

## VARIETIES OF THEISM AND MORAL EXPLANATION

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**Abstract.** Many authors claim that theism bears a certain relationship to realism about moral facts. In this paper I investigate two arguments aiming to show this: the explanans-driven argument for theistic moral realism and the explanationist argument for naturalist moral realism. I show that each argument presupposes, but does not make explicit, a controversial conception of God that other theists may well reject. Specifically, the arguments must take a stand on whether God is personal or a-personal, and how this affects God's relation to the natural world. The lesson to take away is that "theism" leaves too indeterminate what God is like for us to discern what difference God's existence would make to moral facts.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Does God's existence make a difference to whether or not there are any moral facts? Would it make a difference to what kind of moral facts there are? Many philosophers attempt to answer these questions without getting into the weeds about what God is like; we can construct good arguments that support conclusions about how moral realism interacts with any garden variety of theism.<sup>1</sup>

We can understand the tendency of philosophers to put particularities of varieties of theisms to the side when discussing theism and moral facts. For we aim for our arguments to have broad appeal and theoretical economy, relying only on the assumptions we absolutely need to establish our conclusions. An argument might establish that God grounds moral facts, for instance, by relying on the premise that God is not hidden to any human beings. That premise could cost the argument a large portion of its consumer base and end up delivering the conclusion at a higher cost than an argument with more ecumenical theistic premises.

In this paper I give a closer look at two arguments for moral realism that purport to generate conclusions about God and morality where the conception of "God" is quite thin. I shall argue that in both cases, the arguments' validity changes between thicker accounts of God though proponents of the arguments do not acknowledge this. Specifically, the arguments require controversial assumptions about whether God is personal and the nature of God's involvement in the human and natural world. As many theistic traditions would reject such assumptions, the arguments do not cover the theisms of those traditions. Thus we would do better to be clear that the arguments do not show anything about any garden variety theism and morality, but rather show something about theisms that hold particular commitments and moral realism.

I begin by reviewing the only extant explanans-driven argument in the literature: Mark Murphy's explanans-driven argument for the conclusion that, if God exists, God necessarily explains moral facts.

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1 For instance, see Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. (OUP 1999, 6), Bergmann, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (OUP, 2011, 2), J.E. Hare, *God's Command* (OUP, 2015, 3), Mark C. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics. Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument From Evil* (OUP 2017, 2–3), Kai Nielson, *Ethics without God* (1973), James Rachels, "God and Human Attitudes", *Religious Studies* 7, no. 4 (1971), 325–37 (1971). These authors take theism to include the claim that the God of any of the Abrahamic traditions exists. Sometimes philosophers will simply say that their arguments generalize to all "classical theisms"; e.g. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God?* (OUP, 2009) and Andrew Brenner, "Theism and Explanationist Defenses of Moral Realism" *Faith and Philosophy* 35, no. 4 (2018), 447–63.

I argue that the explanans-driven argument fails without adding premises about God's being personal and concerned with, and intimately involved in, human affairs. Then I turn to the explanationist argument for naturalist moral realism and show that a certain variety of personalist theism takes the wind out of the sails of the argument. Thickening the conception of God by including claims about God's being personal, sovereign, and intimately interested in human affairs thereby better supports a supernaturalist moral realism.

## II. THE EXPLANANS-DRIVEN ARGUMENT

In *God and Moral Law*, Murphy argues for the conclusion that God must figure in the ultimate explanation of moral facts. He purports to show this while prescinding from particular controversial claims about what God is like. In his view, something about the nature of God on a broadly Anselmian picture guarantees that God is an ultimate explainer of all there is, and so if moral facts are among the things that are, God must be an ultimate explainer of them.<sup>2</sup> The upshot for the theist is that her theism restricts what metaethical views she can reasonably endorse. She may not be an ethical naturalist, constructivist, subjectivist, or sentimentalist (though she is free to be a nihilist, denying the existence of moral facts or laws). As a consequence, the likelihood of theism will be tied to the likelihood of a version of moral realism that denies the existence of free-standing, brute moral facts (or moral nihilism).<sup>3</sup>

The task of this section is to examine the argument as Murphy presents it carefully to see whether any additional assumptions about God are needed for the argument to succeed. I will suggest that the argument requires a “thickening” of theism — the addition of controversial claims about God's nature beyond the claim that God is the Anselmian being. In fact, certain thickening theistic assumptions will free up the theist to hold naturalist, constructivist, subjectivist, or sentimentalist views in tandem with her theism.

### II.1 Murphy's Explanans-Driven Argument

The explanans-driven argument begins with a claim about God and explanation; but what exactly is meant by explanation here? Murphy clarifies that the sense of explanation at play is *metaphysical* explanation. A metaphysical explanation answers a why question of the form, “Why does x exist?” or “Why does x have the nature it does?”<sup>4</sup> (Contrast this with the epistemological question “Why is it rational to believe x exists?” which would yield an epistemological explanation, or the pragmatic question “What benefit is there in my believing in x?” which would generate a practical or psychological explanation.)

The thesis that God metaphysically explains morality comes in a variety of modal strengths. A theist could hold a weak version:

**Weak:** Possibly, God figures in the correct metaphysical explanation of morality.

Or, she could acknowledge other possible metaphysical explanatory grounds of morality, but assert the moderate version:

**Moderate:** Actually, God figures in the correct metaphysical explanation of morality.

More often than not, though, theistic philosophers want to defend a more robust version<sup>5</sup>:

**Robust:** Necessarily, God figures in the correct metaphysical explanation of morality.

The Robust thesis seems to have a great payoff for theism. So long as there are moral facts in need of explanation, it ensures that God is not an otiose entity, susceptible to being shaved off our ontology by an Occamite razor.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, *God and Moral Law*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Mark Murphy for discussion on this point.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> See ch. 2 of Anne Jeffrey, *God and Morality* (CUP, 2019).

