INTERPRETER

A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship

Volume 49 · 2021 · Pages vii - xxivk.j

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Offprint Series

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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If God Does Not Exist, Is Everything Permitted?

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Can people be good without believing in God? Obviously, yes. They can. Is atheistic naturalism capable of supplying a foundation for morality? That is a separate question, to which more than a few theists have answered No. However, a relatively new book by a very prominent student of religion and society suggests otherwise. A rational morality can, it argues, be founded upon atheistic naturalism — but it will necessarily be a modest and quite limited one, lacking universal scope and without a belief in human rights as objective "moral facts."*

The striking statement that, "if God doesn't exist, everything is permitted," is often attributed to the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) and, more specifically, to perhaps his greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which was first published in 1880. Theists have used the statement to argue that the alternative to belief in God is moral nihilism. Absent a grounding in the divine, so the argument goes, human moral systems are without foundation — and, thus, are likely to crumble in the face of human self-interest, error, and corruption. At best, we will be left with the world described by the prophet Isaiah, a world of "slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine," in which the shallow refrain is "let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die" (Isaiah 22:13). At worst, as I discuss shortly, human life will more closely resemble that of the "state of nature" portrayed by Thomas Hobbes in the twelfth chapter of his 1651 classic, *Leviathan*: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."[1]

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), 78, https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf. (Page number references provided are from this PDF typescript of the original book.) And,

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* famously captures the cynical and disenchanted mood of such a devalued world:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time.
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[2]

In recent years, however, atheists seeking to rebut the theistic argument — and others, as well — have commonly denied that such a statement even occurs in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Perhaps, some will allow, it's a decent though fairly loose paraphrase; others refuse to grant even that.

It appears, though, that Dostoevsky really did say "If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted."[3] Or, at least, that his fictional character Ivan Karamazov did. Whether the statement accurately represents Karamazov's actual viewpoint, of course, let alone Dostoevsky's, is a separate question. (Presumably, not everything said by Iago or Macbeth or Richard III represents the views of Shakespeare.)

But the more important question, plainly, is whether it's really true that "if God doesn't exist, everything is permitted." Does atheism actually entail moral nihilism? Please note that the question isn't whether or not atheists can behave ethically or be morally good. Obviously, they can. Many have been and many continue to be. The question is whether, given an atheistic or naturalistic worldview, the moral principles that guide many highly ethical unbelievers are well-founded.

With that issue in mind, I'm taking this opportunity to call your attention to a relatively small book that I recently enjoyed very much: *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism Can't Deliver*.[4] It was written by

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it should be mentioned that contrary to common rumor, *Solitary, Poor, Nasty, Brutish, and Short* isn't actually the name of a Boston law firm.

2. *Macbeth*, 5.5.18–27.

3. See Andrei I. Volkov, "Dostoevsky Did Say It: A Response to David E. Cortes," https://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei-volkov-dostoevsky/.

4. Christian Smith, *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism Can't Deliver* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Christian Smith, who — after completing a Ph.D. at Harvard University (and a year at Harvard Divinity School) — taught at Gordon College and, thereafter, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for many years (ultimately serving as the Stuart Chapin Professor of Sociology there), and who is currently the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame. Professor Smith has won numerous professional prizes and honors, among them a "Distinguished Career Award" from the American Sociological Association. Although raised an Evangelical Protestant, by the way, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 2011.

I won't be offering a book review of *Atheist Overreach* here, nor will I be drawing on the entirety of the book. I'm hoping that at least some of you will take a look at it yourselves, because I think that it has much to offer. But I do want to examine what it has to say about whether, "if God doesn't exist, everything is permitted."

Basically, the book consists of four chapters. The third of those, entitled "Why Scientists Playing Amateur Atheology Fail," deals with "the question of what the findings of modern science can and cannot tell us about the existence of God."[5] The fourth chapter ("Are Humans Naturally Religious?") examines "the question of whether or not human beings are in any significant way 'naturally religious,' as some religious apologists say."[6] I will not pursue either question here.

