

1 Introduction

Philosophical questions about God’s existence – that is, theism – intersect questions in moral philosophy at a wide range of points. We can ask questions about God and applied ethics: *If God created the world, how should we treat the environment and other animals?* We might wonder whether theism is equally compatible with all normative ethical views: *If theism is true, is hedonism probably false?* Theism might also affect our metaethics – for instance, *Are moral obligations grounded in divine commands?*

In this short Element we’ll consider whether theism makes a difference in answering questions of general interest in metaethics: What grounds moral truths and the normativity of morality? Do we have moral knowledge, and if so, how? What explains the rationality of moral motivation and other practical moral attitudes?

We’ll canvass and evaluate major arguments in contemporary literature that take a stand on whether theism impacts or provides unique answers to these questions. While we’ll limit the discussion to metaethics, the answers provide something in the way of guidance for thinking through questions downstream in normative and applied ethics. Should moral normativity be grounded in God’s commands, for instance, then our evidence about the content of those commands will constrain and inform the account of which actions, in particular, are morally required or prohibited.

Contemporary debates about God and morality treat traditional theism and atheism as the major fault line along which answers fall (Adams, 1999: 5–6). Little is said about the referent of theism or God in this literature except that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent – that is, the omniGod – or that “God” refers to the divinity of the Abrahamic traditions (Adams, 1999: 6; Bergmann, Murray, and Rea, 2011: 2; Evans, 2014; Hare, 2015: 3; Murphy, 2017: 2–3; Nielson, 1973: 2).

One of the most important and influential works on the topic in the last decades, Robert Adams’s *Finite and Infinite Goods*, opens by clarifying that the moral framework presented is meant to be ecumenical among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam:

Its author is a Christian, but it is not a Christian book or a study of Christian ethics. It doubtless bears in various ways the impress of my own moderately liberal Protestant beliefs, but the framework presented here is intended to have room in it for other forms of theistic ethics, including forms of Jewish and Islamic as well as Christian ethics. (Adams, 1999: 6)

Others take theism to be slightly more expansive. John Hare notes in the outset of *God’s Command* that his account is felicitous to faiths including “Judaism,

Christianity, and Islam . . . the Baha'is, the Druze, and many others" (Hare, 2015: iii). Even those who oppose theistic accounts of morality typically take their target to be the God of Abrahamic religions or the *omniGod* (Rachels, 1971). Some argue against a representative version of that God to support a generalization about all or most classical theisms (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2009). Others fail to specify the conception of God they are assuming but use various classical theisms as examples of the view they seek to refute (Mackie, 1973).

In general, the discussion operates at a remove from the substantive theistic views found in particular religions. From here on out, I call a view *thin traditional theism* (thin theism for short) if it claims no more about God than that God is the God of the Abrahamic traditions, narrowly or broadly construed, or that God is the *omniGod* of perfect being theology – an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being.

One reason for focusing on thin theism has to do with distinguishing philosophy from theology. If we presuppose a thicker conception of God, the thought goes, we end up doing theology or religious ethics rather than philosophy. Robert Adams heads off the objection that he is doing theology rather than philosophy by claiming, "The subject about which I am offering theistic hypotheses is not religious ethics as such, or any particular brand of it" (Adams, 1999: 6).

Another motivation for operating up a level of generalization is that thin theism seems like the least common denominator of clusters of specific theisms (Adams, 2006: 6). By taking thin theism as a starting point, we can paint a picture of morality mutually supported by all varieties of traditional theism. Should the account of morality be especially compelling, this strategy would demonstrate how much one can get from fairly minimal theistic assumptions.

Finally, a good philosophical argument will rest on only those assumptions needed to secure its conclusion. Thus it would make sense to steer clear of assumptions like "God is trinitarian" or "God necessarily creates" when engaged in a philosophical argument about God's relationship to morality. The question is whether thin theism really is cut out to do the work theists say it can do, or is the proper target of arguments opposing theistic accounts of morality.

We'll subject arguments on both sides to scrutiny and see that they often require more substantive assumptions about God than what is assumed in thin traditional theism. I'll suggest that, once we start paying attention to the differences such substantive assumptions make, the fault lines in the debate shift. The ensuing change of landscape puts certain thick theisms in the same metaethical territory as some atheistic and agnostic views and creates distance

between them and other theisms. This approach could draw into the mainstream conversation theisms often pushed to the margins – those with origins in Eastern religions like Hinduism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Taoism, as well as nontraditional philosophical views like pantheism and panentheism. These varieties of theism deserve a seat at the table when philosophers are discussing questions about God and morality just as much as theisms of the Abrahamic faiths.

