

Answering Michael Martin's "Atheism, Christian Theism, and Rape"

Michael Martin is to be commended both for addressing an important issue, the ethics of rape (though he is actually responding to Christians who challenged atheism) and, more significantly, for compelling Christians to defend the standards of Mosaic law in order to defend the character of the Christian God. His is exactly the kind of argument atheists should use. If the Bible is God's Word, then its teaching about social law, even in the Old Testament, should reflect the character of the One who revealed it. Atheists are right to pressure Christians to defend what they believe. And if the Bible is what it claims to be, Christians have nothing to fear. Indeed, as a matter of historical fact, it has often been through the pressure of those who opposed Christianity that the Church has progressed.

Martin advances three contentions. First, that Christians cannot prove that atheistic ethics is necessarily subjective. Second, that Christians themselves cannot escape "Euthyphro's Dilemma." Third, that the Biblical teaching on rape displays an attitude toward female victims that is "insensitive and chauvinistic."

Is Atheistic Ethics Subjective?

The first point requires more attention than we can offer in a short essay, especially if we try to take into consideration not only the authors Martin cites who favor an objective atheistic ethic, but also the arguments concerning the positions of John Mackie and the Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne. We cannot address this adequately in this essay, especially since it is not particularly important for our main point.

To state my opinion simply and directly: I cannot even begin to imagine how an atheist can establish "objective" ethical standards on the basis of a worldview that assumes the ultimately impersonal nature of reality. Why? Because ethics, in the nature of the case, is fundamentally personal. Ethical thinking must take into account things like purpose and motivation. It is necessary, for example, to be able to distinguish killing intentionally and unintentionally, killing for self-defense and killing for pleasure, killing other persons and killing insects.

Now, it seems to me that in a world which is nothing more than chemicals accidentally organized in various and sundry configurations, there can be no conceivable "objective" meaning to any personal concern. Personhood, whatever else it might be, would be an accident. Persons as such could have no essential right to survive, to progress, or to advance on the scale of evolutionary development. In the evolutionary scenario, a human being is a distinctly organized set of chemicals that includes chemical combinations which give the subject a feeling of "selfhood." But there is no special meaning to this experience. Like all other species, the human race faces eventual extinction, if not in the nearer future, then in that far, far future when the universe itself freezes over.

Until then, as long as we survive, “personal” concerns are not essential to the “objective” chemical structure of the universe. The “objective” world of chemistry, which does not, and cannot, take into account things like motives or purposes, other than as chemical combinations, cannot provide commandments, standards, or condemnation. No particular behavior is chemically evil, none is chemically good. On the presuppositions of materialism or naturalism, the very highest “ethic” one might attain would be “the bias of the breed.” Behavior x, y, or z benefits the human race — our favorite species! — in ways a, b, or c. Humans would pursue what is best for the survival of their species as a matter of instinct. Which means that our bias would have a biological basis. That is, I suppose, “objective” in a certain sense of the word, but this is clearly not what most people have in mind when they speak of *ethics* as “objective.”

What Martin seems to have in mind is the kind of ethical reasoning that he suggests in this essay. Rape “violates the victim’s rights, it traumatizes the victim, it undermines the fabric of society, and so on.” Of course, an atheist could observe these things as easily as a theist. And an atheist could earnestly contend against rape for reasons of this sort. But in so doing, he seems to take a great deal for granted that is not defensible on the presuppositions of atheism. The kind of reasons Martin suggests sound more like a Christian hangover than “objective” reasons. Also, it is notable that as a matter of fact, very few societies in the past have had any notion of “rights” and not a few people today deny the Western notion of rights, including the officially atheist society, communist China.

From a Christian perspective, I can comprehend and defend the notion of the “victim’s rights.” I am concerned about the relationship of crime to the fabric of society and so on. My Christian concern about such things is grounded in the fact that I believe human beings are created in God’s image. They are not merely animals who talk. Humans are special and must be treated differently from animals. This means that in the Christian worldview, we are permitted to kill and eat cows, but we may not kill and eat our neighbors.

But in an atheistic evolutionary view of the world, humans are animals — just another species. If there is nothing special about the human race, except perhaps that they are stronger or more intelligent than other species, why should human rights be somehow more important than cows’ rights? What basis is there in the evolutionary worldview for treating humans differently?

Peter Singer, for example, understands very well the implications of an evolutionary view of the world in which God does not exist and man is not God’s image. He writes:

“There have been cultures, especially in the east, that have held that all life is sacred, including the lives of non-human animals. There have been other cultures that have had a much more restricted view of the sanctity of life, punishing only the unprovoked killing of a member of the tribe or national group, and accepting as ethically unproblematic the killing of outsiders, or of unwanted newborn infants. The western tradition is unusual in its emphasis on the sanctity of every human life, but only of human life.”¹

Singer believes in animal liberation. He thinks that it has already been conclusively demonstrated that great apes are “persons” and that someday it may be possible to prove that whales, dolphins, elephants, monkeys, dogs, pigs, and other animals are persons, too.² Interestingly, with a perverse twist of evolutionary logic, Singer argues that we should both

¹ Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), p. 165.

² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

extend what we now regard as human rights to the animals and also, at the same time, revise our notions of human rights to allow for such things as infanticide.³

One might, however, on the same grounds, argue not for an extension of human rights to animals, but for the opposite — the extension of animal behavior to humans. One might argue, in other words, for the entire elimination of the notion of “ethics,” whether for humans or for animals, on the grounds that it endangers our species. Let the fittest survive. This doesn’t have to mean random murder. On the presuppositions of evolution, why couldn’t one argue for allowing the demonstrably superior individuals — intelligent, healthy, etc. — to kill not only biologically defective infants, depressed elderly, mentally retarded, and others who fit the category of unwanted “persons,” but also to reduce the population of pollution creators by killing and eating whomever among our overly reproduced race has the kind of biological predispositions that lead to that species-weakening prejudice which is called “religion”?

