

Chapter Eleven – Morality and Religion

William J. Wainwright and Anne Jeffrey

A number of important religious views entail that the ontological and epistemic relations between religion and morality are tighter than most secular thinkers suppose. We will focus on three theistic metaethical accounts of moral phenomena and moral knowledge: natural law theories, divine command theories, and divine will theories. These three types of accounts are among the most dominant in the philosophical literature on theistic ethics in contemporary anglophone philosophy, perhaps owing to their connection to major Western religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is important to note, however, that they hardly exhaust the conceptual space. Intellectual traditions of other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, traditional Chinese religions, and African religions raise distinct philosophical questions about and offer a host of alternative views on the relationship between religion and morality (Jeffrey 2019). We close by offering a few such examples, though it is outside the scope of this chapter to provide a comprehensive survey of available views.¹

1. Natural Law Theories

Natural law theorists generally believe that morality consists in a set of principles of practical reason—the natural law—ultimately explained by God’s creation or providence (Murphy 2002). The principles of natural law are rules that direct us to pursue goods appropriate to the sorts of creatures we are. Those principles get their normative *authority* over us (they are something we are bound to obey) from being part of God’s design for the creation.

For instance, friendship is a good for humans, and so there is a principle that we should pursue and maintain friendships. Yet someone like Hobbes’s fool might ask why he must, on pain of irrationality, pursue friendship, since it seems possible that it would be rational to forego that natural good, or that what is normally good for humans is not good for each and every human and thus for him. Most natural law theories claim that natural laws are universal and binding because they are part of the ‘eternal law.’ That is, they state principles for life and action that express the human part of God’s ordered plan for the universe.

Natural law theories differ with respect to their epistemological claims about how we discover these principles. Rationalist strands hold that the natural law is part of God’s reasonable plan for creation. Since God gives humans reason, we can discern what is good for us and what sorts of lives and activities will secure the human good using reason. Most natural law theories agree that revealed laws—like those made known through prophets or sacred scriptures—are

¹ The earlier edition of this book featured a chapter sole-authored by William J. Wainwright. Wainwright passed away in November of 2020. I have attempted to keep intact much of the contribution while adding discussions of relevant literature published since the printing of the first edition.

A recent tribute to him by Michael Peterson in *Faith and Philosophy*, a journal—of which he was the third editor—put out by the Society for Christian Philosophers—of which he was the president—highlights the fact that Wainwright actively worked to make philosophy of religion more inclusive for those of a variety of faiths. Indeed, Peterson attributes to him advancing *Faith and Philosophy*’s ‘commitment to serious dialogue with those who do not share our Christian commitments’ (399). In an attempt to honor this aspect of Wainwright’s legacy, I have added discussions of non-Western religions and morality as well as Western religious ethical traditions besides Christianity.

needed to direct us toward what will be good for us in eternity, or our supernatural good.² Voluntarist strands, by contrast, deny that we can discern the principles of natural law by reasoning about nature alone. These theories give revelation and traditions of scriptural interpretation a more important epistemological role in ethics. Below we discuss representative natural law theories in contemporary Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions.³

1.1 Natural Law Theory in the Christian Intellectual Tradition

Natural law theory has historical roots going back to the Stoics, but most contemporary natural law theorists draw on major Western theological accounts. A compelling and representative formulation of natural law theory in the Catholic tradition is Mark Murphy's.⁴ According to Murphy, a fully adequate natural law theory will maintain that the most basic principles of practical reason are generally accessible, and will offer 'a tight and distinctive connection between human nature and natural [i.e., moral or ethical] law' (Murphy 2001: 18). Murphy's 'real identity thesis' does this: 'any state of affairs that theoretical reason grasps as "x is an aspect of human flourishing" would be correctly grasped by practical reason as "x is a good worth having," and vice versa,' (Murphy 2001: 19). Neither judgment entails the other, however, and either one of them can be grasped without grasping the other.⁵ It is thus possible for someone to grasp the basic principles of common sense morality without grasping their connection to human flourishing. Nevertheless, because the contents falling under the concepts of *human flourishing* and of *goods worth having* are essentially the same, and the same state of affairs makes both judgments true, once we become aware of the connection 'we may be able to use this information to argue in a justifiable way from judgments of one type to judgments of the other type' (Murphy 2001: 20).

