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Chapter Three

The Trans-Religious Ethics of *Kingdom of Heaven*

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[3.0] Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) immerses the viewer in the philosophical and cultural worldview of the Crusades by taking the point of view of the true believers, both Christian and Muslim, who fought for possession of Jerusalem. That worldview is a thoroughly religious one, with religion touching every aspect of life, and virtually all human experience mediated through the filter of religious beliefs. But while taking a religious point of view, *Kingdom of Heaven* can also be seen as subversive of any conception of ethics as wholly religion-based. In place of this conventional religious view, the film suggests that morality falls within the domain of natural law rather than revealed law; in other words, there are some higher principles that people can agree on despite their religious differences, rather than assuming that ethics are divine commandments revealed, either directly or indirectly, only through one's God.

[3.1] As is dramatized on an epic scale in *Kingdom of Heaven*, a dangerous consequence of the belief that ethics are revealed is that such a view can lead to intolerance and cultural conflict between religious communities, since different religions have different value systems—contrasting beliefs about what God has ordained as right and wrong—while also often believing in the absolutism of their own values. If ethics are mandated by God, then our ethics cannot be wrong, nor can they be adapted when encountering peoples with ethical beliefs that are contrary to our own. *Kingdom of Heaven* rejects this view by privileging universal ethical principles (such as mercy, tolerance, compassion, benevolence, and generosity, as well as love, fairness, self-control, and reasonableness) over ethical principles exclusive to either Muslims or Christians. The characters that we most identify with in the film,

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including noble characters of the opposing religions, all embody these higher principles. As such, Saladin (Ghassan Massoud) can be cast as the “good Muslim” to Christians because he adheres to ethical principles that transcend those of his religious faith. Likewise, from the Muslim point of view, Balian (Orlando Bloom) is the “good Christian,” despite his heretical religious views.

ETHICS REVEALED

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Standing in contrast to the “good” characters in *Kingdom of Heaven* are antagonists such as Guy de Lusignan (Marton Csokas) and Reynald de Châtillon (Brendan Gleeson), who together break the peaceful truce through such actions as raiding and pillaging Saracen caravans. Our sense that Guy and Reynald are bad guys while King Baldwin (Edward Norton) and Saladin are good guys, turns the ethical spotlight on ourselves by raising the following question: how do we know what is good and what is bad? This, it turns out, is a deeply philosophical question, one that can be distilled down by dividing it into two separate questions: What determines right and wrong? and, How do we come to know the difference? These are the fundamental questions of ethics, questions which *Kingdom of Heaven* leads us to reflect on. The first question has a simple answer for twelfth-century Muslims and Christians alike in *Kingdom of Heaven*: divine authority determines what is good and bad. Among theologians, the view that divine authority is known directly is often referred to as the Divine Command Theory, which, as eloquently summed up by philosopher James Rachel, “says that ‘morally right’ means [arbitrarily] ‘commanded by God,’ and ‘morally wrong’ means [arbitrarily] ‘forbidden by God.’”¹ Put another way, God’s arbitrary will is good, and all else is bad.

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If the first of our questions about ethics (What determines right and wrong?) was easy to answer for twelfth-century Jews, Muslims, and Christians, the second question (How do we come to *know* what is right and what is wrong?) was much more difficult. Not all ethical precepts come to us from above, written on tablets of stone as did The Ten Commandments. How does one learn right from wrong for everything else that falls within the moral sphere? More poignantly, how do we know to be skeptical when—echoing Reynald’s battle charge of “God wills it!” before attacking a Saracen caravan—Guy de Lusignan and the Knights Templar chant, “There must be war. God wills it!”² The virtuous characters Balian and Saladin may doubt the veracity of claims about God’s will such as these, but not even they are told directly by God what is the right thing to do. “God does not speak to me,” laments Balian, who has come to Jerusalem seeking forgiveness. Though believing that their God is the source of ethical principles, neither man re-

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ceives special moral instruction from God, and so must acquire their knowledge of right and wrong in other ways. Knowing right from wrong, then, is also an epistemological question, a question of how we know what we know.

