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Moral Occasionalism

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C13S1

Introduction

C13P1 The aim of this chapter is to build a view we call Moral Occasionalism. To introduce the view, let's begin with a case presented by Ross:

C13P2 I am walking along the street, and I see a blind man at a loss to get across
C13P3 the street through the stream of traffic. (Ross 1939, p. 167)

C13P4 In such a case, Ross thinks, one can (and typically would) correctly believe that it is right to help the blind man cross the street.¹ Yet, according to Ross, one would reach this correct belief in a roundabout way. He says:

C13P5 Rightness is always a resultant attribute, an attribute that an act has because it has another attribute. It is not an attribute that its subject is just directly perceived in experience to have, as I perceive a particular extended patch to be yellow, or a particular noise to be loud.

C13P6 (ibid., p. 168)

C13P7 And he says:

C13P8 It is only by knowing or thinking my act to have a particular character, out of the many that it in fact has, that I know or think it to be right. It is, among other things, the directing of a physical body in a certain direction, but I never dream that it is right in consequence of that. I think that it is right
C13P9 because it is the relieving of a human being from distress. (ibid., p. 168)

¹ In addition to being correct, would the belief also count as knowledge? Ross often claims in both *The Right and the Good* and in *Foundations of Ethics* that knowledge about right and wrong in particular cases is elusive and that we can only hope for “right opinion” or “probable opinion.” But this view is arguably motivated by an overly restrictive view of knowledge.

“godless pre-established harmony” view. We also identify and respond to several key objections to Moral Occasionalism.

C13S2

13.1 Moral Occasionalism

C13P13 In this section, we present a stipulative definition of Moral Occasionalism and offer a few clarifications of the view.

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13.1.1 Our Definition of Moral Occasionalism

C13P14 Moral Occasionalism as we want to understand it here, has two parts. The first part is we-optimism. The second part is a particular way of explaining the truth of we-optimism. We-optimism is simple. Let’s say that Largely Correct Believers (LCBs) are those whose moral beliefs are largely correct. We-optimism is the claim that we⁴ are LCBs.

C13P15 Moral Occasionalism says that we-optimism is true and that its truth isn’t just a brute, unexplainable fact. The explanation of the truth of we-optimism, according to Moral Occasionalism, is (in rough outline) as follows:

C13P16

1. **Moral facts are grounded in natural facts:** Some (or perhaps all) moral facts are (at least partially) grounded in non-moral facts. When a moral fact is grounded in a non-moral fact, that non-moral fact is (let’s say) the *sub-moral ground* of the moral fact. In most (or all) cases, the moral fact is (at least partially) grounded in a natural⁵ fact.⁶

C13P17

2. **Sub-moral grounds are detectable:** Because the sub-moral grounds of moral facts are natural facts, they are typically detectable by us. Often, these sorts of facts are directly perceptible.

⁴ Who are *we*? Different versions of we-optimism will count different classes of individuals as LCBs. Very inclusive versions of we-optimism might say that human beings generally are LCBs; very cautious versions might only hold that the members of some small class of epistemic elites count as LCBs. The arguments in this chapter do not depend on whether we take a relatively inclusive or a relatively cautious version.

⁵ According to a typical view, which is good enough for our purposes, natural facts are those facts that fall within the scope of scientific investigation: see Shafer-Landau (2003).

⁶ Principles may also be among the grounds. See Berker (2019) and Enoch (2019) for opposing views on the role of principles in grounding particular moral facts.

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- C13P18 3. **Sub-moral grounds influence us:** When we detect the sub-moral ground of a moral fact, this typically triggers a psycho-physical process in us that causes us to form a moral belief (or beliefs).⁷
- C13P19 4. **Our moral belief-forming process typically matches the process through which moral reality is determined and shaped by sub-moral grounds:** The psycho-physical process mentioned in (3) typically bears a certain relation of resemblance—a *mirroring relation*, as we'll say—to some grounding relation that obtains between a sub-moral ground and a moral fact grounded in it.
- C13P20 5. **Our belief-forming process is typically truth-conducive:** Because of (4), moral beliefs formed in response to a sub-moral ground of a moral fact typically match the moral fact grounded in that sub-moral ground. Consequently, the moral beliefs formed by the process mentioned in (4) are typically true.

C13P21 The claims in (1)–(5) constitute the rudiments of a Moral Occasionalist explanation of the truth of we-optimism. Moral Occasionalism does not say, however, that (1)–(5) provide a *complete* explanation of the truth of we-optimism. There are many details to be filled in. This incompleteness is not a defect. Many good explanations are incomplete and leave room for expansion, clarification, and elaboration.

C13S4 13.1.2 Moral Occasionalism Illustrated

C13P22 Consider Harman's familiar cat-burning case. You see a gang of hoodlums in an alleyway douse a cat in gasoline and strike a match. The predictably horrible result:

C13P23 **G:** The cat bursts into flame, screeches in pain, writhes, and dies, while the hoodlums look on and laugh.

C13P24 Because of G, you form a moral belief:

C13P25 **B:** You believe that what the hoodlums did is morally wrong.

⁷ As explained above, this psycho-physical process might be inferential or perceptual or neither; Moral Occasionalism is neutral about the causal details.

C13P26 Your belief is correct:

C13P27 M: What the hoodlums did is indeed morally wrong.

