COULD GOD LOVE CRUELTY?
A Partial Defense of Unrestricted Theological Voluntarism

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One of the foremost objections to theological voluntarism is the contingency objection. If God's will fixes moral facts, then what if God willed that agents engage in cruelty? I argue that even unrestricted theological voluntarists should accept some logical constraints on possible moral systems—hence, some limits on ways that God could have willed morality to be—and these logical constraints are sufficient to blunt the force of the contingency objection. One constraint I defend is a very weak accessibility requirement, related to (but less problematic than) existence internalism in metaethics. The theological voluntarist can maintain: God couldn't have loved cruelty, and even though he could have willed behaviors we find abhorrent, he could only have done so in a world of deeply alien moral agents. We cannot confidently declare such a world unacceptable.

I. Introduction

Even among theists, divine command theory is commonly thought to be deeply problematic. Some problems are mitigated when one moves from sourcing morality in God's *commands*, specifically, to sourcing it in his[1] *will*, more generally. Perhaps it's not specific, communicative commands from God to groups of humans that fix the moral facts; it's something more universal about what God wants humans to do, or the behaviors that he would choose for them, or loves. Even so, proponents of this more general "theological voluntarism" are not large in number among theistic philosophers.[2]

This is not too puzzling. After all, a seemingly devastating worry for the view is well known. Does God will the kinds of human conduct he does because such conduct is moral? Or instead, is the conduct God wills moral because God wills it?[3] If we assent to the first, we give up on a

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[1]I follow (possibly regrettable) convention in referring to God with masculine pronouns.

[2]On divine command theory vs. theological voluntarism, see Murphy, *God and Moral Law*, 100. Murphy credits Quinn, "An Argument for Divine Command Ethics," with the term.

[3]This is of course the "Euthyphro problem." See Plato, *Euthyphro.*

theological voluntarism worthy of the name. If we assent to the second, we seem to introduce morally abhorrent contingency into the question of what we might owe to one other. What if God were to will *cruelty*?[4]

My project here is defensive and limited. I will not offer positive motivations for theological voluntarism,[5] nor will I attempt to address all major worries one might have about the view. But I will attempt to cast doubt on this objection from contingency, which is pervasive in the literature and often thought to be damning. The theological voluntarist should indeed think morality is contingent—that fundamental moral norms, values, and reasons could have been radically different than in fact they are. But, I'll argue, she needn't think *we ourselves* could have been subject to such a radically different system of morality. And the theological voluntarist's commitment to the idea that God could have created a very different moral order—for very different, alien moral agents—does not generate a powerful objection to the view.

My strategy, broadly, is to consider logical constraints on moral facts—hence constraints on the ways even a sovereign, omnipotent God might will morality to be. God cannot make the number 3 a color. He cannot make triangles have four sides. Neither, I claim, can he make what's morally good also be (in the same respect) morally bad.[6] And neither, I'll argue, can he make a genuine system of morality for some agents that is wholly opaque to all of those agents; robust, universal opacity is the sort of property that morality could not logically have.

My approach is thus very different from other recent attempts to reconcile theological voluntarism with constraints on the moral systems or laws an authoritative God might will. I do not claim that an authoritative moral legislator is necessarily loving or that God's commands are constrained by non-voluntarist, "pre-existing" moral values. Hence, this is a partial defense of "unrestricted" theological voluntarism.[7] (I'll use the shorter term "theological voluntarism" in what follows.)

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[4]Cf. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," 320.

[5]Cf. Quinn, "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics."

[6]There's an uninteresting sense in which lots of actions are in some respects good and in some respects bad. The claim, more carefully, is that God cannot make the very qualities that make some action, person, or state of affairs morally good, also make it morally bad.

[7]Some theological voluntarists (including, e.g., Quinn in later work ("An Argument for Divine Command Ethics," "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics"), Alston ("Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists"), and Adams ("A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation")) avoid the contingency objection by restricting the explanatory scope of their views (for a nice, concise discussion of historical precedents, see Haldane, "Voluntarism and Realism in Medieval Ethics"). These authors suggest that moral *wrongness* or moral *obligation* arises from the divine will, whereas other moral properties and values have their source elsewhere (perhaps they are simply necessary or arise from God's nature rather than his will). "Restricted" theological voluntarists can deal handily with the contingency objection, since on their view God has good moral reasons to will that wrongness or obligation be as they are. I will not have the space to evaluate restricted theological voluntarism here. (Murphy, in *God and Moral Law*, and "Restricted

I will argue for two different logical constraints on morality—one constraining cruelty and one constraining morality itself. It's important to be clear on the status of these claims. In one sense I suppose these are "analytic"; I will appeal to our sense of the concepts *cruelty* and *morality* for their justification. And moreover I claim that these limit the logically possible moral states of affairs. But, as controversies amongst logicians demonstrate, to argue for something as a principle of logic is not to suggest that it is undeniable or must be uncontroversial once properly understood. If analyticity is taken to imply the impossibility of disagreement among competent language users (as, arguably, it should not be if there are to be any analytic truths[8]), I do *not* claim these as analytic truths. I simply do not defend theological voluntarists who reject them. My aim is to show that there's a compelling way of being a theological voluntarist—i.e., being a theological voluntarist who also accepts formal, logical constraints on the ways morality might be—that allows one to satisfactorily answer the contingency objection. Part of the burden of the paper will be to show, especially in section 7, that these constraints are not only plausible but consistent with motivations for theological voluntarism.