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An ongoing debate in both Christian and Muslim societies throughout the time of the Crusades was whether ultimate truth was reasoned, discovered, intuited, or revealed. Is reason the superior path to truth, or is practical experience the better guide? Or are higher truths (such as God's will, or right and wrong) things a person just knows, either by intuition or divine revelation? In developing a natural law theory of morality, the virtually unrivaled medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) emphasized a rational approach. We know what is right and wrong—even though God does not speak to us in a special way—by appealing to reason, because “human morals are spoken of in relation to reason” and ethical matters “belong to the natural law inasmuch as they are regulated by reason.”³ Aquinas is making the case here for what theologians would call “general revelation,” in which truth and ethical principles are discovered, reasoned, and known through natural means. In contrast to this way of knowing is “special revelation” through supernatural means, a way of knowing splendidly presented by influential Islamic philosopher and Aristotelian, Al-Ghazali (1058-1111).

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Al-Ghazali argued that since the senses can be easily deceived and our reasoning is often fallacious, that the most reliable source of truth is through revelation. Empirical methods are unreliable since our eyes are not even capable of detecting the movement of a gnomon's shadow on a sundial—and yet it moves! Likewise, reason is not an infallible guide, since syllogistic sophistry is commonplace and arguments based on pure reason are riddled with paradoxes. Zeno's paradoxes, for example, seemed to prove by syllogistic reasoning and against common sense that motion was impossible. Revealed truth is surely a more reliable guide than proofs and arguments such as these, concluded Al-Ghazali, and truth is revealed either through mystical insight or through the Qur'an, an infallible source of revealed truth.⁴

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Aquinas agreed with Al-Ghazali's argument that written revelation is a source of revealed truth though—in addition to regarding as infallible a different, substantially discrepant collection of scripture—privileging reason over mystical insight. Though explaining how Christians can come to know ethical truth in the absence of direct revelation, Aquinas's reason-privileging approach shares with Divine Command Theory and Al-Ghazali's mysticism the assumption that our knowledge of good and evil must come, *ultimately*, from God Himself. In the absence of continuous and direct revelation, however, the lingering question for the religiously faithful is (as suggested by Aquinas's naturalistic line of inquiry): what are the more reliable *indirect* means of knowing good and evil? If through religious authorities (mediated revelation) or scripture (written revelation), then how can Balian and Saladin both come to similar conclusions about higher ethical principles when con-

sulting, as with Aquinas and Al-Ghazali, clergy and scriptures that are not only distinct but often contradictory? "You cannot say," King Baldwin instructs Balian on the matters of moral responsibility and moral authority, "But I was told by others to do thus." For believers of either faith, ethical precepts ultimately come from God, but just as important is the belief that, as moral agents, our ethical behavior must ultimately come down to personal responsibility.

Believers of all three Holy Land faiths might seek divine guidance on a specific ethical dilemma through prayer—often itself conceptualized as happening through the intercession of an intermediary, such as the Virgin Mary—but knowledge of more general ethical principles is garnered primarily in other ways. Among these is another, often unexamined, means by which we come to distinguish good from bad. Mainly, we are born into it. That is, we are born into an ethical worldview that we become acculturated to from an early age. Just as none of the people raised by Christian parents in Balian's home village in France would likely come to adopt Islamic religious beliefs and practices, so none of them would likely adopt an ethical worldview in which killing Christians (for whatever religiously-motivated reason) was the will of God. Yet Crusaders from that same village would likely share the belief of the pilgrim stationed outside of Messina who proclaims to those on the road to Jerusalem, "To kill an infidel is not murder." This is the great ethical dilemma for which the Crusades stand as a metaphor in *Kingdom of Heaven*. If ethical principles are universal, and revealed truth the most reliable means of knowing what is right and what is wrong, then why do different faiths so often come to opposite conclusions about what is ethical? How, that is, can religion conceived as the sole source of universal values lead us into a clash-of-values with anyone? Such vexing questions need not necessarily lead us to reject the notion that some values can be considered universal, but they do lead us to question how it is that we know which values are universal and which are not. What, we might ask, is the basis of the shared ethical principles that people of both faiths are agreeing on, when, in *Kingdom of Heaven*, Christians come to accept that a Muslim character can be good despite his faith—and vice versa? And if at least some ethical principles are trans-religious rather than specific to a particular religion, then how do we know what those universal principles are?

