

Morality does not Depend on God

Naturalists have many and diverse reasons for thinking that morality does not depend upon God. I do not aim to give an exhaustive inventory of these reasons. Rather, I aim to give reason that emerge from the kind of naturalism that I accept. I begin with some preliminary considerations that establish a framework for the subsequent discussion.

1. Preliminary Considerations

What one means when one says that *morality depends on God* turns on what one means by *God*, *morality*, and *depends*.

God

For the purposes of this discussion, I shall adopt a very inclusive conception of God. On that conception, to be God is to be the one and only god. And to be a god is to be a non-natural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world but that is not, in turn, under the power of any higher-ranking or more powerful non-natural beings or forces. Setting aside all other relevant considerations, whether it could be reasonable for one to think that morality depends on God may turn on further details that figure in one's conception of God.

Morality

As noted by Gert and Gert (2016), the term 'morality' has two kinds of common uses. When used descriptively, the term 'morality' refers to particular codes of conduct put forward by societies or groups, or accepted by individuals for their own behaviour. If used normatively, the term 'morality' refers to an informal public system of norms that, given specified conditions, would be endorsed by all suitably qualified persons. When a person claims that morality prohibits or requires a given action, it can be quite unclear whether 'morality' refers to: (1) a guide to behaviour that is put forward by a society to which the person may or may not belong; (2) a guide to behaviour that is put forward by a group, to which the person may or may not belong; (3) a guide that someone—who may or may not be the person in question—regards as overriding and wants everyone else to adopt; or (4) a universal guide that all suitably placed persons would put forward for governing the behaviour of all moral agents.

It is almost universally accepted that, in the descriptive sense, there are moralities distinct from systems of etiquette, laws and religions. (These moralities are always concerned with minimising harm to some (or all) human beings, but may also be concerned with other matters, such as loyalty, purity and/or acceptance of authority.) However, some philosophers suppose that normative uses of 'morality' fail to refer: there is no informal public system of norms that, given specified conditions, would be endorsed by all suitably qualified persons.

According to natural law theories of normative morality, any suitably qualified person in any society can know the general kinds of actions that normative morality prohibits, requires, discourages, encourages and allows. *Theological* natural law theories maintain that God has implanted this capacity in all persons, but typically add that the exercise of the capacity may be disabled as one of the wages of sin.

Dependence

There are various different ways in which it might be supposed that morality depends upon God. *First*, it might be supposed that the very existence of an informal public system of norms that, given specified conditions, would be endorsed by all suitably qualified persons, is entirely a result of divine providence: we would not live in conditions in which there is an appropriate informal public system of norms if God had not chosen for us to live in those conditions. *Second*, it might be supposed that our knowledge of the content of morality depends upon God's having implanted in each of us a capacity to have that knowledge: we would not have moral knowledge if God had not given us the capacity to have moral knowledge (and, on some views, if divine grace did not undo the damage wrought by the wages of sin). *Third*, it might be supposed that the very content of morality is determined by God: it would not be the case that our informal public system of norms has the content that it does if God had not decreed—or otherwise determined—that that informal public system of norms should have the content that it does.

Alternative Claims

Suppose that, for some determinate understanding of the claim that morality depends upon God, you reject that claim. Immediately, it follows that you hold that morality does not depend on God. But the position that you occupy may go well beyond mere maintenance of the claim that morality does not depend upon God. Perhaps, for example, you think that it could not be that morality depends upon God. One possible reason for adopting the view that it could not be that morality depends upon God is that you suppose that it could not be that God exists: if it could not be that God exists, then it could not be that morality depends upon God. A second possible reason for adopting the view that it could not be that morality depends upon God is that you suppose that, on the given determinate understanding of the claim that morality depends upon God, there is nothing to which the term 'morality' refers: if there is nothing to which the term 'morality' refers, then it could not be that morality depends upon God. A third possible reason for adopting the view that it could not be that morality depends upon God is that you suppose that, on the given determinate understanding of the claim that morality depends upon God, it could not be that there is anything that morality depends upon: if there could not be anything that morality depends upon then, in particular, it could not be that morality depends upon God. A fourth possible reason for adopting the view that it could be that morality depends upon God is that you suppose that, on the given determinate understanding of the claim that morality depends upon God, while it is true that morality could depend upon something, it is not true that morality could depend upon *God*: if it is not true that morality could depend upon God, then it is true that morality could not depend upon God.

2. The Existence of God

I self-identify as a naturalist. 'Naturalism' means very different things to different people. I take naturalism to be the view that there are none but natural entities involving none but natural properties. Since gods are non-natural beings or forces (or powers or grounds), naturalism entails that there are no gods. Since to be God is to be the one and only god, naturalism entails that God does not exist. *A fortiori*, given my naturalism, there is nothing that depends upon God. In particular, then, it is not the case that morality depends upon God.