C13P28 G, B, and M are all facts, according to the story we are now telling. The belief in B matches the reality in M. That is, the belief is true. Further, according to the present story, the fact that your belief comes out as true in this case can be explained as follows: M is grounded in G; B is formed, via a certain psycho-physical process, in response to G; that psycho-physical process mirrors the grounding relation between M and G; and because of all of this, your belief matches the truth.

C13S5 13.1.3 Moral Occasionalism Is Modest

C13P29 Moral Occasionalism says that the story we've just told about the cat-burning case is *typical*. Our moral beliefs often match reality, and when they do, it's typically because our beliefs result from an occasionalist belief-forming process that leads us to the truth—a process along the lines described above.

C13P30 Moral Occasionalism grants, however, that although the truth-conducive occasionalist dynamic that we have described is typical for us when we form moral beliefs, not all of our moral beliefs participate in such a dynamic, and therefore not all of our moral beliefs are true. When we have false moral beliefs, it is because our belief-forming process has unfortunately deviated somehow from this typical pattern.

C13P31 In some cases, for instance, our beliefs miss the mark because we fail to detect sub-moral grounds. For example, we might fail to see or understand that our behavior hurts others. In some such cases, the hurtfulness of our behavior makes our behavior wrong, but because we overlook that hurtfulness, we mistakenly believe that our behavior is permissible.

C13P32 In other cases, we successfully detect sub-moral grounds, but fail to respond correctly to them. For example, in a case where the hurtfulness of our behavior makes our behavior wrong, we might understand our behavior hurts others—but then we might fail to grasp that this hurtfulness makes our behavior wrong. This failure might be due to the operation of various biases, prejudices, or other distorting influences; or it might be due to a simple failure to engage in moral thought about a given case.

- C13P33 It is evident that there are many ways that our beliefs can and do stray from the moral truth. Moral Occasionalism does not deny this. The Moral Occasionalist contends that we are LCBs—not that we are infallible.
- C13S6 13.1.4 The Analogy with Classical Occasionalism
- C13P34 We’re calling our view *Moral Occasionalism* because it has structural similarities with a much older view: the classical occasionalism of the Islamic Ash’arite school and early Enlightenment thinkers including Nicolas Malebranche and Antoine Arnauld. Here we’ll briefly discuss similarities and differences between these two occasionalist hypotheses.
- C13P35 To get an idea of the central claim of classical occasionalism, consider the following case. Suppose you see a cat knock over a vase. You have a perceptual experience which, you might think, is caused by the perceived event. The causal story here—according to present-day science, at least—is like this: the cat and the vase and the other objects in your surroundings reflect light; this light strikes your retina; this causes electrical signals to travel via your optic nerve to your brain; this causes neuronal activity; and this brings it about that you have a visual experience of the cat knocking over the vase. According to this hypothesis—call it the *current view of ordinary perception*—your visual experience faithfully corresponds with the external event because of the way that the former is causally downstream from the latter.
- C13P36 The variety of substance dualism that was prevalent among the classical occasionalists barred them from accepting this sort of story (Lee 2008; 2015). On their view, it is true that visual experience corresponds with external events—but that can’t be a result of the external event causing visual experience. Mind and matter, being different substances, cannot interact in that way. So, to explain ordinary perception, the occasionalists proposed that God directly sees to it that experience is such, and external events are such, that experience’s contents correctly represent external events. No direct causal relationship between experience and external event exists or is required. The central claim of classical occasionalism is this: God is the one true cause; all other apparent causal relationships are merely “occasional” causes (Nadler 2010).
- C13P37 Classical occasionalism seems (to almost all philosophers) to be clearly false. And so, given that we are fans of Moral Occasionalism, it might seem unwise for us to associate Moral Occasionalism with classical occasionalism.

But we think that the analogy is instructive: Both are examples of views that make use of a “common influence” structure to explain correlation between belief and reality. Additionally, we think that it is fruitful to reflect on the differences, as well as the similarities, between classical occasionalism and Moral Occasionalism.

C13P38 Why does classical occasionalism seem to be so plainly false? To start with, it requires the existence of God. Further and more damningly, it requires a highly interventionist God, and this will be implausible even for most religious folk. True, many believers think God intervenes in the world at times, but few will accept the much more extreme classical occasionalist view that God’s influence in the world is universally pervasive and exclusive of other causes. Most believers accept that ordinary objects and events can be genuine causes without being divine, which means they cannot accept classical occasionalism without drastic revision of their world-view. Finally, the dualist assumptions that motivated some to adopt classical occasionalism are no longer shared, rendering the view a solution without a problem.

C13P39 Moral Occasionalists have no such commitments. In place of God, they have grounds of moral facts. These grounds are non-moral, natural facts, such as the fact that a given action causes pain. Such facts are utterly mundane and fit easily within scientifically respectable pictures of the world.

C13P40 In place of God’s manipulation of our perceptual experiences, Moral Occasionalism posits that sub-moral grounds induce certain moral beliefs in us when we consider them. This posit, again, is not in any way at odds with what is known in science.

C13P41 In place of God’s orchestration of the external world, Moral occasionalism says that grounds give rise to normative facts, such as the wrongness of a given action. It is the case, we grant, that modern science does not say that grounds have such moral powers. But it is equally true that modern science does not say they lack such powers. Modern science has nothing at all to say about moral reality or its grounding relations. By contrast, science is *not* silent about the causes of non-moral events, such as the shattering of a vase.