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WHAT OUGHT WE TO DO?

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The question of whether there are higher ethical principles that are shared by those with opposing religious beliefs is part of a long-standing philosophical inquiry about the nature and very existence of universals: ethical principles that are true for all people everywhere. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) thought

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that such universals existed, and that they could be reasoned out as “categorical imperatives.” Simply stated, Kant’s categorical imperative is the idea that the ethical maxim motivating an action should be considered universalizable—a universal law of nature—only if it would still hold if everyone did it.⁵ By this reasoning, killing people of other faiths in the name of a holy war would not be a universal ethical principle because we would not want everyone else to do it too—and we certainly would not want people of other faiths killing *us* in the name of a holy war.

[3.11] Against Kant’s claim that there can be any moral universals at all, ethical relativists argue that ethics are different for every culture and, as such, there can be no universals. This would explain why Christians could believe that it is ethical and right to kill any Muslims who stand in the way of their retaking and holding of the holy city of Jerusalem while, conversely, Muslims would understandably see such beliefs as unethical and wrong. What is right for Balian is wrong for Saladin because each obeys ethical principles specific to his own culture.

[3.12] The ethical relativist position fails to explain the existence of higher ethical principles shared by Balian and Saladin, while Kant’s categorical imperative fails to account for the all-too-routine conflict between different cultures adhering to competing value systems. Surely there must be what Aristotle (384-322 BC) would call a “golden mean” somewhere between these two positions. Indeed, as paragons of the virtuous person, Balian and Saladin serve as exemplars of Aristotle’s “virtue ethics.” In showing mercy and compassion to his Muslim captive, Balian will come to be seen as a noble and good person among his Muslim foes despite belonging to a culture whose religiously-specific values clash with theirs. This exceptionalism is foretold by the Saracen knight (Alexander Siddig) when Balian frees him: “Your quality will be known among your enemies before ever you meet them, my friend.”

[3.13] Character traits, however, cannot be separated from deeds. Nor is it enough simply to have virtuous thoughts, an insight summed up in the familiar adage that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” When translating ethical principles into actual acts, however, what is most ethical often depends on the context of the situation. *Kingdom of Heaven* presents us with a situational ethics dilemma by leading the viewer to sympathize with Balian even though he is a murderer. In trying to justify our sympathy for the character with the wrongfulness of the deed, we may ask ourselves if Balian’s murder of the priest might be justified, or at least deserving of consideration due to mitigating circumstances. After all, the priest provoked him by stealing and then wearing his dead wife’s necklace, ordering her corpse decapitated, and then telling Balian that his wife was surely in hell. We might also note that it was an emotional response—our identification with and empathy for the person committing the deed—that led us to ask this ethical

question, underscoring the extent to which, as put forth by David Hume (1711-1776) and Anthony Ashley Cooper (1671-1713), emotions and moral sentiments guide our value judgments rather than pure reason, as Kant proposed.⁶

Consequentialist philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) would later combine the emotional basis of value judgments—stressing “pleasure” or “happiness” as the teleological goal of ethics—with a logic-driven moral calculus.⁷ Their “utilitarianism” focuses on the outcomes or consequences of an action, such as striving to attain “the greatest good for the greatest number” of people. We see this concept as one of Balian’s noble virtues when he chooses to stay and defend the people of Jerusalem rather than escape and save himself when he has the chance to do so. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), however, might object here, arguing that Balian is motivated exclusively by the “slave morality” thinking of Christianity: the young Frenchman does not risk his life to save others because he is altruistic or thinks like a utilitarian, but because he believes that God will punish him for abandoning Jerusalem (the kingdom of heaven on earth), and reward him (with an everlasting kingdom of heaven in the afterlife) for sacrificing his own life to defend the holy city and the people within its walls.⁸