When it comes to a question like rape, one would think that there may be more biological reasons for allowing humans to conform to their animal cousins than for trying to force dogs, cats, and bats to adopt the custom called monogamy found in some human societies. How Peter Singer intends to manage this aspect of his animal liberation, I am not certain. At any rate, monogamy as an institution has no basis in biology *per se* and seems to be indefensible on evolutionary grounds. Prohibitions against rape in the West are the result of the influence of the Bible and its monogamist ideal of marriage. Once the Biblical ideal of sex as an expression of marital love is eliminated, who is to say what is right or wrong in the area of sexual relationships? Or again, if it could be proved that sadism has as much a biological basis as homosexuality is thought by some to have, why shouldn’t a sadist be allowed to express himself?

Why should any strong, healthy animal of the species known as *homo sapiens* be forbidden by anyone to fulfill any particular biological urge? Because it violates someone’s rights? What are rights? Whatever they are, rights must be defined by some individual or group. For rights to have any actual social meaning, they must be imposed. Usually that means there must be an elite faction who will decide what is right and who can impose its own ideas of rights on the rest. Who shall be the elite? Whoever has the power to impose his will?

I do not know of anything in the atheist’s view of the world that would enable the atheist to offer a truly *ethical* answer to this kind of problem. I can imagine long debates about what is really best for the survival of our species, but what I cannot imagine is a moral reason for our species to survive which is grounded in the atheist’s evolutionary worldview. We are not really talking about ethics when we argue about what is best for survival. Any view that tries to give man rights that are not available to the animals seems to be the function of a Christian hangover or, even worse, that deep-seated irrational prejudice termed “speciesism.”⁴

Although this is a digression, I hasten to add that being an atheist does not necessarily transform a person into a moral monster. I am not trying to suggest that Martin or any other particular atheist has some hidden conspiracy to kill people or that atheists are all immoral. On the contrary, some atheists are nicer than some Christians. An atheist may be honest, hard working, and kind. Nor is this a paradox or a contradiction of the teaching of Christianity. For the Bible teaches that all men are created in God’s image and that all men reflect the moral

³ Ibid., p. 128-131.

⁴ Singer tells us that the term was coined by Oxford psychologist Richard Ryder in 1970 and that it is now in the Oxford English Dictionary. It is defined as “discrimination against or exploitation of certain animal species by human beings, based upon an assumption of mankind’s superiority.” It is, Singer explains, essentially the same as racism. Ibid., p. 173.

character of God, to a greater or lesser degree, regardless of what they believe. Even though the human race has fallen into sin, men still manifest, though in a distorted fashion, their Creator's goodness.

In addition, just as some men have greater gifts and ability in music or business, other men are born with greater ability at self-control, a kinder disposition, etc. What might be called "ethical propensity" is not distributed according to one's faith. A cruel vicious man may be an atheist or a theist. It is not the teaching of the Bible that each individual who disbelieves in God will become morally rotten, though it is the teaching of the apostle Paul that an idolatrous society will suffer gradual moral decline over time. Paul is talking about the long term social corruption of groups, he is not saying that every individual non-Christian becomes radically evil.

What difference does faith make, then, to the individual? The man who is born with the tendency to be cruel and vicious, must, if he becomes a Christian, fight against that tendency and seek to become ethically like his Creator and Savior, kind and loving. He must repent of his cruelty and attempt to eradicate it from his life. An atheist may or may not take a similar course of action. But there is nothing in his atheism that requires him to do so. Faith in the Christian God entails the pursuit of righteousness and conformity to His will, but rejection of faith in the Christian God does not entail the pursuit of goodness. Faith that the universe is ultimate and that man is an accident of the natural process of evolution carries with it no particular moral obligations that I can imagine.

Finally, I also wish to add that there may be a certain sense in which it is fair to say that Martin actually does have "an objective ethic." For atheists are created in God's image. They can look at personal relationships and discern what is loving and what is not loving. Generally speaking, modern atheists will be able to define love very much in the same way that Christians do because most modern atheists live in societies with a Christian conscience. Martin knows that his own views of right and wrong are profoundly influenced by the Christian history of the West and that other peoples in other places had views significantly different. But, as a Christian, I believe that in many respects his views are closer to being "objectively" correct than the views of those other peoples. In this sense, Martin does have "objective knowledge" of ethical truth, because he reflects the fact that He is created in the image of the tripersonal God by often expressing ethical judgments that accord with the Christian's conscience.

The problem is, it seems to me, that Martin cannot provide an adequate justification for his ethical observations. When one asks why we ought to be ethical, why ethical notions like goodness make any difference whatsoever for an animal who has accidentally emerged from the primordial soup, Martin cannot provide the kind of answers that ground whole societies and civilizations.

Euthyphro's Dilemma

Martin's argument about Euthyphro's Dilemma is important. If, as Martin asserts, Christians cannot answer "Euthyphro's Dilemma," then his conclusion would follow: Christians have nothing more to offer than atheists in the way of an ultimate foundation for ethics. Though this may not prove Christianity to be false, it would demonstrate that Christian metaphysics offers no advantages in the philosophy of ethics — certainly contrary to what one would expect from a religion that teaches God is an absolute Person, the Creator and Lord of all things and a God who has revealed His righteous character in the ethical teaching that He gave to Israel and His Church.

