The evil of absolutes

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While I was doing my PhD at Tübingen University, one of my duties was to correct, edit and, sometimes, offer my opinion on various articles, book chapters or presentations my PhD supervisor was working on at that time. She is, among other things, part of the Ethics Council that advises the German government,[1] and as it so happens my PhD (which I handed in this April) fell into a time where VAD was, once again, one of the issues they repeatedly dealt with. I was too immersed in my research to follow precisely what caused this renewed interest, but I did read her statements and presentations, as well as those of several other members of the German Ethics Council. What struck me then—and still does—is the lack of attempts to define the basic perimeters, especially the implicit assumptions, inherent in the discussion rather than go straight into the detailed problems or individual cases. It is, in a way, just the way I see the world. The big connections and most fundamental questions and definitions were (sometimes to the frustration of my supervisor, who had to read through hundreds of pages of argument and grand project ideas) always the ones that I found the most interesting. Indeed, they are, for me, what makes theology one of the most fascinating pursuits there is because it's precisely the space where those kinds of questions can be asked—albeit not always answered. No natural science, by definition, has that kind of dizzying and exhilarating overview. So what I'm going to offer here is not a concrete, case- or legal-based argument (which many others like my supervisor have done and can do better),[2] but—hopefully—a better understanding of the overarching perspective within which both sides operate.

The basic theological premise at the root of the discussion not only of VAD but also related issues like abortion, the death penalty, bio-ethics (e.g. stem-cell research) or, at the beginning of the 20th century, eugenics and euthanasia is life as an—or maybe the—ultimate value in Christian ethics. As a result, these very diverse questions often get mingled together both in public and academic debate as though they were all essentially interchangeable, which can—and did—lead to some logically very adventurous results. Euthanasia especially and its connection to Nazi-ideology has had a profound effect on the German attitude towards both abortion and VAD, for example.[3] Even someone who doesn't know anything else about Christianity will very probably be able to repeat the

1 https://www.ethikrat.org/en/.

2 For an example by my supervisor, which was one of those written during the debate, see: Elisabeth Gräb-Schmidt, 'Ein neues Verständnis von Selbstbestimmung: § 217 StGB und das christliche Menschenbild,' *Analysen & Argumente* 418 (Nov 2020), https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/7995358/Paragraph+217+StGB+und+das+christliche+Menschenbild.pdf/e7676d7b-aeb9-15cf-5865-9e5ddd615222?version=1.0&t=1605523962091.

3 Ferdinand von Schirach (grandson of Nazi-Youth leader and one of the main perpetrators of the Holocaust in Vienna Baldur von Schirach) captured this very well in his play, which was also written in the course of the 2020 debate after the new law was passed and subsequently very influential in that debate: Ferdinand von Schirach, *Gott: Ein Theaterstück* (Berlin: btb Verlag, 2021), 36–38; 76–77.

claims of those protesters who declare the 'defense of life' as the core truth of Christianity on things like the 'March For Life'.[4] This is one of the reasons why it is fundamentally important for academic theology and philosophy of religion to carefully examine this part of Christian ethics especially and offer some long-overdue reactions to it because it continues to do irreparable damage to real, human lives based on half-knowledge.

The (theo)logical root of the assumption of life as the greatest value within the framework of Judeo-Christian thought is the notion of the creation of all life through YHWH. The most famous image is the description of YHWH literally blowing his breath through Adam's nostrils to make him a 'living being' in Gen 2:7 (we'll come back to that shortly). As Creator, He is the one who both gives individual life and takes it, and any attempt by a created being to do the same is an attempt to 'play God', play the part of the Creator and influence something that is His and His alone. The most familiar actualisation of this theoretical framework is, of course, the fifth of the so-called ten commandments 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17). In Gen 9:4–5 and the later sacrifice laws of Leviticus, animals are explicitly included in this—humans are only allowed to kill them within very specific, clearly defined contexts.[5] Interestingly, this extends to animals killing humans (and, presumably, each other), as well, as Gen 9:5 shows. Death, it seems, is viewed as a profound rip in creation that permanently mocks the majesty and glory of the Creator, which is also visible in the fact that YHWH is, for most of the Hebrew Bible, viewed as exclusively the God of the living.[6]