Murphy defends the Robust thesis by a novel route. Typical arguments for Robust are *explanandum-driven*. These arguments start with what needs an explanation (the explanandum). Then they survey what sort of thing could do the explaining (the explanans). If only one such thing exists, or if something's unique ability to explain the explanandum gives us reason to think it exists, we can conclude that explanans must exist and explain the explanandum.<sup>6</sup> The success of an explanandum-driven argument hinges on its ability to show the explanans to be best or the only viable candidate for doing this.

*Explanans-driven* arguments, by contrast, take for granted that some candidate for doing the explaining actually exists. Then they ask what that thing is like, and whether it is the sort of thing that, if it exists, must explain some explanandum. Murphy illustrates the idea with the example of a cat left in a room for several days with a bowl of water: if, upon returning, you find that the cat is still alive and the bowl of water is empty, you can infer that the cat explains the absence of the water.<sup>7</sup> This form of argument leaves open the possibility that there are other good candidate explanans. However, given the fact that one candidate is essentially an explainer of the explanandum in question, and given that it exists, it must figure in the explanation of the explanandum. The success of an explanans-driven argument lies in demonstrating that it's part of the essence or nature of the explanans to explain the explanandum.

Explanandum-driven arguments have dominated the scene in debates about God and morality, taking this form:

- (1) There is some moral phenomenon or fact that needs a metaphysical explanation.
- (2) God is the only suitable candidate for the metaphysical explanation of that moral phenomenon or fact (it is impossible for another candidate to suitably metaphysically explain it).
- (3) Therefore, God necessarily figures in the metaphysical explanation of that moral phenomenon or fact.

Explanans-driven arguments begin with the same first premise (1) but then proceed:

- (2') God is essentially such that, if God exists, then God necessarily explains the moral phenomenon or fact in need of explanation.
- (3') God exists.

Conclusion: Therefore, God necessarily explains the existing moral phenomenon or fact.

The explanans-driven approach boasts a significant advantage over the commonplace explanandum-driven approach: it does not demand that every other candidate explainer be considered and found wanting in order to establish the explanatory connection between God and morality. The theist can slot in any aspect of morality for the explanandum, just as in the case of the explanandum-driven arguments. What matters instead is that God be the sort of being which must explain that explanandum.

Murphy's explanans-driven argument focuses on the explanation of *moral laws*. On his view, moral laws ground all moral facts. Moral facts are "first order facts involving act-types' moral necessity", like the fact that one ought not steal a person's organs.<sup>8</sup> Moral laws determine what the moral facts are by imposing moral necessity on a certain act or attitude type in virtue of some property it has. To illustrate what he means by moral necessitation, Murphy draws an analogy with physical necessitation: a law of physics makes it the case that the property being negatively charged necessitates an electron's act of repelling positive charges. Similarly, moral laws impose moral necessitation, for instance, when a moral law about respect for bodily autonomy makes it the case that the property of being my organ necessitates that the act of stealing my organ for money is bad. Moral laws explain the obtaining of moral facts, like the fact that it is wrong to take my organs against my wishes.

6 Ibid., 1. See also Shamik Dasgupta, "Normative Non-Naturalism and the Problem of Authority", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 117.3 (2017): 297–319.

7 Ibid., 4–5.

8 Ibid., 47.

The metaphysical explanatory question we need to answer, if we are seeking an explanation of moral laws, is, “Why do certain properties select for certain act-types in this way?” So in Murphy’s explanans-driven argument, premise 1 is:

- (1’) There are moral laws, which make it the case that certain properties necessitate moral facts, and which need a metaphysical explanation.

The conclusion will thus read:

Conclusion: Therefore, God necessarily explains moral laws and the moral facts they necessitate in virtue of things in the world exhibiting certain properties.

The weight-bearing premise in Murphy’s argument is 2’, that God is essentially an ultimate explainer of all that exists. As I mentioned earlier, Murphy claims that he can establish 2’ on an ecumenical Anselmian conception of God as just that being than which nothing greater can be thought. How does he derive that conclusion? And how does the inference from God’s being essentially an ultimate explainer to God necessarily explaining work?

Take the latter question first. When Murphy says that God is “essentially” such-and-such, he is using the Aristotelian notion of essence: a property something has by nature. But not everything which is essentially such-and-such is necessarily such-and-such. We might grant that while cats are by nature, or essentially, four-legged, but some cats can fail to exhibit that property and so be defective instances of their natural kind. God, however, cannot fail to exhibit properties God has by nature. For God, on the Anselmian conception, is an absolutely perfect being. Failing to exhibit a property one has by nature is a defect (as in the case of the three-legged cat, which is a defective token of an essentially-four-legged type). A being who was otherwise perfect but failed to exhibit one aspect of its nature would not be absolutely perfect. So it is conceptually true that the Anselmian being cannot fail to exhibit properties it has by nature. If God is essentially an ultimate explainer, therefore, God is necessarily an ultimate explainer.<sup>9</sup>

Now we can turn to the question of why God is an essential explainer. Murphy opts to put aside divine properties we come to know via revelation on the Abrahamic religions’ conception of God.<sup>10</sup> Instead he suggests we use the much thinner Anselmian conception of God. I will call the thesis that claims no more than that the Anselmian God exists *thin theism*. Thin theism doesn’t purport to make any claims about whether God is a person, or three persons in one, whether God is in time or outside of time, whether God predestines certain people for heaven or sends anyone to hell, whether God is equally revealed to everyone or hidden to some, and so on.<sup>11</sup> Murphy takes special care not to assume any more about God than he thinks we can derive as an entailment of the claim that God is absolutely perfect.<sup>12</sup> He consciously puts to the side certain thickening properties that Abrahamic faiths attribute to God because they may not be entailed by the Anselmian conception alone. Even if many perfect-being theologians assume that God is creator of all that exists outside of God, for instance, Murphy thinks we must argue that being creator is a divine attribute based on a prior perfection that is more obviously a perfection, since some reasonably maintain that God might not have created but still have been God.