What is called "Euthyphro's Dilemma" comes up in dealing with the question, "Why is it [rape] wrong?" We can see the nature of the dilemma through this question. Martin first describes what he understands to be the options for Christians. A Christian may answer that rape is wrong because God condemns it. But that provokes the question, why does God condemn rape? The Christian might answer that God condemns rape because rape "violates the victim's rights, it traumatizes the victim, it undermines the fabric of society, and so on." However, according to Martin, all of these answers could be made by an atheist — though I have doubts, as I said above, about the atheist's basis for claiming that matters like "rights" are important. At any rate, if it is just a matter of appealing to reasons of this sort, Martin contends, one does not need God to condemn rape. Anyone with ethical sensibility can see the harmful effects of rape and the reasons it should be condemned.

On the other hand, Christians may say that rape is wrong because God condemns it and that God has no reasons outside of Himself for this condemnation. In this case, it is God's condemnation of rape that defines it as wrong. If God had not condemned it, it would not be wrong. The basis for condemnation is simply God's will. But this, according to Martin, is not an objective ethical ground for condemning rape, for if God had recommended rape, it would be good. It is all a matter of God's arbitrary will, not a matter of objective principles of good and evil. If that is what Christians believe, their ethical philosophy offers nothing attractive to the atheist, especially to the atheist who believes that he does have objective grounds for condemning rape.

In this discussion, Euthyphro's Dilemma appears to be the dilemma faced by the man who claims that God is the ultimate source of ethics. When a believer makes such an assertion, he is either professing faith in a standard that one might know without knowing God, or professing faith in an arbitrary standard in God. Neither view advances the cause of faith.

Martin refers to John Frame and Greg Bahnsen, who claimed that Euthyphro's Dilemma can be avoided. If ethics is grounded in God's character rather than simply on His condemnation of certain acts, then we have both an objective ground for ethics in the character of God while at the same time ethics is based upon His revelation in Scripture. Goodness means being like God and we know what is like God because He Himself tells us in Holy Scripture.

But for Martin, this position is not clear. In his view, Bahnsen "suggests both that something is good because God approves of it and that God approves of it because it is good." This is said to be contradictory, but the contradiction may not be immediately apparent. To clarify the problem, Martin restates the matter in terms of what "caused" rape to be morally

wrong. If rape is wrong because God condemns it, then God's condemnation of rape caused rape to be wrong. On the other hand, if God condemned rape because it is wrong, then God found something bad in rape that caused Him to disapprove of it. Which is it? Is rape wrong — caused to be wrong — because God condemned it, or did God condemn rape because rape's wrongness caused Him to condemn it? Christians may take either one of these two positions but not both at the same time.

Furthermore, according to Martin the problem may be restated in terms of God's character. Is God's character good because it conforms to some standard of goodness or is God's character good simply because it is God's character? If God's character is good because it conforms to some standard of goodness, then goodness itself exists as an objective notion apart from God. There would then be no inconsistency for an atheist to deny the existence of God and still appeal to that standard of goodness as an objective ethical standard.

On the other hand, if Christians say that goodness is defined by God's character, then whatever God is or does would be good by definition. If God were cruel and unjust, He would still be "good" because whatever He is and does is defined as good. This is certainly not what Christians want to say. They will affirm that God is necessarily good and not cruel or unjust. But, Martin points out, that seems to presuppose some idea of goodness exists outside of God, otherwise we could not know whether He is being good or cruel. We are brought back to objective standards of goodness outside of God's character.

Though I have simplified his argument, I think I have accurately presented Martin's point. He believes that with this argument he has demonstrated that Christians cannot escape Euthyphro's Dilemma and that the Christians' belief in an objective ethical standard actually argues for the possibility of an atheist's affirming an objective ethical standard as well.

How, then, shall a Christian answer Euthyphro's Dilemma? First, it seems to me that the atheist faces a similar dilemma, in a form that forces us to question the nature of the dilemma itself. After all, if the Christian God cannot be considered the ultimate source of ethics and must be judged either good or evil in terms of some standard outside of Himself, what shall we say about the atheist's ultimate standard for ethics? Is it good because it conforms to some notion of goodness outside of itself, or is it good just because it is good? If Martin's use of Euthyphro's Dilemma applies to his own objectivist ethic as well, all we have here is an invitation for both theist and atheist alike to play the infinite regression game.

Second, that being the case, it seems to me that Euthyphro's Dilemma, especially in the form presented by Martin, is actually not what it appears to be. In other words, Martin's notion of Euthyphro's Dilemma reduces to a verbal game. It is presented in the language of a question about ethical standards, but what it really does is offer a clever way of challenging the notion of an absolute standard of truth and righteousness in God. There are other questions similar to this, like the well-known, "If God can do anything, can He make a stone so big that He cannot pick it up?" What appears on the surface to be a question about power is really a question of whether or not God is the kind of being who can contradict Himself. The answer is no. Thus, Euthyphro's Dilemma, as employed by modern atheists, seems to be about ethics, but it is really nothing more than a denial that God is absolute, like the question "If nothing comes from nothing, who created God?" These sorts of questions are nonsense in the context of the Christian worldview. God is ultimate and absolute. To ask who made Him or whether He learns right and wrong by looking at some standard outside of Himself is to ask a question that includes hidden presuppositions which deny the Christian notion of God.

As I pointed out above, if the atheist is going to have some sort of objective ethics, he can only offer an abstract standard which is subject to the same kind of questions that he poses to Christians. How do we know that this standard is true? Is it true because it conforms to some other standard of right, or is it true just because it is true? We are on the road to an infinite regress. If the atheist answers that we must, in the nature of the case, stop the questioning somewhere, and that the standard he is suggesting is an *ultimate* standard, beyond which there can be no appeal, it is clear that he is merely confessing faith in an impersonal ultimate other than God. There is nothing in this answer inherently more rational than the Christian answer. Moreover, an impersonal ultimate that is supposed to provide standards for what is inescapably a personal issue offers its own contradictions. At any rate, it is decidedly inferior to an ultimately personal solution.