I hold an austere view of modality. In my view, all possible worlds share a common initial history with the actual world, and diverge from the actual world only as a result of the outplaying of objective chances. If there are no objective chances, then there is just one possible world: the actual world. I think that there are objective chances; so I think that there are other possible worlds. If our world has an initial state—‘the initial singularity’—then all possible worlds have that initial state: all possible worlds begin from the (same) initial singularity. However, if our world does not have an initial state, then all possible worlds share an infinite initial history with our world. Either way, given that our world contains none but natural entities with none but natural properties, and given that it is impossible for there to be a transition from a world state in which there are none but natural entities with none but natural properties to a world state in which there are some non-natural entities with some non-natural properties, there is no possible world in which there are non-natural entities with non-natural properties. So there are no possible worlds in which there are gods. So there is no possible world in which God exists. On my view of modality, it is impossible that God exists. Hence, on my view of modality, it is impossible that morality depends upon God.

I do not think that there is a knockdown argument in favour of my naturalistic worldview. Unsurprisingly, when I evaluate the merits of competing worldviews, I find that my naturalistic worldview comes out ahead. As I say in Oppy (2013), it seems to me that my naturalistic worldview makes the best trade-off of simplicity against explanatory depth and breadth. However, this assessment is evidently controversial; I am happy to allow that we can reasonably agree to disagree about the doxastic virtues of competing worldviews. I am far more certain that there are no knockdown arguments in favour of competing worldviews; in particular, I have elsewhere argued at great length that there are no successful arguments in favour of the existence of God. (See, for example, Oppy (1996), Oppy (2006), Oppy (2014).)

Since what I have said to this point may be open to misunderstanding, I should emphasise that the theoretical weighing of theism and naturalism takes in considerations about morality. Comparison of a particular version of naturalism with a particular version of theism requires consideration of what they say about putative moral truth, putative moral knowledge, conscience, virtue, societal dysfunction, happiness, and so on. The judgment that God does not exist—and, so, the judgment that it is impossible that God exists—is not arrived at in advance of considerations about morality, and so cannot be taken to absolve naturalists of the need to pay attention to morality. The only point that I have been making here is that, since it is my all things considered judgment that it is impossible that God exists, it is also my all things considered judgment that it is impossible for morality to depend upon God.

3. The Existence of Morality

On the ‘descriptive’ understanding of ‘morality’, it is uncontroversial that ‘morality’ refers to a set of empirical phenomena that includes, for example, manifestations of human capacities to exhibit sentiments like *remorse*, *sympathy* and *resentment*, to deploy concepts like *goodness* and *fairness*, and to make normative judgments. Given this ‘descriptive’ understanding of ‘morality’, it is also uncontroversial that there can be systematic scientific investigation of the evolutionary origins and functions of our ‘moral’ capacities.

On the ‘normative’ understanding of ‘morality’, it is controversial whether some moral judgments are representations of moral facts. According to *moral realists*, some of our moral judgments are

representations of moral facts that obtain independently of our evaluative attitudes, and, in at least some cases, we have knowledge of those moral facts. However, according to *moral sceptics*, we are unable to obtain any knowledge of moral facts; and according to *moral anti-realists*, some other part of the moral realist position must be rejected. According to *moral error-theorists*, all primitive, positive moral judgments are false; according to *moral expressivists*, all moral judgments serve merely to express norms and attitudes rather than to represent an independent domain of moral facts; and, according to *moral subjectivists*, all moral truths are entirely functions of our evaluative attitudes.

I am a moral realist. I think that some of our moral judgments are representations of moral facts that hold independently of our evaluative attitudes, and that, in some of those cases, we know those moral facts. Consider, for example, the claim that *it is morally wrong to torture young children solely in order to ward off boredom*. I think that this claim is true, and that almost all human beings know that it is true.

Some philosophers hold that moral realism is inconsistent with naturalistic evolutionary theory. In their view, the fact that evolutionary influences have pervasively conditioned the contents of our moral thoughts provides a defeater for moral realism. (See, for example, Street (2006) and Joyce (2006).) However, a plausible naturalistic moral realism *denies* that our evolutionary history *pervasively conditions* the contents of our moral thoughts. Sure, we have an evolved capacity to form and employ normative concepts in our thinking and decision making, an evolved capacity that is present, in rudimentary form, in both human infants and chimpanzees. But our ability to grasp moral truths is also dependent upon our culturally enhanced capacities for autonomous moral reflection and reasoning—and this, in turn, is dependent upon our culturally enhanced general capacities for critical reasoning. There is no more reason to see pervasive evolutionary conditioning of the contents of our moral thoughts than there is to see pervasive evolutionary conditioning of our mathematical and scientific thought: but it is not very controversial to be a realist about some of our mathematical and scientific judgments. (See Clarke-Doane (2012) (2014) for the provocative—but I think plausible—suggestion that moral realism is in *better* standing than mathematical realism.)