Murphy asserts that we can derive 2’ from thin theism alone. “If we accept the methodology of perfect being theology”, he writes, “we will arrive at the conclusion that God has an essential explanatory role with respect to everything that is explanation-eligible.”<sup>13</sup> The middle term in this sub-argument is that one of the Anselmian God’s attributes is *divine sovereignty*. Sovereignty, according to Murphy, is

9 I am grateful to Christoph Jaeger for pressing me to clarify this.

10 Ibid., 6.

11 One might think one of these properties is strictly entailed by a divine perfection, and so Anselmianism is committed to God’s having that property. For instance, if not being hidden is entailed by a divine perfection like omnibenevolence, then we could infer that God is not hidden on thin Anselmianism. But claims that there are such entailments, such as Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument, tend to be controversial. Whether God must be a person on the Anselmian approach has also been contested and does not seem obvious.

12 Ibid., 7–8, 63.

13 Ibid., 7.

the property of being a source of and having immediate control over everything that exists.<sup>14</sup> We can know that sovereignty involves immediate control over other things, he says, via the following thought experiment. Imagine if God were to bring something into existence, but then the object persisted and God ceased to exist. This would be possible if God's control over the object were *mediated* by a third thing, which then sustained the created object once God ceased to exist. On this possibility God seems to lack a certain perfection of agency and authorship — the perfection of being in immediate control of all that is. Hence we can think of sovereignty as at least partly involving unrestricted, immediate control. Further, God is supposed to be omnipresent, not just as a universal voyeur. If God is omnipresent, Murphy says, then God must be a sustainer of all the goings on in the universe.<sup>15</sup> Thus divine sovereignty is a perfection. Since all attributes which are perfections belong to the Anselmian God as a conceptual matter (remember that a being cannot qualify as God unless it is perfect, on perfect being theology), the Anselmian God possesses divine sovereignty. Further, Murphy assumes that God exercises that sovereignty by generating and immediately sustaining all the moral laws.

Now we are positioned to formulate Murphy's explanans-driven argument more carefully:

- (1') There are moral laws that stand in need of a metaphysical explanation.
  - (2') Sovereignty is the property of being a source of everything and having immediate control of everything that exists.
  - (3') If God exists, then God necessarily has divine sovereignty.
  - (4') God exists.
  - (5') God necessarily is a source of everything that exists and has immediate control over everything that exists. (2', 3', 4')
  - (6') Therefore, God necessarily is the source of and has immediate control over moral laws. (1, 5)
  - (7') If y is necessarily the source of and has immediate control over x, then y necessarily figures in the metaphysical explanation of x.
- Conclusion: Therefore, God necessarily figures in the metaphysical explanation of moral laws.<sup>16</sup> (6', 7')

We can sum up the fuller argument as follows. A moral realist posits the existence of moral facts. Those moral facts are best explained by moral laws which express a necessity relation between non-moral properties and moral properties, thus entailing moral facts. Given that sovereignty is a divine perfection, if God exists, God will be sovereign necessarily — necessarily God will be in control of and be the source of those moral laws, and mediately, of all the facts jointly explained by them and the existence of the non-moral properties that select for moral properties according to the laws. So on the assumption of thin theism, God is necessarily an ultimate explainer of moral facts.

## II.2 Alternative Conceptions of God and Divine Sovereignty

The explanans-driven argument attempts to derive the Robust metaphysical thesis using only two assumptions about God: that God exists and that one of God's attributes is divine sovereignty. Murphy argues that sovereignty *must* be a divine perfection, so any theist who accepts perfect being theology should be on board with both assumptions. We might imagine, then, that Murphy's argument commits all theists who are perfect being theists to his version of supernaturalist moral realism.

However, this is not quite right.

Turn first to the understanding of omnipotence and sovereignty operating in premise (2'). This description of sovereignty is supposed to entail that sovereignty is a perfection and thus that God on any

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 65–7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 59.

version of perfect being theism exhibits this property. But the description of sovereignty as a divine perfection does not integrate equally well with all varieties of perfect being theism. For example, on Yujin Nagasawa's Maximal Theism, divine perfections are to be understood as a maximal consistent set of properties.<sup>17</sup> Rather than each perfection being the maximum degree to which a property can be held. If God's power to be the source and in control of human beings is constrained by God's high degree of love for human beings, then while God has the highest degree of power possible, it may *not* be the case that God has power to be the source and immediate controller of human agents, or the activities of those agents, or the norms used to govern their interaction. On Maximal Theism, then, sovereignty as defined in (2) would not be a divine perfection. So here we can see that two conceptions of God that are purportedly Anselmian will yield different views of the relationship between God and moral laws and facts.

Next, suppose a perfect being theist holds that omnipotence is not a divine perfection at all because of the personalist view God to which she subscribes. Peter Geach argues that omnipotence is the philosopher's adaptation of the Christian creedal concept of God's being "Almighty", and not a very fruitful adaptation at that.<sup>18</sup> To be Almighty does *not* require that there is nothing the being with this property cannot do. In fact, Geach points out, the Christian Scriptures and traditional texts seem to tell against omnipotence as the correct understanding of God's being Almighty, since the God of those Scriptures cannot break his promises or be unfaithful to those he has called, for instance.<sup>19</sup> Since God isn't just any sort of agent but a personal agent in Scriptures, God's will, and so God's power, is seen as responsive to all sorts of considerations with which an a-personal being would not be concerned, like promise-making and keeping. The notion of "God's power in abstraction from his wisdom and goodness" would be rejected on this account — we must understand God's power, sourcehood, and control as unified with God's wisdom and goodness. Thus the personal Christian God may not have the attribute of sovereignty described in (2').