Many psalms try to bargain with YHWH by telling him that they are not going to be able to sing his praises or worship him in the Sche'ol (the Jewish, Hades-style afterlife).[7] Because of that, Ecclesiastes and other wisdom-literature advises people to eat, drink and enjoy their youth because with death, everything—even the relationship to YHWH—ends.[8] In early Christianity God's connection with life was further extended and, in some senses, redefined, through his involvement in Jesus' resurrection (e.g. Romans 8:11 - a concept we know to have probably originated within the last two centuries before Jesus' birth). It became intrinsic to His very definition: He was now not primarily the God who led Israel out of Egypt but the God who raised Jesus from the dead and will raise everyone who belongs to Him. Like Adam—and with him all his descendants—was temporarily animated by YHWH's breath, so all who belong to Jesus will be animated by YHWH's (and Jesus') spirit (Romans 8:11) which is already present in them through that connection, after their bodily death (Romans 8:11; see also Paulus' great resurrection-discourse in 1 Corinthians 15:1–58). But even a very brief examination will show that there are two major problems with equating this with 'life' as an absolute value in general:

4 For a statement of the self-understanding of this initiative of so-called 'pro-life' anti-abortion activists which is supported by many Catholics and Evangelicals as well as some fundamentalist groups in the US see: https://marchforlife.org/; the German Lutheran Church, on the other hand, has officially distanced itself from it and, thankfully, doesn't take part in the German version of this initiative.

5 Lev 1:1–7:38.

6 Ps 30:10; Ps 88:11; Ps 115:17.

7 E.g. Ps 30:10; Ps 88:11; Ps 115:17.

8 Ecclesiastes 9:1–12; this attitude is also referenced—very critically—in Isa 22:12–14.

a) contrary to the biblical record I just very briefly laid out, most popular interpretations of this Christian value of 'life' are—without further explanation—exclusively focused on human life while the life of other animals is still defined only in relation to its usefulness or otherwise to humans. In many countries there are still barely any restrictions on lab experiments with mice or other animals, for example.[9]

b) even granting this violent anthropocentrism, regarding 'life' as an absolute value carries with it the intrinsic danger of pantheism or, at least, equating God with biological processes, which in turn poses massive problems in an age of advanced intensive care, abortion and in vitro fertilisation. Problems which, at least in my view, are easily avoidable. YHWH was the God of the living, but he was never, on any Jewish or Christian view that I know of, identical with life or the biological processes (like procreation and death) connected to it. Indeed, the stories of women like Hannah (1 Sam 1:1–20), Sarah (Gen 17:17–19; 18:10–15), Rebecca (Gen 25:21) or Mary in the New Testament (Luke 1:26–38) show that God is actively involved only in cases where there are biological barriers (like infertility) or where the resulting child is destined for a special purpose—like being a king or a prophet (e.g. John the Baptist in Lk 1:15–17). As David's affair with Batseba shows (2 Sam 11:1–27), the texts are also aware of cases where neither the woman nor the man nor YHWH want the biological consequences of that affair to happen as well as of the link to patriarchal structures that permeates this side of the debate. 'Creation'—which is the precise term God is defined by even in the creeds—is something that by its very definition transcends biology or physics. In medieval theology this was emphasised by the notion of '*creatio ex nihilo*'. One theologian (Friedrich E. Schleiermacher)—in the context of the so-called science vs. creation debate in the 19th century—defined it very succinctly as the 'Gefühl der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit' (the notion of absolute dependency).[10] It is one of the great ironies that now, of all times, all of this is ignored by many Christian groups in favour of extremely simplistic and naturalistic views which are not only irrational and not founded in the text but, as we shall see, actually dangerous. Part of my PhD, for various reasons, was to immerse myself in Nietzsche's writings and I, like most others, became fascinated by how completely he ripped apart any logical securities with regard to morality. He was not the first (or the last) to do so, but he was probably the most consequent and this—not the famous 'God is dead' quote, which was a part of it—is his most chilling, philosophical legacy whose reverberations can still be felt.[11] Sometimes he sounds as though he scared himself with what he found. This may not sound like it has anything to do with what we're concerned with here, but bear with me.

It is impossible to do him justice in a few sentences, but basically his argument was

9 In the US, for example, 'purpose-bred' mice as well as a number of other animals such as frogs and turtles are not protected by even minimal legislation: https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/animals-used-experiments-faq (last accessed 7 July 2023).

