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KAI NIELSEN AND THE NATURE OF THEISTIC ETHICS

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Theists frequently argue that nontheists must affirm the following: (1) If there is no God, each person must define "good" and "evil" for himself. (2) If each person must define "good" and "evil" for himself, there can be no objective moral standard. (3) God does not exist. (4) Therefore there can be no objective moral standard (i.e., all moral principles are relative).[1]

Some nontheists agree (e.g. Sartre) and attempt to live with the implications of (4). Others deny (2), claiming that the existence of an objective moral standard is not dependent on religious commitment. Kai Nielsen is one of the best known and most outspoken members of this group. Nielsen argued that "the nonexistence of God does not preclude the possibility of there being an objective standard on which to base [moral] judgments."[2] He has recently reaffirmed this claim:

> There is no need to have the religious commitment of Christianity or its sister religions or any religious commitment at all to make sense of morality, . . . In terms of its fundamental rationale, morality is utterly independent of belief in God. . . . A moral understanding, as well as a capacity of moral response and action, is available to us even if we are human beings who are utterly without religious faith.[3]

The basis for this contention is best stated when he argues that the assertions "Happiness is good" and "All persons should be treated fairly" are not only moral absolutes that most persons intuitively know to be true but are principles that, if put into practice, are normally most advantageous for all involved.[4]

But suppose that it is pragmatically advantageous for an individual to treat others unfairly, and he therefore does so. Or suppose that an individual does claim to have radically different moral intuitions. On what basis can such persons be judged morally wrong? Nielsen is aware of such difficulties. He admits that he cannot prove that happiness is good, arguing that he "can only appeal to your sense of psychological realism to persuade you to admit intellectually what in practice you acknowledge."[5] And he admits that he cannot prove that fairness is always the most advantageous principle to employ, but argues that "to be moral involves respecting [human] rights."[6] Or, as he phrases this point in his most

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[1]See for example F. Schaeffer, *He Is There, And He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1972) 21-35.

[2]K. Nielsen, "History of Ethics," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), 3. 108.

[3]K. Nielsen, "On Religion and the Grounds of Moral Belief," *Religious Humanism* (Winter 1977) 33-34.

[4]K. Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (London: Pemberton, 1973), chap. 3.

[5]Nielsen, *Ethics*, 56.

[6]Ibid., p. 62.

recent discussion, unless such a principle is affirmed there can be "[no] understanding of the concept of morality, [no] understanding of what it is to take the moral point of view."[7]

Such argumentation is basically question-begging. Fundamental to his case is that we accept his "concept of morality" and "sense of psychological realism." But it is the objective validity of these very presuppositions that needs to be established. Nielsen, however, does more. In an attempt to lend credence to his position he also attacks (1), claiming that even if there is a God the theist must still define "good" and "evil" for himself and therefore is in no stronger position than the nontheist to make claims about the objective nature of morality.[8] It is this contention that I wish to critically discuss.

The implicit theistic assumption in (1) is that since God is absolutely good his attitudes and actions serve as an objective, absolute standard for "good" and "evil." Accordingly, Nielsen begins his critique of (1) by posing the following epistemological question for the theist: Why do you believe the statement, "God is good," to be true? Only two basic avenues of response are acknowledged.

The theist, we are told, may claim that his affirmation of God's goodness is based on good evidence (i.e., is a factual matter). Such evidence might include experiential data: God has given me a purpose for living, God has healed me, and so on. Or it might include scriptural data: The Biblical God offers comfort and guidance to all who trust him, the Biblical God demonstrates his concern for the physical needs of the destitute, and so forth.

But, Nielsen is quick to point out, we can only test for something if we already have some idea as to the nature of that for which we are testing. Hence for the theist to maintain that God's goodness is established by factual evidence is actually for the theist to admit that he possesses his own independent standard of morality against which God's actions and attitudes are (were) judged. But if this is true, he continues, then the theist can no longer maintain that God's actions and attitudes function as his ultimate standard for "good" and "evil." If God's goodness is a factual matter, man's own moral sensitivities are ultimately "the measure of all things."

The other theistic option, Nielsen informs us, is to claim that the proposition "God is good" is true by definition or, more correctly, to claim that "goodness" is a necessary defining characteristic of "God." God's attitudes and actions are then good simply because he possesses (or performs) them. But this is said to generate another question: Upon what basis do such theists label the being they worship "God"? Or, stated differently, Nielsen is asking: How do such theists know that the being whose attitudes and actions they accept as an objective moral standard is God?

Certain responses are ruled out. The theist, Nielsen argues, cannot justifiably claim that such a being is God simply because this being says he is good. The question then simply becomes: Upon what basis can the moral claims of such a being be believed? Nor, he argues, can the theist claim that the attitudes and actions of the being he worships should be accepted as good because the being in question is the omniscient, omnipotent creator of the universe. It may be true

[7]Nielsen, *Humanism*, 33.