The contents falling under the concepts of goods and human flourishing are 'basic aspects of wellbeing', or basic human goods, which 'together...exhaust all the fundamental reasons for action' (Murphy 2001: 96). On Murphy's account, these are 'life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence in play and work, excellence in agency, inner peace [largely consisting in the absence of unsatisfied desires and aspirations], friendship and community, religion, and happiness' which Murphy defines as 'the successful achievement of a reasonable life plan' (Murphy 2001: 96, 133).⁶

² Cf. Aquinas, 1947, ST I.II q. 93, a. 1, and q. 94.

³ For comparative discussion of these strands of natural law, see Emon, Levering, and Novak (2014) and Lloyd (2016).

⁴ We say 'natural law metaethics' in contrast to natural law theories that are primarily theories of law (treating questions about the nature and source of legal authority, the aims of law, the justification of punishment and the like).

Other recent formulations of interest include those by John Finnis (1980), Anthony J. Lisska (1996), Martin Rhonheimer(2000), Jean Porter(2005), Russell Hittinger(2007), and Steven Brock(2020). These authors all engage in serious textual debates about medieval source texts (predominantly those of Aquinas and Suarez) while Murphy presents his formulation in a way that prescind from the historical interpretive questions and focuses on questions of interest in contemporary metaethics. Hence our focus on his version of natural law theory as a paradigm here.

⁵ Cf. 'I am in my study' and 'William J. Wainwright is in his study.' Since neither entails the other, I can grasp the first without grasping the second, and grasp the second without grasping the first. (I might, for example, forget who I am.)

⁶ Happiness so-defined 'has something in common with Aristotle's eudaimonia, on the one hand, and Rawls's...life plan on the other' (Murphy, 2001, pp. 133-34). It differs from the former in that the plan or structure which orders the nine basic goods is not objectively given but chosen. Because basic goods are incommensurable, no hierarchical ranking of them is objectively (i.e., independently of our desires and preferences) better or worse than any other. It differs from the latter in that the goods which are ordered are objectively given.

We have reason to pursue each of these human goods because they bring to fruition capacities God creates humans with in the ways God has ordained for humans.⁷

An attractive aspect of Murphy's natural law theory is the connection it draws between being morality and human flourishing. Natural law theory says that to be moral, we should live in ways that contribute to human flourishing because God has ordained it. This view holds an advantage over secular Aristotelian naturalism, which only says that to be moral, we should live in ways that contribute to our flourishing. This generates a standard objection to Aristotelian naturalism: that it is egoistic, since it appears to turn morality into a self-serving enterprise. A second objection to the naturalist view is the Pollyanna problem: 'It is naively optimistic to think what is naturally normal for humans will coincide with what is morally good,' (Hacker-Wright 2018: 21; see also Millgram 2009, Andreou 2006, Woodcock 2006).⁸ By contrast, Murphy's natural law account provides an explanation for the normativity of human flourishing: God has ordained that humans pursue what will contribute to their flourishing.

Protestant theologian Karl Barth in the early 20th century rejected natural law theory, famously asking, 'Jesus Christ or Natural Law?' (1941: 18). Perhaps because of Barth's widespread influence, Barth was taken as a figurehead for a general rejection of natural law by Protestant Christian ethics. Yet in the 21st century, interpreters of Barth, religious historians, and theological ethicists have challenged this story and sought to recover Protestant natural law theory (Arner 2016, Herdt 2014). Neil Arner shows that John Calvin and Hugo Grotius clearly endorse some conception of natural law while holding onto a Protestant view of God's sovereignty. Calvin, for instance, asserts that God is not under natural law and has liberty with respect to it, but is responsible for creating the natural law by which God governs humans as a legislator (ibid.: 381). Protestant commitments to the permanent effects of sin on human ability to know God's law ('noetic effects of sin') were for a time thought to be directly in conflict with natural law theory; but early reformed theologians like Calvin countenanced a faculty akin to what Bonaventure called conscience and Aquinas called *synderesis*—an unerring grasp of first principles of natural law (ibid: 382-383). Finally, in some contemporary Protestant ethics we see versions of natural law with the Bible taking a more central place in the theory (Van Drunen 2014, Bowlin 2002).

1.2 Islamic Hard and Soft Natural Law Theories

The Islamic tradition houses two varieties of natural law: Hard and Soft natural law theories. The division between these two schools owes largely to their different answers to the question of the grounding of goodness, raised by Socrates and known as the Euthyphro Dilemma (see Miller 2013). Does God love what is good because it is good, or is the good good because God loves it? The Hard Natural Law jurists take as a starting point for ethics that God desires x

⁷ Whether the principles of the natural law are normatively binding on us only given the connection to God's providence, which contains God's ordering and plan for all things (the eternal law), is a matter of some serious dispute amongst natural lawyers. For discussion see Stephen Brock (2020: 33-60).