Some philosophers hold that naturalism is inconsistent with evolutionary theory. Notoriously, Plantinga (2012) argues that we cannot rationally accept the conjunctive claim that naturalism is true and our cognitive faculties have come to be in the way proposed by contemporary evolutionary theory. In his view, there is a vanishingly small probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable—i.e. produce a preponderance of true beliefs over false beliefs—*given* that naturalism is true and our cognitive faculties have come to be in the way proposed by contemporary evolutionary theory. However, if we suppose that most of our beliefs concern matters about which more or less all competent believers agree, then the probability in question is not vanishingly small: the evolved capacities that underwrite the judgments on which more or less all competent believers agree were evolutionarily successful precisely because those capacities track the truth. (Creatures that form true beliefs about the presence of predators in their immediate environment are more likely to pass on their genes than creatures that form false beliefs about the presence of predators in their immediate environment.) And if we suppose that most of our beliefs concern matters on which there is widespread disagreement, then it is simply not true that our cognitive faculties are reliable. In philosophy, religion, politics, and a host of other domains, there is no preponderant opinion: most philosophical beliefs are false; most religious beliefs are false; most political beliefs are false; etc. If it is very likely that our cognitive faculties produce a preponderance of true philosophical beliefs over false philosophical beliefs *given* that Plantinga's theism is true, then the correct conclusion to draw is that it is very likely that Plantinga's theism is false.

4. The Independence of Morality

Suppose that, on the 'normative' conception of 'morality', things are as I suppose: there are 'moral' facts. What should we suppose is the metaphysical status of these moral facts? In particular, should we suppose that there is something else upon which these moral facts depend?

I think not. Given that there are moral truths, the most plausible view is that those moral truths are necessary truths. If, as I suppose, it is true that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom, then it is necessarily true that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom. And if it is necessarily true that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom, then it is true *no matter what* that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom. But if it is true no matter what that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom, then there is nothing that the fact that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom depends upon.

The claim that *there is nothing that the fact that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom depends upon* is a metaphysical claim.

If you believe that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom, then there will be countless valid derivations from claims to which you are committed, by the things that you believe, that have as their conclusion the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom. If you want to say that the conclusion of a valid argument is 'logically dependent' upon the premises of that argument, then it will be true that the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom—like any other claim—is logically dependent upon other claims. But even if the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom is logically dependent upon other claims, this goes no distance at all towards establishing that there is something that the fact that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom depends upon.

If you believe the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom, it may well be that you inferred this claim from other claims that you believe. If you want to say that claims that you infer from other claims are 'doxastically dependent' upon the claims from which they are inferred, then it will be true—at least for you—that the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom is doxastically dependent upon other claims. But even if the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom is doxastically dependent upon other claims (at least for you), this goes no distance at all towards establishing that there is something that the fact that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom depends upon.

If you are committed to the claim it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom, it may be that this claim would not be an axiom in any most economical axiomatisation of your (moral) beliefs and commitments. If you want to say that claims that would not be axioms in any most economical axiomatisation of your (moral) beliefs and commitments are 'epistemically dependent', then it will be true—at least for you—that the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom is epistemically dependent (at least for you). But even if the claim that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom is epistemically

dependent (at least for you), this goes no distance at all towards establishing that there is something that the fact that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom depends upon.

In order for it to be the case that there is something that the fact that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom depends upon, there must be something that makes a difference to the obtaining of this fact. But, if it is necessary that it is morally wrong to torture children in order to ward off boredom, then there cannot be anything that makes a difference to the obtaining of this fact: the fact obtains come what may. While there may be logical, or doxastic, or epistemic dependence of the claim upon other claims, there cannot be metaphysical dependence of the fact upon other facts.

Many philosophers have claimed that the moral supervenes on the natural: there can be no variation in the moral without variation in the natural. This thought is readily vindicated if there is nothing that moral truth depends upon. While the application of particular evaluative moral terms to particular events and things depends both upon the necessary moral truths and the details of those particular events and things, the necessity of the moral truths ensures that the application of particular evaluative moral terms to particular events and things varies only as the particular events and things vary. (Compare with the application of mathematical terms to particular events and things. I have four oranges. I could have had five oranges. In the counterfactual circumstances in which I have five oranges, the necessary mathematical facts remain the same, but there is a change in the distribution of fruit. Hold fixed the distribution of fruit, and there can be no change in the correct application of the mathematical terms to the fruit.)