I'll proceed as follows. In section 2, I'll formalize the simple *reductio* of theological voluntarism generated by the thought that, if theological voluntarism is true, then cruelty could be morally good. In section 3, I'll critique and revise that *reductio*, *inter alia* introducing the broad strategy of considering logical limits on God's moral will, which I expand on in section 4. Sections 5 and 6 argue for an anti-opacity principle I call Suitability and show how it blocks the revised contingency *reductio*. In section 7, I close by considering the charge that the view I end up defending—theological voluntarism + Suitability—is not *real* theological voluntarism.

2. The Contingency Objection: First Pass

Robert Adams nicely characterized the contingency objection, which he considered to be the "gravest objection" to divine command theory (a species of theological voluntarism):

> Suppose God should command me to make it my chief end in life to inflict suffering on other human beings, for no other reason than that He commanded it . . . Will it seriously be claimed that in that case it would be wrong for me not to practice cruelty for its own sake?[9]

Adams called a positive answer to this question "unacceptable," and I agree.[10] We should not accept that cruelty for its own sake could possibly be morally good. I want to begin by formalizing this common reasoning:

1. If theological voluntarism is true, then God could have willed that agents engage in cruelty for its own sake.
2. If theological voluntarism is true, then, if God could have willed that agents engage in cruelty for its own sake, cruelty for its own sake could have been morally good (or right).
3. (By 1, 2) If theological voluntarism is true, then cruelty for its own sake could have been morally good (or right).
4. Cruelty for its own sake could not have been morally good (or right).
Conclusion: theological voluntarism is false.

The nonderived premises are just 1, 2, and 4. Premise 1 seems to follow from the very theological conception of God that helps motivate theological voluntarism—a conception on which God is perfectly free, sovereign, and omnipotent. Premise 2 seems definitive of theological voluntarism. And premise 4 is a good candidate for being a bedrock moral intuition. This seems, at first, a damning *reductio*.

3. The Revised Contingency Objection

Yet theological voluntarists can (and should) deny premise 1. Adams himself is clear that this premise—"that it is logically possible for God to command cruelty for its own sake"—is an assumption, though he also claims it seems difficult for voluntarists in particular to deny it and that, e.g., William of Ockham would have accepted it.[11] I claim that even radical, Ockham-esque theological voluntarists should reject premise 1.

This is because "cruelty" is a moral concept, a thick term necessarily implying significant (*pro tanto*) moral badness.[12] A cruel trick is one that, *ceteris paribus,* ought not to be played; cruel treatment of any person is, *ceteris paribus,* impermissible. But when we call an action cruel we actually do something a bit stronger; we say that the cruelty of the action is (part of) what makes it bad. A cruel trick's cruelty is always a (significant!) moral reason not to play it, just as a kind gesture's kindness always counts in favor of its moral goodness. I claim an action's cruelty is, necessarily, a serious reason counting against the morality of its performance.

Now one might argue that there are some cruel actions that nonetheless ought to be done, such as torturing an innocent person in order to appease a demon threatening to destroy the whole world. The demon might even command specifically *cruel* treatment; nothing else would cause him to refrain from world destruction. In such recherché cases, it may be that one has an instrumental moral reason to be cruel (for a more realistic case,

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[10]Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," 321.
[11]Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," 320.
[12]For the introduction of "thick concepts," see Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

one might have reason to tell a cruel joke to cheer up a severely depressed friend with a twisted sense of humor).

But, regardless of whether cruelty is ever actually justified, supposing that it is in such cases is compatible with my claim. For in these cases, the putative *final* moral reasons for performing the cruel actions are certainly not that these would be cruel.[13] Rather, the final moral reason for appeasing the demon is that this would benefit others or preserve life. It's the beneficence of the action that counts in favor of it. Similarly, the moral reason for telling the cruel joke is one's friend's need; it's the loving, caring, kind, or helpful nature of the action, rather than its cruelty, that makes it even plausible as permissible.

The question that's important for my argument is whether an action's being cruel always, necessarily, counts against it morally, to some extent or in some way. I take it the fairly clear answer is *yes*.

But if this is right, then trying to suppose that an action were cruel but that it was nonetheless good and right to perform the action "for its own sake" (i.e., because it was cruel) involves a contradiction. It is good and right to perform actions for the reasons that make them right. Were God to will that humans engage in cruelty for its own sake, cruelty—necessarily a moral bad-making feature of actions—would have to function as a moral good-making feature of actions. And even Ockham, that paradigm of radical theological voluntarism, held that God cannot will a contradiction into existence.[14]

Theists already accept many similar logical limitations on God. Again, God cannot will that 3 be a color—or that a square be also a circle, or that there be a rock he cannot pick up. Descartes aside, these constraints on God's will are typically taken to be no mark against his sovereignty or omnipotence. I'm suggesting that in much the same way, God is constrained by logic when it comes to morality. God cannot make it the case that an action's being cruel adds to its moral value, any more than he could make it the case that a shape's having three sides makes it a square.

