Preface

Some philosophers argue that there is no need to ground morality in God. A recent example is Derek Parfit, who argues that our best metaethical theory is one where God does not play any role. I think it would be a real setback for theological ethics if the best conception of metaethics is one in which the notion of God is simply superfluous. That is why this book aims to show the relevance of theology in the contemporary metaethical discourse. More specifically, this book shows how theological resources can be useful for solving philosophical problems in Parfit's metaethics, thereby improving this theory. I hope that this theological approach to a metaethical discussion will be of interest to both philosophers and theologians – as well as others concerned with ethics and religion.

This book starts out with some PROLEGOMENA, some things that should be said before the discussion starts. Chapter 1 introduces the topic. I argue that the rise of non-naturalism in moral philosophy, exemplified by Derek Parfit, warrants a new treatment of whether morality needs a theistic grounding. In chapter 2, I present Parfit's metaethical project. I argue that his main project is not to establish a particular theory of ethics, but to establish that there are moral truths, that there are things that *matter*.

PART ONE of the book concerns metaphysics. In chapter 3, I argue that Parfit's theory faces *the profoundest problem*, a problem concerning how to uphold the importance of morality without undermining the importance of happiness. I show how the problem can be solved either by invoking a general theological notion of God as judge, found for instance in Kant, or by invoking the notion of friendship with God, a notion found in the Christian tradition. I take friendship with God to be the best solution; it can carry with it the best parts from Kant and it fits better both with Parfit's theory and with Christian theology. In chapter 4, I present Parfit's account of the ontological status of moral facts. Parfit is a quietist, a fairly new and still controversial position in metaethics. I argue that even if we grant the quietist position, quietism does not have the resources to explain the special normative weight of morality, what normative claims are about, and what it would be for normative claims to be true. Christian theism, on the other hand, does have the resources needed.

PART TWO concerns epistemology. In chapter 5, I show how the epistemological problem can be formulated in terms of explaining the correlation between moral beliefs and moral facts, and I show how Parfit explains this correlation by appealing to our evolutionary history. Furthermore, I argue that Parfit's explanation faces *the Darwinian dilemma*; the evolutionary influence on our moral beliefs have either been related to moral truths, or it has not been related to moral truths. The first alternative is implausible on scientific grounds, and the second makes the correlation an unexplainable lucky coincidence, thereby undermining Parfit's explanation

of moral epistemology. Finally, I argue that the correlation between moral beliefs and moral facts is better explained in a theistic framework.

PART THREE concerns God and the good. My aim here is to show that theism does not bring problems into the discussion of moral realism, which would challenge my thesis that Parfit's moral theory works better with theism than non-theism. In chapter 6, I show how the Euthyphro dilemma presents certain problems for theistic ethics and how these problems are solved in the work of Robert Adams. In chapter 7, I suggest how Adams's theory can be improved philosophically, partly by appeal to Parfit's work, and theologically, by appeal to the Christian notion of revelation. In doing so, I put forward a specific Christian view on God's relation to value and moral obligations, and I put forward a conception of Christian ethics

In conclusion, I argue that my theological contribution to Parfit's metaethics shows the relevance of theology in the metaethical debate, shows how Parfit's theory may be improved, and how moral realism may provide a reason in favour of theism.

What sort of contribution am I making in this book? First of all, this work is a contribution to theological ethics. In Parfit's theory, there lies a significant challenge to a theistic view of ethics. Parfit presents a moral theory that he thinks everyone ought to accept, a moral theory that does not invoke the notion of God. If Parfit has succeeded in showing that the best conception of moral realism is one in which God does not play a role, then he has also shown that God is not needed in a theory of morality. Some theologians might perhaps think that it is not worrying that God does not play a role in the *formal* aspect of a moral theory as long as God plays a role in the *material* aspect, that is, as long as theology has something to say about first-order questions of applied ethics. However, most metaethical theories – and this is certainly true for Parfit's theory – will have implications on first-order questions of how we should act and what we should value. If God is irrelevant to metaethics, God is presumably also irrelevant to considerations of how we ought to live our lives. Now, by arguing – contra Parfit – that metaethical non-naturalism does not work just as well with non-theism as it does with theism, I am showing how the notion of God provides a better conception of morality, thereby justifying the claim that God is needed in a theory of morality. So, my contribution to theological ethics is to show that God is not made redundant but still has a role to play.