Here is a summary of what's to come. In Section 2 we ask whether God is a metaphysical ground of morality or the normativity of morality. We'll see theists' arguments that God must ground objective moral values, moral obligations, or moral laws, as well as atheist objections to these arguments.

Section 3 turns to questions about moral epistemology. Here the arguments concern whether traditional theism implies a certain kind of moral skepticism, theistic replies to evolutionary debunking arguments against moral realism, and whether belief in supernaturally grounded moral properties is subject to special epistemic criticism.

We delve into the practical domain in Section 4. We'll ask whether certain of our moral practices and attitudes are justified only if God exists. Many of the practical arguments have the form of a Kantian transcendental argument: they attempt to show that theism is a condition on the possibility of some practical attitude or its rational justification.

Throughout, I draw attention to places where the arguments purport to rest on or target the thin traditional theism but, without further assumptions about what God is like, fail to support their conclusions. I aim to make a cumulative case not against theistic accounts of morality in general but against using thin traditional theism as a placeholder for thicker theisms in these arguments. I close by suggesting an alternative strategy for pursuing questions about God and morality: We ought to shift focus to questions about substantive conceptions of God and the grounds of morality, moral knowledge, and moral motivation and action. Foundational metaethical questions become richer, more interesting, and answers more illuminating once we thicken the conception of God under consideration. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, our philosophical debates might make closer contact with lived religious beliefs and practices if we take this approach.

2 Grounding Normativity in God

Some contemporary theists say that God has an important role in *metaphysically grounding* morality. That is, when we ask why there are moral obligations, or laws, either their existence or their normative authority depends on God. The strong version of this metaphysical thesis says that God necessarily figures

in a successful metaphysical explanation of fundamental moral truths. The moderate thesis says that God actually figures in such an explanation, though not necessarily. The weak thesis says only that God possibly figures in such an explanation.

Broadly speaking, there are two forms of argument that support different versions of the metaphysical thesis (Murphy, 2011). Data-driven arguments (what Murphy calls *explanandum-driven* arguments) take some phenomenon and show that the only thing that could explain the data, or the thing that best explains the data, is *x*. If we can't dismiss the phenomenon as a mere fiction and it really requires explanation, then we should believe that *x* exists and grounds the phenomenon. Suppose we are hiking in Colorado and observe large tracks and scat. Given the shape and size of the tracks and scat, we eliminate animals like mountain lions and marmots as responsible for them, and, given the sorts of animals that live there, we rule out various types of bear and figure that the best explanation for the tracks and scat is that a mature black bear has been walking ahead of us. By contrast, explainer-driven arguments (what Murphy calls *explanans-driven* arguments) take for granted that something exists and shows that, as it is essentially the sort of thing that must ground some phenomenon, it does ground that phenomenon. For instance, if we were to see a black bear lumbering ahead of us on a hike, and in front of us we see fresh bear tracks, we would conclude that the bear was responsible for them because it is essentially the sort of thing that leaves tracks. We wouldn't need to eliminate all other possible explanations to draw the conclusion.

Data-driven arguments for theistic accounts of morality succeed when they persuade us that there is some moral phenomenon whose existence or character requires an explanation, and that God's being responsible for the phenomenon best or uniquely explains that data. Explainer-driven arguments for the same conclusion succeed when they show that God is essentially the sort of being that must ground the moral phenomenon presented as data.

Data-driven arguments have dominated the scene in debates about God and morality. The first three arguments we'll consider for the metaphysical thesis follow the data-driven schema:

- (1) There is some moral phenomenon or truth *M* that needs an explanation.
- (2) God's metaphysically grounding that phenomenon or truth is the only or best explanation of *M*.
- (3) Therefore, God metaphysically grounds *M*.

Prominent versions of this argument differ in what the phenomenon *M* is: objective moral value, moral obligation, and moral goodness. We'll look at each version and objections in turn, and then look at the only explainer-driven

argument in the literature. We'll see that how these arguments fare often depends on the details of the theism being defended.