If this is granted, the theological voluntarist's argument against premise 1 is straightforward:

5. If God willed that agents engage in cruelty for its own sake, then a potential action's cruelty would be a moral reason to perform it. (theological voluntarism)
6. It is impossible that a potential action's cruelty be a moral reason to perform it. (logic of *cruelty*)
Conclusion: It is impossible that God will agents to engage in cruelty for its own sake.

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[13]See Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness."

[14]See Adams, "Ockham on Will, Nature, and Morality," for discussion and argument against the most radical understandings of Ockham's voluntarism. Indeed, Ockham appears to have made similar claims about *adultery* to those I have made about *cruelty*. Namely, that God could command the act but only under a different name or description, since "adultery" connotes wrongness. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing the adultery case to my attention. See also Osborne, "Ockham as a Divine Command Theorist," 9.

By leaning on a relatively simple claim about the logic of the concept of cruelty, the theological voluntarist can dispel this first version of the contingency objection.

Of course, the rejoinder is waiting in the wings. God needn't will cruelty under that description. Perhaps he could will that agents engage in actions satisfying the various nonmoral descriptions that—for us, given what God has willed in *our* world—make them count as cruel.[15,16] In a different world, he *could* have willed actions that are in fact cruel in our world. Sure, he could not have made the moral badness of an action be its moral goodness. But the theological voluntarist does seem bound to think he could possibly have imbued, e.g., actions that cause intense pain sensations in sentient beings without any other significant effects or complicating factors, with positive moral significance.

We must be careful here. For while some concepts like *cruelty* are clearly moral and others like *intense sensations* are clearly nonmoral, there are lots of concepts and terms in between. Take *suffering*. There is a natural understanding of *suffering* such that it necessarily has moral significance. In the current context, we should not use *suffering* in that sense to describe the kind of actions God might have willed.[17] By the theological voluntarist's lights, God could not have willed actions that are necessarily morally bad into moral goodness. But he *could* have willed actions that satisfy various purely nonmoral descriptions into moral goodness.[18] And that is a strange and troubling enough thought to generate a revised version of the contingency objection to theological voluntarism:

1* God could have willed that agents engage in what is, in our world, cruelty for its own sake.
2* If theological voluntarism is true, then, if God could have willed that agents engage in what is, in our world, cruelty for its own sake, then what is in our world cruelty for its own sake could have been morally good (or right).
3* (By 1, 2) If theological voluntarism is true, then what is, in our world, cruelty for its own sake could have been morally good (or right).

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[15]Cf. MacIntyre, "Which God Ought We to Obey and Why?" 360; Murphy, *God and Moral Law*, 123.

[16]It's famously difficult to formulate purely descriptive, nonmoral rules separating what we take to be cruel actions from what we take to be non-cruel actions. Although I myself am pessimistic about general nonmoral rules sufficient to identify cruel actions, I think this objection is dialectically unhelpful to me. God's will for agents might look very particularist and piecemeal. But this would not separate the world in which God wills what is, in our world, cruelty, from our *actual* world, in which he anti-wills such behavior and instead wills what is in our world noble or loving (also a particularist, piecemeal affair).

[17]Thanks to Michael Rea for helpful discussion on this point.

[18]Cf. Foot, "Moral beliefs," for classic discussion of the flexibility of "goodness." Foot's interlocutor thinks that "morally good" is an extremely flexible, purely evaluative concept that could in theory be predicated of all kinds of trivial actions—a position superficially similar to mine. Foot argues convincingly that this cannot be so, absent what she calls a "special background." I think the theological voluntarist should think of God's counterfactual willing as precisely the kind of special background Foot allows for. Thanks to José Eduardo Porcher for pointing me to this reference.

4* What is, in our world, cruelty for its own sake could not have been morally good. (Moral Impossibility)
Conclusion: theological voluntarism is false.

Moral Impossibility, or 4*, is less intuitive than 4 and, ultimately, I will argue the theological voluntarist should reject it. However, I do not pretend that Moral Impossibility is implausible or should be given up readily. In order to reject Moral Impossibility convincingly, the theological voluntarist should identify a *true* premise in the vicinity of Moral Impossibility that is consistent with theological voluntarism. I propose:

Human Moral Impossibility: What is, in our world, cruelty for its own sake could not have been morally good, for human moral agents.

That is, there are no humans or human counterparts, in any possible world, for whom the sorts of actions that in our world count as cruelty are morally good. I affirm Human Moral Impossibility. But notice that it is insufficient for the revised contingency argument to go through. Human Moral Impossibility is fully consistent with theological voluntarism and:

Alien Moral Possibility: What is, in our world, cruelty for its own sake could have been morally good, for some alien agents.

In the rest of the paper, I'll argue that a logical constraint on morality I'll call Suitability secures Human Moral Impossibility, in a way that is consistent with Alien Moral Possibility as well as theological voluntarism and its motivations.