C13S7

13.2 A Non-Interactionist Rationale for Moral Occasionalism

C13P42 Our aim in this section is to lay out the premises of an argument for the view that moral non-interactionists ought to be Moral Occasionalists.

C13S8 13.2.1 Toward a Characterization of Moral
Non-Interactionism

C13P43 Just as (many of the) classical occasionalists accepted a form of substance dualism that precluded interaction between mind and matter, many philosophers believe that there are severe limitations on our ability to interact with moral reality. That is the core idea of what we'll call moral non-interactionism. A typical way to reach such a position is via non-naturalist moral realism, but one does not have to be a non-naturalist in order to be a non-interactionist.

C13P44 How should moral non-interactionism be understood? To start, we can point to a few assertions that might be regarded as paradigm examples of non-interactionist claims. Consider:

C13P45 (a) In the cat-burning case, the fact that the hoodlums' action is wrong does not and cannot influence or explain our belief that the hoodlums' action is wrong.

C13P46 The above claim identifies a barrier preventing a piece of moral reality from influencing us. Additionally, non-interactionists will posit barriers in the other direction, that is, barriers preventing us from influencing moral reality. For example:

C13P47 (b) Our belief that the hoodlums' action is wrong does not and cannot influence or explain the fact that the hoodlums' action is wrong.

C13P48 If (a) and (b) are paradigm examples of non-interactionist claims, then perhaps we should generalize from them and say that non-interactionism imposes a total ban on interaction between us and moral reality. Non-interactionism thus understood would be the view that there is nothing about us that influences moral reality, and nothing in moral reality that influences anything about us.

C13P49 But defining non-interactionism in such a highly restrictive way would be a mistake. Here's why. Consider the following pair of claims:

C13P50 (c) The fact that your workplace supervisor's treatment of you causes you to be pointlessly distressed makes your supervisor's actions wrong,

C13P51 and,

- C13P52 (d) the fact that you have promised to meet your sister for lunch at noon makes it obligatory for you to meet your sister for lunch at noon.
- C13P53 The above moral explanations seem perfectly acceptable. These are the sorts of claims that identify links between what we have called sub-moral grounds and moral facts. Given that such links clearly exist, non-interactionism is unsustainable unless it can allow claims like (c) and (d) to be true.
- C13P54 Non-interactionism, therefore, cannot be defined as a view according to which there is nothing about us that explains anything about moral reality. The view must be significantly less restrictive than that.
- C13P55 We propose that non-interactionists will generally sign on for at least the following two claims:
- C13P56 **Belief constraint:** For every moral proposition P and every subject S, the fact that S believes that P never makes it the case that P,
- C13P57 and,
- C13P58 **Intuition constraint:** For every moral proposition P and every subject S, the fact that P seems true to S never makes it the case that P.
- C13P59 These constraints both readily follow from standard versions of non-naturalist moral realism, according to which morality is (as is said) stance-independent—a view that, we have noted, standardly motivates (what we’re calling) moral non-interactionism.⁸ So, we propose, the belief constraint and the intuition constraint should both be understood as core commitments of moral non-interactionism.
- C13P60 However, these constraints do not exhaust the full meaning of the claim that moral reality is stance-independent.⁹ So, a fully specified non-interactionism will involve further limitations on the forms of influence

⁸ One of our reasons for focusing on non-interactionism rather than non-naturalism is that this allows us to isolate a widespread metaphysical belief about morality and its corresponding epistemological problems without having to make use of controversial concepts like “natural” or “mind- or stance-independent.” Nevertheless, we want to be sure that the version of non-interactionism we articulate here is amenable to those who do use those notions to characterize their metaphysical commitments.

⁹ For example, consider the constructivist hypothesis, defended by Street (2008), that the coherence of P with a subject S’s set of moral beliefs can make P true (for S). This hypothesis is, strictly speaking, consistent with the Belief Constraint and the Intuition Constraint, but it will be rejected by those who take morality to be stance-independent.

that we can have on moral reality. And different moral non-interactionists might have different views about what those further limitations are or ought to be.

C13P61 But in any case, the foregoing observations suggest that two things will be true of all reasonable forms of moral non-interactionism: On the one hand, moral non-interactionism severely limits the ways that we can influence moral reality—such that, for example, simply believing that something is wrong cannot make it wrong. But, on the other hand, moral non-interactionism does not say that we can have *no* influence on moral reality—because, for example, promising to do something can make it wrong not to do it.

C13P62 Now, what about the other direction? How do, and how should, moral non-interactionists think about the ways in which *moral reality* can influence *us*?

C13P63 Here non-interactionists might be free to adopt a very hard-line view. Specifically, they may be able to posit a *total* ban on any form of influence flowing from moral reality toward human beings (or anything else in the natural world). This is because, although morality seems clearly to be influenced by some of our actions and properties (such as our acts of promising, our experiences of suffering, etc.), there might be good reasons to doubt that anything in nature, including human beings and the contents of their minds, are in any way influenced by moral properties, or moral facts, or any other moral phenomena.¹⁰

C13P64 So, although a maximally restrictive form of moral non-interactionism, according to which we never interact with moral reality at all, seems indefensible, there may be a slightly less restrictive, but still quite restrictive, form that is defensible. According to that slightly-less-restrictive version of the view, firstly, moral reality never has any influence on us; and, secondly, our ability to influence moral reality is limited in various strict ways—for example, our moral beliefs have no sway in the moral realm. From here on, “moral non-interactionism” will be our name for such a view.