It's the first two chapters of *Atheist Overreach* with which I'll be concerned in this short essay, and even in their cases I intend to provide only a taste of them. Again, I encourage you to read them for yourself, because I'm not by any means doing justice to their arguments. Chapter 1, entitled "Just How 'Good without God' Are Atheists Justified in Being?" contends that a modest and humble system of what we might call "local morality" — if, I would add, the term *morality* is really appropriate in such a case — can, in fact, be derived from a naturalistic worldview. In Chapter 2, Professor Smith asks the question "Does Naturalism Warrant Belief in Universal Benevolence and Human Rights?" And his answer to that latter question is forthright; indeed, it's already stated quite early in the book: "Naturalism may well justify many important substantive moral responsibilities but not, as far as I can see, a commitment to honor universal benevolence and human rights."[7]

5. Ibid., 6.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

As a first step, it's important to understand what Christian Smith understands by "naturalism." Happily, he provides a very clear description of the world so understood:

> A naturalistic universe is one that consists of energy and matter and other natural entities, such as vacuums, operating in a closed system in time and space, in which no transcendent, supernatural, divine being or superhuman power exists as a creator, sustainer, guide, or judge. Such a universe has come to exist by chance — not by design or providence but by purposeless natural forces and processes. There is no inherent, ultimate meaning or purpose. Any meaning or purpose that exists for humans in a naturalistic universe is constructed by and for humans themselves. When the natural forces of entropy eventually extinguish the human race — if some natural or humanmade disaster does not do so sooner — there will be no memory or meaning, just as none existed before human consciousness evolved.[8]

And, just to be clear, Smith explains that "Metaphysical naturalism … describes the kind of universe that most atheists insist we inhabit."[9]

In *Atheist Overreach*, Smith reports that he has read extensively in the writings of various people who hold to a naturalistic worldview but who advocate moral principles, even moral systems, that they seek to ground in that worldview. And he further reports that he finds them completely unconvincing. There are, of course, good reasons for individual members of a species to cooperate with each other, reasons that enhance the quality of an individual's life or the prospects for an individual's or a family's survival — or, at least, increase the likelihood that certain genes will be transmitted into the future. Many kinds of animals, for example, pair off as mates, and some of them then share the responsibility, at least for a while, of feeding and caring for and protecting their offspring. Gorillas and dolphins and bonobos and whales live in more or less organized and mutually beneficial communities, and the cooperative nature of beehives and ant colonies scarcely requires mention. Recently, it has been seriously argued that even the trees in a forest cooperate with each

8. Ibid., 45–46.
9. Ibid., 46.

other in remarkable ways.[10] And we're just beginning to understand that crows and ravens communicate, too, and help each other.

But those associations appear to be limited in scope. And, I would ask, do they really result from what we would consider "moral" considerations? Do mother bears protect their cubs because they think it the right thing to do? Does a mother bear feel any moral responsibility for protecting bear cubs in general? Does her heart go out to abandoned bunnies and fawns? Christian Smith focuses on the issue of the scope of moral-seeming mutual obligation among humans:

> The first problem for … atheistic moralists is that none of them provides a convincing reason — sometimes *any* reason — for the *universal* scope of humans' asserted obligations to promote the good of all other human beings. It is one thing for people to be good to those who are proximate and similar to them. It is quite another to demand that every person is morally obliged to advance the well-being of every other human on earth. A careful reading of [such] moralists reveals good reasons why atheists should be motivated to be good to a limited set of people who matter to them. But they do not provide good reasons to be good to everyone.[11]
>
> If we in fact live in the naturalistic cosmos that atheists and much of science tell us we occupy, do we have good reasons for believing in universal benevolence and human rights as moral facts and imperatives?[12]

In Christian Smith's considered opinion, the answer to that question is a decisive No. The arguments advanced by atheistic moralists for such things, Smith contends, aren't even "remotely persuasive":

> They may "convince" people who, for other (good or bad) reasons, *already want to* believe in inclusive moral universalism without thinking too hard about it. But convincing people who are already or mostly convinced is not the challenge. The

10. See, for example, Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate — Discoveries from A Secret World*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2016). A new edition of the original German book has recently been published: Peter Wohlleben, *Das geheime leben der Bäume: Was sie fühlen, wie sie kommunizieren — die Entdeckung einer verborgenen Welt* (Munich: Heyne, 2020).