Finally, suppose a perfect being theist accepts that God is omnipotent but quibbles with the idea that omnipotence must be spelled out in terms of sovereignty. Why might she do this? Suppose she thinks (as many traditional theists do) that omnipotence doesn't entail the ability to do *anything*.<sup>20</sup> God's power does face limits, such as logical limits, and also must be coherent with attributes with higher priority such as omnibenevolence. It is conceivable that God might lovingly refrain from generating and controlling laws that will be used to normatively regulate human agency and social relationships. Perhaps God's omnibenevolence constrains this use of power, as love involves respect for the human community and an interest in promoting a certain kind of human freedom. This freedom could include a freedom to forge agreements about what actions are appropriate — that is, which natural properties of actions select for which moral properties like permissible, prohibited, and so on. Thus, the most loving thing for God to do, given God's respect for the human community, is to let the members of that community make the moral law. Perhaps this sort of theism better supports moral constructivism than moral realism of the sort we see defended in the explanans-driven argument.<sup>21</sup>

A perfect being theist might also dispute that sovereignty, if it is a perfection, necessarily entails immediate control over everything. Murphy's way of thinking about sovereignty alienates many natural law theists (though not all) because they dispute the immediacy of control. By their lights, creaturely natures fully explain the norms that govern each kind of creature and select certain act types as normatively necessary for their flourishing. When it comes to rational creatures like us, our natures and reason together are supposed to be sufficient to ground the facts about what we ought to and ought not do.<sup>22</sup> God's role

17 Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God. A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* (OUP, 2017).

18 Peter Geach, "Omnipotence", *Philosophy* 48, no. 183 (1973).

19 *Ibid.*, 8.

20 The exchange between Funkhouser and Senor illuminates some possibilities here. See Erik Funkhouser, "On Privileging God's Moral Goodness", *Faith and Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (2006), 409–22 and Thomas D. Senor, "God's Goodness Needs No Privilege", *Faith and Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (2006): 423–31.

21 Thanks to Meghan Page for suggesting this possibility.

22 See, for instance, Anthony L. Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law. An Analytic Reconstruction* (Clarendon Press, 1996).

in metaphysically grounding moral facts is in the causal history of the natures that ground those facts. As God chose to bring those natures into being, on the causal view of metaphysical explanation, this suffices for God's being part of the metaphysical explanation of moral facts.

For God to figure in a metaphysical explanation in this causal sense, however, is insufficient for meeting the immediacy requirement on Murphy's understanding of divine sovereignty. Murphy complains that the natural law view presents a picture of morality that is equally available to an atheist. If human nature can provide us with an account of the activities and things that perfect a human life — what natural law theorists call “the basic goods” — then what explanatory role over and above being part of the causal history is left for God? None, Murphy argues. Once the natures exist, then God no longer needs to exist to sustain the moral norms they ground. But on this account, at a certain time, there is something that exists of which God need not be in control.

Perhaps surprisingly, one's view of God's relation to time can also bear on the success of the explanans-driven argument. If a natural law theorist is an *eternalist* — thinks that God is atemporal and always outside of time — then she can evade Murphy's objection above. The objection asks us to consider that, on natural law theory, God is causally responsible for the natures of creatures and that God could cease to exist and the natures would continue to ground norms. Now suppose God is eternal. Either God causes the natures' existence timelessly, where this is sufficient for sustaining them, or God does not. If God causes their existence timelessly, then the natures seem to be under God's immediate control and the view does not run afoul of the requirement for sovereignty he has put forward. If God does not cause the natures' existence, then we do not have a natural law theory, since God is no longer creator. What makes the objection work is the viability of the (counterpossible) scenario where God ceases to exist and the natures persist in grounding their own norms. But this takes for granted that there is a time at which the natures exist and God does not, as though God is *sempiternal* — in time.<sup>23</sup>

Another motivation for a perfect being theist to reject the tie between omnipotence and immediate control as ongoing sustenance of the moral law is a thought concerning a perfect being's interest in creaturely affairs. Murphy assumes that God will use God's control over human beings to select for certain moral necessitations over others. But it is not clear we must accept this without further argument or religious revelation. A theist who emphasizes God's holiness, or set-apartness, for instance, reasonably might deny that God cares enough about norms governing earthly interpersonal relationships to want to exercise control over those norms. Imagine that God is sovereign and loving of human beings insofar as God will ensure their *eternal* wellbeing. This is compatible with God's setting up the world such that human beings can make up their own moral rules of engagement for the infinitesimally small amount of time they spend on earth. The question for this sort of theist is whether the moral rules they make up have the status of laws under which all moral facts can be subsumed. If not, then the theist can deny the existence of the explanandum in Murphy's argument. If so, then she can argue that it's possible for God to be sovereign and not be the immediate explainer of moral laws, but for humans to ground them due to an act of divine *discretion*.<sup>24</sup> For Murphy's argument to entail the Robust metaphysical thesis, then, we need to build in assumptions not just about the personal character of God but about God's level of interest and involvement in earthly human affairs.

Once we make these assumptions, the argument becomes a non-starter for some varieties of theism on which God is impersonal. Consider again the panentheist views on which God is constituted by everything in the universe as God's parts. Two potential problems arise for God's grounding moral laws on

23 Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* (Wipf&Stock, 1992), William L. Craig, *The Tensed Theory of Time* (Springer 2000); see also Deng, *God and Time* (2019). That is, God must be sempiternal in the counterpossible scenario. For Murphy's objection to natural law theory to work does not require that Murphy hold sempiternalism but rather that in the counterpossible, sempiternalism is true. Thanks to Mark Murphy for helping me to clarify this in correspondence.