¹⁰ We’d have good reason to believe that moral phenomena influence natural phenomena if natural scientists were telling us that moral phenomena play an important role in the best explanations of natural phenomena. Sadly, that’s not what natural scientists do tell us (Leiter 2001). However, even if the natural facts and properties that appear in scientists’ explanations aren’t advertised by scientists themselves as *moral* facts and properties, those natural facts and properties might nevertheless *be* moral facts and properties, if some version of ethical reductionism were true (Sinhbabu 2018). A typical undergraduate might struggle to find moral truths in her science textbook, but ethical reductionists can claim to have no trouble finding them there. Those who are comfortable with such reductionism, or with views in the neighborhood of it, will be able to maintain that morality is explanatorily and causally efficacious, and so will neither need nor want to be moral non-interactionists.

C13S9 13.2.2 A Path from Moral Non-Interactionism
to Moral Occasionalism

C13P65 Moral non-interactionism as defined above rules out two classes of hypotheses: those according to which our beliefs influence moral facts—these may be called *moral constructivist* hypotheses; and those according to which moral facts influence our beliefs—these may be called *moral naturalist* hypotheses.

C13P66 Each of these types of hypotheses might explain the truth of we-optimism (which, recall, is the view that our moral beliefs largely match the facts). Compare: If Student A's exam largely matches Student B's exam, you could explain this either by the hypothesis that Student A copied from Student B, or by the hypothesis that Student B copied from Student A.

C13P67 But once both classes of hypotheses are ruled out by the moral non-interactionist, then one might worry that there is no longer any remaining way to explain the truth of we-optimism. And if we cannot produce an explanation of the truth of we-optimism, then—it may be argued—we cannot justifiably believe that we-optimism is true. But—the argument continues—we *can* justifiably believe that we-optimism is true. Therefore, moral non-interactionism is unsustainable, or so it has been argued (by, e.g. Street (2006) and Joyce (2007) among others).

C13P68 This argument fails, however, because the above moral constructivist and moral naturalist hypotheses are not the only ways of explaining the truth of we-optimism. Moral Occasionalism is another way of doing it. And Moral Occasionalism is fully consistent with moral non-interactionism. In this way, Moral Occasionalism rescues the non-interactionist from an explanatory challenge that otherwise might have deprived non-interactionists of justification to believe that we-optimism is true.

C13P69 These considerations provide the basis of the following simple argument for Moral Occasionalism:

C13P70 **The Simple Argument for Moral Occasionalism**

- (1) Moral non-interactionism is true.
 - (2) We-optimism is true.
 - (3) If moral non-interactionism is true, then Moral Occasionalism is the best explanation of the truth of we-optimism.
- Therefore, Moral Occasionalism is true.

- C13P71 If this argument succeeds, it shows that those of us who are committed to both moral non-interactionism and we-optimism should also be committed to Moral Occasionalism.
- C13P72 There are four ways to object to the Simple Argument. One can make objections against any of the three premises. Or one can make an objection against the inference to the best explanation that occurs in the move from the premises to the conclusion.
- C13P73 For the moment, let's focus on objections to the third premise—the claim that Moral Occasionalism is the best non-interactionist explanation of the truth of we-optimism. In Section 13.3, we'll consider Enoch's "godless pre-established harmony" view, which we take to be the leading non-interactionist explanation of the truth of we-optimism (and therefore the non-interactionist competitor that Moral Occasionalism most urgently needs to outperform). One way to object to the third premise of the Simple Argument for Moral Occasionalism would be to argue that Enoch's view is consistent with non-interactionism, capable of explaining the truth of we-optimism, and offers an explanation that is better than Moral Occasionalism.
- C13P74 Against that line of objection, we contend that Enoch's view is in fact inferior to Moral Occasionalism. To support this contention, we will argue in Section 13.3 that Enoch's view has serious problems and that Moral Occasionalism avoids those problems.

C13S10 **13.3 Enoch's Pre-Established Harmony View
Is Implausible**

- C13P75 Moral Occasionalism is not the only possible non-interactionism-friendly explanation of the truth of we-optimism. Moral Occasionalism is an example of what Enoch (2011, p. 167) has called a *third-factor view*—a view that seeks to explain the truth of we-optimism in terms of a "third factor" that influences both moral beliefs and moral facts. There are many ways to devise a view that has that structure.
- C13P76 Enoch has his own third-factor view, which he calls a "godless pre-established harmony" view—we'll call it MPEH (moral pre-established harmony) for short. According to MPEH, (a) evolution has an aim; (b) its aim is "at least somewhat good"; (c) our moral beliefs are determined by or at least largely affected by evolution; and (d) these facts, taken together, can explain why our moral beliefs are largely true. (ibid., p. 168)

C13P77 MPEH is structurally different from Moral Occasionalism. MPEH appeals to distal causes: the view is about causes of our moral beliefs that lie deep in our evolutionary history. By contrast, Moral Occasionalism appeals to proximate causes: the view is silent about our evolutionary history; its commitments are about the sub-moral grounds that we consider and react to in the here-and-now when we are forming our moral beliefs.