11. Smith, *Atheist Overreach*, 18. Emphasis in original.

12. Ibid., 48.

> challenge is to convince reasonable skeptics. So let us consider the position of a reasonable skeptic whose starting point is something like this: "I can see why, even without God, and understanding moral norms to be mere human inventions, I should be motivated to behave ethically and be good to the people around me who could affect my well-being. Beyond them, however, I see no compelling obligation to promote the well-being of other people who are irrelevant for all practical purposes to my own life, happiness, and welfare."[13]

Now, we might be inclined to call such a skeptic "bad," "selfish," "egocentric," or "self-centered," but name-calling isn't a convincing argument. And, again, such names seem to presuppose a moral foundation that is precisely the point at issue. Moreover, our skeptic would merely be conforming to what nature seems to dictate: Mama bears don't care much, if at all, about unrelated cubs. Troops of silverback gorillas don't feel much, if any, sense of obligation to help each other. Indeed, they fight and kill silverbacks of other troops, and nothing in nature suggests that, in doing so, they're being "immoral." (Adolf Hitler's quest for *Lebensraum*, for greater space into which the Aryans or the Germanic peoples could expand via continual warfare, and his belief that other "races" should be either subjugated or altogether exterminated, seen from this vantage point, fits right in. Hitler's attitude would not be so very different from that of a silverback gorilla, if a silverback could articulate its worldview. A literate silverback could have written a book called *Mein Kampf*, "My Struggle." And this shouldn't be surprising; Hitler was a social Darwinist. His "god," to the extent that he actually had one, was Nature.[14])

You may, however, have noted Smith's acknowledgment above, a very quiet one but (as we'll soon see) one that is made more explicit elsewhere, that naturalism is actually capable of grounding some moral standards — or, perhaps better, moral standards of a certain kind or range. That concession might seem to some to be a significant one, undercutting the claim of certain critics of naturalism that it is incapable of grounding any moral standards at all. "If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted." (I, myself, am inclined to that point of view.). As Smith puts it,

13. Ibid., 22, emphasis in original.

14. See Richard Weikart, *Hitler's Religion: The Twisted Beliefs that Drove the Third Reich* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2016).

> I think that atheists are rationally justified in being morally good, if that means a modest goodness focused primarily on people who might affect them and with a view to practical consequences in terms of "enlightened self-interest." "Good," however, has no good reason to involve *universal* moral obligations. Atheists who wish to promote being "good without God," if they are intellectually honest, need to scale back their ambitions and propose something more defensible, forthright, and realistic than most of these moralists seem to want. A more modest goodness may or may not suffice for functional human societies and a happy life, but — unless these atheist moralists have so far missed a big reason yet to be unveiled — that is all it seems atheism can rationally support.[15]

In allowing for that modest kind of naturalistically justifiable "moral obligation," though, is Christian Smith really describing anything human that isn't functionally equivalent to monkeys picking lice off of each other, or to wolves working together to take down prey, or, for that matter, to a fungus "cooperating" with green algae or cyanobacteria in order to make up a functioning lichen that benefits both? Individual specimens of *Ipomoea hederacea*, a tropical American flowering plant in the bindweed family that is more commonly known as "ivy-leaved morning glory," compete fiercely with unrelated rivals but seem to relax considerably in the presence of kin.[16] Is what Christian Smith describes really very different, *mutatis mutandis*, from that? And, I would ask, is there really anything specifically "moral" about it?

Many years ago, while my wife and I were living in Egypt, we had an American neighbor family who had lived and worked for several immediately prior years in a large city in Nigeria. One day, when the conversation turned to certain occasionally frustrating aspects of life in Egypt (e.g., traffic, and traffic signals that were taken as unsolicited and mostly unheeded advice rather than as commands), the husband, who was an engineer, hastened to assure me that, compared to the west African city in which he had previously resided, Cairo was a virtual utopia. One illustration that he gave me to support his claim has remained with me ever since.

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15. Smith, *Atheist Overreach*, 24–25, emphasis in original.

16. See Jay M. Biernaski, "Evidence for competition and cooperation among climbing plants," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 1714 (2011): 1989–96, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3107641/.