If Martin claims that he is only appealing to the pragmatic realities of human living and the rights that all men ought to have, we would have ask him why people ought to have rights, why we have any moral obligation to live in a manner that promotes the welfare of man, and so forth. In other words, we have to find ethical justification for the ethical notions that appear in his reasoning about rape. And this leads eventually to the same sort of infinite regress that we pointed out above. But we will return to this problem later.

There is another issue that seems to me relevant to the whole discussion: modern atheists who appeal to Euthyphro's dialogue are not being altogether accurate. For when we actually read Plato's dialogue, Euthyphro's Dilemma is significantly different from the kind of problem that Martin presents. In Plato's dialogue, Socrates, surprised that Euthyphro has such assurance in his knowledge of good and right that he can accuse his own father of murdering a servant in what might be considered an ambiguous case, asks Euthyphro to teach him the true nature of piety. "Rare friend! I think that I cannot do better than be your disciple."

Euthyphro explains to Socrates that "Piety, then, is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them." Socrates is happy that Euthyphro has addressed the real issue, even though the answer requires more thought. "Very good, Euthyphro; you have now given me the sort of answer which I wanted. But whether what you say is true or not I cannot as yet tell, although I make no doubt that you will prove the truth of your words."

The dialogue continues:

Socrates: Come, then, and let us examine what we are saying. That thing or person which is dear to the gods is pious, and that thing or person which is hateful to the gods is impious, these two being the extreme opposites of one another. Was not that said?

Euthyphro: It was.

Socrates: And well said?

Euthyphro: Yes, Socrates, I thought so; it was certainly said.

Socrates: And further, Euthyphro, the gods were admitted to have enmities and hatreds and differences?

(Note: Socrates first questions Euthyphro's view of ethics on the grounds that the gods are not actually united in their view of what is right.)

Socrates: But what differences are there which cannot be thus decided, and which therefore make us angry and set us at enmity with one another? I dare say the answer does not occur to you at the moment, and therefore I will suggest that these enmities arise when the matters of difference are the just and unjust, good and evil, honorable and dishonorable. Are not these the

points about which men differ, and about which when we are unable satisfactorily to decide our differences, you and I and all of us quarrel, when we do quarrel?

Euthyphro: Yes, Socrates, the nature of the differences about which we quarrel is such as you describe.

Socrates: And the quarrels of the gods, noble Euthyphro, when they occur, are of a like nature?

Euthyphro: Certainly they are.

Socrates: They have differences of opinion, as you say, about good and evil, just and unjust, honorable and dishonorable: there would have been no quarrels among them, if there had been no such differences — would there now?

Euthyphro: You are quite right.

Socrates: Does not every man love that which he deems noble and just and good, and hate the opposite of them?

Euthyphro: Very true.

Socrates: But, as you say, people regard the same things, some as just and others as unjust, about these they dispute; and so there arise wars and fightings among them.

Euthyphro: Very true.

Socrates: Then the same things are hated by the gods and loved by the gods, and are both hateful and dear to them?

Euthyphro: True.

Socrates: And upon this view the same things, Euthyphro, will be pious and also impious?

Euthyphro: So I should suppose.

Socrates: Then, my friend, I remark with surprise that you have not answered the question which I asked. For I certainly did not ask you to tell me what action is both pious and impious: but now it would seem that what is loved by the gods is also hated by them. And therefore, Euthyphro, in thus chastising your father you may very likely be doing what is agreeable to Zeus but disagreeable to Cronos or Uranus, and what is acceptable to Hephaestus but unacceptable to Here, and there may be other gods who have similar differences of opinion.

The portion of the dialogue quoted above clearly suggests that Euthyphro's Dilemma in Plato is something very different from Euthyphro's Dilemma as presented by the modern atheist. A plurality of gods with different opinions about what is good and evil is no doubt a hard problem for Euthyphro, but modern Christians do not believe in a multiplicity of gods with differing opinions. So, when Socrates makes statements like the following, we are not addressing a worldview analogous to the Christian's.

“Well then, my dear friend Euthyphro, do tell me, for my better instruction and information, what proof have you that in the opinion of all the gods a servant who is guilty of murder, and is put in chains by the master of the dead man, and dies because he is put in chains before he who bound him can learn from the interpreters of the gods what he ought to do with him, dies unjustly; and that on behalf of such an one a son ought to proceed against his father and accuse him of murder. How would you show that all the gods absolutely agree in approving of his act? Prove to me that they do, and I will applaud your wisdom as long as I live.”

Now, it is true that the dialogue doesn't stop with the problem that the gods have different opinions, but this overwhelming fact is the basis on which the whole dialogue is built, even when, in the next step in the discussion, Socrates suggests to Euthyphro that he should amend his view of piety.

Socrates: “I will suppose, if you like, that all the gods condemn and abominate such an action. But I will amend the definition so far as to say that what all the gods hate is impious, and what they love pious or holy; and what some of them love and others hate is both or neither. Shall this be our definition of piety and impiety?”

Although we have now a definition of piety that requires that all of the gods agree, the gods who are in agreement here are penultimate beings. None of them is absolute; none is transcendent. It is, then, with regard to the sort of gods that ancient Greeks believed in that Socrates asks the question that modern atheists employ.

“The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.”

We are not surprised that Euthyphro finds this question very difficult.

Socrates: And what do you say of piety, Euthyphro: is not piety, according to your definition, loved by all the gods?

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: Because it is pious or holy, or for some other reason?