10 Friedrich E. Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundlagen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhang dargestellt*, ed. Rolf Schäfer, Vol 1 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 210–12.

11 It is practically impossible to pick up a book about the problem of evil in both philosophical and theological debate where Nietzsche is not mentioned; a pretty recent example is Werner Thiede, *Der gekreuzigte Sinn: Eine trinitarische Theodizee* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 93–93.

this:[12] He started from two well-known points that had been floating around discussions in moral philosophy and theology for centuries, at least since Plato: Firstly, the common human experience that, at least sometimes, following certain moral premises takes conscious effort and comes up against internal barriers although they (the moral premises) should be, as many philosophers have maintained, logically obvious and therefore absolutely compelling for any individual with the capacity for rational thinking. Secondly, the equally common human experience is that often the ones who don't follow apparently obvious moral premises are more successful or, more flatly put, that doing bad (objectively) pays off while doing good often results in (objective) disadvantages. The underlying assumption that doing good should lead to rewards while doing bad should lead to punishment is called the 'act-and-consequence connection'.[13] It goes to the very basis of any human understanding of 'justice' and, indeed, was so important that Kant made it the starting point for his famous moral argument for the existence of God: Even though he (God) can't be proven by experience, the fact that many objectively good people suffer in this life makes it necessary to assume that there is a being who guarantees the validity of the act-and-consequence connection by offering the reward—or punishment—in the next life.[14] This was also the foundation of medieval theology, where the majority of people let unimaginably poor lives full of disease, hard work, war and early death, exploited by the thin percentage of the elite: Your reward, so the church and theology told them, will be in heaven (or hell) and in that, all were equal, the king and the beggar alike. But on what basis are those moral distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' themselves to be made? As Nietzsche points out, there are many possible conceptions of morality and views of morality that have changed over time and from culture to culture, sometimes dramatically.[15] And, like both Kant and Nietzsche realised, there is no a-priori reason why one of them should be more 'objectively true' or 'objectively false' than the other unless the basic authority guaranteeing them is seen as 'objective'. Every worldview has such a foundational authority. In the case of theistic models, that authority is God. And, even more importantly: Once we accept this authority, it is very difficult to change into the rational framework of another worldview or interpretative perspective because it becomes part of our own rationality. But that also means that if God or any other objective, foundational (moral) authority is completely removed from all of these worldviews and perspectives, all morality necessarily becomes relative in the sense that

12 The main work in which Nietzsche develops this argument and on which the following is mainly based is *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*.

13 The 'act-and-consequence connection' is, as its name already implies, the wide-spread assumption that every morally relevant act should, either immediately or at least at some point in a person's existence after that act, have the appropriate positive or negative consequences. A morally 'good' person should be spared from pain, sickness, loss, poverty etc. while a morally 'bad' person should be 'punished' for their moral wickedness. As this is a very schematic and, in important senses empirically naïve view of our world, it has already been criticised in antiquity, most famously in the Servant Song in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 and the book of Job.

14 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft*, ed. Horst D. Brandt and Heiner F. Klemme, Philosophische Bibliothek 506 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2003), 174.

15 Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 1988), 88–216.

it now becomes anchored in the individual itself.[16]

Here Nietzsche goes back to problem 1 (the fact that we often come up against internal resistances and/or have to make a conscious effort to follow ethical premises that should be 'obvious' while acting against them often comes 'naturally') and makes it the basis for his solution: That resistance we feel (or don't feel) with regard to certain moral premises is the only moral certainty we can have. And those feelings in turn are rooted in our desires—for power, for sex, for food. Any morality, like one of the available Christian ones,[17] that tries to denounce obvious individual and collective human desires as 'morally bad' is, as he said, a 'slave-morality' that artificially oppresses the strong ones, who have the power to actually realise their desires, in favour of the weak ones who are jealous because they lack that power. For him, Christianity is the high-point of this unnatural worship of weakness, humbleness and self-denial (that is why he paints such a scathing picture of Jesus' message of 'love', as he calls it, and makes it sound, paradoxically, like something incredibly violent). When Darwin's theory of evolution came around, that view seemed to be scientifically bolstered: Biological development is based on 'survival of the fittest' and, therefore, essentially death and the fulfilment of desires. The capacity for non-discriminating violence and killing actually became a measurable, verifiable scientific fact, the foundation of one of the fundamental mechanisms that shape our world. Whether *Tyrannosaurus Rex* or *Homo Sapiens*, earth was, to our knowledge, always ruled by the fiercest, most vicious apex predators, not the gentle ones.