[8]Nielsen, *Ethics*, chap 1.

that it would be unwise not to follow the commands of such a being. But it is not impossible that an omnipotent, omniscient creator could be wicked. The only valid response, it is maintained, is for such theists to admit that the being they worship is called "God" because they possess independent moral criteria for goodness that are met by the actions and attitudes of this being.

In short Nielsen is claiming that no matter how the theist responds to his initial question the outcome is the same. If the theist maintains that "God is good" is a factual statement he must admit to possessing an independent standard of morality in relation to which he, at least initially, ascertained that God's actions and attitudes are in fact good. If the theist maintains that "God is good" is a definitional truth he must then admit to possessing an independent moral standard in relation to which he, at least initially, ascertained that the actions of the being he has chosen to worship are in fact "godly."

But if such is the case, Nielsen concludes, then the consequent of (1)—that each individual must decide for himself what is good and evil—is as true for the theist as it is for the nontheist, and accordingly the theist has no more right to speak of the objectivity of his moral standard than does the nontheist.

Is Nielsen correct in his analysis? Must the theist admit that the objectivity of his ethical system is no more secure than that of the nontheist? Must the theist ultimately admit that in the area of morality "man is the measure of all things"?

The theist[9] must concede, I believe, that "God is good" is not solely (or even primarily) a definitional truth. Few thinkers wish to contend that definitional truths can confirm matters of fact,[10] and theists (of the type currently under discussion) certainly do maintain that a wholly good, personal God does in fact exist. Accordingly, such theists cannot simply affirm that a being worthy of worship should be called "God." They must give some ostensible justification for maintaining that the "God" they believe does in fact exist is actually worthy of worship.

Nor can the theist hope to circumvent Nielsen's challenge by arguing that his affirmation of God's goodness is based not primarily on moral considerations of any type but on the fact that "God is good" stands as a basic tenet in a world view that he believes best explains the totality of his experience. Since an omnipotent, omniscient creator need not be good, such a theist could only validly incorporate "God is good" into his world view if the actions and attitudes attributed to the being in question best explained his moral expectations (i.e., best coincided with his moral sensibilities).

The most viable option is for the theist to grant Nielsen part of his thesis: that he (the theist) does affirm "God is good" because the actions and attitudes of the being in question are consistent with his moral sensibilities; that he does claim that God is a being worthy of worship because he has tested the character of this being and found it to be consistent with his moral expectations. Thoughtful theists such as E. J. Carnell have long recognized this fact:

> If a cosmic being appeared before us, but showed no signs of truth and justice, we

[9]I, like Nielsen, will be discussing primarily the ethical position of the Judeo-Christian theist.

[10]Proponents of various versions of the ontological argument would, of course, contend that a matter of fact (that God exists) is established by definitional considerations (a proper analysis of the phrase "God exists").

> would know he was not God. . . . Suppose a religious prophet said, "God delights in those who commit murder." Would a morally upright theologian assign this to God? The answer is plain. He would not because he could not because the claims of the moral and spiritual environment would be violated.[11]

But to grant Nielsen this much is innocuous. The objectionable aspect of his thesis is his contention that the moral criteria used by the theist to evaluate God's goodness constitute a moral standard that is separate from and more fundamental than the divine moral code being judged. This the theist need not grant. Such moral criteria are only "separate" (independent) and "more fundamental" in the sense required by Nielsen if they are rationally formulated (or intuited) by each theist apart from divine influence. But Judeo-Christian theology has traditionally maintained that man is created in the "image of God." Accordingly, it is not inconsistent for the theist to claim that each human (theist and nontheist alike) is created with an innate (although more or less sensitive) moral sense that is not only similar to that of each other human but in principle "divine."

Moreover, there seem to be good reasons for such theists to affirm this contention. First, for those who accept its authority the Christian canon seems to support this concept of man's nature. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness. Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them" (Rom 1:19-20). "The Gentiles are a law unto themselves; who show the work of the law written in their hearts" (Rom 2:17-18). Second, this view has enjoyed widespread support among careful thinkers in the Christian tradition for centuries—e.g., Augustine and Aquinas. Third, it serves as a plausible explanation for at least two basic aspects of man's present moral experience: (1) the increasingly popular belief that certain basic moral precepts are (have been) accepted in all cultures, and (2) the fact that man, although intellectually able to espouse relativism, does not seem able to live out consistently such a theory in practice.