4. Logical Limits on Morality

First, however, it will be helpful to stress again just what sort of principle Suitability is supposed to be. In the previous section, I argued that some of our moral concepts, like the concept of cruelty, have a logic. There are logical facts about how these concepts necessarily relate to some other concepts (e.g., *good, bad, right-making, blameworthy,* etc.). Here, I want to suggest that the concept of morality itself also has a logic. There are facts about what morality or moral facts—i.e., moral values, norms, and/or reasons—must be like in any moral world.
Let's start with an easy one:

No Cheese: Morality cannot consist in blocks of cheese.

No Cheese is, I hope, uncontroversial. Why is that? While there is significant controversy over what it takes for something to be a moral fact—as opposed to a legal fact, or a biological fact, or an aesthetic fact—there are *some* loose boundaries of the concept that rule out cheesy possibilities definitively. Just as God cannot will 3 to be a color, he cannot will morality to be cheese. This is, of course, a very minimal constraint on God's moral will, which (I hope) no one will dispute.
On the other end of the spectrum, though, it seems to me theological voluntarists should be leery of very substantive principles, if those are

supposed to constrain what any logically possible system of morality might involve. For example, someone might claim that morality necessarily and as a matter of logic has to do with promoting flourishing over suffering, or that it has to do with respect for justice, etc. If that were right, then God would seem to be limited by such putative logical truth about morality as well. But, given the high view of God's omnipotence and sovereignty that often leads one to theological voluntarism in the first place, it seems safer to suppose that there are no such *substantive* constraints on the logic of morality, or at least none of which we can be confident. The unrestricted theological voluntarist, to enjoy the positive motivations for her view,[19] should maintain God's perfect freedom and control over all of morality. This is consistent with some logical constraints, such as No Cheese, but substantive constraints on the sorts of acts/agents/states of affairs that can be morally good are a different matter and would seem to compromise the position.

What about principles "in the middle," so to speak? Are there purely formal, voluntaristically acceptable principles constraining the logic of morality (and hence constraining God's moral will) that nonetheless have more bite, or tell us more about what any moral system must be like, than No Cheese?

We might start with:

Normativity: Moral facts can matter to what moral agents should do.

Any world with moral reasons, values, or norms is a world where it is possible that agents should do something because of those reasons, values, or norms. Even God could not make a genuinely moral world of which this was not true. Of course it's possible to be skeptical about whether one really should do what one morally should do. But if one is skeptical about whether moral facts could matter at *all* to what one really should do, then it seems that one is skeptical of genuine morality (as distinct from sociological facts about what people would say is/isn't moral).

So it seems morality, whatever else it might be like, has the ability to matter to what moral agents should do. But talk of what agents "should" do is a bit ambiguous, and I believe we can say something a bit stronger than Normativity. For there is a strained sense of "should" that's purely evaluative rather than action-guiding. I might, e.g., say wistfully that I "should" have gone on vacation back in January 2020, before the covid-19 pandemic hit the US (this would have been very good for me, let's suppose), even though I couldn't possibly have known this at the time or acted rationally in taking my vacation so early. But it seems to me the more natural sense of "should" *is* action-guiding; it's indexed to the sorts of considerations agents do or could appreciate and be motivated by. And, in the following section, I intend to defend a very weak version of the requirement that any properly *moral* system must not only be normative

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[19]Cf. Murphy, "Restricted Theological Voluntarism."

in some, possibly purely evaluative sense; it must be, at least in principle, the sort of system that some moral agents can grasp and respond to:

> Suitability: Moral facts are suited to the appreciation of the kinds of moral agents to whom they apply.

In section six I'll explain why I think this relatively thin, formal constraint on God's moral will is nonetheless strong enough to rule out the most troubling possibilities pressed by the contingency objection to theological voluntarism; it's strong enough to secure Human Moral Impossibility. But first, why accept Suitability as a logical constraint on morality?

5. Suitability

My argument for Suitability will take the form of (1) considering arguments for and against a much stronger position, existence internalism; (2) showing how Suitability captures some of the motivations for existence internalism without incurring its primary cost; and (3) responding to an objection from the variation of moral principles that human moral agents in different societies have seemed (un)able to appreciate.

5.1. Existence Internalism

Consider:

> Moral Existence Internalism: Moral reasons must be capable of motivating the agents to whom they apply.

Moral Existence Internalism is distinct from moral *judgment* internalism, the latter being a thesis about what making a moral/normative judgment entails.[20] Moral Existence Internalism is also distinct from a more general reasons internalism, a thesis about the possible motivational power of all normative practical reasons. And yet a good deal of the plausibility of moral existence internalism derives from that more general thesis.

In Williams's classic paper arguing for general reasons internalism, he appeals to the possessibility and explanatory power of reasons. On the first: "If something can be a reason for acting, then it could be someone's reason for acting on a particular occasion [. . .]."[21] Reasons apply to agents. They are, necessarily, the sorts of things that may be possessed and used. The quote continues, emphasizing their explanatory power: "[. . .] and it would then figure in an explanation of that action."[22] Once we are considering a *person's* reason for acting, we are considering the sort of thing that can explain or justify a performance, as having rationally prompted it. Korsgaard summarizes general reasons internalism succinctly: "[I]t seems to be a requirement on practical reasons, that they be

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[20]Cf. Darwall, *Impartial Reason*.
[21]Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," 106.
[22]Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," 106.

capable of motivating us."[23] If this general thesis is true, then—so long as moral reasons are a species of practical reasons—so is MORAL EXISTENCE INTERNALISM.