C13P78 An analogy might help to clarify this difference. If one wanted to explain why our sense of vision provides us with a largely correct picture of our macroscopic surroundings, one might do this in evolutionary terms (e.g. one might say that our distant ancestors' survival depended on being able to correctly detect predators, food, mates, etc., so via natural selection we have inherited a genetic disposition for reliable vision) or one might do this in biomechanical terms (e.g. one might provide details about ocular and neurological anatomy that show that our eyes reliably translate visual information into accurate representations). The former explanation is distal, so it's analogous with MPEH; the latter is proximate, so it's analogous with Moral Occasionalism.

C13S11 13.3.1 An Explanatory Non-Sequitur?

C13P79 A first question to ask about Enoch's view is whether (d) is true. Now, if any of (a), (b), and (c) are false, then presumably they cannot do any explaining at all. Only truths successfully explain. So, if any of (a), (b), or (c) are dubious, then (d) becomes dubious. But, for now, let's assume that (a)–(c) are all true. Even on that assumption, it is unclear that (d) is true—that is, it is unclear why (a)–(c) are supposed to explain why our moral beliefs are largely true.

C13P80 Consider the following scenario. Suppose you believe, or want to believe, that our aesthetic judgments are largely true. That is, you are attracted to some form of aesthetic we-optimism. But you do not have a good explanation of the truth of aesthetic we-optimism.

C13P81 Then, suppose, you learn that you and everyone else in the world is a fictional character inhabiting a fictional world. Further, this fictional world and its inhabitants were created by an author who aimed to produce something aesthetically good: she aimed to produce an aesthetically valuable work of fiction.

C13P82 Would these revelations provide anything like an explanation of the fact (assuming it is a fact) that our aesthetic judgments are largely true? No. After

Given that evolution's strategy in serving its aims evidently does not usually involve or require inducement of true moral beliefs, it's unclear what reason can be given for thinking that evolution aims to induce true moral beliefs in humans specifically.

C13S12 13.3.2 Morally Dubious Commitments of MPEH

C13P87 A further problem for MPEH is that all of (a)–(c) are questionable. There are reasonable doubts about (a) (it is not obvious that non-conscious evolutionary processes have genuine aims) and about (c) (the extent of evolution's influence on the content of our moral beliefs is not obvious) but let's focus on (b)—the claim that evolution's aims, whatever these may be, are “at least somewhat good.”

C13P88 Generally, if someone or something competently pursues good aims, then the result will at least typically be something good. So, if (b) is plausible, then either evolution is incompetent (i.e. it poorly serves its own aims, whatever they are), or the outcome of evolutionary processes is at least typically good. However, it does not seem that evolution is incompetent in this sense (i.e. whatever it is that evolution is trying to do, there seems no reason to doubt that it is doing it well), and it is questionable whether the outcome of evolutionary processes is typically good.

C13P89 The natural world is not uniformly awful (Browning and Veit 2023) but much of it is bad. In the natural world, those who are sick and weak are frequently allowed to suffer and die without aid. Violence and domination are widespread. Many individuals cannot even feed themselves unless they are able and willing to endure great hardships and inflict great suffering on others. None of this is good, yet it is a product of evolution. So, there are reasons to doubt that the outcome of evolutionary processes is typically good.

C13S13 13.3.3 Moral Occasionalism Lacks MPEH's Flaws

C13P90 Moral Occasionalism can do the same sort of explanatory work as MPEH, and it does not require us to defend the goodness of evolution's aims. Moral Occasionalism is silent about evolution's aims because (as mentioned earlier) the view is about proximate rather than distal causes of moral beliefs. Moral Occasionalism is even consistent with creationist views, according to

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which the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection is false. It is consistent with creationist views for the same reason that a biomechanical explanation of the reliability of vision can be understood and accepted by creationists.

C13P91 However, although Moral Occasionalism makes no direct claims about our evolutionary history, this does not mean that Moral Occasionalism does not carry any commitments about evolutionary history.

C13P92 It is plausible to suppose that something like the following is true. Our brains are a product of evolution. When individuals with our sorts of brains find themselves in the sorts of societies that we have, they tend to develop certain belief-forming dispositions. And it is because we have those dispositions that we have the moral beliefs that we have. So, if our evolutionary history had been different, or if our societies had been different, then our moral beliefs might have been (and probably would have been) different as well.

C13P93 The Moral Occasionalist therefore must admit that we are epistemically fortunate in having the evolutionary history that we have. If we had evolved differently, then our belief-forming dispositions might have been different, and then we might not respond to sub-moral grounds in ways that correspond with moral reality. In short, the Moral Occasionalist has to say that we have fallen by luck into becoming—via our contingent evolutionary history and via the contingent order of our society—the sorts of beings who possess dispositions to form largely true moral beliefs in response to sub-moral grounds.

C13P94 The hypothesis that we indeed have such good epistemic fortune might be surprising or dubious. We'll come back to this. For now, we want to emphasize, once again, that that hypothesis is distinct from Enoch's commitments about evolution. Moral Occasionalism does not require us to argue that evolution's aims are in any way good (because, as noted earlier, the goodness or badness of evolution's aims have little bearing on whether moral beliefs induced by evolution are largely true or largely false). This is a plus because, as we've argued, it's difficult to establish that evolution's aims are indeed good.