Especially after the First World War—which, above all in the Europe it ravaged - was seen as an unprecedented, complete collapse of all previous moral, political or social certainties—philosophers, biologists, theologians and members of the newly-born discipline of psychology increasingly started to come back to Nietzsche's conclusions. They, in turn, did not arise in a vacuum. Ever since Plato there had been sometimes fierce philosophical and theological critiques of the view that human beings possessed instinctive knowledge that could be fine-tuned through rigorous, rational analysis. In theology, this was, at least up to the 18th century, often based on the concept of (original) sin and its fundamental influence on human nature itself that seemed to fit the empirical evidence perfectly.[18] In their own way, both Kant and, among others, Rousseau paid their

16 The character of 18th century-born vampire Lestat de Lioncourt in the 2022 AMC TV show *Interview With The Vampire* once put this very succinctly (albeit with a slightly different emphasis) by saying 'Every one of them is capable of abomination, even the ones worthy of admiration. (…)Thrust them into circumstance, whisper to them their Lord God and Saviour is not listening and you will see all kinds of depravity.' (*Interview With The Vampire*, Season 1 Episode 3 [the first scene]); Kant (like Plato and many others of that line) did think that humans have an intrinsic capacity for morality and moral understanding, but in the context of the actual world where, as he admits as well, clearly not all people use that capacity he'd agree; (see Kant, *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft*, 175–76)

17 There are, as in any worldview, sometimes significant differences between various forms of Christian thought both among various exponents of Christian thought in academia and church today and over the course of the history of Christianity from a historical point of view.

18 A good basic overview of the concept of original sin and especially Augustine's influence on it and following Christian thought is Friedrich Hermanni, *Das Böse und die Theodizee: Eine philosophisch-theologische Grundlegung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002), 36–44; and Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve: The Story That Created Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 64–120.

dues to that viewpoint, because, in effect, both recognise that human beings very often behave in irrational ways that seem to confound any idea of moral 'instincts'.[19] They just disagree on why. Kant, like Plato before him, basically chalks it up to an unwillingness to think (a line which would later find another, famous proponent in Hannah Arendt and her 'banality of evil'). Rousseau, on the other hand, sees the development of social and political structures and their moral strictures (in the form of laws) as the root of all evil and thereby became the inspiration for the so called 'social' models of moral evil and sin in psychology, theology and philosophy. One of them was Freud,[20] who also saw all morality as intrinsically artificial and, like Nietzsche, identified our instincts and desires as our only really empirically demonstrable, primary sources of both morality and motivation, but—contrary to Rousseau and his other successors—that didn't lead to a critique of all political or social structures. On the contrary, he saw them as a thin—if violent and brutal—veneer on top of the broiling magma stream of our instincts and desires that kept catastrophes like World War I from happening more often. Otherwise he too thought the world would be ruled by 'the strong' and their desires—which was the actual 'natural' state. There was no other morality. In conceptual terms, this view of evil is, as I just mentioned, often called 'social' or 'collective' evil. Nietzsche's kind of evil, the third basic kind, would be 'rational evil', which basically means that, as we just saw, both 'good' and 'evil' can, either within the same or from different overarching perspectives (or worldviews), be just as convincingly rationally justified and there is no clear 'objective' criterion to prove either argument wrong outside of the individual perspective. In one sense, the Nazis were 'simply' the most radical, political actualisation of that widespread view. And, indeed, there have always been exceptions to the apparently obvious view that life per se is an objectively 'good' moral value. I've already mentioned the killing of animals. Likewise, war has always been exempt from that life-as-the-greatest-value-view in almost all cultures and world-views. There were even 'holy wars' that were seen as morally good by Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) theologians, in spite and sometimes even because of the killing they brought with them. Israel's conquest of YHWH's promised land in the Hebrew Bible is such a war,[21] as are the famous Crusades of the early Middle Ages. It was only after the moral monstrosities of the First and Second World War that an attempt has been made to set down explicit rules for warfare and, importantly, to establish courts where those rules can be legally enforced.[22] Importantly for VAD, modern theology and philosophy have begun to question the assumption that death is intrinsically morally 'bad'.[23] One theodicy model, for example, has used it as one of its central arguments in an obviously positive way: Yes, there are horrifying, objective evils in this world—so it

19 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social ou Principes du Droit Politique* (Amsterdam, 1762); Kant, *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft*.

