Sense and Goodness without God: A Defense of Metaphysical Naturalism* (Bloomington, Indiana: Authorhouse, 2005), pp. 331–35, which argument is formally verified in Carrier, "Moral Facts Naturally Exist."

10. Flannagan, "Is Ethical Naturalism More Plausible," p. 23.

11. Flannagan, "Is Ethical Naturalism More Plausible," p. 24.

12. Carrier, "Moral Facts," pp. 340–43.

13. Flannagan might say that p can be evidence *that* God commands x (and thus p does not have to literally be God's command), but that reduces to the same thing: we would then know what God commands from p, and would only agree p justifies x because it confirms that God commanded it. It is precisely this p that Armstrong is saying can't be known. And he's right.

14. Carrier, "Moral Facts Naturally Exist."

15. Carrier, "Moral Facts," p. 426 (n. 35).

16. In the most relevant detail in Carrier, *Sense and Goodness without God*, pp. 291–348, with formal underpinning in Carrier, "Moral Facts Naturally Exist." I also specifically address the old saws that ethical naturalism can't justify "human rights" or that it's "speciesist" (as Flannagan claims, in "Is Ethical Naturalism More Plausible," pp. 33–34): see Carrier, *Sense and Goodness without God*, pp. 329–31 and 389–90.

17. Flannagan, "Is Ethical Naturalism More Plausible," p. 31.