24 Note that the discretion must result in God's giving up control of the moral norms that govern human interactions altogether. As Murphy has pointed out to me, for God to lack control over x it is not enough that God not exercise a choice over x; God must not have the power to exercise a choice over x. Yet if God can give up the power to exercise a choice over x, perhaps to preserve human freedom, then God has given up genuine control over x.

this view. First, if the divinity composed by the universe isn't itself an emergent mind, then it only has as mental parts human beings. If anything in God can select certain moral necessitation relations, then, it will be the human parts of God. Perhaps we could say that God metaphysically explains moral laws but this is true only in the elliptical sense, as when by reflex my hand knocks over a glass of milk, we can say I explain the spilled milk where this is elliptical for "my hand's motion explains the spilled milk and my hand is a part of me." Second, even if God is an emergent mind, on the panentheist's view God metaphysically depends on the universe as parts, and so it would get the order of explanation wrong to say that God explains moral laws rather than the parts that constitute God explaining those laws.

To sum up: The *explanans*-driven argument presumes that divine sovereignty is a perfection and that, therefore, God on the Anselmian conception, will possess divine sovereignty. Further, it presupposes that the property of sovereignty includes being the source and in immediate control over all things that exist. But one might think the Anselmian conception of God is more properly thought of as less involved, less concerned, less immediately controlling, or altogether apersonal. And on such versions of Anselmianism the inference from what sovereignty is (2') to God's necessarily having it (3') will seem faulty.

Now, Murphy does not assume that all those who subscribe to Anselmianism will share his view about God and moral law. He is trying to show that they should. It is no objection to his argument if those claiming to be Anselmians mistakenly reject his account of sovereignty and his claim that Anselmianism entails that God has it. Instead, perhaps what the above discussion shows is that Anselmianism is not helpful as a conception of God. Anselmianism is better thought of as a methodology for defending claims about divine attributes: if our value judgments support the idea that *x* is a great-making feature or perfection, then Anselmianism licenses us to believe that God has *x*. What Anselmianism does not do is provide guidance about the value judgments we use to determine that *x* is great-making or a perfection. Murphy's value judgments regarding agency support his claim that immediacy and control are great-making features. Anselmianism then licenses the inference that God has immediacy and control. Other Anselmians reject this because they reject Murphy's value judgments regarding the goodness of having immediate control over all that exists. If this diagnosis of the disagreement is correct, then what we see is that Anselmianism is not a very useful starting point qua conception of God if we want to know how God and moral facts are related. A thicker conception of God is needed, even if that thicker conception is supported by the Anselmian method plus some value judgments.

### III. EXPLANATIONIST ARGUMENTS FOR NATURALIST MORAL REALISM

Now I will turn to an argument about *epistemic* explanation: the so-called explanationist argument for moral realism. The explanationist argument is crafted to respond to a particular challenge. But the explanationist takes onboard a certain assumption embedded in that challenge, namely, that the only kind of moral realism worth saving is *naturalist* moral realism. Our interaction with moral entities can play an appropriate role in explaining empirical phenomena only if those entities are identical to, or supervene on, natural properties that can cause empirical effects. The immediate upshot of the explanationist argument for the theist is that she is not justified in believing in moral properties if they supervene on the non-natural or supernatural, as such properties lack empirical effects. Moreover, some have said that if the explanationist argument rules out nonnaturalist moral realism as a viable epistemic position, it also rules out theism on the same grounds.<sup>25</sup>

After reviewing the challenge and the prominent forms of the argument, I will identify how a theist might be able to vindicate supernaturalist moral realism by thickening her theism in certain ways.<sup>26</sup> If I am right, then the explanationist argument need not be an argument for *naturalist* moral realism alone.

25 Russ Shafer-Landau, "Moral and Theological Realism: The Explanatory Argument", *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 4, no. 3, 311–329.

26 Andrew Brenner argues that the naturalist's strategy could be appropriated to construct an argument for supernaturalist moral realism. If there is a need to cite moral properties in theistic explanations of nonmoral occurrences, or facts about God, then we get



### III.1 The Explanationist Argument

The explanationist argument is occasioned by an epistemological problem. If there are real moral properties that exist independently of our beliefs and desires, how could we know them? Gilbert Harman raises this problem in a pointed argument now known as Harman's Challenge:

- (1) We only have reason to believe in real moral properties or facts if they are part of the best explanation of observable phenomena. (Explanatory Requirement)
- (2) The best explanation of observable moral phenomena doesn't require the existence of real moral properties or facts. (No Explanatory Role Thesis, *Ibid.*)
- (3) Therefore we don't have reason to believe in real moral properties or facts.<sup>27</sup>

Two points about Harman's Challenge are worth noting. The first premise asserts a very reasonable looking requirement; as David Enoch explains, "What underlies the explanatory requirement is, after all, a highly plausible methodological principle of parsimony. Kinds of entities should not be unnecessarily multiplied, redundancy should be avoided."<sup>28</sup> Second, the kind of explanation at issue in the explanatory requirement is epistemic. Many authors have been keen to point out that an argument in the form of Harman's challenge would be fallacious if it claimed that things only exist if they are part of the best explanation of observable phenomena, since such an argument would beg the question against any non-natural entities. Harman's conclusion is about what we have justifying reasons to *believe*, not about what *is*. This suggests that "best explanation" in premise (2) means "best relative to evidence accessible to us." If there were an explanation unavailable to us, but metaphysically more elegant or true, it would not qualify as a best explanation on Harman's view.

Harman's Challenge puts pressure on all moral realists. There seem to be just two ways to respond to it. The realist can give reasons for thinking moral properties *do* figure in the best explanations of moral phenomena, or she can reject the explanatory requirement (as Enoch does). The latter option seems radical, especially since it seems to have ramifications for all of our beliefs if we give no special treatment to the domain of moral belief. If we dropped the explanatory requirement, all sorts of entities could find their way into our ontological beliefs despite our having no empirical evidence of their existence. For if there's no epistemic standard that says, "Don't believe in the existence of things that play no role in a best explanation of what's observed," then it seems we are free to believe in entities that leave no empirical trace.