Euthyphro: No, that is the reason.

Socrates: It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved?

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: And that which is dear to the gods is loved by them, and is in a state to be loved of them because it is loved of them?

Euthyphro: Certainly.

Socrates: Then that which is dear to the gods, Euthyphro, is not holy, nor is that which is holy loved of God, as you affirm; but they are two different things.

Euthyphro: How do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates: I mean to say that the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved of God because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved.

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: But that which is dear to the gods is dear to them because it is loved by them, not loved by them because it is dear to them.

Euthyphro: True.

Socrates: But, friend Euthyphro, if that which is holy is the same with that which is dear to God, and is loved because it is holy, then that which is dear to God would have been loved as being dear to God; but if that which dear to God is dear to him because loved by him, then that which is holy would have been holy because loved by him. But now you see that the reverse is the case, and that they are quite different from one another. For one (*theophiles*) is of a kind to be loved because it is loved, and the other (*osion*) is loved because it is of a kind to be loved. Thus you appear to me, Euthyphro, when I ask you what is the essence of holiness, to offer an attribute only, and not the essence — the attribute of being loved by all the gods. But you still refuse to explain to me the nature of holiness. And therefore, if you please, I will ask you not to hide your treasure, but to tell me once more what holiness or piety really is, whether dear to the gods or not (for that is a matter about which we will not quarrel) and what is impiety?

Euthyphro: I really do not know, Socrates, how to express what I mean. For somehow or other our arguments, on whatever ground we rest them, seem to turn round and walk away from us.

These gods that Socrates and Euthyphro are debating about cannot be the final court of appeal. Their opinions, their likes and dislikes, and their ethical commands are all open for rational question precisely because they are so utterly unlike the Christian God. The dilemma that Euthyphro faces, therefore, comes from the fact that the gods he wishes to recommend cannot be the answer to Socrates' questions. If Euthyphro answers that the gods approve of what is good because it is good, he is back to the starting point, trying to answer questions about the essence of the good which the gods approve of. Without the Christian God, Euthyphro does indeed have a dilemma, but neither Socrates nor Euthyphro had any notion of an absolute, transcendent Creator. Even if such a God had been part of the discussion, Socrates would no doubt have had questions, but not the questions we know as Euthyphro's Dilemma, for those questions do find an answer in the Christian God.

It is interesting to note, finally, that the atheists' gods — the human race or some special group of humans — tend to disagree as frequently and violently as the gods of ancient Greece. An atheist seeking to establish an objective ethic is in a position quite analogous to that of Euthyphro. Atheists cannot agree among themselves either on the philosophical issues related to ethics or on the practical problems related to deciding ethical right and wrong in human society. Assertions about "rights" sound good, especially to people with a Christian hangover who want to have Christian-like ethics without being burdened with the Christian God. But all of these ethical ideas must be justified. The atheist with his multiple deities cannot find his way to an ethical standard for society. He must find some essence on which all the gods can agree. Thus, all the problems that Euthyphro faced seem especially to belong to the atheist with his penultimate pantheon.

This brings me to my third and most important point. The Christian has an answer to Euthyphro's Dilemma because the Christian God is absolute and transcendent. In addition, it is important to stress that ethical standards are related to God's character in a much more specific way than many Christians have argued. What I am referring to is the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is the true source for specifically Christian ethics. The Christian answer to Euthyphro is found in an ethic of love specifically grounded in the fact of God's triunity.

First, according to Jesus, the very essence of the Christian ethic is found in the two great commandments that summarize the whole law of God.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Mat. 22:35-40)

Second, this ethic of love is grounded in two important truths. The first is that God is a God of love. The second is that we have been created in His image. For us to do what is good is to conform to God. In so doing, we fulfill the meaning of our creation and become like God Himself.

Third, God is a Trinity. God is one Being in three eternal Persons. The Father, Son, and Spirit are a society bound in covenantal love. Each gives Himself wholly to the others. And all share in their love for the others — the Father and Son sharing together their love for the Spirit, the Spirit and Son sharing their love for the Father, and the Spirit and the Father sharing their love for the Son — so that the Trinity is a perfect fullness of love. It is clear that in this understanding of God, He could not be other than what He is, not only because it is ontologically inconceivable for God to be other than what He is, but also because of the fact that for the Persons of the Trinity to relate to one another any other way would mean the dissolution of the Trinity itself. The love which God commands is not arbitrary for it is grounded in the ontological and ethical necessities of His own being.

For a man to be ethically right means to do what pleases God. God is one. The Father, Son, and Spirit never disagree about what is good or right. Pleasing a sovereign Creator to whom we are responsible for our whole lives is something quite different from pleasing, or attempting to please, the gods of ancient Greece. All relationships with other persons as well as our stewardship over the non-personal creation are first of all and primarily to be understood in terms of our relationship with God. That is what it means for Him to be an absolute Creator and Lord.

At the same time, relationships with other persons are the second priority. We are to love others as we love ourselves. What that means exactly in the everyday affairs of men is spelled out in the law of Moses. Though the law of Moses was given to ancient Israel for her use in the land of Palestine until the coming of the Messiah, the ethical teachings of that law are still relevant for us today for they show us concretely the meaning of love.

Would Socrates have posed the same kind of questions about this kind of God? He certainly could not have referred to jealousy and strife between the Persons of the Trinity and questioned our ability to know what pleases God, as if what were pleasing to the Father might not be pleasing to the Son. If he understood the Christian notion of God, he would not have asked how God knows what is good. God is love essentially and inescapably. When He commands what is right, we are to do it because it is pleasing to Him. Could He command us to do the opposite of what is loving? Not without ceasing to be Himself, for He is a God who subsists in three Persons who are equally ultimate, powerful, wise, and holy. What is right is what is loving and what is right and loving is what pleases the God of love who cannot be other than what He is. Euthyphro's Dilemma does not seem to be relevant. Though we still have questions about defining what is right and loving in a particular situation, the Christian answer is that God has revealed the way of love in His Word.