In his former city, he said, absolutely nobody paid even the slightest attention to traffic lights. And that meant that every intersection was a continual snarl of cars entering from at least four directions, trying to work their way through to the next chaotic mess a block beyond. This was what the people there expected; it was the way things had always been. In his frustration, he told me, he often wanted to get out of his car, jump on its hood, and explain loudly to them that, if the traffic going east-west would simply pause for a couple of minutes to allow north-south traffic to pass through the intersection, and if the north-south cars would just permit the east-west cars to have their own two minutes of uninterrupted transit, everybody would save both time and emotional health.

Now, traffic rules are not moral laws. There's nothing intrinsic to green lamps that says "Go!" and nothing intrinsic to red lamps that means "Stop!" Requiring cars to travel on the righthand side of the road rather than on the left is purely arbitrary. Deciding whether the speed limit on a given street should be set at thirty miles per hour or at twenty-five is a matter of prudence, not of ethical theory. Traffic regulations simply make public life a little easier and better, and, on the whole, we all benefit from them. (It's easy to imagine exceptional cases, of course, such as an ambulance or even a private vehicle speeding and running a red light in a desperate attempt to save a life or to deliver a woman in labor to medical care. But, in general, the rules make for much better cities and improved communities.)

It seems to me that the limited "morality" that Christian Smith sees as justifiable on naturalistic grounds, when it is so justified, actually resembles traffic rules more than it does what many of us feel is actual morality. There is a self-interestedness to it, an element of *quid pro quo*, that seems fundamentally different from the self-sacrificial sense of many genuinely moral rules and decisions. "I will do this because I will benefit by doing it" — doing well by doing good, as it were — seems quite distinct from "I will do this even though it will hurt my own interests and perhaps even cost me my life."

Moreover, there is a second grave problem that seems to cripple the project of grounding a universally benevolent morality in naturalism. No atheistic moralist, writes Smith, drawing again on his systematic reading in a wide range of writings from such thinkers,

> successfully explains why rational persons in an atheistic universe should uphold a culture's moral norms *all* of the time. Why not be good when it serves one's enlightened self-interest

> but strategically choose to *break* a moral norm at opportune moments, when violation has a nice payoff and there is little chance of being caught?[17]

For, after all, individual interests aren't — even "enlightened self-interest" isn't — always perfectly aligned with society's interests. Sometimes, in fact, they're diametrically opposed. It's not difficult to imagine cases where public and private interests or priorities would be out of alignment.

Presumably, for instance, it would be in society's interest that a drowning boatload of thirty young honors students be saved. But is it in the individual interest of the people on the shore to risk their lives in order to save those honors students? And would it make any moral difference if, instead of honors students, these were criminals being transported from one prison to another? The public interest in high-quality medical care would certainly not be served were all medical students to cheat their way to graduation. But it might easily be in the interest of an individual medical student, burdened with ever increasing debt and perhaps an ever-growing family, to find a short-cut, guaranteed way to his degree.

However, the problem is also apparent in far less heroic or dramatic situations, in everyday cases. It's the challenge posed by the "sensible knave" in David Hume's 1751 *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and, long before that, by Glaucon's challenge to Socrates in the second book of Plato's early-fourth-century BC *Republic*. What rational objection can a confirmed naturalist offer to someone who chooses to live as a shrewd opportunist, cultivating a reputation for ethical integrity while shunting ethics aside when doing so suits his or her interest? "Recall our atheistic situation," Smith writes.

> There is no objective, external source of moral order, such as God or a natural law. Humans invent morality through learning and social contract to make society function better — to benefit themselves. People are motivated to follow their culture's moral norms because breaking them will lead to punishment in the short run and unhappiness and reduced well-being in the longer run. This kind of enlightened self-interest should produce societies of people who are morally good without God.[18]

17. Smith, *Atheist Overreach*, 25, emphasis in original.
18. Ibid., 26.

But, again, what if our shrewd opportunist can escape punishment and evade damage to her reputation? (Smith sagely observes, by the way, that, for some atheistic moralists, society, with its sanctions, appears to have taken the place of a judging and punishing God.) What if she has solid reasons to believe that her personal well-being will be enhanced and her happiness uninjured (if not actually increased) by violating one or more social rules? While hoping that other people follow traditional moral codes, why shouldn't she feel free to violate them when it serves her interests to do so?