Now one might also try to motivate MORAL EXISTENCE INTERNALISM on specifically *moral* grounds, or at least on grounds less tied up with the philosophy of reasons and rationality. Consider Kant's "ought implies can." It is at least arguable that a moral agent is excused from typical moral requirements, in some situation, if she is actually unable to comply with those. This too, in a different way, suggests that the sort of considerations that *can* motivate an agent matter to what is actually morally demanded from her; they seem to matter at least to the sorts of motivations she may be morally required to act from.

On the other hand, MORAL EXISTENCE INTERNALISM and its more general cousin, reasons internalism, face significant challenges. Most notably, existence internalists seem unable to secure sufficient objectivity for moral/normative reasons. Consider Parfit's Future Tuesday Indifference case.[24] Parfit imagines a "certain hedonist" who "never cares about possible pains or pleasures on a *future* Tuesday. Thus he would choose a painful operation on the following Tuesday rather than a much less painful operation on the following Wednesday."[25] Parfit's claim is that "This man's pattern of concern *is* irrational. Why does he prefer agony on Tuesday to mild pain on any other day? Simply because the agony will be on a Tuesday. *This is no reason*."[26] To put the point only slightly more strongly, we might say this man *has* a reason not to choose the more painful operation next Tuesday, regardless of whether he himself can see it or be brought to care about it.

The moral version of this problem is perhaps even clearer. Shafer-Landau gives a nice statement of it:

> Consider a person so misanthropic, so heedless of others' regard, so bent on cruelty, that nothing in his present set of motives would prevent him from committing the worst kind of horrors. He cannot, in the relevant sense, be moved to forbear from such behaviour. But why should this unfortunate fact force us to revise our standards for appropriate conduct? Nothing we say to him will convince him to modify his behaviour. But is this intransigence a basis for holding him to different standards, or isn't it rather a justification for convicting him of a kind of blindness? It is natural to say that people have reason to refrain from behaviour that is fiendish, callous, brutal, arrogant, or craven. We don't withdraw such evaluations just because their targets fail (or would, after deliberation, fail) to find them compelling.[27]

In this paper I want to remain neutral on MORAL EXISTENCE INTERNALISM and reasons internalism generally. Instead of adjudicating those disputes,

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[23]Korsgaard, "Skepticism About Practical Reason," 11.

[24]Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 123–124.

[25]Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 124.

[26]Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 124.

[27]Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 187.

my aim is to point out one very weak thing that I think internalists get right, which does not threaten the objectivity of reasons or morality.

5.2. Suitability vs. Moral Existence Internalism

Namely, Suitability: moral facts have to be suited to the appreciation of the kinds of agents to whom they apply. Suitability simply rules out the possibility that morality is hopelessly opaque to moral agents, as a group.[28] If Suitability is true, then it is impossible, e.g., that for humans in our world right now, there is a moral reason for humans to promote the instantiation of the color blue, or that it is strictly morally impermissible to type on a keyboard.

Two terms deserve attention in my definition, especially as these depart from the terminology of Moral Existence Internalism. First, Suitability refers to "appreciation" rather than motivation. This reflects an attempt at greater ecumenicism about how exactly moral considerations should be able to move us or be grasped by us. In humans, appreciating a moral fact typically involves a cognitive grasp of some reason for acting, an appropriate affective response, and concomitant motivational dispositions.[29] Appreciating the moral wrong of racism typically involves, e.g., belief in the worth and dignity of all people, dispositions to anger and sadness upon encountering or considering racism, and motivation to behave in ways that are non- or anti- racist. But there is controversy over which of these elements is really central or necessary for a good grasp of a moral fact. We might think, especially after reading the previous subsection, that motivation is crucial. Yet motivation alone can be a blind, seemingly arational affair (thus, some might think, insufficient for "appreciation"), and, relatedly, motivation is often blocked by arational contingencies such as depression and exhaustion (thus, some might think, unnecessary for "appreciation"). Suitability requires that—whatever an appropriate grasp of morality looks like—at least some moral agents of a kind could be capable of that.

The second term needing attention is "kinds." This marks the most interesting difference between Suitability and Moral Existence Internalism. Suitability does not say that moral facts must be suited to the appreciation of every individual moral agent; rather Suitability claims morality is necessarily connected to the appreciative capacities of at least some (typical or, alternatively, excellent) agents of a group or kind. Suitability leaves open the possibility of moral facts that would apply to those who really cannot appreciate what they ought to do but

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[28]Some theologians have held that (part of) morality is opaque outside of religion. I take it Aquinas thought this. This is not my own view, but it is compatible with Suitability. Perhaps humans have the capacity to appreciate morality but only because they have the capacity for religion. Thanks to Brian Leftow for bringing this to my attention.

[29]I have argued for a view of what a good grasp of moral facts involves, in a different dialectical context, in Callahan, "Moral Testimony."

who nonetheless belong to a kind of social, rational agents for whom such appreciation *is* possible. (A similar sort of principle may be plausible in the aesthetic domain: perhaps a genuinely beautiful piece of art needn't be such that *everyone* can appreciate it as such, but it must be suited to the appreciation of at least some artistically-minded humans.)