C13S14

13.4 Problems for Moral Occasionalism

C13P95 We have argued that Moral Occasionalism avoids serious disadvantages that face its main non-interactionist rival. This does not entail that Moral

Occasionalism is the *best* non-interactionist explanation of the truth of we-optimism, but we hope it at least provides some initial support for that view. Now we'll consider some of the problems that might be presented for Moral Occasionalism.

C13S15 13.4.1 Moral Occasionalism Is Awfully Convenient

C13P96 Moral Occasionalism explains the truth of we-optimism by positing a resemblance—a mirroring relation, as we've called it—between the psycho-physical process that yields our beliefs, on the one hand, and the grounding relations that obtain between sub-moral grounds and moral facts, on the other. A critic might claim that such resemblance would be surprisingly, objectionably convenient, and that Moral Occasionalism is therefore not plausible.

C13P97 Moral Occasionalism is committed to two separable claims. First, there is a claim that all we-optimists (whether or not they are Moral Occasionalists) will need and want to endorse:

C13P98 **The general mirroring claim:** Our psycho-physical belief-forming process produces moral beliefs that largely match moral reality.

C13P99 And, second, there is a narrower claim, one that those outside the Moral Occasionalist camp will not need or want to make:

C13P100 **The Moral Occasionalist mirroring claim:** Our psycho-physical belief-forming process neither influences nor is influenced by moral reality. But because that process is responsive (in the right way) to sub-moral grounds, it produces moral beliefs that largely match moral reality.

C13P101 If our opponents argue that the general mirroring claim is already too convenient to be believed, even before the Moral Occasionalist explanation of that claim has been introduced, then they are voicing a concern about we-optimism. (This is because all we-optimists need to endorse the general mirroring claim.) Such concerns are far from baseless, but responding to them is beyond the scope of this chapter (as our rationale for Moral Occasionalism, presented in Section 13.2.2, relies on we-optimism as a premise).

C13P102 In order to articulate an objection to Moral Occasionalism specifically (rather than we-optimism broadly), our opponents might argue that the

Moral Occasionalist mirroring claim is implausibly convenient. Here again the analogy with classical occasionalism is instructive. We grant that it would be awfully convenient for us if there exists a God who benevolently orchestrates both our beliefs and external reality such that these distinct realms correspond. And we likewise grant that it would be awfully convenient for us if our moral belief-forming process is responsive to sub-moral grounds in just the way that it needs to be in order to produce moral beliefs that match moral reality.

C13P103 In fact, one might argue that Moral Occasionalism is even more vulnerable to these sorts of worries than classical occasionalism. Granted, the epistemically benevolent God of the classical occasionalists is convenient, but at least the classical occasionalists *have* a God. By contrast, in place of God, Moral Occasionalism has sub-moral grounds (Section 13.1.4). These grounds are mundane non-moral facts, which means they're not conscious beings, so they cannot be benevolent in the way that God is supposed to be. And unlike God, who is one being, there are innumerable many grounds (because, for instance, the rightness of any particular act will be grounded in a non-moral fact about that particular act).

C13P104 If a classical occasionalist were to shift to a polytheistic view, according to which each of our beliefs is caused by a different god, and each of these gods is not benevolent and not even conscious, and yet the beliefs caused by these non-conscious gods tend to be true—then her position would more closely resemble Moral Occasionalism. If such a polytheistic view would be too convenient to be plausible, then it might be argued that the Moral Occasionalist mirroring claim is also too convenient to be plausible.

C13P105 So, we grant that the Moral Occasionalist mirroring claim is awfully convenient if it's true. But that doesn't yet mean it's *not* true, nor does it even mean that it is dubious or improbable. It's awfully convenient for Edwin Castro that he won \$2 billion in a California lottery (reportedly the largest lottery win ever) but he did win that sum, and he (and we) can know that he did.

C13P106 In Section 13.2.2, we offered a Simple Argument for the view that Moral Occasionalism is true. If the premises of that argument are plausible, then Moral Occasionalism (along with its mirroring claim) is plausible. By the same token, those who doubt the premises of that argument should not be persuaded by it. But the mere fact—and it is, we grant, a fact—that Moral Occasionalism is awfully convenient does not supply reason to doubt those premises.

C13S16

13.4.2 Coincidence

C13P107 Consider:

C13P108 **The coincidence objection to Moral Occasionalism**

(1) If Moral Occasionalism is true, then our moral beliefs are, in large part, merely coincidentally true.

(2) If our moral beliefs are, in large part, merely coincidentally true, then they are, in large part, epistemically defective (e.g. unjustified).

(3) It's not the case that our moral beliefs are, in large part, epistemically defective.

Therefore, Moral Occasionalism is false.

C13P109 We take it that this objection differs from, and is significantly more promising than, the convenience-based objections discussed above. In this section, we'll do our best to undermine the first premise.

C13S17 13.4.2.1 Good and Bad Common Influence

C13P110 Consider the following case:

C13P111 **Bad Sheep:** Mary sees a sheep-façade in a field and—mistaking the sheep-façade for a real sheep—she forms the belief that there is a sheep in the field. Unbeknownst to Mary, there is a real sheep hiding behind the sheep-façade. This sheep is there because it was attracted from a neighboring field by the façade. So, Mary's belief is correct: There is indeed a sheep in the field.¹¹

C13P112 In Bad Sheep, Mary's belief that there is a sheep in the field, and the fact that there is a sheep in the field, have a common explanans: the sheep façade. And it is because of this common-explanans structure that the belief turns out to be true.