20 See above all his essay *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*.

21 See the account in the book of Josua and its ties back to Exod 3:17.

22 For an overview of this legal background see: Gerd R. Ueberschär, *Der Nationalsozialismus vor Gericht: Die alliierten Prozesse gegen Kriegsverbrecher und Soldaten 1943–1952* (Berlin: Fischer, 1999).

23 See e.g. Hermanni, *Das Böse und die Theodizee*, 84–85; famous examples in German theology are, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Dorothee Sölle (for a brief overview of their thought see Thiede, *Gekreuzigter Sinn*, 244–245 n. 44).

goes—but at least we can die. So any torture or other evil we experience is necessarily limited by the fact that, at some point, we will die either as a direct result of the experience or from old age. Even if our torturer is particularly sadistic and makes sure never to kill us, at some point our biological time is up and we'll die. It might be years or decades, but we'll die and the suffering will end.[24] This idea is not new but was famously endorsed by the Stoics who held that freedom in choosing one's time to exit the world (either because the suffering was unbearable or for other reasons) is the only real freedom a human being possesses.[25] They saw it as a fundamental part of human dignity that can never be taken away. Even in apparently hopeless situations, a human being who wants to die can find a way. That choice—and that ultimate dignity—will always be there, if someone really wants it.

Now this general relativity in morality has one obvious consequence, which is also the essence behind the biblical concept of sin: If no morality can ever be 'objectively' proven outside of the particular world-view and its foundational authority, there is always the theoretical—and often very real—possibility that our conceptions are wrong. On the other hand, accepting a fundamental, moral authority, if it is taken seriously, means to really cede all our authority to that authority. In the biblical texts and laws this is emphasised by the fact that it is YHWH alone who has the right to punish, no human agent (Deut 32:35). He is the one—and the only one—who will decide on the good-ness or otherwise of every human being and their actions. That is, for example, the thought behind the 'cities of refuge' in the Hebrew Bible where someone who had murdered someone (especially if it was an accident) could flee and be protected from the vengeance of his victim's family (Numbers 35:25.31–34; a logic which can also be seen in the story of Cain, where Cain is protected by YHWH himself from anyone who wants to kill him after he kills Abel; Gen 4:15). The final really important implication of all we've just said, with which I'll close my thoughts, is one that may seem obvious but is often forgotten: Any moral premise—and I mean any, even an apparently 'objective' one—becomes morally bad if it is set absolute. Nazism, among other things, showed that in all its terrifying possibility. It becomes, through that focus on abstract absolutes, intrinsically inhuman (even while, in this case, claiming to support human life).This is not meant to say that respecting and protecting life—all life—isn't, generally, a very commendable goal or that the Christian emphasis on this value hasn't led to some good results like the fact that in most countries you aren't likely to be hanged or guillotined anymore no matter the crime. But it has also led—most recently in the USA—to the perpetuation of patriarchal structures and the deaths of thousands of women through a denial of basic human rights and to intolerable situations in palliative and intensive care.[26] Often, these laws cause doctors to act against their own instincts for fear of being convicted if they don't (as most

24 Alvin Plantinga, 'The free will defence,' in *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), and *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983).

25 For an overview see, for example, *Die Philosophie der Stoa: Ausgewählte Texte*, transl. and ed. Wolfgang Weinkauf (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2001), 317–327.

26 See e.g. Jennifer Wright, 'Why a pro-life world has a lot of dead women in it,' *Harpers Bazaar*, 20 June 2017, https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a10033320/pro-life-abortion/ (last accessed 7 July 2023).

recently in the case of a young woman in Poland[27] and the same is true for VAD). Any morality—just like any worldview—needs room to evolve, to incorporate new situations and new challenges into its overarching rationality. Without that, it becomes destructive, laughable and irrelevant.

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27 For this latest case see Weronika Strzyżyńska, 'Protests flare across Poland after death of young mother denied an abortion,' *The Guardian*, 29 Jan 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/27/protests-flare-across-poland-after-death-of-young-mother-denied-an-abortion (last accessed 7 July 2023).