> To use the economist's language, many perceptive people in an atheist universe will be tempted on occasion to "free ride" — that is, let others pay the full fare for the collective benefits of moral order, while they themselves occasionally jump the turnstile while nobody is looking and ride for free.[19]

And Smith raises yet another interesting issue: It seems intuitively obvious, he says, and evident to him as a practicing sociologist, that most people will be more inclined to follow moral rules if they believe them to be objective truths and/or that moral rules have been decreed by an all-powerful, all-observing, and all-judging divine being than if they regard them merely as rules that have been ginned up by society in order to enhance collective (but not necessarily individual) well-being and social functioning. As Thomas Hobbes wrote,

> the laws of nature, as justice, equity, modesty, mercy, and, in sum, doing to others as we would be done to, of themselves, without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like.[20]

Thus, David Hume's sensible knave will not only feel free to violate received moral standards while hoping that others obey them, but will actually prefer that the mass of humankind not discover that morality is a mere human construct, effectively an illusion, designed to minimize social frictions. After all, the authority of the Great and Terrible Oz didn't last very long after his subjects discovered that he was really just a carnival magician and conman named Oscar, from Omaha, Nebraska. Since greater ethical education would seem liable, on an atheistic construal of the matter, to lead not to improved morality

19. Ibid.
20. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 103.

but, rather, to increased moral skepticism and even perhaps to knavery, the moralists of naturalism should, says Christian Smith, oppose moral enlightenment. They should hope that the masses of humanity remain naïve conformists.

Perhaps they should actually, maybe even cynically, encourage ordinary people to believe that morality reflects some sort of natural law, or the Will of God, or the laws of karma, while (of course) they themselves believe nothing of the kind. Perhaps they should tell what Plato, in the third book of his *Republic*, called a γενναῖον ψεῦδος, a *gennaion pseudos* or "noble lie."

Early in that book, Plato's fictionalized Socrates announces that, in the ideal, utopian, authoritarian state that he's undertaken to describe, "it's appropriate for the rulers, if for anyone at all, to lie for the benefit of the city in cases involving enemies or citizens, while all the rest must not put their hands to anything of the sort."[21]

His interlocutor agrees to this, and they proceed. Accordingly, Socrates soon introduces what is often called "the myth of the metals."

"Could we," he asks, "somehow contrive one of those lies that come into being in case of need … some one noble lie to persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, the rest of the city?"

He speaks here in the first person:

> I'll attempt to persuade first the rulers and the soldiers, then the rest of the city, that the rearing and education we gave them were like dreams; they only thought they were undergoing all that was happening to them, while, in truth, at that time they were under the earth within, being fashioned and reared themselves, and their arms and other tools being crafted. When the job had been completely finished, then the earth, which is their mother, sent them up. And now, as though the land they are in were a mother and nurse, they must plan for and defend it, if anyone attacks, and they must think of the other citizens as brothers and born of the earth. …
>
> "All of you in the city are certainly brothers," we shall say to them in telling the tale, "but the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold in at their birth; this is why they are most honored; in auxiliaries, silver; and iron and bronze in the farmers and the other craftsmen. So,

21. Plato, *Republic*, 3:389b. The translation is from Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 67.

> because you're all related, although for the most part you'll produce offspring like yourselves, it sometimes happens that a silver child will be born from a golden parent, a golden child from a silver parent, and similarly all the others from each other. Hence the god commands the rulers first and foremost to be of nothing such good guardians and to keep over nothing so careful a watch as the children, seeing which of these metals is mixed in their souls. And, if a child of theirs should be born with an admixture of bronze or iron, by no manner of means are they to take pity on it, but shall assign the proper value to its nature and thrust it out among the craftsmen or the farmers; and, again, if from these men one should naturally grow who has an admixture of gold or silver, they will honor such ones and lead them up, some to the guardian group, others to the auxiliary, believing that there is an oracle that the city will be destroyed when an iron or bronze man is its guardian."

