Does Morality Need God in Order to Be Objective? The "Yes and No" Answer of Thomism

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ABSTRACT

It is common within evangelical apologetics to leverage a moral argument for God's existence by maintaining that God is necessary for morality to be objective. The standard argument says

1. Morality is objective.
2. The existence of God is necessary for morality to be objective.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Some Thomists will qualify the sense in which the second premise is true, arguing that (a) there is sense in which God's existence is not necessary for the objectivity of morality and (b) that the sense in which God's existence is necessary for morality is different than the common moral argument maintains.

Prolegomena

After writing this paper, I began to wonder whether and to what extent the title I submitted captured the gist of what I actually ended up writing. I did not want my hearers to think they had fallen for a bait and switch. As the current title suggests, my interests have to do with a Thomistic understanding of morality. More specifically, I am interested in this Thomistic understanding of morality vis-à-vis the apologetic/philosophical issue of whether or how the existence of God relates to the question of the objectivity of morality or, indeed, to the question of morality as such. (I am thinking here more specifically of the Classical Apologetic approach as opposed to the Presuppositionalist approach.) But, likely, only those who are already familiar with Thomism will know that any discussion of a Thomistic view of morality must be nested in a discussion of Aquinas's doctrine of Natural Law. As such, I worried that my hearers, having seen the current title and who might not already be familiar enough with Thomism, would quickly begin to wonder (when I started to delve into Aquinas's Natural Law Theory) whether my paper...
had gotten off topic. Perhaps this introductory paragraph will suffice to exonerate me from appearing to have written the wrong paper.¹

Further, I was hoping that in some small but sufficient way, my paper title would appear provocative enough to get you here. For in suggesting that Thomism (or Natural Law, if you will) gives both a 'yes' and 'no' answer to the question of whether God is necessary for morality to be objective, you should suspect that, in my understanding, Thomism stands to some extent in contrast to the standard view on this issue in contemporary Evangelical apologetics. I will leave it to you to decide whether the contrast (if, indeed, there is a contrast) is important enough to warrant my provocation.

One last thing about my title. As I was writing this paper, the difficulty presented itself in trying to confine my analysis strictly to the question of morality's objectivity. All in all, it seemed necessary to expand the issue to the question of Aquinas's view of the relationship of the existence of God to the question of morality as such, and ignore trying to separate out when my point pertains specifically to just one or the other.

Natural Law Theory

Let be begin to sneak up on the topic at hand by briefly summarizing Aquinas's Natural Law Theory, for it is only in that context (as I have already suggested) that his understanding of

¹ After reflection, I decided that my original title was better than if I had said in the subtitle "The 'Yes' and 'No' Answer of Natural Law." The reason is, because I am more comfortable talking about Aquinas's view of the objectivity of morality in light of his views on Natural Law, than I would be in trying to defend what I will say here in light of the current controversies surrounding Natural Law Theory itself; controversies like those generated by the thinking of John Finnis, Joseph Boyle, and Germain Grisze regarding whether and to what extent the metaphysics of Aristotle and Aquinas play into the theory or application of Natural Law. For example, John Finnis says "It is simply not true that 'any form of a natural law theory of morals entails the belief that propositions about man's duties and obligations can be inferred from propositions about this nature.' Nor is it true that for Aquinas 'good and evil are concepts analysed and fixed in metaphysics before they are applied in morals." [John Finnis, Natural Law and Natural Rights (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 33] His quotations are from D. J. O'Connor, Aquinas and Natural Law (London: 1967), p. 68 and O'Connor, op. cit., p. 19. And now, with Robert George entering the discussion, there is a controversy about the controversy.) See Robert P. George, In Defense of Natural Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). While these controversies are not the topic of my paper, it should become evident which side of the debates I come down on.
morality can be understood. In doing so, I will touch on a few additional points in his
metaphysics that are themselves presupposed in his Natural Law Theory. For Aquinas, Natural
Law finds itself being one part of four aspects of law, working here with a somewhat loose
understanding of law in terms of how God relates to His creation.