Nietzsche’s genealogy of how it is that we come to believe what we believe about moral principles raises a provocative ethical question: do only Balian’s actions matter, or do his beliefs as well? Kant elicits a similar question by focusing on our *reasons* for doing “the right thing” or not. If beliefs and reasons are less important than deeds, then one’s religious faith is much less important, from an ethical point of view, than what one actually does. As such, carrying out a suicide bombing amongst innocent civilians is immoral whether the attacker is a Christian ideologue in Oklahoma or an Islamic fundamentalist from Nigeria. “The quality of mercy is not strain’d,” as Portia pleads in *The Merchant of Venice*, regardless of an individual’s religious beliefs.⁹

ETHICS NATURALIZED

The themes of religious tolerance, the possibility of interfaith harmony, and the existence of trans-religious ethical values as depicted in *Kingdom of Heaven* remain relevant to us today. The Crusades have ended, but religious conflict remains and continues to revolve primarily around the periodically resurgent conviction that not only are one’s own religious beliefs coextensive with absolutist ethical mandates but that other cultures and religions must necessarily agree with those values. And though organized religion is often enough a source or channel of shared universal values—as seen in the appar-

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ent universality, in all major religions, of some version of the Golden Rule—any such ethical convergence is counterbalanced by a long history of religion as a source of value-based conflict, as epitomized by the Crusades of an earlier millennium and the religious fundamentalism of Al-Qaeda in the modern age. Nevertheless, the customary association of ethics with religious belief has led many to conclude that without religion there would be no morality.

[3.18] The privileging of trans-religious ethical values in *Kingdom of Heaven* suggests just the opposite: that some higher values exist and are apprehended by people in spite of the particular beliefs of their religious community. The characters in the film, even more so than most people today, are thoroughly immersed in a theistic point-of-view and see their respective faiths as the ultimate source of moral understanding. Many of them would agree with the dictum that “without God and the future life,” as Fyodor Dostoevsky famously put it, “everything is permitted.”¹⁰ At the same time, these characters also practice a kind of moral reasoning that leads them to arrive at ethical principles that would seem to exceed a purely faith-based transmission of moral values. Time and again these universal values are elevated above religiously-conveyed ethical beliefs that put them in conflict with the rival faith. Balian, for example, clearly gives greater weight to natural methods of inquiry than to what is held up as revealed ethical truth when his moral reasoning leads him to burn the bodies of the dead so as to protect the living from disease. When told by the bishop that burning the bodies of the dead would cause God to delay their resurrection until Judgment Day, Balian reflects before concluding that God would understand and that “if he does not, then he is not God.” The statement is not a rejection of God—Balian is a true believer, and his belief in an afterlife is part of the ethical dilemma for him—but it is an affirmation that universal ethical principles can be known outside of revealed truth, and that moral agents regardless of religious orientation are most ethical when giving precedence to rational inquiry through natural means over claims based on religious authority alone.

[3.19] As suggested by Balian’s principled rejection of religious orthodoxy while yet retaining his religious faith, the moral philosophy that should most appeal to religious believers might also, initially, be the least intuitive one from the theistic point of view: a naturalistic model of ethics that treats morality as independent of God. Indeed, this is precisely the path that Aquinas’s natural law theory of morality puts us on by suggesting that any universal “laws” that are true for all of humankind are also knowable through rational inquiry regardless of one’s faith. Aquinas, it should be noted, does not take naturalism that far. Rather, he follows St. Augustine (354-430) in assuming the unity of truth—that natural knowledge and revealed knowledge are not only compatible but also work together—and argues that if still in doubt after consulting the book of nature, that we should then turn to the

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revelations of a particular sacred text (the Bible) and the interpretations of religious authorities (“wise men”) for moral clarification.¹¹ Contemporary versions of ethics naturalized, in contrast, are more likely to turn to a wholly biological and cultural understanding of ethics than to an account that is, ultimately, dependent on religious faith.