C13P113 However, intuitively, Mary's belief is true only by coincidence. This is bad news for Moral Occasionalism, because the structure of Bad Sheep is like the structure found in the Moral Occasionalist view of our relationship with moral facts. In both Bad Sheep and in Moral Occasionalism, a belief and a fact have a common influence, and the belief and the fact match one another in virtue of the operation of that common influence. It might be argued,

¹¹ This case and the next are adapted from Faraci (2019, p. 5).

- C13P120 But in Good Sheep, Bo’s awareness of the fact that sheep are attracted to façades, in addition to being part of the explanation of her belief, *also* explains why her belief matches the truth. We can explain the matching proposition in a way that isn’t simply repeating the explanation of the particular proposition. So, Bhogal’s view plausibly allows that Bo’s belief is non-coincidentally true.
- C13P121 If Bhogal’s view is right, the Moral Occasionalist needs to show that there is some explanation for the fact that our moral beliefs match the moral truths that doesn’t merely repeat the explanation of each. In Good Sheep, it is Bo’s awareness of the causal relation between façades and sheep that explains the matching proposition. Similarly, a Moral Occasionalist can say that we are aware of grounding relations and can appeal to this to explain the match between our moral beliefs and the moral truth. Such awareness plays a distinctive role in explaining the matching proposition and can therefore allow us to avoid the conclusion that the truth of moral beliefs, given Moral Occasionalism, is a mere coincidence.
- C13P122 But how do we become aware of these non-moral to moral grounding relations? Suppose, for instance, that Bo came to believe that sheep are attracted to façades because she read it in the *Journal of Unreliable Claims*. In this case, the truth of her belief that there is a sheep in the field would be a mere coincidence. So, unless the Moral Occasionalist can say something about the source of our awareness of these non-moral to moral grounding relations, she won’t have fully answered the critic.

C13S19 13.4.2.3 Strong and Weak Occasionalism

- C13P123 Moral Occasionalists can respond to the request to explain our awareness of grounding relations by reapplying the basic occasionalist schema at a deeper level. They claim that we form our moral beliefs on the basis of facts that ground their content. They can also claim that our awareness of non-moral to moral grounding relations is based on facts that ground these grounding relations. For example: we believe we ought to do something because we promised to do it. The truth of our belief is no coincidence since we are aware that promising in this case grounds obligation. And our awareness of that grounding relation could be based on some fact that grounds it, such as the fact that we didn’t make the promise under duress.¹²

¹² We’re here relying on the idea that enabling conditions are a kind of ground and can be thought of as grounding what Wygoda Cohen (2020) calls “exclusive” grounding relations.

- C13P124 Will this reapplication strategy always be available? That depends. Let's distinguish two versions of Moral Occasionalism: Strong Occasionalism, according to which all moral facts have sub-moral grounds, and Weak Occasionalism, according to which some moral facts have sub-moral grounds but moral principles concerning the most fundamental non-moral to moral grounding relations do not have sub-moral grounds (so, they either have *moral* grounds, or are not grounded at all). For the Weak Occasionalist, the basic Occasionalist schema will not apply to fundamental principles.
- C13P125 The Strong Occasionalist can hope to rely upon an Occasionalist schema in *every* case in which the truth of a moral belief calls for explanation, whether that belief concerns a moral principle or a judgment about a particular case. However, Strong Occasionalism is arguably in tension with non-naturalism (which, we've noted, is a main source of motivation for non-interactionism). Some non-naturalists deny that every moral fact has some non-moral ground.¹³ These non-naturalists cannot avail themselves of Strong Occasionalism. But other non-naturalists define their view compatibly with Strong Occasionalism.¹⁴
- C13P126 Weak Occasionalists cannot reach for the Occasionalist schema to vindicate beliefs about fundamental principles. Whether this will cause a problem for them depends on whether Weak Occasionalists can find a different way to vindicate such beliefs. (See Smithies 2022 for an option that may be attractive to Weak Occasionalists.)
- C13P127 We have suggested ways that both Strong Occasionalists and Weak Occasionalists might go about developing a response to coincidence-based objections to Moral Occasionalism. Our discussion here falls well short of a full answer to this class of objections, but we hope that we have at least established that Moral Occasionalists have some avenues to explore, and that a knock-down coincidence-based objection is elusive.

C13S20 13.4.3 Explanationist Critiques of Moral Occasionalism

- C13P128 One might argue that the Moral Occasionalist denial of any direct explanatory connection between moral beliefs and moral facts directly undermines

¹³ Berker (2019) characterizes non-naturalism as the view that “there are normative facts, and at least some of them are not grounded in any fact (or plurality of facts).”