⁸ Aristotelian naturalists like Micah Lott and John Hacker-Wright contend that the natural norms at play in the view are not value-neutral, statistical norms from biology. So even if, for instance, aggression against humans in one's out-group were statistically normal for humans, it would not be fair to infer that such aggression was conducive to flourishing. But recently Parisa Moosavi has problematized this defense: In what sense is the view naturalistic if it is not sensitive to data from empirical sciences like biology (Moosavi 2018)? Some Aristotelians claim that biology already utilizes value-laden concepts of life forms for nonhuman species, but their evidence for this is scant. Moosavi suggests that a better route lies in developmental biology, but this may push us away from thinking of natural goodness as relative to species (2022).

because x is good, whereas Soft Natural Law jurists assume that God's desiring x makes x good (Emon 2010: 21).

The most prominent defenders of Hard Natural Law, the Mu'tizalite school, holds that God creates the world to benefit creatures and God's design does not involve their suffering or injustice to them, because God can only love what is good and avoid what is evil by God's very nature. Like Murphy, the Mu'tizalites hold much in common with Aristotelian naturalists in that they think we can make judgments about what is good and bad based on mundane observations about what conduces to flourishing, but that the normativity of these judgments is underwritten by the fact that God creates human and other creaturely natures with a purpose. Thus, we ought to fulfill God's purpose for us by doing what conduces to our natural flourishing (Ibid.: 27).

Proponents of Soft Natural Law argue that God, in God's omnipotence, is not constrained to only doing good to creatures; instead God exhibits grace in creating the world such that creatures benefit (Emon 2014: 152). The principles of the natural law on this account, as on Murphy's, direct us to pursue human goods: for example, abstaining from alcohol is required to preserve the good of a sound mind according to al-Ghazali (Ibid.: 154).

The Ash'arite school, competing with the Mu'tizalites and advocating for Soft Natural Law, lodges several complaints about Hard Natural Law. First, Hard Natural Law's way of viewing morality does not give enough of a role to God's will. They argue that if humans, using reason, can settle on rules and laws that are contingent but binding, then if God enforces morality God will have to punish people for determinations that were simply the product of human reasoning (Emon 2010: 27). Second, Soft Natural Law better accounts for the semantics of moral terms. We can still ask, intelligibly, whether to do something that is of natural benefit or harm to us, they say, but when we view a benefit or good as divinely appointed, it takes on normative significance. On their account, the very meaning of 'good' and 'bad' make reference to what God wills and does not will, and that is what makes the 'good' required and the 'bad' prohibited (Frank 1983: 204).

Third, as early as the 11th century, defenders of Soft Natural Law level the critique that nature by itself does not carry the same normative authority that divine reason or will does (Emon 2010: 29). (This criticism prefigures objections to Aristotelian naturalism discussed above.) The anthropological claim about human nature being deeply flawed isn't peculiar to Islamic Soft Natural Law (or Augustinian Christianity, for that matter). Many religions include 'a sense that there is *something wrong about us as we naturally stand*' (James 1902: 498, original emphasis). Advaita Vedantins and Buddhists, for example, would agree. A compelling natural law theory, then, might offer an account of human nature that departs significantly from observable statistical norms. Or better yet, it would do this and provide a story explaining how God's relation to human nature generates a moral requirement to do and be what is best for us according to our nature.

1.3 Natural Law in the Jewish Tradition

This brings us to a formulation of natural law theory arising out of the Jewish tradition. On David Novak's account, God's creative and contingent commandment (*mitzvah*) forms the basis of natural law, rather than an uncreated, necessary, eternal law (Novak 2014: 6-7). Further, human nature is not continuous with the rest of nature, since humans have freedom of choice and can represent God's law to ourselves as a command, something that makes a demand on us. Novak argues that for these reasons, we cannot come to know natural law through scientific or theoretical rational reflection. Instead we come to grasp natural law and human nature through practical

reasoning about being human. This involves reflection on what it is like, from the inside, to live a human life and be a human person.⁹ According to Novak's account, such reflection will precipitate a recognition that we are created in God's image, and that we must be in positive relationships with other humans and the rest of creation (Ibid.: 7-9).

This variety of natural law theory avoids a critique of Islamic Hard Natural Law theory we reviewed above, since it distances its conception of human nature from what is statistically normal and likely objectionable from a moral point of view. Moreover, on Novak's account, we are not expected to receive God's commandment as law unthinkingly or unquestioningly. 'These commands can only be accepted by rational persons,' he writes, 'when they believe that the person commanding them to do something or not do something has a good reason or purpose for addressing the command to them... that the command is for the direct benefit of the specific group of persons who are the object of the command...[and] benefits them as subjects' (ibid.: 11-12).