5. The Independence of Morality from God

I hold that it is impossible for morality—in either the descriptive or the normative sense—to depend upon God. So I hold that those who think that morality does depend upon God are necessarily mistaken. But it does not follow that I think that there is a contradiction in the beliefs of those who think that morality does depend upon God. Those who think that morality does depend upon God disagree with me not only about what is actual, but also about what is necessary and what is possible.

While I cannot provide a ‘counterfactual’ consideration of the views of those who think that morality depends upon God—since I take it that counterfactuals with necessarily false antecedents are all trivially true—I can consider issues that I think would bother me were I a theist considering the claim that morality depends upon God.

Since there are many kinds of theism, there are many views to consider. What follows is both broad brush and impressionistic.

Some Christian theists hold that it is literally true that God is a perfectly morally good person. On this view, ‘moral goodness’ picks out an attribute that is shared between God and human beings: God and human beings are morally good in exactly the same sense. Given that moral goodness is a property shared between the divine person and human persons, it is plausible to suppose that what makes it true that the divine person possesses this property is also what makes it true that human persons possess this property. But, if that’s right, then it cannot be that God has a role to play in determining what it is for a person to be morally good. It cannot be, for example, that God’s commands or decisions determine what is morally good because God is morally good *prior to* the

giving of those commands or the making of those decisions. On this view, then, the content of morality is determined independently of God. Perhaps it might be said that, even if the content of morality is determined independently of God, God has a role to play in bringing it about that human beings know the content of morality. But that seems implausible. Given that the moral codes found in the foundational texts of all of the world's religions are based on in-group loyalty, hierarchical authority, rigidly enforced gender roles, and gratuitous regulations concerning sex and purity, those moral codes do not accord with contemporary deliverances of autonomous moral reflection, and so are not plausibly taken to be the deliverances of a morally perfect person. A morally perfect person simply would not be *for* tribalism, authoritarianism, out-group discrimination, rigid gender roles, etc. Perhaps it might be said that, even if it is not the case that God has a role to play in bringing it about that human beings know the content of morality, God took special measures to ensure that human beings have the capacity to arrive at moral knowledge through the exercise of autonomous moral reflection. But, as we have already observed, there is good reason to think that our possession of that capacity can be adequately explained in historical terms, adverting to a combination of biological evolution and cultural overlay: our capacity to arrive at mathematical knowledge and our capacity to arrive at moral knowledge fit into the very same explanatory framework. If it is literally true that God is a perfectly morally good person, then there is no significant way in which morality is especially dependent upon God.

Some Christian theists hold that God is simple and only describable in analogical terms. Because God is simple, God is ontologically *sui generis*: neither substance nor attribute, but something utterly beyond our familiar ontological categories. Because God is describable only in analogical terms, it is not true that God is a good, wise, powerful person, if 'good', 'wise', 'powerful' and 'person' are understood as they would be were we applying these terms to a human being. Rather—putting these two claims together—in the appropriate analogical sense of these terms, 'God' 'good', 'wise', 'powerful', 'person', and so on are just different ways of referring to the very same thing: God is identical to goodness, God is identical to wisdom, God is identical to power, etc. This view escapes the objection raised in the preceding paragraph: that God is good in an analogical sense does not foreclose the possibility that God's commands or decisions determine what is literally morally good. However, the view is vulnerable to a different objection: namely, that it seems to make no sense to suppose that God is simple and only describable in analogical terms. It is uncontroversial that, taken literally, 'good', 'wise', 'powerful', 'creator', 'saviour', and 'person' pick out very different members of very different ontological categories. What process of analogising could possibly bring it about that, making use of that process of analogising, we end up with a bunch of analogical terms that pick out the very same, ontologically *sui generis*, referent? (Perhaps it is worth noting that, when I listed the identities, I did not give the identity for 'person'. What would it be? God is identical to being a person? God is identical to a person? Even grammar resists the proposal that God is simple and describable only in analogical terms.)

I don't say that the kinds of considerations invoked in the preceding two paragraphs are a decisive strike against the claim that morality depends on God, even for the particular conceptions of God that have been considered. I have developed no explicit contradiction in either case. Some may think that explicit contradictions could be exposed with more careful and detailed work. I doubt that this is so. My reasons for thinking that morality does not depend on God have nothing to do with internal difficulties that arise for worldviews which maintain that morality does depend on God; rather, my reasons for thinking that morality does not depend upon God are grounded in the worldview that I accept, a worldview which I think is more theoretically virtuous than competing worldviews.

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