To return to the example at hand, is rape wrong — caused to be wrong — because God condemned it, or did God condemn rape because rape's wrongness caused Him to condemn it? In part, it is a matter of perspective. First, we know that rape is wrong because God condemned it. If we had no other reason for thinking it wrong, that would be enough, for in the nature of the case, the command of an absolute God is the highest court of appeal. At the same time, it is legitimate for us to ask why God condemns rape. We cannot suspend our obedience to the commandments of God upon our attaining what we consider to be a satisfactory answer, but it is never wrong to ask why and to seek understanding. The simple answer is that rape is violating another person. It contradicts both the basic love commands. It is a sin against God since the other person is created in God's image. It is also a sin against that person. Not loving a person is failing to treat that person with the honor and respect that God's law commands.

What about the question, Did God's command "cause" rape to be wrong? I think not. Did God condemn rape because it violated some standard of right? Yes. But that standard of right is

God Himself. Rape is a contradiction of the kind of love that characterizes the Persons of the Trinity and is therefore also a contradiction of the kind of love that men are commanded to show toward one another.

The Christian answer is that what is right is what is pleasing to God, but what is pleasing to God is not arbitrary, for God is a God of love who cannot be other than what He is. He Himself is the love which He commands us to reflect in our personal relationships. Ethical conformity to God Himself is the essence of Christian ethics. Christ has an answer to Socrates' question about the essence of piety, the true definition of what is right: first, to love God with all our being, and second, to love others as we love ourselves. This is the essence of what is good and right, for to do so is to be like God.

Finally, the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in this regard may be illustrated by considering the problem for those religions and philosophies which conceive of God as a monad, like Judaism, Islam, and many of the modern cults. In this conception, God is one being and one person. No personal plurality in God Himself means that from eternity there is no love, goodness, kindness, or any other essentially ethical quality, for all of these words define how persons relate to one another. For in a monad, there are no personal relationships. If we conceive of God as a monad, there are fundamental problems in understanding how God can be the source of ethics. The notion of a monad existing eternally alone, neither needing or seeking fellowship or love, hardly suffices as an ultimate source for an ethic of love. Indeed, such a conception of God is closer to the notion of an impersonal absolute than it is to the Biblical and Christian belief in God as totally and radically personal.

For the Christian, then, saying that God is Himself the source of ethics is not simply philosophical speculation about where one can find absolute standards. It is confession of faith in the Father, Son, and Spirit who love one another from eternity. No doubt this is a position that we hold by faith based upon revelation in Holy Scripture. Though Christians believe that no other faith offers the kind of transcendent ground and eternal meaning for ethics that Christianity does, we did not come to believe in the Triune God because He answers our philosophical needs. We were drawn by the Holy Spirit to the Father because He loved the world and sent His Son to die for our sins and rise again to give life to those who believe.

The Biblical Teaching on Rape

Martin's third argument may actually help modern Christians grow in their understanding of the Bible. For there are not a few who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament and may be tempted to answer Martin hastily with "That was the Old Testament, we don't follow the Old Testament any more." This kind of answer is a grave mistake. Although the thinking it represents may be more common than it ought, those who offer this answer have seldom considered what it implies. To begin with, it implies that in the Old Testament era God gave Israel a morally inferior law. Even if this is excused in part by appealing to Israel's cultural immaturity, the problem remains that God, on this view, condones immorality, or at least a grossly inferior morality. This is utterly inconsistent with the Biblical doctrine of God as a holy God.

As we saw above, the heart of the Biblical teaching about ethical righteousness is found in the very law that God gave to Israel in the "holiness code," which defines holiness for the people of Israel (Lev. 17-20). There God commanded Israel, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself:

I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18b). It is significant that just a few verses before this, God commanded Israel not to oppress those who are weak.⁵ In fact, protection of and care for the weak is one of the basic and frequently repeated themes of the Mosaic law (Dt. 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19; etc.).

What Jesus taught to be one of the two commandments that define the very essence of the law, Leviticus 19:18b, is found in a context that includes clear teaching about what it means to love one’s neighbor, especially the weak neighbor. The law gives particular attention to the subject of care for the weakest members of society, because without special protection, they tend to be oppressed. This is the broader context of Biblical law, within which we must seek to understand the laws that deal with rape. For ancient Jews were not ignorant of the fact that some laws were “weightier” than others (Mr. 12:32-33). They well understood that the most basic requirements of the law — the obligations to love God first and our neighbor as ourselves second — color the entire law and serve as the key to its correct interpretation.

Condone Rape?

With this in mind, consider the passages that Martin quotes. First, he says, certain passages “seem to tacitly sanction rape.” He refers to Numbers 31:18 — “But all the women-children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.” — and suggests that “Moses encourages his men to use captured virgins for their own sexual pleasure, i.e., to rape them.” This interpretation not only violates the very heart of the law and its commands to care for the weak, including specifically “the alien” (cf. Lev. 23:22; etc.), it also contradicts the whole point of the immediate context.

The very reason that Israel is going to war here with the Midianites is that their women have seduced Israelite men to participate in idolatrous sexual rites. Moses complains about the problem of Israelite men and their sexual involvement with these pagan women in the verses immediately preceding vs. 18, which Martin claims is a call for the Israelites to rape the virgins (cf. Num. 31:13-17). Also, Martin is bothered by the fact that God Himself “rewards Moses by urging him to distribute the spoils.”