Eternal Law

Eternal law is God's providential working of the universe. It is the plan by which God
governs His creation. Though the universe is not eternal in itself, both the universe and God's
law to govern it are eternally in the mind of God as the One who foresees and foreordains them,
as Rom. 4:17 hints.²

As the transcendent Creator by whose power the entire creation comes into and remains
in existence, God superintends everything that comes to pass. Not surprisingly, Christians have
various understandings of the details of this superintendence. While there are interesting and
profound and important questions surrounding this issue of how God superintends His creation,
how natural law fits within the framework of the eternal law is (in some respects) indifferent to
the answer to these specific questions. It is enough that one realizes that the eternal law is God's
ultimate sovereignty and authority over His creation.³

² "(as it is written, "I HAVE MADE YOU A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS") in the presence of Him
whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;"
(Translation New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982))

³ Aquinas says, "It is evident, granted that the world is ruled by Divine Providence … that the whole
community of the universe is governed by Divine Reason. Wherefore the very Idea of the government of things in
God the Ruler of the universe, has the nature of a law. And since the Divine Reason's conception of things is not
subject to time but is eternal, according to Prov. vii, 23, therefore it is that this kind of law must be called eternal."
[ST I-II, Q 91, art. 1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica:
Complete English Edition in Five Volumes, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster,
MD: Christian Classics, 1981)]
Natural law

Within this context, the natural law can be understood as the participation in eternal law by rational creatures by virtue of being rational. This term 'natural' requires a closer analysis which I will undertake in due course. For the time being, let me make several observations. We see from Aquinas that the natural law is that aspect of the eternal law whereby the Creator governs and guides the actions of humans such that, when obeyed, it leads humans to their proper end. It remains to be seen exactly why such actions are regarded as moral. It also remains to be seen what it means to talk about proper ends of humans. The thing to note here is that the truths of the natural law are discoverable by reason irrespective of whether the human is in a saving relationship with God, or, for that matter, whether the human even acknowledges the existence of God. Knowledge of these truths is a matter of creation not re-creation. The (perhaps to some) startling implication of this is that, inasmuch as such actions are moral, then morality is something in which, in some robust sense, even non-Christians can participate. Perhaps even at this point one can anticipate the sense in which morality might be objective for the atheist.

Before I begin to draw my thinking directly to bear on the main topic, let me round out the picture by touching on the two other aspects of law in Aquinas.

Human Law

More narrow still from the eternal law to the natural law is human law. For Aquinas, human law is a particular application of natural law to local communities. It seeks to implement

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4 "It is evident that all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, in so far as, namely, from its being imprinted on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law." [ST I-II, Q 91, art. 2]
regulations of human behavior stemming from truths knowable from the natural law. Aquinas observes that the human reason can only participate in that eternal law according to human reason's own mode; and then only imperfectly. The divine reason is infinite but human reason is finite. Thus, there is no pretense that this trickle down from eternal law to natural law to human law is infallible.

**Divine Law**

The narrowest of the four aspects of law is the Divine law. It is the revelation of God's law through Scripture to believers (if I may put a Protestant spin on this otherwise Catholic thinker). While the Divine law certainly overlaps with the natural law, Divine law will contain laws and prescripts that pertain only to those who are in a saving relationship with God.6

**What Is Natural about the Natural Law?**

I have been freely using the term 'natural' and its cognates. The terms 'nature' and 'natural' have a number of usages. In more technical and philosophical contexts 'nature' refers to that metaphysical constituent of a thing by virtue of which it is the thing that it is. In this way, it is similar to the terms 'essence' or 'substance'.7 To be sure, such metaphysical realism has fallen on

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5 "Just as, in the speculative reason, from indemonstrable principles, we draw the conclusions of the various sciences, the knowledge of which is not imparted to us by nature, but acquired by the efforts of reason, so too it is from the precepts of the natural law, as from general and indemonstrable principles, that the human reason needs to proceed to the more particular determinations of certain matters. These particular determinations, devised by human reason, are called human laws, provided the other essential conditions of law be observed." [ST I-II, Q91, art. 3]

6 But why is there a Divine law? If the eternal law is grasped to the degree it can be by human reason (the natural law) which is then applied to particular situations (human law), what is left for the Divine law to do for human beings? This trajectory from the eternal law through the natural law to the human law is toward the human being's end naturally speaking. But for Aquinas, the end of human life is not something that is merely natural. There is a difference between mankind's "natural end" and what the Christian understands as mankind's ultimate end (purpose) which is knowledge of and communion with God or, as the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms would have it "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." The latter, according to Aquinas, cannot be obtained naturally but only by supernatural grace.