2.1 The Argument from Objective Moral Value

A common argument for the strong thesis is what we'll call the Argument from Objective Moral Value (Wainwright, 2005: 49). It's not just philosophers who are drawn to this argument. As C. Stephen Evans (2018) puts it, "if someone believes that morality is in some way 'objective' or 'real,' and that this moral reality requires explanation, moral arguments for God's reality naturally suggest themselves." We find this kind of argument in the philosophical literature as well as in popular texts (e.g., Craig et al., 2009: 29–31; Lewis, 1952).

Generally, the Argument from Objective Moral Value runs as follows:

- (1) Morality consists of objective moral values whose existence stands in need of explanation.
- (2) God's existence grounding objective moral values is the only or best candidate for explaining their existence.
- (3) Therefore, God grounds objective moral values.

Some theists support (2) by claiming that if human concerns or interests, or particular human commitments and desires, grounded moral values, they would fail to ground moral values that are objective in the right way. The datum that *objective* moral values exist is supported by the phenomenology of moral disagreement. If moral values were grounded in particular human desires, commitments, or concerns, then they would be subjective. But when people disagree about subjective matters, the disagreement tends not to be as vehement or people as unyielding as when they disagree about objective matters. Yet moral disagreement is vehement, and people on opposing sides of such disagreements are unyielding (Lewis, 1942). Moreover, the appropriate way to settle disagreements that rest on subjective preferences or personal commitments is typically to step back from our partial point of view and seek an impartial solution. If we disagree about whether we should watch *RGB* or *Han Solo*, it's fine for you to act contrary to your preference and come see *RGB*. Not so with moral disagreement (Enoch, 2011: 112). If you and I are physicians and we disagree about the value of life on a ventilator, it would be morally spineless for me to seek a compromise and unplug our patient on a ventilator simply because you think we should, even if I think doing so would fail to respond appropriately to the value of the patient's life.

Even if moral values were grounded in commitments or ends common to all humans, some theists think the resulting moral system wouldn't fit the data. Some kind of morality could have evolved or been constructed by social

arrangements of humans, but these theists say that such a moral system would fail to have the normative force of objective morality – that feel of inescapable, binding authority (Craig, 2003: 18). One could always play the Hobbesian fool, and, not caring about complying with human social norms, fail to feel the force of morality (Scanlon, 1998: 53; Shoemaker, 2000: 345). Additionally, a system of morality grounded in human commitments or concerns could be objectionably speciesist, giving priority to human lives over those of nonhuman animals simply because the system is structured by parochial human ends (Craig, 2009). If genuine moral objectivity excludes such species bias, then a moral system based on human interests, even universal human interests, could fail to be adequately objective. This assumes that principles based on human concerns won't be based on a concern for any beings that share a human feature such as being sentient (Morrison, 2012: 260).

While many theists focus on supporting (2), the argument only gets off the ground by granting that objective moral values exist and require explanation (1). But there are several ways to resist this assumption. One could deny that objective moral values exist, that moral values demand further metaphysical explanation, or that moral values are objective. Subjectivists and relationalists take this last strategy, but those who reject the datum in (1) this way shoulder a hefty burden of proof; they have to give us reasons to reject the commonsense conception of moral values and to adopt their revisionary conception. For present purposes, then, we'll sidestep subjectivism and address objections to (1) that accept the analysis of moral values as objective.

2.1.1 The Argument from Queerness and Error Theory

To object to the first premise by denying the existence of moral values is to take the hard road. Acceptance of not just the concept of objective moral value, but the existence of such values is deeply entrenched in beliefs and practices. We'd need a powerful argument to show that we're systematically mistaken that such values exist. And this argument would need to be accompanied by what philosophers call an error theory – a story that explains how such systematic error could have come about. J. L. Mackie and, more recently, Jonas Olson have developed the Argument from Queerness and an accompanying error theory to unsettle our confidence that objective moral values exist. If compelling, the argument and error theory give us reason to reject (1).