While studying “the biological origins of moral reasoning,” E. O. Wilson concludes that “outside the clearest ethical precepts, such as the condemnation of slavery, child abuse, and genocide, which all will agree should be opposed everywhere without exception, there is a large gray domain inherently difficult to navigate.”¹² Human nature, in other words, is not programmed with clear and absolute values across the entire ethical spectrum, in part because of competing drives and instincts. Indeed, absolutism of any kind can be dangerous, as Queen Sibylla (Eva Green) reminds us by rebuking Balian for his refusal to “do a little evil to do a greater good.”

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Further complicating any understanding of human morality is that it is also a cultural phenomenon, and any naturalistic approach must also explain how it is possible to get an “ought” from an “is,” an apparent conflation of values with facts that G. E. Moore (1873-1958) called the “naturalistic fallacy.”¹³ As if in response to Moore, Michael Shermer articulates a well-accepted conception of how the biological origins of an incipient moral sense merge and overlap with strictly cultural dimensions (the domain of “ought”) of morality when he writes, “Our moral sentiments . . . evolved out of premoral feelings of our hominid, primate, and mammalian ancestors. . . . I consider these sentiments to be premoral because morality involves *right and wrong thoughts and behaviors in the context of a social group*.”¹⁴ Understanding ethics as having a “natural” biological component would partially explain the universality, across religions and cultures, of the Golden Rule. It cannot be forgotten, however, that biology is inextricably linked with culture, and that the two interact to shape our moral sense. This interplay between nature and culture is seen in the shared chivalric code of honor—a set of values that gives a specific cultural form to premoral sentiments, and that also transcends religious differences—by which Saladin promises safe conduct to the defeated Christians and Balian upholds his oath to “safeguard the helpless.”

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MORAL SENTIMENTS

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Kingdom of Heaven guides us to be more sympathetic toward some characters than to others—namely, those who embody admirable qualities and live according to universal ethical principles such as mercy, tolerance, compassion, benevolence, and generosity. The logic of the film’s “argument” is emotional, persuading viewers through filmic rhetoric such as imagery, di-

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alogue, and non-diegetic sound primarily at the level of affect. It is not by cold reasoning and a rigid moral calculus that we come to see the Saracen knight who returns the favor of sparing Balian's life as a good man. Rather, we are emotionally persuaded that he is a good man, despite his being cast as the enemy from a Western viewer's perspective. Our identification with the "good Muslim"—or the "good badman," as Nancy Kang poetically dubs the basis of her chapter that starts this volume—subverts any notion that ethics exist exclusively within the domain of religious belief. Rather, the higher ethical principles embodied by all of these characters are trans-religious in nature, communally derived and culturally specific yet (for reasons inherent to the premoral stamp of human nature and the capacity to reason) universally agreed upon—in varying degrees—by people of all faiths.

[3.24] A twenty-first century "good Muslim" character appears in a subsequent Ridley Scott film, *Body of Lies* (2008), which, as with *Kingdom of Heaven*, features William Monahan as screenwriter. Hani (Mark Strong) is the Jordanian intelligence director who manages to bring down a terrorist cell of jihadist fundamentalists when the heavy-handed American techniques of invasion, torture, and interrogation fail. Though we might question his willingness to take whatever measures he deems necessary to accomplish what he sees as the greater good, Hani's character comes across as more trustworthy and reliable than that of his American counterpart, Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe), whose cultural disengagement with the Middle East leads him to act as if operating in a moral vacuum. Caught between Hani and Hoffman is CIA operative Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) who, unlike Hoffman, his state-side-based controller, feels morally responsible and conscience-stricken when American actions cause harm and death to local civilians and collaborators.