Suitability is the claim that, whatever else morality may be, it has to be the kind of thing that moral agents—at least some of them, at least in some deep and partially idealized sense—could deeply make sense of and rationally respond to. Robust, universal opacity is not the kind of property a system of morality could have.

Suitability seems to me intrinsically plausible. It also pretty clearly enjoys *a fortiori* motivation from arguments favoring Moral Existence Internalism. It can capture a sense of Korsgaard's claim, that practical (or, rather, moral) reasons have to be capable of motivating us. They must be capable of moving agents *like* us, agents of our kind, who share our broad appreciative capacities. Moreover, Suitability affirms that any moral "ought" implies some form of motivational/appreciative can: anything I ought to do is such that I at least have the right *kind* of capacities to appreciate its goodness/rightness.

So Suitability captures some of the motivations supporting Moral Existence Internalism. Yet unlike classic versions of internalism, Suitability does not even seem to threaten objectivity. Parfit's exhibitor of future Tuesday indifference and Shafer-Landau's misanthrope both clearly belong to the same rational, social kind with people who *do* appreciate reasons to avoid agony on future Tuesdays and to treat others well, so Suitability is compatible with thinking they too have such reasons.

My interest in Suitability, as I'll argue in the next section, is that if Suitability is true, and true as a *logical* fact about morality, constraining logically morally possible states of affairs, this supports Human Moral Impossibility. For if Suitability is true, then even God couldn't will some morality into existence that was wholly opaque to all the moral agents to whom it applied, and any moral system affirming the goodness/rightness of what we currently call cruelty would be opaque to humans or their counterparts.

But before completing my defense of that argument, I want to consider an important objection to Suitability. Namely, whole swaths of people have seemed to themselves to appreciate the moral rectitude of slaveholding, cannibalism, and torture of innocents. Concomitantly, they have failed collectively to appreciate moral reasons for respecting human dignity and freedom. If we understood "kinds" narrowly, as indexed to societies or cultures, then Suitability might seem to imply that they had no such moral reasons. Let me be clear: I disagree. All people have always had moral reasons not to support the institution of slavery. This is because groups or kinds of moral agents should be understood widely, defined by their broad capacities for moral appreciation (e.g., *humans,* not *18th century Southern gentry*).

Consider a society in which cannibalism—specifically the consumption of those of an out-group as a show of strength, courage, and honor—deeply makes sense to people as morally good. I want to say it makes sense to think of even these people as having the same *kind* of appreciative capacities we do—"humans" is the right category here. For even people in this cannibalistic society could share *some* of our basic moral values and sensibilities. After all, honor—or integrity, or justice, or moral rectitude, or what have you—*is* a moral value. As is love for members of an in-group—one's children, parents, or friends. Moreover, though this cannibalistic society is profoundly morally confused, there is a sense in which they *could know better.* They have the right kind of moral capacities, they have enough of a hold on the kind of things that matter morally—however tenuous that hold may seem—that moral improvement is not hopeless for them, though it might indeed involve a great deal of time, effort, and re-enculturation in better moral society (indeed, I suspect that not much better could be said of contemporary societies; we might substitute "factory farming" for cannibalism). Even humans in cannibalistic societies belong to a social, rational kind that can appreciate moral facts.[30]

6. Suitability *and the Revised Contingency Objection*

Let us return to the revised contingency objection to theological voluntarism. I want us to think carefully about the world envisioned by 3*—i.e., the merely possible world in which God wills what is in fact cruel (in our world) and where, according to the theological voluntarist, such behavior is morally good/right. The objector to theological voluntarism espouses Moral Impossibility and claims this world is impossible. But I want to suggest instead that this world is *alien,* in the sense that moral agents must be aliens rather than humans or human counterparts in such a world.

I suspect the usual way of trying to think about the world in which God's commands are radically different is something like this: we try to imagine God's will for humanity changing, at some unspecified point in the future. Or we try to imagine a hypothetical human history in which our familiar societies and psychological tendencies had developed underneath a strangely-willing God. In other words, we try to imagine rather *nearby* possible worlds in which God's will might be different—and yet many other facts about moral agents' histories, their natures, and, crucially, their rational and moral capacities might remain the same.

It's this procedure, I suspect, that generates the strong intuition in favor of Moral Impossibility. There are no *nearby* possible worlds in which what is in our world cruel is instead morally good or right. Given Suitability, in order to consider a world in which some behavior is morally right or rational, one has to consider a world in which that behavior is suited to the appreciation of the agents to whom it applies. That is, one must imagine a world in which the best of agents could, while making

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[30]Thanks to Robert Adams for helpful discussion on the morality of other human societies.

no moral mistakes, appreciate and be motivated by a reason to, e.g., cut off agents' limbs at birth for the sake of their greater approximation of an oval shape.[31]

This is no small imaginative task. What would it be like to deeply and correctly appreciate the morality of such behavior? What would *agents* be like who were capable of such appreciation?