7 David S. Oderberg defines essence as "an objective metaphysical principle determining [a thing's] definition and classification. Such principles are not mere creatures of language or convention; they belong to the very constitution of reality." [David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), x]
increasingly hard times beginning right after the Middle Ages. It remains, nevertheless, the philosophical backdrop within which the 'natural' of 'natural law' gets its meaning.8 Natural law is "natural" because, as a theory about morality, it defines morality largely (but not exclusively) in terms of human nature.9

Several important metaphysical doctrines are tied up in Aquinas's understanding of nature in general and human nature in particular; much of which he adopted from Aristotle but with his own critical metaphysical additions and modifications. For Aquinas (as with Aristotle) the nature of a thing (and I am doing two things here in this unpacking: excluding artifacts and limiting myself to living things) [the nature of a thing] not only is that metaphysical constituent of a thing that makes the thing what it is, but it also sets that thing on a trajectory of development. As a living thing grows and matures, it does so, if unimpeded, towards its proper end or goal or telos. Aquinas understands this development to be the actualizations of perfections that exist potentially in the thing by virtue of its nature. This is easy to see in living things. An acorn grows into an oak tree. In so growing and developing, the potentialities within the acorn, by virtue of the nature it has, are actualized; aiming the plant towards it proper end, achieving greater and greater perfection. But (for reasons that are beyond the scope for this paper) for these potentials to be actualized is to say that they are made to be or to exist. The move toward a thing's proper end (i.e., the move towards a thing's perfection) is a move to the realization of being or existence

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8 As philosopher Edward Feser has said, "It is widely assumed that the analysis and justification of fundamental moral claims can be conducted without reference to at least the more contentious issues of metaphysics. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Aquinas, for whom natural law … is 'natural' precisely because it derives from human nature, conceived of in Aristotelian essentialist terms". [Edward Feser, Aquinas (Oxford: One World, 2009), 174]

9 As such, it has nothing to do with the idea that somehow we can discern morality by an examination of "nature" or from mere physical reality.
itself. As the plant grows it actualizes more and more of the perfections of being up to the limits of and according to the contours of its nature as an oak tree.

What about human beings? To be sure, just like the acorn to oak tree, a human aims at a telos as it grows from zygote to adult. But, for Aquinas, human perfection is more than just the human reaching his physical ends. Because of the difference between a human and an oak tree, the human contains a greater level of the perfections of being up to the limits and according to the contours of human nature. The most important expression of human perfection is that which makes humans distinct from animals. It is that the human has a rational soul.

Aquinas argues that a human's perfection pertains to this aspect of us most importantly. Why is this so? Again, following Aristotle, Aquinas maintains that that which determines what the proper end for the human is, will have to do with that which is properly (i.e., uniquely) human. Because we have a rational soul, a human is able to be the "master of his actions" inasmuch as his actions "proceed from a deliberative will." More pointedly, humans have free will and, thus have the capacity (again, unique among sensible creatures) to choose a course of action that either perfects or does violence to the nature and can choose toward or choose in opposition to advancing along this trajectory towards one's proper end. This point is key. It is precisely because humans have this capacity of deliberation that we are moral creatures.

Freedom of the will is a necessary condition for morality as such.

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10 “Of actions done by man those alone are properly called human, which are proper to man as man. Now man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions. Wherefore those actions alone are properly called human, of which man is master. Now man is master of his actions through his reason and will; whence, too, the free-will is defined as the faculty and will of reason. Therefore those actions are properly called human which proceed from a deliberate will.” [ST, I-II, Q1, art. 1]

11 In opting for free will, Aquinas is not taking sides in what we now recognize as the Calvinist/Arminian debate. Since, in Aquinas, there is more than one way for an agent to be causally related to an event (God is the primary cause of the existence (esse) of creation and creatures are secondary causes of the thing existing in a certain way), his notion of free will is somewhat more robust than the notion of free will as the expression is used in that debate.
Another point that has been latent throughout is how Aquinas understands 'good'. Since the point of this paper has to do with morality, one might wonder why I have not yet addressed the notion of 'good'. It was necessary for me to get out the preceding points before Aquinas's understanding of 'good' could begin to make sense. Let me begin by noting that, in Aquinas, "moral good" is a subset of "good." We use the term 'good' in a wide range of ways; we talk about a good meal, a good car, a good team, a good person. While Aristotle himself seems to have disagreed, Aquinas maintained that there is something common among all these uses of the term 'good'.

A good x is, as George Klubertanz says, "that which is perfect according to its kind." An x is a good x when it has all the perfections that an x ought to have by virtue of being an x. The good is that toward which all things aim. As I have said, as a thing actualizes its potentials towards its telos, those actualizations are the perfections of its being. Achieving its good is acquiring more being. This means that, for Aquinas, 'being' and 'good' are convertible. (This is why, by the way, that God is good. He is good because He is infinite being.)