Second, this is a contribution philosophical ethics, specifically to the ongoing discussion on Parfit's work. *On What Matters* has made a significant impact on the field of moral philosophy. Philosophers such as Peter Singer and Mark Schroeder praises it as "the most significant work

in ethics since Sidgwick's masterpiece was published in 1873"[1] and as the work of "one of the greatest moral thinkers of our time."[2] They have also engaged in a critical discussion of Parfit's work, together with plenty of other philosophers.[3] However, so far few philosophers have focused on Parfit's own theory. Parfit's critics have mainly been interested in Parfit's objections to their own views. But Parfit's own proposal deserves some critical attention. So, my contribution to the ongoing discussion is to offer a critical engagement with Parfit's metaethical proposal.

Moreover, Parfit's work has generated a lively philosophical debate with voices from all sorts of metaethical positions. *On What Matters* has attracted contributions from naturalists and non-naturalists, from emotivists and rationalists, from consequentialists and constructivists and deontologists, from moral realists and non-realists and quasi-realists. However, it has not attracted any contributions, at least as far as I can see, from anyone advocating a theistic conception of ethics. My contribution to the ongoing discussion is to further offer a *theological* engagement with Parfit's metaethical proposal.

As I engage in the discussion on Parfit's work as a theologian, my aim is also to demonstrate the relevance of theology to the contemporary metaethical debate. In the same way as a psychologist may argue that perspectives from moral psychology are relevant to the metaethical discussion, or the way an anthropologist may argue that perspectives from human anthropology are relevant to the metaethical discussion, I argue that theology is relevant to the discussion. By showing that theology can contribute to the discussion, I hope to show that theology deserves a seat at the metaethical table. Now, the theological tradition that I am the most familiar with is the Christian one. My conception of God is a Christian conception, and the theological resources I put forth are found in the Christian tradition. Still, a great deal of my reasoning will be recognisable to theists from other religious traditions, not the least because when I show how theology can solve certain metaethical problems, I will sometimes do so in two stages. First, I will show how mere theism, a theism that is philosophical rather than confessional, can solve certain problems and thereby improve Parfit's theory. Second, I will show how Christian theism, resources that are explicitly Christian, can provide a solution that is even better. So, my contribution to the philosophical discourse is to show that theology – that is, theology in general and Christian theology in particular – is an interesting and useful conversation partner.

Finally, this book is a contribution to natural theology, the branch of theology concerned with whether we can learn something about God (such as whether God exists) from God's creation. The claim that God has a role to play in Parfit's metaethical theory is a claim that has some

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[1] Singer, "One Mountain."
[2] Schroeder, "On What Matters, Volumes 1 and 2."
[3] See for instance collections such as Kirchin, *Reading Parfit*; Singer, *Does Anything Really Matter?*; Suikkanen, *Essays on Derek Parfit's On What Matters*.

apologetic potential. In this book, I integrate Parfit's metaethical theory into a theistic framework – which is interesting on its own – and show that theism provides a better explanation of morality. Now, it is a common scientific principle to select the theory that best explains the phenomenon in question; that is, to make an inference to the best explanation. If moral realism is better explained when integrated into a non-theistic framework, then the truth of moral realism counts in favour of atheism. But if moral realism is better explained when integrated into a theistic framework, it counts in favour of the truth of theism. So, my contribution to natural theology is to show that Parfit's metaethical theory supports theism over atheism.

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