It is very difficult to know what to say when someone ignores the context so utterly and interprets the passage in a manner that is so far outside the bounds of literary reason. According to Martin, we are to understand that Moses, immediately after rebuking the Israelites for their sexual immorality with Midianite women encourages them to rape the virgins. We are also to believe that God, who had just blasted Israel with plague for her sexual immorality with the Midianite women (Num. 24), suddenly decides to condone immorality. This sort of hermeneutics tells us less about the text of Scripture than it does about the interpreter.

Is there perhaps an interpretation that does more justice to the immediate context and also fits in with the basic notions of righteousness in the law? Yes, there is — though it may be almost as offensive to modern readers as Martin’s. The young women are referred to among the “spoils” of the war because the law of God allowed Israel to make slaves of those defeated in war. Female slaves would have been highly valued, especially by Israelite women, because they helped to decrease the burdens of cooking and cleaning — time consuming and difficult tasks in the ancient world. Moses did not permit the women who were already involved in the idolatrous

⁵ I know that some feminists might be offended at the implication that a rape victim be regarded as “weak,” but the fact is that women are generally physically weaker than men in terms of muscular strength. I think that we can assume that usually rape involves the oppression of a weaker person by one who is stronger.

sexual rites of the Midianites to become slaves. Younger girls, however, could be taken as slaves and put under the management of Israelite women to aid in household duties. There is nothing in the immediate or larger context that even remotely suggests that Moses or God condone rape.

Martin's first objection is based upon an interpretation of the passage that hardly makes sense, either in the immediate context or the larger context of Jewish law. He has not really offered us a possible interpretation of Scripture and criticism based upon such an interpretation.

Concern for the Victim

Martin's second objection to the Biblical teaching about rape is that "in the Old Testament the woman's rights and her psychological welfare are ignored." He quotes Deuteronomy 22:28-29, "If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days." According to Martin, the victim of the rape here is "treated as property of the father." He also thinks that "the woman apparently has no say in the matter and is forced to marry the person who raped her." Finally, he adds "if they are not discovered, no negative judgment is forthcoming. The implicit message seems to be that if you rape an unbetrothed virgin, be sure not to get caught."

This passage is more difficult, especially for someone like Martin who is not well acquainted with the nature of Biblical law. To begin with, Martin may be misled by the modern notion of "law." The word "law" is probably not the best translation for the Hebrew word "torah," especially if modern readers take this to imply that what Moses wrote was something like what we think of as a civil law code. Moses is not writing a civil code *per se*, nor is the law of Moses written so that each "law" spells out all of the details that concern a particular case.

This means, among other things, that when we read what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 22:28-29, we need to compare this passage with other passages in the *torah* to get the whole picture. Some of the things that Martin is concerned with are simply not addressed in this passage. Without comparing Deuteronomy 22:28-29 to other passages dealing with similar issues, one's interpretation can only be superficial and misconstrued. For example, the book of Numbers (36:6) addresses one of Martin's objections when it refers to the right of the daughter to marry the man who is "good in her eyes." Especially when understood in the larger context of the Bible's teaching about daughters and marriage, this passage clearly indicates that daughters had a say in whom they would marry. Nothing in the law anywhere suggests that a father can force his daughter to marry against her will. Presumably Martin has read this into the passage because he has certain presuppositions about what ancient "patriarchal" Israelites *must* have thought.

If his suggestion that a woman "apparently" had to marry the man her father chose is the expression of a bias, his comments about getting caught are just plain strange. To begin with, the Hebrew word translated "found" in Deuteronomy 22:28 is often used in legal contexts and implies that the crime can be proved. That this is the meaning here, too, is rather obvious. Which is to say that the importance of investigation and obtaining proof is what the law here refers to. But Martin misses the point and offers the bizarre comment, "Notice also if they are not discovered, no negative judgment is forthcoming. The implicit message seems to be that if you rape an unbetrothed virgin, be sure not to get caught." If it were legitimate to conclude here

that the “implicit message” is “be sure not to get caught,” we might say this is the implicit message of any criminal justice system that requires careful investigation before conviction.

Laws about murder also require careful investigation. Is the implicit message, “Don’t get caught”? I suppose one might say that since modern courts require evidence to convict people of crime, the “implicit message” is, don’t leave evidence behind. No doubt from the perspective of the criminal, that is the implicit message! However criminals may view things, their perversity may not be made into an indictment of our modern criminal justice system or of that of ancient Israel.

Martin’s notion that the daughter here is treated as property of her father is another example of misunderstanding the law, the place of a daughter in ancient Israel, and the role of social customs such as the dowry. The payment required here is rather large (cf. 2 Kings 15:20) and is a penalty, not simply a regular marriage present. Nothing in this passage implies that the daughter is the father’s “property,” as if she is here being sold for money.

Beyond the misinterpretation of these matters, Martin misses two of the most important points of the passage. First, the girl here has not been “raped” in the way that we think of rape. Ancient Israel was an agricultural society. People lived in villages in which everyone knew their neighbors. The case being described here is not analogous to our modern situation where a total stranger violently attacks a woman. Rather, it is like what has been called “date rape.” The young woman knows the man who forced himself on her. If the crime can be proved, she has the choice of forcing him to be hers (eye for eye justice), if she so wishes. She may also refuse, in which case the man would have to pay a heavy fine without obtaining a wife (cf. Ex. 22:16-17).

Second, if the girl does decide to marry the man, “he cannot divorce her all his days.” This is an important aspect of the punishment for the man. He *must* marry the woman, providing for her for the rest of his life. By saying that he cannot divorce her, *de facto* control of the family is put in her hands. She cannot be “forced to submit to him” after they are married. Even if she disobeys him, refuses to take care of the house, or even refuses to live with him, he has no right of divorce. Thus, he will have to win her affection and submission, or suffer her lordship. Again, the principle of eye for eye justice comes to play in the judgment.