This part of my argument closely parallels an argument given in Street, where she defends attitude-dependent conceptions of normative reasons. Street takes herself to be tackling "a modern, secular version of the *Euthyphro* debate."[32] Paraphrasing—does one have reasons to prefer the scratching of one's finger to the destruction of the world because of some broader, deeper fact about our attitudes and desires? Or do we (typically) desire the former more than the latter because we have reason to do so? Street takes the first, attitude-dependent horn of the dilemma (the analogue of theological voluntarism), and she agrees with critics of such positions that this commits her to seemingly outlandish possibilities. Ideally coherent but highly eccentric individuals—of which Parfit's man with future Tuesday indifference is one example—might really have reason, e.g., to prefer the destruction of the world.

I am not espousing Street's attitude dependence. What's interesting for my purposes is the way Street attempts to make the outlandish plausible by, first, considering in detail what these ideally coherent eccentrics would have to be like. They are *not*, she argues, your kooky Uncle Fred or even the neo-Nazis next door. *Those* individuals are nowhere near ideal coherence. Real-life kooky uncles and neo-Nazis are making ridiculous, tragic, and/or infuriating mistakes about what they really value and what this entails for how they should live. With some more careful sketches of *ideally coherent* eccentrics in hand, Street proceeds to claim that initially outlandish verdicts look at least more plausible than they might at first seem.

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[31]It may be objected that these agents needn't have the same, seemingly a-religious (or natural, or general-revelatory) access to moral facts that we seem to have. Perhaps these agents might appreciate the morality of cutting off limbs *by* (i) believing (correctly) that God wills them to do it, and (ii) desiring to be in harmony with God. Are agents who could "make sense of" cutting off limbs in *that* way necessarily alien? After all, this is how some (though not I) understand Abraham's predicament: Abraham had, and knew he had, a moral reason to kill Isaac stemming from God's command.

The world we are considering, however, is not one in which God overrides standing moral prohibitions on what is, in our world, cruelty. It is rather a world in which there are no prohibitions on such behavior. God hasn't willed them. So—assuming Suitability extends to some negations of moral facts—we must imagine that the best of agents in this world are capable of seeing the matter such that they *would not even be conflicted* about whether to cut off limbs; they would not see it as a case of genuine competing considerations, or a case of revealed morality overriding "natural" morality. *Those* agents could not be humans.

See also note 28 above; in general, I take no stand on the necessary epistemology of morality, whether this must be generally or specially revealed. Thanks to Mark Murphy for raising this issue.

[32]Street, "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference," 274.

Similarly, an important aspect of my strategy is to suggest that it takes some care to think through what a world would be like if God had willed morality to be very different than in fact it is. Given Suitability, agents in that world would, as a kind, be capable of *genuinely appreciating* the moral goodness/rightness of what is, in our world, cruel.

These agents, I claim, could not be humans (Human Moral Impossibility). They could not be our mothers or cousins or even our distant ancestors or descendants. For though our real cousins and ancestors may have highly, troublingly dubious moral views, these human individuals are making mistakes. They merely seem to themselves to appreciate, e.g., the goodness of cannibalism. But their confusion is, collectively, remediable. Human beings on the whole are capable of seeing the moral *badness* of cruelty. And any kind of moral agents whose typical or exemplary members were not capable of this but instead were capable of the total reverse would be an alien kind.

Of course, this involves some appeal to intuition. I will not here offer and defend any particular theory of human nature, psychology, or moral capacities that entails exclusion of the possibility that best (or typical) humans would be able to discern and respond to moral reasons to cut off the limbs of infants for the sake of ovalness. But my intuition in this case is a very strong one. And recall that the contingency objection to theological voluntarism rests on an intuition too: Moral Impossibility.

Formally, we can separate this reasoning into a few premises, generating an argument for Human Moral Impossibility that leaves Alien Moral Possibility intact:

7. Morally good or right actions are suited to the appreciation of the kinds of moral agents to whom they apply (Suitability)
8. Therefore, in the possible world envisioned by 3*, the moral goodness of what is, in our world, cruelty is suited to the appreciation of moral agents in that world.
9. Any world in which what is, in our world, cruelty for its own sake is suited to the appreciation of moral agents, is an alien (non-human) world.
10. (from 8, 9) The possible world envisioned by 3* is an alien (non-human) world.
Conclusion: Human Moral Impossibility.

Any world in which God wills what is in our world cruelty, is an alien world, with alien moral agents. The theological voluntarist can espouse Human Moral Impossibility. But, so long as she thinks God really could have willed morality to be radically different, she must still espouse Alien Moral Possibility. What should we say about the possibility of such an alien morality? Is the theological voluntarist's commitment to Alien Moral Possibility still strong enough to ground a contingency *reductio* of her view?

It seems not. Regardless of what we might find intuitive to say about the real moral obligations of alien agents (ought they *really* to cut off infant limbs? Would this be morally good in them in the same way that, e.g.,

altruistic acts of generosity are good in humans?), I think the second-order question of how confident we should be in theorizing about morality for such agents is pretty clear (here again, I echo Street). We should be very humble about our abilities to theorize morality for alien beings. After all, all our fodder for moral theorizing comes from what Crisp calls "lived morality"—i.e., lived *human* morality.[33] We should be much less confident about moral theorizing on behalf of alien creatures. If that's right, then we should not confidently reject Alien Moral Possibility.