Understandably, most naturalist moral realists take the former strategy. Cue the explanationist argument. There are several versions in the literature, but we can focus on a recent formulation that avoids certain problems with previous formulations:

- (1) "We have reason to believe that a property P is genuine if a predicate S figures ineliminably in a good explanation of observed phenomena and in that explanation S refers to P.
- (2) Moral predicates feature ineliminably in good explanations of observed phenomena, and in those explanations they refer to moral properties.

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to believe in realist moral properties. Suppose, for instance, that God is all good. (Brenner makes the not-uncontroversial assumption that God's being all good entails God's being *morally* good.) Whenever God performs an action like creation, God necessarily responds to all the moral properties there are. If this is the case, then the explanation for God's choosing to create this world rather than another or rather than not create at all must make use of moral properties (Brenner, "Theism and Explanationist Defenses of Moral Realism"). The proponent of any such argument must assume the existence of God- there must be a theistic act or feature in need of explanation. Neither those who put forward the explanationist argument nor those who brought forward the challenge occasioning it would accept this sort of first move. Further, in Brenner's argument we must posit that God is a person, and has intentions and desires which must be unified in a certain form of moral agency. So this argument, too, clearly requires going far beyond thin theism.

27 David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously. A Defense of Robust Realism*. (OUP, 2011), 24.

28 *Ibid.*, 26.

(3) We have reason to believe that moral properties are genuine.<sup>29</sup>

According to this explanationist argument, we can believe in moral properties justifiably *just in case* the terms we use to refer to them play an ineliminable role in explaining observed moral phenomena. For example, Nicholas Sturgeon says, when seeking to explain riots against the government, we might find our best explanation invokes the injustices suffered by those oppressed whose cause is being championed in riots. But when we speak of the injustice done to some part of the population, we're not just blowing off steam — we're *referring* to something that exists, namely, the property of injustice.<sup>30</sup> As the best explanation features a moral predicate whose reference is a moral property, we have reason to believe at least one moral property — injustice — is real.

So far, there doesn't seem to be anything distinctively naturalist or anti-supernaturalist about the explanationist argument. Couldn't the theist run the very same argument for realism about moral properties and then add her theistic analysis of those properties? Ultimately, I will argue that some theists can do just this. But proponents of the explanationist argument do not think so. To understand why the explanationist argument is supposed to be at odds with theistic realism, we need to consider premise (2) more carefully.

Premise 2 asserts that moral predicates that refer to moral properties earn their epistemic keep by playing an indispensable role in empirical explanations. The Cornell Realists, who pioneered explanationist arguments, maintain that for a moral property to play the right role in an explanation of observed moral phenomena it has to be part of the natural order and so causally efficacious: "Moral properties are causally efficacious (or causally relevant) and thus suited to scientific explanation and admissible into our ontology."<sup>31</sup> For recall that on Harman's Challenge, whose terms they accept, we're only licensed to believe in (a) observable, empirically testable entities, and (b) unobservable entities with observable effects against an appropriate background theory.<sup>32</sup> So the referents of moral terms must have observable effects for our belief in them to be above board. Put another way, they assume that our moral beliefs should hold up under the same epistemic principle that applies to our scientific beliefs. The principle allows us to believe in unobservable properties of quarks, say, as long as the background scientific theory and observable data support the claim about quarks; and they can do this because quarks themselves are natural entities with natural, empirically observable effects. Similarly, then, the principle should allow us to believe in moral properties if they are identical to or constituted by natural properties with empirically observable effects, as long as the background ethical theory and observable data tell in favor of the existence of those properties.

Yet this feature of having observable effects is precisely what supernatural properties lack, or so it is commonly assumed in this literature. Nicolas Sturgeon, a Cornell Realist, for example, chastises those who draw a distinction between natural and non-natural properties in such a way as to include the supernatural; he makes clear his position when he writes, "I shall now reclaim the term 'natural,' using it henceforth as I have throughout this essay, to mean something that contrasts with 'supernatural,' and certainly not as equivalent to 'non-evaluative.'"<sup>33</sup> Properties such as being what God wills or being an idea in the mind of God do not belong to the natural order.

Furthermore, this is supposedly true as a conceptual matter. In explaining how explanationist arguments might also undermine theistic belief, Russ Shafer-Landau writes:

Since the reply relies on invoking moral naturalism in defense of moral realism, a parallel route is unavailable to the theist. For that parallel route would be to enlist theological naturalism in defense of theological realism, and that — ongoing, Western conceptions of God — just doesn't make sense.

29 Neil Sinclair, "The Explanationist Argument for Moral Realism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 41, no. 1 (2011), 15.

30 Though see Sinclair (Ibid.) for an argument that there is a viable alternative interpretation.

31 Debbie Roberts, "Explanatory Indispensability Arguments in Metaethics and Philosophy of Mathematics," in *Explanation in Ethics and Mathematics: Debunking and Dispensability*, ed. Leibowitz and Sinclair (OUP, 2016), 186.

32 Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations Defended" *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier. (Blackwell, 2006) 241.

33 Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations Defended", 248.

Theological naturalism would seek to vindicate the explanatory necessity of divine facts by revealing them to be a species of natural facts. But that simply runs counter to the essence of the monotheistic tradition, which depicts God and his attributes as supernatural.<sup>34</sup>

The thought that divine attributes and actions do not have observable phenomena as effects is entrenched. Philosophers assume that supernatural properties like being willed or commanded by God just could not be empirically tested or have empirically testable effects. The explanationist argument, in accepting the explanatory requirement of Harman's challenge wholesale, thus seems to rule out theistic accounts of realist moral properties. By contrast, the naturalist limits her account of moral properties to just those properties that do have empirical effects, per hypothesis. Thus she has a guarantee that the properties will meet the explanatory requirement as they understand it.

### III.2 Varieties of Theism and the Naturalist's Explanationist Argument

The explanationist argument treats all theisms, at least Western theisms, as of a piece. And its proponents take it to support naturalism over any form of non-naturalism, including supernaturalism. The variety of theism one holds can make all the difference in whether the argument threatens theistic grounding of moral phenomena at all and in how severe the threat is.