The error theorist begins with the same conceptual claim the theist makes: if moral values do exist, they are objective and binding. She then shows that, historically, moral objectivity is conceived of as categoricity: "Moral facts are or entail facts about categorical reasons (and correspondingly that moral claims

are or entail claims about categorical reasons)” (Olson, 2011: 62). Olson says a categorical reason is a reason a person has to perform some action irrespective of whether doing so would promote the satisfaction of her aims, desires, ends, or the fulfillment of some role she occupies, or abide by the rules of some game or activity in which she engages. This is quite a strong characterization of categorical reasons, but there are others on offer – for instance, reasons that are independent of particular individuals’ desires, commitments, or ends (Shafer-Landau, 2003).

The error theorist then raises a metaphysical problem: nothing in our world answers to the description of a categorical reason. Nothing is at once so authoritative as to determine that we ought to perform an action and so objective as to be independent of facts about our ends or aims. If there were such a thing, it would be too odd to warrant belief. Ordinary reasons for action – the nonmoral ones – depend on such facts: the reason for the chess player to move her bishop diagonally depends on the rules of the practice of chess and her desire to win; the reason a father has to bake his daughter a cake is because he has the end of making her happy and a cake will make her happy. If objective moral values are or entail the existence of categorical reasons, and the existence of categorical reasons is dubious, we shouldn’t believe there are objective moral values.

Finally, the error theory states that our moral practices and beliefs about moral values merely developed and became entrenched to give us social and evolutionary advantages. Treating values such as the value of human life as though they are objective helps to encourage motivation to adhere to these values. So, more advantages might have been conferred on groups of humans that treated such values as objective, explaining the prevalence of these beliefs in the human population (see Section 3.2.1).

The Argument from Queerness spells bad news for the proponent of the Argument from Objective Moral Value. For if it works, there would be no special class of things (objective moral values) for God to ground, and so theism wouldn’t be the only or best explanation of the datum.

To respond, theists can appropriate responses to the Argument from Queerness given by secular nonnaturalists who believe in objective moral values. These philosophers point out that the error theorist’s objection relies on the notion of something’s being too metaphysically “queer” to believe in. We need more clarity, they say, on what metaphysical queerness is. The error theorist owes us an account of metaphysical queerness that shows why it’s so damning a property as to be the sort of thing that couldn’t plausibly be instantiated. If no account of metaphysical queerness of this sort is forthcoming, so much the worse for the error theorist’s objection to (1).

Consider three potential accounts of metaphysical queerness that won't support the error theorist argument (Morton and Sampson, 2014). "Queer" can't mean nonnatural, because if it did the argument would beg the question against the moral nonnaturalist. It can't be that the property "queer" picks out whatever intuitively seems odd, since moral nonnaturalists disagree with the error theorist's intuition that objective moral values are odd. Neither can "queer" mean *sui generis*, since other kinds that are *sui generis* – physical facts, for instance – obviously exist and warrant our belief in them.

The "last bulwark" construes the Argument from Queerness as an argument from parsimony. Here's a global parsimony principle: "Generally speaking, nature is simple, so simpler theories are more likely to be true" (Morton et al., 2014). Here's another, construed in probabilistic terms: " $\Pr(E|\text{Error Theory}) > \Pr(E|\sim \text{Error Theory})$ " (ibid.).

What evidence could favor the error theory over the theistic theory using these parsimony principles? Ordinary moral discourse and practice doesn't seem likelier on error theory than on the view that there are objective moral values. Similarly, error theory wouldn't make the fact that evolution has shaped our commitments and talk about morality any likelier. It just suggests different implications of this fact. The two best pieces of evidence we have regarding objective moral value don't favor error theory. Thus, even the parsimony version of the Argument from Queerness fails.

If the theist uses this secular response, she has to show that her theory of objective moral value is simpler, or likelier given the evidence, than error theory. Perhaps some theisms are simple or likely enough to make good on this claim. Others, however, will not be. If the introduction of theism comes along with new puzzles and a bigger ontology to solve them, it may well not be the case that theism plus moral realism is on the whole more parsimonious than the error theory.

For instance, to respond to the problem of how creatures can be free when God foreknows every truth, some theists hold to molinism – the view that there are true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that specify what every agent would do in any circumstances she could encounter. This introduces a host of new entities or truths into one's theory. It would be surprising if the molinist moral realism were simpler than the error theory. In fact, comparing such a theistic view to accounts that explain moral realism using human social conventions or facts about human nature, it doesn't seem that parsimony would favor theism. This will not be the case for theisms that countenance fewer entities or only add God to the realist ontology and nothing else.