Recall that the dialectic is a defensive one. The revised contingency objection purports to demonstrate that theological voluntarism must be false. But the revised contingency objection relies on a premise—Moral Impossibility—which is too dubious to bear its argumentative burden.

It's dubious, first, because once we separate Human Moral Impossibility from Moral Impossibility, it is not clear that we have strong intuitions supporting the latter, more general impossibility claim rather than the former, more specific one. And as I've been at pains to argue, the theological voluntarist *can* secure Human Moral Impossibility, by appeal to Suitability. Second, Alien Moral Possibility, considered in its own right, seems very difficult to rule out. The theological voluntarist with a high view of God's sovereignty over morality should certainly accept Alien Moral Possibility. But all of us—even those without prior commitments or sympathies toward theological voluntarism—should admit that our abilities to reason about Alien Moral Possibility are limited by our terrestrial intuitions and imaginations.

In sum, theological voluntarism + Suitability can secure Human Moral Impossibility, and while some may still be uncomfortable with the view's entailing Alien Moral Possibility, this is far from the sort of damning *reductio* of the view that the contingency objection is often claimed to be.

7. Real Theological Voluntarism?

I've presented myself as defending full-strength, unrestricted theological voluntarism. Yet I've done so by arguing for a significant constraint on God's moral will. Actually, I've argued, God *couldn't* have willed morality to be radically different—unless moral agents were also radically different. One worry for my view is that it doesn't really vindicate the high view of God's sovereignty and omnipotence that (partly) motivates theological voluntarism in the first place. I will consider two different versions of this worry.

First version: one might think real, full-blooded omnipotence entails a lot of "could haves." God could have made pigs fly. Or made chocolate taste like asparagus. Or made tomatoes talk. One who held this view would not be satisfied with proposals like, "Well, it's true that God could have made pigs fly. But not *our* pigs—in order to make pigs fly many other

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[33]Crisp, "Does Modern Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?"

important things in the universe would have to be differently arranged, we'd have to be talking about alien pigs, and that world would be very distant in modal space." (Similar proposals would be unsatisfying for chocolate and tomatoes.) Why, then, should we be satisfied with the thought that God could have made morality different, but *only* if he created a very different sort of moral agents than us, in a distant possible world?[34]

Second version: this so-called theological voluntarism is actually more similar to natural law theory, Murphy's "moral concurrentism,"[35] or simply a theistic Aristotelian virtue ethics. For it seems that on my view, too, the *kind* of beings we are determines morality. God's will in creating the natural order may have moral effects, but he lacks the power to immediately determine the moral order.

I have a three-part response that applies jointly to these versions of the worry. First, I have not said there is exactly one way morality could be for any humans or human counterparts. Indeed, it seems plausible to me that had God willed differently, e.g., justice and the alleviation of suffering might have had different relative weights in the moral system, *for us.* It is only when we imagine the scenario in which morality is radically different—in which what is in our world morally bad (inequality) or morally irrelevant (the color blue, ovalness) is elevated to moral importance—that, so say I, we must be imagining a world of alien moral agents. This preserves the idea that God has libertarian freedom in willing human morality even holding fixed the creation of humans with our basic moral capacities. Analogously—regardless of whether God could make (our) pigs fly, he could certainly have made them all reddish, or a little shorter, etc.

Second, even if we set this aside and assume that basic human capacities for moral appreciation admit of only one way human morality could be, there is still a question of priority. That is, does God will morality as he does because of the human moral capacities he has created? Or does he create human moral capacities to fit the morality he has willed? Or is the choice a single, unified one? As long as we do not assent to the first question—as long as we do not see God's moral will as constrained by a prior choice or commitment to human moral capacities—the freedom of God's moral will seems intact. And nothing about my picture puts pressure on us to see God's choice of capacities as coming "first" in this way.

Finally, there is a subtle but important difference between views on which a thing's *nature* constrains morality and my view, on which agents' capacities for moral appreciation constrain morality. On many other views, a thing's nature slots into a necessary teleological framework of hypothetical moral imperatives. If a thing has *this* nature, its good and aim and, therefore, the moral norms/values/reasons that apply to it must be (roughly) like *this.*

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[34]Thanks to Dean Zimmerman for suggesting this version of the objection.
[35]Murphy, *God and Moral Law*.

I reject this strictly necessary moral framework and principle as too substantive a constraint on God's moral will (although of course I can't critique such views at any length here). The necessary conditionals my view entails are more formal, less substantive. They take the form: if moral agents have *these* moral capacities, then morality has to be (roughly) like *this.* I say that these are formal because, as I've argued, they fall out of the logic of morality, its being not-hopelessly-opaque as a matter of logical necessity. They are not, importantly, substantive moral claims about the good or aim of creatures with various natures, nor about the necessary moral relevance of creaturely aims.

8. Conclusion

My arguments, if successful, are a partial defense of theological voluntarism. Of course, there are other putatively devastating objections to the view besides the contingency objection. Most notably: how is the theological voluntarist supposed to view God's goodness? That is a question for another paper. The primary contention of the present paper is that even the theological voluntarist should accept some logical constraints on the ways God could have willed morality to be, and plausible candidates for those constraints seem sufficient to allay the contingency objection.[36]

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