The proponent of the explanationist argument for naturalistic moral realism presupposes that God is at the kind of remove from nature that would make divine attributes and actions "epiphenomenal."<sup>35</sup> If God were part of or a cause of natural things, which in turn caused the moral beliefs, judgments, and language that require explanation, then in principle, theistic ethics could offer an explanation of moral phenomena in keeping with the epistemic principle we use in scientific enquiry.

Two theistic views that posit a very close relationship between God and nature are pantheism and panentheism. Yujin Nagasawa explains that these varieties of theism reject the "independence thesis, according to which God is ontologically distinct from the universe."<sup>36</sup> Instead, they hold that all of nature is enveloped in God. Pantheist Karl Pfeifer, for instance, argues that God refers to the totality of the universe rather than discrete parts of or objects in it. But if this is true, then it's hardly a stretch to think that God causes observable phenomena. In fact, on this view, observable moral phenomena and the properties that proximately cause them are *parts* of God or *items* within Godself. These theists can leverage the naturalist's explanationist argument perhaps even better than the naturalist, then, since naturalists like the Cornell Realists think moral properties won't themselves be observable but it's open to the pan/panentheist to say that aspects of the divine are directly observable, as are divine effects.

On some of these varieties of theism, we might wonder whether moral properties, facts, or laws have a distinctive enough role to warrant our believing in them as parts of the universe. Some pantheists think of God as the sum total of existing things in nature, but as the greatest possible being because of God's comprehensiveness. This entails only that everything that does exist composes God; it says nothing about whether there are distinct moral properties or principles that are part of God. And parsimony might direct these pantheists to countenance only our moral judgments, beliefs, and not any further properties or objects to which they correctly refer.

If the above thought is correct, then I think it much more likely that theism will countenance real moral properties and entities on a personal conception of God. For instance, John Leslie's pantheism countenances God as an infinite mind that has attitudes towards other persons, as God is benevolent. It would be unsurprising if a benevolent universe/God self-regulated partly by means of moral norms and if this God had moral properties. So too for a panentheism like Mark Johnston's; Johnston says "Love of the Highest One can be analogized as its outpouring in ordinary existents."<sup>37</sup> Since God is identical with or constituted by the universe, again, it comes as no surprise that whatever moral properties are on such a view, they will have empirical ef-

34 Shafer-Landau, "Moral and Theological Realism", 316.

35 Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations Defended", 247–8.

36 Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 13.

37 Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*, (Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 158.

fects. By analogy, a biological entity with chemical parts can obviously generate chemical effects, discernible using chemistry and not biology. So too whatever features of God are identified with moral properties and norms will be able to produce observable phenomena, as parts of something or someone—God—with empirical parts and effects.

There's another reason to think the naturalist's explanationist argument may do less to support naturalism over supernaturalism than is assumed, depending on one's conception of God. Discussion of the explanationist argument usually takes place in metaethics, and little first order, normative ethics is presupposed. This also means very little is said about which moral phenomena stand in need of explanation.

Consider, though, a moral phenomenon that is ubiquitous but not well explained on naturalist moral realisms like Railton's or Sturgeon's, but is well explained on certain personalistic versions of theistic moral realism: forgiveness. Suppose we take the nature of forgiveness to be a moral phenomenon whereby a victim with standing to blame someone who has wronged her releases the wrongdoer in some way. Brandon Warmke has argued convincingly that theorizing about the nature of forgiveness should take into account norms of forgiveness; for instance, whether the wrongdoer must apologize in order for it to be appropriate for the victim to forgive her, or who has the standing to forgive.<sup>38</sup> The difficulty is in finding what grounds those norms. Forgiveness is ubiquitous in human relationships, and it is clearly a moral phenomenon in need of explanation. An explanation of its nature should include an explanation of some of its norms, if Warmke is right. However, naturalist reductivist accounts of forgiveness struggle to identify a plausible cluster of properties, or complex property, that could be identified with forgiveness and explain the norms we think are involved in it, such as the appropriateness of apologizing to gain forgiveness and the victim of the wrong having special standing to forgive. For emotions or events sometimes identified as the reductive base of forgiveness, such as letting go of resentment, can be experienced by third parties as well as victims.

The moral predicates in particular which seem hard to alight on are predicates about normative constraints on forgiveness, like, “deserving of apology” or “deserving of forgiveness”, or “standing to forgive.” The naturalistic accounts generate counterexamples, such as excluding from having standing to forgive people who, in many real-life cases, seem to have been able to successfully and appropriately forgive, say, on behalf of a group or a loved one. There is also the problem of unifying the norms that seem to govern forgiveness on these naturalistic reductivist accounts. What is it about forgiveness that, for instance, makes apology typically required for it to be appropriate to forgive a wrongdoer, makes it inappropriate to forgive on behalf of someone else in some cases, and makes it appropriate to seek forgiveness from proxies of the victims in others?

Turn now to a variety of theism on which forgiveness is quite easily explained: a version of Christianity on which God is a personal and relational creator who forgives humans for wrongdoing against God. Suppose that God creates with a moral order in mind; and God wills that humans honor and pursue that moral order, partly by seeking to restore it where it is damaged. God exemplifies how to do this in Christ, who is God incarnate and who suffers and dies on behalf of all humans who have disrupted the moral order. Supposing that this theist can give an account of the atonement, she can also offer a unified and compelling account of the phenomenon of forgiveness.