But if man's moral nature is of divine origin, it is of course not true that we judge God by a moral standard that is separate from and more ultimate than the divine moral law. It is rather true, as Carnell has aptly noted, that "we test for God, to be sure, but God himself is the author of our expectations. . . . The Character of God is the norm by which we test for the character of God."[12]

In other words, by affirming the "divine" origin and nature of man's moral expectations the theist can grant that he judges the goodness of God by his own moral sensibilities and yet deny that his own, personally formulated moral code is "the measure of all things." For he need not grant that the moral standard in question is independent of God. And from this it in turn follows that the theist need not grant that he and the nontheist are in an identical situation with respect to the objectivity of morality.

Nielsen of course would not affirm this theistic concept of man's moral nature. But this is irrelevant. He is challenging the validity, not the soundness, of the theist's ethical stance. That is, Nielsen is not making any claim concerning the

[11]E. J. Carnell, *Christian Commitment* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 132.

[12]Ibid., p. 134.

truth or falsity of the theist's beliefs concerning God's existence, attitudes or actions. His contention is only that the theist cannot consistently maintain that his moral decisions are based on an absolute, objective moral standard independent of man, even if he does profess belief in a wholly good God. This contention, I have argued, can be successfully countered.

To forestall certain lines of criticism it is important that I specify exactly what the theist is not affirming (or, at least, need not affirm) if he claims that he possesses a basic moral standard implanted by God.

First, the "divine implantation" theist is not contending that morality originates in the "commands of God" in the sense that the moral code of each theist is based on specific moral commands that God continually and directly communicates to him or even in the sense that morality is based on general moral decisions that God continually makes in reaction to given circumstances. Such "divine command" theories presuppose a dynamic—possibly arbitrary—divine ethic. The "divine implantation" theory I have sketched presupposes just the opposite: that there exists as an extension of God's character a single, unchanging ethical code that has been and always will be applicable to all rational beings (including God himself).

This does not mean that the "divine implantation" theist cannot contend consistently that he receives some specific moral commands directly from God. He need only acknowledge that such commands are recognized as coming from God (at least in part) because they are consistent with the basic, innate moral principles he possesses as a divinely created being.

Second, the "divine implantation" theist need not contend that all moral decisions are drawn directly from his innate moral understanding. It is consistent with the "divine implantation" theory to assume that only general moral principles are innate and that man must use his ability to reason inferentially (e.g., use his ability to apply general rules to particular circumstances) to arrive at specific moral decisions.

Third, the "divine implantation" theist need not contend that all persons will in fact affirm even a general theistic moral code. He can argue that since human beings are rational, free moral agents they possess the power to conceive of alternate moral codes and for any number of reasons actually commit themselves to one. Nor must such a theist even contend that every individual will be consciously aware of the divine moral code implanted within him. To counter Nielsen a "divine implantation" theist need only affirm that he believes such universal implantations to be an objective fact. He need not commit himself on the ability of each indiviudal to relate subjectively to this innate moral data.

These clarifications also explain why the "divine implantation" theist is free to acknowledge openly (1) the myriad of particular moral codes (theistic and nontheistic) and (2) the fact that some persons appear to be more morally sensitive than others.

But even given these clarifications there still exists one basic objection to my thesis that must be considered. Is not the very contention that man is created in the image of God itself based, at least in part, on moral considerations? That is, does not a theist affirm this "divine implantation" theory because to do so best explains his total experience, including his moral experience? Accordingly, is it not still the case that each theist possesses his own independent, logically prior moral standard in relation to which moral decisions about God are made?

To evaluate this contention, two related but distinct theistic tenets must be distinguished: (1) God is good (i.e., the creator of the universe is "God"), and (2) the creator of the universe implanted his moral standard within us. We have already seen that (1) is a normative statement that the "divine implantation" theist must readily admit he affirms because the actions of the being in question are consistent with his own moral expectations. But (2) is a more fundamental metaethical statement (i.e., a statement about the nature of normative claims) that cannot justifiably be affirmed for normative reasons. (2) is a factual statement that must be settled on evidential grounds (e.g., on the basis of indirect empirical evidence, etc.). The objection under consideration obviously muddles this distinction.

Moreover, in the present context it is not important to determine if the "divine implantation" theist can justify his affirmation of (2). Remember that we are discussing the validity, not the soundness, of such a theist's ethical stance. It is only important to see that, since the affirmation of (2) is not itself a normative issue, the "divine implantation" theist by affirming (2) can admit that he affirms (1) because it is consistent with his moral sensibilities without granting that he possesses a moral standard independent of God.

Let me briefly summarize what has and has not been argued. I have not argued that morality is not autonomous from religion. Nor have I argued that the theist's moral judgments are not in fact based on personal moral criteria independent of God. I have not even argued that the "divine implantation" theory preserves "personal morality" in the usual sense of the phrase. I have only argued that Nielsen's standard (and oft-cited) argument against the objectivity of the theist's moral code can be countered and that other, more sophisticated argumentation must be forthcoming if he is to make his case.