Moral good is a narrower concept. Morality has to do with a human choosing an action that perfects the human towards what a human ought to be by virtue of the kind of thing a human is, i.e., because of his nature. What is morally good for a human to do is tethered explicitly to what it is to be a human. We can see, therefore that not only is morality unique to humans among sensible creatures, but it also follows that God is not a moral being. This is so because God does

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12 Aristotle says "The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one Idea." [Nicomachean Ethics, I, 6, 1096b25, trans. W. D. Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed. The Basic Works of Aristotle (New York: Random House, 1941), 940] As far as it goes, Aristotle could say nothing else given that he does not have a higher category than form in his metaphysics (as neither did Plato). Aristotle says "So, too, there are many senses in which a thing is said to be, but all refer to one starting point" and then goes to connect all things that are said to be to substance. It will take Aquinas's notion of the convertibility of 'being' and 'good' to ultimately make sense of the common notion of the term 'good'. See Jan A. Aertsen, "The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas," New Scholasticism 59 (1985): 449-470.

not choose a course of action to perfect Himself as He aims at a telos. God does not have a telos and cannot be perfected because He already is infinite being itself—ipsum esse subsistens; substantial existence itself.

**No: Morality Does Not Need God in Order to Be Objective**

Before my time runs out, let me now try to directly address the issue before us. In what sense can morality be objective without God? First, both the Thomist and the standard apologetic view agree that God is not epistemologically necessary for morality. All agree that it is possible for an atheist to know that it is wrong to murder. This is so even when the atheist cannot fully understand why it is wrong.14

Second, because mankind's good is defined primarily in terms of the perfection of his nature, what is good for him will be good for him as a matter of fact. Now, to say this much still does not distinguish Aquinas's view from the standard apologetic view inasmuch as everyone would agree that being virtuous is good for a person's soul and will contribute to human flourishing collectively speaking. What I think the Thomist might resist is when the standard apologetic approach is worded in such a way as to suggest that these objective goods cannot be regarded as goods by the atheist. Along these lines, if someone remarked that this was a good knife because it had such a sharp blade, what sense would it make for another to say "Who are you to say that a knife ought to have a sharp blade?" The question is nonsensical as a matter of principle. Whatever it is to be a knife, then to be a good knife is to possess all those perfections that a knife ought to have by virtue of being a knife. By analogy, certain questions like "Who are

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14 This point is continually missed by atheists and general audiences who listen to debates on God and morality. Michael Shermer, after having summarized the moral argument for God thus "humans are moral beings and animals are not. Where did we get this moral drive? Through the ultimate moral being—God" goes on to misunderstand the argument by concluding after his analysis "Apparently you can be good without God." [Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God.* Second Edition. (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2000), 98]
you to say that I (as a human) ought to do this certain action?" The question can be nonsensical as a matter of principle. (I am not suggesting that one could not come up with a question that makes perfect sense like "Who are you to say that I ought to listen only to country music?") But when it comes to many of the human virtues like honesty, fidelity, and courage, it is not as though we have not been having this conversation for over 2,500 years as to what constitutes a good person. For Aquinas, I think it is fair to say that the oft referenced sentiment in Dostoevskii's novel just is not true.15

Consider how this might compare to our relationship to other aspects of reality. Gravity is a real thing. It affects the Christian and the atheist alike. As such, it is objective. It does not matter whether the atheist realizes why there is gravity or, for that matter how it is that gravity affects us. It is enough that it does, and the atheist cannot help but know this. In a similar way, morality is real. It affects the Christian and the atheist alike. As such, it is objective. It does not matter whether the atheist realizes why there is morality (or, for that matter how it is that morality affects us). It is enough that it does and the atheist cannot help but know this. What is more, it is precisely because morality is objectively real that Natural Law Theory can serve as a viable approach to issues of public morality in the midst of religious or philosophical diversity.

Last, if Aquinas is right that free will is a necessary condition for morality, then any philosophy of human action that includes a sufficiently rich notion of free will can have morality, at least in principle. It should be noted that Aristotle's god, despite the fact that his arguments for god's existence are picked up by Aquinas almost verbatim, bears little resemblance to the God of Christianity. Thus, for all intents and purposes regarding the current project, Aristotle's

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Nicomachean Ethics is an ethics without God, or at least without a god that any classical Christian would recognize. To suggest that the Nicomachean Ethics is not an objective morality in any sense of the term seems, to me, to be clearly false.

Yes: Morality Does Need God in Order to Be Objective

One way in which morality would need God in order to be objective is the way anything would need God in order to have any attribute. It needs God before it can even exist. Morality has to do with human actions. Being a morally good person includes choosing those actions that perfect the human along the trajectory of and towards his proper telos. The human only has that telos because of his nature and he only has that nature because it was created by God. Without God's creation, there would not exist any humans to be morally good. In so many words, a discussion about whether morality needs God in order to be objective amounts to a discussion of cosmological argument, specifically Aquinas's Secunda Via—his Second Way.