Our commonsense judgments about and practices of forgiveness intimate certain normative requirements for seeking and giving forgiveness which can be given sense by a theistic explanation of the following sort. When a person rends the fabric of the moral order God has created, the person violates God's will that she care for and respect her fellows. The victim has unique standing to forgive because of the place in the moral order God has given her and the fact that the failure was a failure to respect and honor her. The wrongdoer has failed to honor and respect her and has wronged God also by violating God's will, so should seek apology from both. Finally, the victim ought to forgive because those who have been forgiven must forgive others to restore the moral order intended by God. Here divine forgiveness serves

38 Brandon Warmke, “Articulate Forgiveness and Normative Constraints,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 4 (2015), 1–25.

as a model, either constituting or perfectly satisfying the norms of forgiveness. (Biblical passages such as, “Forgive as the Lord forgave you”, [Ephesians 4:32] and the parable of the unforgiving servant [Matthew 18:21–35] indicate as much.)<sup>39</sup>

In order for the theist to respond to the moral naturalist’s explanationist argument, she can show either that the theistic explanation meets the Scientific Epistemic Principle or that no adequate explanation that meets the principle is forthcoming. If she takes the latter strategy, then she forces a choice: the naturalist moral realist to must give up the moral phenomena of forgiveness, deny moral realism by denying that the moral phenomena is best explained by an empirically adequate moral property, or reject the Scientific Epistemic Principle altogether.

Now the theist will have an advantage if the naturalist takes one of the first two strategies. For either she can countenance and explain the moral phenomena of forgiveness and the naturalist cannot, or she can defend moral realism and the naturalist cannot. If the naturalist takes the third strategy, then what does she have to offer that theism cannot get? It will become unclear what a property must be in order to qualify as “natural”, since the scientific principle regarding unobserved phenomena helped to carve out the concept. And other interpretations may be so broad as to allow theism to count as a version of naturalism, or so narrow as to rule out many moral phenomena and their explanations.

Of course, the naturalist could complain that theism of that stripe is too high a price to pay to get a good explanation of this particular cluster of observable moral phenomena. But if we only compare theories based on how well they explain these particular phenomena, then a certain version of theism could have a leg up.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In closing I want to consider the implications of the above arguments and respond to an objection to the general approach I would favor.

I have attended to only two arguments aiming to answer the question “What difference does theism make to moral facts?” The first argument purported to show that theism must metaphysically explain the moral facts, via moral laws, because God is the sort of being that necessarily explains what exists if God exists. The second argument aimed to show belief in naturalist moral realism uniquely justified because of the role natural properties can play in explanations of empirical phenomena that supernatural properties supposedly cannot.

These arguments are representative of philosophical debates about God and morality in that they both assume thin theism is the view to defend or beat. The naturalists giving explanationist arguments don’t bother to spell out what supernatural properties would be or what relationship God’s attributes or actions are thought to have to the rest of the natural order. This is a mistake, of course, because whether God is pantheistic, personal, or apersonal bears significantly on whether a supernaturalist property could figure in the best explanation of observable moral phenomena. And in fact, by building in more assumptions about what God is like and what God has done, the theist who thickens her theism may be able to show theistic moral realism more explanatorily powerful vis a vis certain phenomena than naturalist moral realism. In the explanans-driven argument, we saw that perfect being theism is supposed to be all that is needed to run the argument. But in fact, perfect being theists may disagree about whether God has an attribute like divine sovereignty, how God would exercise it if God has it, and what is required to be sovereign. The extent to which God is personal and involved in human affairs will again make a difference to how compelling the explanans-driven argument linking theism to moral realism is.

<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, if we bring in Christ in the Atonement as an exemplar of forgiveness, then many competing theories of the atonement arise. But this will further prove my main point, which is that we need to ask what specific versions of theism make a difference to our moral beliefs. It may turn out that the specific Christian theism that holds a vicarious punishment view of the Atonement best explains the phenomenon of forgiveness and so the explanationist argument can support that version of theism. I am grateful to Georg Gasser for pointing out the relevance of competing theories of Atonement here.

While this essay has focused narrowly on a pair of arguments regarding explanation and moral realism, the lesson it teaches may well generalize. If it turns out that more substantive claims about what God is like are needed for these arguments to work, perhaps this is the case with other arguments. (In fact, elsewhere I have argued that this is so.<sup>40</sup>) Why not, then, begin our inquiry from much more specific varieties of theism where their extra commitments are on display, and ask what the entailments of this or that variety of theism is vis a vis some moral or metaethical view? A benefit of philosophy as a tool is that we can conditionalize on just about anything and consider what, logically and rationally, follows. Thus, without siding with one particular version of theism, we can explore many varieties' implications for moral claims and facts, or metaethical views like moral realism. In other words, I suggest we focus our efforts on finding the relationship between morality and God on the many thick conceptions of God available.

One objection to the approach I suggest is that for any substantive, specific theism, the probability space that view occupies is smaller than the probability space occupied by its denial. But consider what would happen if we used this as a sole guiding principle in theory choice. Suppose we want to assess whether the particular version of Kantian Contractualism forwarded by T.M. Scanlon is true. As this view is quite specific — it has a filled out account of the grounds of moral motivation and moral principles unlike most other views (one philosopher praised it for presenting a genuinely new moral theory) — the probability space it occupies is smaller than the probability space occupied by all the many other theories (versions of contractualism all the way to virtue ethics and consequentialisms) that could be true. If we were to use probability as a guide to truth, or justified belief, we should not believe Scanlonian contractualism. The contractualist should complain that this road inevitably leads to skepticism. For no other ethical theory will occupy a bigger probability space than its denial, so the theory that occupies the biggest probability space — no matter the content — is the theory that denies some particular truth.

The likelihood of a view compared with its negation, then, can't be an informative, sole criterion for evaluating whether a view is worth believing. For if it were, it would push us to believe either fewer and fewer things, to deny any specific view. But what is the point of doing philosophy and developing theories if the epistemically safer bet is always on agnosticism or denial? It is unclear that philosophy as typically practiced would lead to more justified beliefs.

With this objection put to the side, I hope to have shown that for the explanans-driven argument and explanationist argument, we are better served thinking about how varieties of thick theisms bear on moral realism. Whether or not the God of theism is personal or a-personal, and if God is a person, what sort of agent God is, will matter a great deal.

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