[3.25] *Body of Lies* can be thought of as the sequel to Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2002) in that it, too, is a story of modern warfare, but it doubles as a sequel to *Kingdom of Heaven* in its continued exploration of cross-cultural awareness and shared ethical principles. The film tests the limits of ethical reasoning by examining questions of right and wrong deep inside E. O. Wilson's "large gray domain": the highly ambiguous moral context of espionage and international politics. In the absence of clear moral guidelines, and in a murky, extra-judicial context in which the justification of murder and torture is routine, the characters are often left to make their own judgments on complex moral issues. Even more so than in clear-cut ethical situations, moral "reasoning" and determinations of right and wrong in this ambiguous context are as much a matter of moral sentiments as of logical inference. Hoffman, for instance, maintains a deliberate emotional detachment so as not to allow himself to get close enough to care about the foreign peoples and cultures who are the casualties of Bush-era American involvement in the Middle East. In doing so, he seems to think of some of the more questionable

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actions committed on behalf of his agency and his country as amoral rather than moral—or immoral, for that matter. Ferris, in contrast, partly relies on his emotions as a moral compass, and in a climactic moment, makes an emotionally-motivated ethical decision to trade himself as a prisoner in order to secure the freedom of Aisha, a local nurse who has been kidnapped by an organization aware of his romantic interest in her, and whom he has put in danger by being seen with in public.

The central metaphor of *Body of Lies*, as signaled by the title, is lying. In a world of lies and mistrust, Hani's most sacrosanct ethical principle is "Never lie to me," a precept soon breached by both Hoffman and Ferris. For Hani, the violation of this ethical principle is about more than simply having accurate information; it is about who a person can trust, and trust is primarily an emotional state, a sentiment, even when solidly based on a rational reckoning of past experiences with the trusted individual. The same logic of trust plays out in the hearts and minds of Western viewers of the film as they move from Islamophobic suspicion and distrust of this Muslim character (and the vast majority of "good Muslims" that he represents) to the realization that shared recognition of and aspiration to higher ethical principles affirm—despite our cultural differences—our common humanity.

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A KINGDOM OF HEAVEN ON EARTH

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However we explain the existence of the higher principles embodied by the characters that we most identify and sympathize with in *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Body of Lies*, these films lead us to conclude that there are ethical principles that transcend those justified by any particular culture or religion. This insight inclines us to believe that not only can morality exist without religion but also, as presented through the eyes of the religiously faithful in *Kingdom of Heaven*, that higher ethical principles often prevail despite religious authority. If even the most fervent of religionists—those prepared to wage a holy war in the name of their beliefs—can come to such ethical conclusions, the film suggests, then surely the rest of us can too. Viewers of all religious faiths leave the film inspired to be more tolerant, compassionate, and benevolent. Through religious tolerance and interfaith harmony, Jerusalem can, as the metaphorical title urges, indeed become not only the "kingdom of conscience" that Balian and his father, Godfrey (Liam Neeson), fight for, but also a "kingdom of heaven" on earth. Implied in this vision is that through greater cross-cultural understanding and trans-religious ethics such as tolerance, compassion, and benevolence, we can make a heaven on earth of the rest of the world too. That is the real crusade of this film.

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NOTES

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1. James Rachel, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 47.

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2. *Kingdom of Heaven*, DVD, directed by Ridley Scott (Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2005); *Body of Lies*, DVD, directed by Ridley Scott (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Videos, 2008).

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3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, quoted in Michael Peterson et al., eds., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 641.

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4. See Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*.

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5. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

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6. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. See Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*.

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7. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*.

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8. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil, Toward a Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Will to Power*.

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9. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.184.

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10. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 589. The quotation appears in ellipsis form and was also popularized by Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), who, in his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946), saw the "without God" premise not as the end of ethics but as its beginning—the point at which people become full moral agents.

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11. See Augustine, *Confessions*.

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12. Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: Norton, 2012), 254.

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13. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1948), quoted in Ethel Albert, et al., eds., *Great Traditions in Ethics*, 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth: 1988), 288.

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14. Michael Shermer, *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* (New York: Owl Books, 2004), 26-27.

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