¹⁴ Leary (2021) gives an account of non-naturalism in terms of essence that wouldn't preclude every moral fact from having a non-moral ground.

the justification of our moral beliefs. To develop a version of that sort of critique, consider a case presented by Korman and Locke:

C13P129 **Namibia:** Nysha reads a book about Namibia and believes what she read. Among other things, she reads and believes that there are monarch butterflies there. She then learns that the book's author has never been to Namibia, has never read anything about Namibia, has never spoken with anyone who has been to Namibia, has never seen photos from Namibia, and so on. In short, Nysha learns that the author has had no contact—direct or mediated—with Namibia, and was just making stuff up for the purposes of publishing a book. (Korman and Locke 2021, p. 1)

C13P131 At the outset, Nysha is justified in believing that there are monarch butterflies in Namibia, but she clearly loses this justification by the end of the story. Intuitively, her justification evaporates precisely because she comes to believe that the contents of the book are not explained by facts about Namibia (and are instead explained by the author's fanciful imagination).

C13P132 In this case, then, it appears that a belief loses justification because the person who holds that belief comes to deny that her belief is explained by the fact that the belief is about. It might be argued by analogy with this case that the moment we become Moral Occasionalists, and thus come to deny that our moral beliefs are explained by the facts that they are about, we likewise lose our justification to believe that our beliefs are true.

C13P133 This conclusion does not yet imply that Moral Occasionalism implies that our beliefs are unjustified. But it does mean that *believing* Moral Occasionalism deprives our moral beliefs of justification, which seems clearly to be a result that defenders of Moral Occasionalism should hope to avoid.

C13P134 To support the line of argument being considered here, the critic of Moral Occasionalism needs to present a general principle that has three features: the principle (i) plausibly explains why Nysha loses her justification in Namibia; (ii) implies that believing Moral Occasionalism undermines our justification to hold on to our moral beliefs; and (iii) is defensible.

C13P135 Unfortunately for the critic, however, it is extremely difficult to find such a principle. Consider, to begin with, the following principle:

C13P136 **EC:** If S believes that her belief that p neither explains nor is explained by the fact that p, then S loses her justification to believe that p.

C13P137 This principle is generally recognized to be false, because there are counter-examples to it. For example, as Korman and Locke write:

C13P138 You observe [a] fire in the fireplace and are justified in believing that there is smoke coming out the chimney. Of course, the fact that smoke is coming out of the chimney does not explain (causally or otherwise) the belief that it is. But [contrary to what EC implies] this realization surely does not

C13P139 undermine the belief. (Korman and Locke 2020, p. 324)

C13P140 Recognizing this problem for EC, Korman and Locke reject EC and shift to a different principle, which is as follows:

C13P141 EC*: If p is about domain D, and S believes that her belief that p is neither explained by nor explains some D-facts, then S is thereby rationally committed to withholding belief that p. (To say that a given fact that p is “about” a given domain D is just to say that the fact that p belongs to D.)

C13P142 EC* satisfies two of the three desiderata mentioned above: it explains (if true) why Nysha’s beliefs lose justification in Namibia, and it implies that believing Moral Occasionalism undermines our justification to hold on to our moral beliefs. However, EC* lacks the third desideratum: EC* is not plausible, for reasons that are explained in Killoren (2021).

C13P143 Because EC* faces serious problems, Korman and Locke have given up on defending it and have more recently argued for a different principle, which is as follows:

C13P144 **E-Reasons:** If S is not entitled to believe that the facts she treats as reasons to believe that p support* her belief that p, then S’s belief that p is defeated.

C13P145 E-Reasons would explain why Nysha loses her justification in Namibia (because it seems clear enough that Nysha is not entitled to treat facts about the contents of the book as reasons to believe that there are butterflies in Namibia). E-Reasons also has the advantage that it is plausible. But E-Reasons does not cause problems for Moral Occasionalism, because Moral Occasionalists can claim that we *are* entitled to treat sub-moral grounds as reasons for moral beliefs (e.g. we are entitled to treat facts about promises made as reasons to believe certain claims about moral obligations). Until the critic of Moral Occasionalism can produce reason to disbelieve that claim, E-Reasons is of no help in building the critic’s case.

C13P146 We have surveyed a few attempts to devise an explanationist principle that can create problems for Moral Occasionalism without having implausible implications and have seen that these attempts fail. This brief survey suggests that there should be at least some doubt about whether any such principle can be found.

C13S21 **13.5 Conclusion: Moral Non-Interactionists Ought to Be in the Business of Defending and Developing Moral Occasionalism**

C13P147 In this chapter, we have defined Moral Occasionalism, given reasons to believe that Moral Occasionalism is superior to its chief non-interactionist rival, namely Enoch’s “pre-established harmony” view, and tried to show that some of the main objections that might be raised against Moral Occasionalism can be defused. We believe that the conclusions of this chapter should be enough to motivate moral non-interactionists—a group that includes but is not limited to non-naturalist moral realists—to align themselves with this view, to develop it in greater detail, and to seek out and try to answer objections.¹⁵

C13S22

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¹⁵ Versions of this paper were presented at the 19th Annual Madison Metaethics Workshop, The Virtual Metaethics Colloquium, CalPoly’s Philosophy Faculty Workshop, UC San Diego’s Moral and Political Philosophy Society, and the ACU International Conference on Moral Epistemology. Thanks to the audiences at those events for helpful discussion. For valuable feedback and discussion, we thank David Enoch, Shlomit Wygoda Cohen, David Faraci, Ken Brown, Amy Kurzweil, Preston Werner, Aaron Elliot, Scott Simmons, Shawn Wang, and two anonymous reviewers. And we have a special debt of gratitude to Russ Shafer-Landau, Rach Cosker-Rowland, and Thomas Carson.

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