"Well," Socrates's conversation partner replies, "that would be good for making them care more for the city and one another."[22] In other words, such deception would be good for the collective welfare.

The flat dishonesty that is advocated, and the seeming aroma of what we moderns might term fascism, is difficult to miss in the lines above and, for that matter, in the hypothetical picture of "atheist moralists" seeking, for the good of society, to prevent moral enlightenment among the masses. It's scarcely surprising, in that light, that the eminent Anglo-Austrian philosopher Sir Karl Popper (1902–1994) harshly criticized Plato as a would-be totalitarian and as a major theoretical source for the autocratic tyrannies of the mid-twentieth century — including the Nazi Third Reich that had absorbed his country of birth. The first volume of his two-part 1945 work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* bears the significant subtitle *The Spell of Plato*.

But this is just the sort of thing, according to Christian Smith, toward which a consistent naturalistic moralism might well tend. And, frankly, it puts me in mind of such dystopian fictions as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, and, perhaps most of all, C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*.

If atheistic naturalism comes to be the dominant ideology of a society, though, might not such a course be necessary? Alternatively, if we

22. Plato, *Republic* 3:414b–415d; Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 93–94.

balk at lying, will we eventually feel ourselves compelled to jettison our cherished but untenable belief in universal benevolence and in human rights as "moral facts?" The American Declaration of Independence announces that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." If, however, such things come to seem no longer "self-evident" but, instead, absolutely false, will we need to simply abandon them?

The eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor wonders if many people in the post-Christian West aren't already operating on borrowed moral capital to which they have no proper right, having rejected the religious tradition from which it comes:

> The question is whether we are not living beyond our moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of justice and benevolence. Do we have ways of seeing-good which are still credible to us, which are powerful enough to sustain these standards? If not, it would be both more honest and more prudent to moderate them.[23]

Christian Smith contends that, if atheistic naturalism is true — and please remember that he himself is a Roman Catholic Christian — that is the path that we are logically required to take:

> The atheist moralists are overreaching. An ethics of genuine goodness without God may be possible. But the substantive obligations of such a morality are not what most activist atheists claim they can justify. They will need to lower their standards to fit the premises and parameters that their atheistic universe actually provides. People seem justified in being "moderately good" without God, motivated by a concern about the practical consequences of morality for their own and their loved ones' well-being, understood in terms of "enlightened self-interest" (what I have called a modest or moderate goodness). But rational and intellectually honest atheists do not have good reasons justifying their strong, inclusive, universalistic humanism, which requires all people to adhere to high moral norms and to share their resources in

23. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 517.

> an egalitarian fashion for the sake of equal opportunity and the promotion of human rights.[24]

It's obvious that the naturalistic moralists of whom Christian Smith writes badly want to reach a conclusion that they favor — a universally benevolent morality and the existence of human rights as genuine, objective "facts" — and that their desire reflects well upon them. But is such a morality logically entailed, or even logically allowed, by their overall position? That is the question. And we shouldn't be sentimental about it.

> Recall the features of a naturalistic universe. There is no transcendent natural law or moral force, no divinity, no ultimate spiritual meaning or destiny that transcends human invention during the blip of cosmic time that we humans have occupied. Reality consists of various conglomerations of infinitesimally small particles pulled together by physical forces and processes of emergence that are in a continual state of flux. Matter and energy — atoms, molecules, cells, organisms, light, heat, gravity, radiation — exist. Everything in existence is working itself out by natural forces that are neither designed nor intended nor morally weighted. Everything simply is. Some forces and processes generate certain outcomes; others generate others. Complex substances have slowly evolved. Life has very improbably evolved. Conscious and self-conscious human beings have even more improbably evolved.[25]

This brings us, again, to Smith's question, which I cited earlier:

> If we in fact live in the naturalistic cosmos that atheists and much of science tell us we occupy, do we have good reasons for believing in universal benevolence and human rights as moral facts and imperatives?[26]

Clearly, as I also mentioned earlier, Smith's answer is No. But he insists that we keep three questions distinct in considering this subject. I've paraphrased them as follows:

1. Can people who accept metaphysical naturalism believe in human rights and universal benevolence and act based on such belief? He forthrightly declares that, yes, they can.