This, then, is a law that takes date rape much more seriously than we take it in the modern world. This is not an example of the Old Testament showing light regard for the woman’s rights. On the contrary, her rights are protected and her future is guaranteed.⁶

Another law in the same context discusses what Martin calls “the raped of a betrothed virgin in a city.” Martin has almost entirely misunderstood the passage. First, the passage is not referring to rape simply, but distinguishing rape from adultery. In a case in which a woman has cried out for help, the judges may assume it was rape and the offender is put to death. But in a case in which the woman did not cry out, it is assumed that it was not rape at all, but consensual sexual relations. In that case, it is adultery. The penalty is death for both offenders, if the victim so decides (It appears that in Biblical law the victim has the right to decide whether or not the death penalty should be executed on the offenders, but that is another topic. I will not get into it here).

Are there cases in which a woman cannot cry out? No doubt there may be. What about those cases? Is the woman guilty of adultery anyway? Not at all. It must be remembered that

⁶ Since the question of rape committed by a total stranger is not part of this law about “date rape,” we might ask how the law of Israel treats it. The answer is that rape of that sort is never spoken of directly. It seems to me most likely that violent rape by a stranger would have been dealt with according to the laws about kidnapping and assault, for which the maximum penalty would be death.

the laws of the Bible are not modern statutes that criminal lawyers can play games with. The law of Moses functioned more as instruction in righteousness and wisdom that provided ethical standards for the civil law of Israel than as a civil law itself. Judges, moreover, had far more discretion in applying the law than do judges in the modern world. What was clearly required was careful investigation and a just decision. It would not at all have been legally difficult for a judge in ancient Israel to decide that a rape had occurred, even though the victim had not cried out. He would only need good reasons for making the judgment, such as, for example, bruises on the victim's face indicating that the man who violated her prevented her from screaming out, or evidence that he placed a knife at her throat, threatening more serious violence if she did cry out. Given the village structure of ancient Israel, the judges' knowledge of the young woman and her family would often be sufficient basis for accepting her testimony — not to mention that in most cases they would also know the perpetrator of the crime.

In the rather similar case of the woman in the open country, her testimony alone is apparently adequate to determine that the man has raped her. The language is significantly different, verse 25 speaking specifically of “forcing her,” language not found in the previous section dealing with the city. Here, in other words, Moses is not trying to distinguish between rape and adultery. Rape is assumed to be the case. No doubt proof of some sort would still be needed, since the importance of investigating a crime and obtaining adequate proof, one of the hallmarks of modern justice, is a repeated theme of the law of Moses. But the passage specifically makes provision for the woman's situation. She does not have to offer proof of her innocence, like she does in the city. Moreover, the law indicates that the woman who is a victim of rape is like the man who is a victim of murder. She is encouraged not to feel guilty. There is no fault on her part. Certainly this has implications for her inward healing from the experience.

It is true, as Martin says, that the Bible does not specifically mention the “psychological harm” done to the victim. However, this is not only true in the case of rape, it is true in the case of every other crime that the Bible deals with. This is not to conclude that God doesn't care about the “psychological harm” done to victims. Martin himself notes that in an historical passage outside the law, the story of Amnon's rape of Tamar, the psychological pain of the victim is described. In historical passages, in the Psalms, and in the books of the prophets, there is ample material addressing the suffering and pain of all sorts of people. In other words, the Bible does not deal with psychological pain in the law, but in a different and more appropriate context.

What we have seen, then, is that Martin has not adequately understood either the specific laws that he cites or the larger context of Biblical law. The interpretations he suggests involve gross neglect of the immediate passage in some cases and basic ignorance about the teaching of the law in general. Even more, Martin exhibits a profound and blinding prejudice. Ancient Israel's law is not what Martin makes it out to be. On the contrary, Biblical law is sensitive not only to the situation of the raped woman — publicly pronouncing her to be as innocent a victim as one who has been murdered — but also to the great difference between date rape and violent rape. In the larger context of loving all our brethren and giving special care to the weak, the laws about rape are no less enlightened than the laws of any land in our day.

Conclusion

Michael Martin claims that Euthyphro's Dilemma cannot be answered by Christians. I have tried to show that 1) on Martin's view of ethics, Martin himself faces Euthyphro's Dilemma; 2) Euthyphro's Dilemma is probably not what it seems on the surface to be; and 3) Christians do have an answer to Euthyphro.

The Triune God is necessarily a God of love. Therefore, the ethic of love was central to His revelation to ancient Israel. When Jesus answered the lawyer's question about the greatest commandment, His answer came from Moses' law and included these definitive words, "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." According to Jesus, everything in the law of Moses is expounding the way of love. The Mosaic laws about rape must be interpreted as laws that expound the meaning of love in a world of sinners.

Martin's comments on the laws of Moses entirely neglect this dimension. He is also guilty of neglecting the immediate context of the laws, distorting the plain meaning of the words, and grossly misreading the purpose of these laws. What he has offered is an example of a man with a deep bias against the teaching of the Scriptures reading ridiculous meanings into the text which he then ridicules as ethically inferior.

But he has also challenged modern Christians to consider the laws of Moses and understand them clearly. The laws of Moses belong to the Christian Bible. They must not be neglected or forgotten. Christians need to consider each of these laws in its original context and in the light of Jesus' teaching, for the law is the way of love. Though we are not *under* the Mosaic covenant, the revelation that God gave to ancient Israel is still God's word and therefore "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:16-17)