Second, it is not only the case that God is the creator of all the elements that make morality actual, but God is also the director of the teleology of all things in His creation. In Aquinas, God's relationship to the creation is that He has caused it to come into being and that He sustains the creation in existence at every instance of its existence. But none of this excludes the reality of secondary causes within creation. By the same token, even though the telos of all things is by virtue of the respective natures of those things (which is to say, they have inherent teleology), it is also the case for Aquinas that all things have an extrinsic teleology, being directed to their proper ends by God who superintends all of His creation. This is Aquinas's Quinta Via—his Fifth Way.

16 Aristotle's god bears little resemblance to the Classical, Christian God in that he is not personal and not a creator.

17 But just as A-T versions of the cosmological argument don't entail that natural objects don't have real causal power, so too the Fifth Way does not entail that natural objects don't have inherent teleology. To use the
Third, the precepts of morality take on their strongest obligatory aspect when they are understood to be the commands of God. Not only ought we act in certain ways because it perfects our being, but God, being the Creator and Superintendent of all his creation has commanded us to act in such a way as to not only facilitate our own flourishing, but also to effect the flourishing of the human community and, by extension, to fulfill our role in our relationship with the rest of His creation. These goals are what God has intended for us. Given the fact that He is our Creator and Sustainer, He has the authority to demand our obedience.¹⁸

Fourth, it is sometimes not clear to us what some of our moral obligations might be. While a great deal can be discerned from understanding our natures, God's Special Revelation supplements our moral data base. This is especially needed given the fact that we are fallen and can find ourselves often explaining away what otherwise might clearly be our moral duty.

Fifth, all of us have experienced the fact that merely knowing what is the right thing to do does not mean we have the power to live the right way. Romans 7 and 8 attest to the fact that, without God's Holy Spirit, we will find ourselves ultimately incapable of living right. (It is traditional metaphysical jargon, the reality of 'secondary causes' is perfectly compatible with the A-T idea that all natural causes must ultimately at every moment derive their causal power from God." Edward Feser, "Does Morality Depend on God?" [http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/07/does-morality-depend-on-god.html, accessed 11/13/15] See also his "Teleology: A Shoppers Guide" in Neo-Scholastic Essays (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2015), 28-48.

¹⁸ This is the nature of law as "a rule and measure of acts whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting" as it manages certain behaviors such that, as these behaviors are repeated and become habits, they develop into the virtues. Aquinas goes on: "A private person cannot lead another to virtue efficaciously, for he can only advise, and if his advice be not taken, it has no coercive power, such as the law should have, in order to prove an efficacious inducement to virtue. … But this coercive power is vested in the whole people or in some public personage, to whom it belongs to inflict penalties." [ST I-II, Q90, art. 3, ad. 3] This helps distinguish between what God commands and why God commands it and goes toward answering the false dilemma of the Euthyphro Dilemma. As Edward Feser observes "We need to distinguish the issue of the content of moral obligations from the issue of what give them their obligatory force. Divine command is relevant to the second issue, but not the first." ["God, Obligation, and the Euthyphro Dilemma," http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/10/god-obligation-and-euthyphro-dilemma.html accessed 11/15/15, emphasis in original]
interesting to notice how Aristotle comes up short in trying to explain how humans can still do what they know at one level to be the wrong action.)¹⁹

Last, we know from Special Revelation that our telos is not confined to the natural end within this life. We also have a supernatural telos of eternal life in communion with God. But this ultimate purpose is only achievable because of God's grace.

**Conclusion**

In order to sufficiently address Aquinas's understanding of morality, it was necessary to show how this understanding relates to the broader question of his Natural Law Theory. Further, it was necessary to discuss other metaphysical doctrines such as 'nature', 'teleology', 'free will', 'good', and 'moral good'. The sense in which morality did not need God in order to be objective had to do with the epistemology of morality, the objectivity of human good, and free will. The sense in which morality did need God in order to be objective had to do with the existence of morality, the teleology of morality, Divine commands, moral knowledge, moral power, and man's supernatural end.

Certainly my paper has gone beyond the specifics of my title. As I warned at the beginning, in trying to talk about the relationship of morality's objectivity to the question of God it proved difficult to avoid ending up talking about the relationship of morality as such to the question of God. I hope in doing so, I have answered the initial question even if I have over-answered it.

¹⁹ "It is plain, then, that incontinent people must be said to be in a similar condition to men asleep, mad, or drunk." [Nicomachean Ethics, VII, 3, 1147a17, trans. Ross, in McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 1041]