2.1.2 No Source Argument

Some philosophers resist the Argument from Objective Moral Value by denying that objective moral values, or truths about them, have to have a further metaphysical ground. This strategy obviates the need for an explanation, and so for appealing to theism in the explanation of the existence of objective moral value. We'll call arguments that use this strategy No Source Arguments (Heathwood, 2012).

Suppose there are moral truths. There are two explanatory options for any moral truth: either it has a metaphysical, propositional ground – a further truth that makes the moral claim true – or it's brute. For example, consider the truth

(1) I have a moral obligation to feed my neighbor's cat.

Surely, (1) is not a brute moral truth. Perhaps what makes (1) true is some descriptive fact plus a general moral principle:

(2) I promised to feed my neighbor's cat

(3) "If a person has made a promise to perform some act then the person has, in virtue of that, a prima facie moral obligation to perform that act," (Heathwood, 2012: 4).

A moral theory like W. D. Ross's can stop the explanation there, since it welcomes brute moral truths and counts (3) as one such truth.

We might complain that (3) is an inappropriate stopping point. For what makes it the case that my promise to feed my neighbor's cat gives me an obligation to feed the cat, but the hitman's promise to assassinate Ms. Smith doesn't give him an obligation to assassinate her? Perhaps some additional or further claim about the reason for which promises generally create obligations could explain away the appearance that the hitman has an obligation.

A theist defending the Argument from Objective Value maintains that (3) is not the appropriate stopping point – that it, too, requires a ground. God must ultimately ground truths about objective moral values. To explain (3), this theist appeals to a claim about God and a principle connecting that fact to the moral claim in (3). For instance, on Divine Command Theory (DCT), the fact that God commands a person to do x is the grounds for it being morally obligatory for the person to do x. She explains (3) via

(4) God has commanded us to keep promises

and

(5) "An act is morally obligatory iff, and because, God commands it," (Heathwood, 2012: 6).

Claim (5) represents DCT.

The No Source Argument points out that we must ask whether the further claim, (5), is a brute moral truth or has a metaphysical ground. Some divine command theorists take it to be brute. Samuel Pufendorf famously asserts that the fact that God has authority to be obeyed is on a par with axioms of mathematics, which “merit belief upon their own evidence” (Hare, 2015: 58). If it is brute, then it is a metaphysically ungrounded moral truth. For it specifies the conditions under which some moral facts obtain, just like (3); and it was in virtue of this that (3) requires a metaphysical ground. If the defender of DCT takes this route, then her view doesn’t hold an advantage over the secular Rossian view that stops at (3), it seems (and we will see how one might object to (5) in Section 2.2.3).

Moreover, depending on the thick conception of God a theist endorses, she might find (5) or Pufendorf’s axiom implausible. First, an epistemically rational person could fail to believe in God’s authority, so it hardly seems self-evident. It also requires divine authority over creatures to be a divine perfection. But many theists think that if creation is contingent, then divine authority can’t be a divine perfection because, generally speaking, conditionals with contingent truths in the antecedent aren’t eligible as axiomatic truths about God (Murphy, 2002).

Other theists think (5) can be metaphysically explained by some meta principle. These theists often have in mind views about the nature of God’s love, or God’s intentions to speak truly or not deceive (which, of course, adds to thin theism). Imagine a theist of this sort asserts the metaprinciple:

- (6) “If God declares that DCT is true, then, and in virtue of that, DCT is true,” (ibid.).

The No Source Argument aims to show that this strategy is doomed to failure. What made (3) and (5) moral truths, on Heathwood’s iteration of the argument, is that they state conditions under which certain moral claims are true. Yet on this criterion (6) is itself a moral truth in virtue of stating conditions under which a certain moral claim, (5), will be true. Thus (6) requires further ground. The same problem arises even if the theist offers a meta-metaprinciple to explain (6), like, “If God declares that God’s declaration of DCT is necessary and sufficient to make DCT true, then it will be so.” For it states a condition – namely, God’s declaring that God’s own declaration of DCT makes it true – under which the moral claim DCT (5) is true. So too for any further meta-meta-metaprinciple; so the regress incited is vicious.

Alternatively, the theist could stop the regress by supposing the metaphysical source of DCT (5) is God’s command that we do what God commands. That is, it is the case that we ought to do what God commands because God commands