24. Smith, *Atheist Overreach*, 42.
25. Ibid., 55.
26. Ibid., 48.

2. Do metaphysical naturalists have good reason, based upon their naturalistic assumptions, to believe in human rights and universal benevolence? Which is to say, is their belief rationally warranted? Here, his answer is no.
3. If his negative answer to the second question is true, will societies and cultures in which that answer becomes widely accepted be able to sustain a committed belief in human rights and universal benevolence over the long term? Here again, his answer is no. He regards it as highly unlikely. "If and when people come to see … 'morals' as mere social conventions," he writes, "the main thing that will then compel their conformity in action is the threat of greater harm for not conforming."[27]

Of course, Thomas Hobbes had already made the same point in the mid-seventeenth century. He was writing principally about political anarchy, but what he said is surely also true regarding the moral anarchy that some feel will arise in the absence of a divine lawgiver or absent a concept of natural law:

> [D]uring the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.[28]
>
> To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues.[29]
>
> No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.[30]

However, the issue here isn't solely the danger that obvious human evils might break out catastrophically in a post-theistic society. Even some conceivably well-intended "reforms" could someday be suggested that many of us conventional moralists would regard as repugnant. Recall, for example, that the extermination of counterrevolutionaries

27. Ibid., 68.
28. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 77.
29. Ibid., 79.
30. Ibid., 78.

and "deviationists" has been a moral imperative under more than one Communist regime and that, for Hitler's National Socialism, the elimination of Jews and Gypsies and the subjugation of Slavs were dictated by supposedly idealistic principles. Christian Smith offers a short list of measures that might potentially be proposed — they are not his proposals — to improve society. I provide an abridgment of his list here:

- "All inveterate drug addicts, incorrigible drunks, and long-term homeless people" should be either forcibly enslaved or euthanized.
- Babies who are born with incapacitating mental or physical defects, or who, though healthy, are unwanted, should be allowed to die.
- Elderly invalids and long-term patients in mental hospitals and insane asylums who show no promise of recovery should be permitted or assisted to die.
- Serious repeat criminals, if allowed to live, should be sterilized.[31]

For most of us — including me and Christian Smith — such suggestions would be abhorrent. But why? And on what naturalistic basis could one rationally argue against them? Smith is unpersuaded that, in an atheistic, naturalistic world, there would be rational grounds for opposing these and similar policy suggestions.

> [I]t is not clear that in a naturalistic universe there *are* normative sources that exist apart from people. Matter and energy are not a moral source. They just exist and do what they do. The natural processes that govern the operation of the cosmos are not moral sources. They are simply the givens of physics and mathematics, elemental facts of natural reality lacking inherent meaning or purpose or normativity. Positive and negative electrical charges do not attract one another because that is right or just, they do so simply because that is simply how they work. The evolutionary development of substances and life forms is not a moral source. These also just happen as they happen. What then in naturalism's cosmos could serve for humans as a genuine moral guide or standard, having a source apart from human desires, decisions, and

31. Smith, *Atheist Overreach*, 71–72.

> preferences and thus capable of judging and transforming the latter? I cannot think of any.[32]

In closing, I want to clearly say that such concerns as those raised by Christian Smith don't prove that there is a God, let alone that the claims of the Restoration are true. One might still conclude that, sadly, we live in a godless (and therefore objectively valueless) world. But they do strongly suggest that rejecting the existence of God comes at a substantial cost.

Happily, we here at the Interpreter Foundation don't live in an atheistic, naturalistic universe. So, it's both my pleasure and, yes, my duty to express my gratitude and appreciation to the authors, reviewers, designers, source checkers, copy editors, and others who have created this volume of *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, as well as all of its 48 older siblings. I particularly want to thank Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, who currently serve as the two managing or production editors for the *Journal*. Like every other leader of the Interpreter Foundation, they volunteer their time, their talents, and their labor; they receive no financial or other compensation. Yet *Interpreter* would not appear and the Interpreter Foundation could not function without their considerable effort. I'm also deeply grateful to all of the other Foundation volunteers and to the donors who supply the funds that are essential even to a largely volunteer organization.

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32. Ibid., 69, emphasis in original.