1.4 Practical and Epistemological Problems

The natural law account of moral obligation often comes under fire for collapsing the distinction between what is required by morality and what is required by practical rationality. Murphy suggests that the moral ought be defined as follows: 'A morally ought to O if and only if it is not possible that A, whose practical reasoning is functioning without error, decide to I, where I-ing and O-ing are incompatible' (Murphy 2001: 222).¹⁰ Suppose a specific intellectual and/or physical regimen is a necessary condition of excellence in play, so that without that training it would be impossible to achieve that excellence. If it is, and my practical reasoning is functioning without error, it seems that I can't decide not to train. Not training and training are incompatible. So if Murphy's definition is correct, it follows that I am *morally required* to train. This transforms all obligations of practical rationality into moral obligations. One reason critics resist such a view is that it threatens to leave too little of one's life and choices outside the realm of the moral (Wolf 1982). Further, Kant suggests that prudential obligations ultimately rest on our desires and inclinations, and are therefore escapable.¹¹ Moral obligations are not. So moral obligations and practical obligations cannot be the same.

Turning now to the moral epistemology of natural law, recent evolutionary debunking arguments seem to cast doubt on the idea in natural law theory that moral principles and facts about human goods are generally accessible to human reason (Street 2006; though see Fitzpatrick 2015). Modern evolutionary biology provides little reason to think the human cognitive capacities and sensibilities evolved in a way that would enable us reliably to track moral facts that float free of facts about our species' survival. Either it is an unexplained coincidence that human reason generally grasps these moral facts or it is extremely unlikely that we do so with any accuracy, given how our cognitive faculties evolved.

A natural law theorist might take up a rationalist response to debunking objections. We grasp the principles of the natural law, like stealing is wrong, immediately. So we need not use any cognitive capacity sensitive to evolutionary pressures, such as those that produce moral

⁹ In this respect, Novak's Jewish natural law theory resembles Finnis's New Natural Law theory. Lloyd (2016: 374) agrees.

¹⁰ Thus, on Murphy's view, 'John morally ought to speak the truth to Sally' is roughly equivalent to:

'It is not possible for John to lie to Sally without committing an error of practical reason.'

¹¹ If not by us, then by rational beings with different basic desires and inclinations.

sentiments of approval or disgust, to grasp fundamental moral principles (Bogardus 2016: 642-643). This would make some of our moral knowledge immune to evolutionary debunking arguments.

Such a response does not vindicate *all* our moral beliefs. It does not help the natural law theorist handle worries about our practical grasp of the basic goods or specific facts about human wellbeing that *do* rely on perceptual and cognitive capacities sensitive to evolutionary pressures. The Mu'tazili school of Islamic natural law theory traditionally claimed that while some of our moral knowledge is immediate and self-evident, our moral judgments about many action types do rely on cognitive capacities that would be susceptible to evolutionary pressures (Farahat 2019: 116; Morvarid 2021). Thus evolutionary debunking arguments still could threaten natural law theory's epistemological claims.

A purported advantage of natural law theory over more explicitly theistic theories (such as divine command theory) is that it appeals to moral principles inscribed in human nature as such and can therefore provide common ground between theistic moralists, on the one hand, and secular moralists, on the other. There are at least two reasons to worry that this alleged advantage is illusory, however. For one thing, in practice, natural law theory is typically invoked to defend controversial ethical positions which secular thinkers by and large find rationally unpersuasive (about human sexuality, for example). This unsurprisingly arouses the suspicion that appeals to natural law are too often instances of special pleading, unconvincing attempts to find rational grounds for injunctions and prohibitions which would not be embraced unless they had been endorsed by religious authority. Second, natural law theory depends on the concept of proper human function---a notion which has no standing apart from a teleological view of nature and/or a theistic or quasi-theistic understanding of reality.¹²

2. Divine Command Theory

Divine command theory is usually considered a form of theological voluntarism, and so is one of a family of theories which ground moral facts in God's volitional acts or speech acts. Divine command theory, as the name implies, grounds moral facts in facts about God's *commands*. Some divine command theorists are only concerned to give a theory of moral obligation, not all moral facts, using divine commands (Evans 2022; Adams 1999).

2.1 Universal Divine Command Theory

Universal divine command theory grounds moral phenomena, including obligations, in God's commands. For instance, the fact that it is bad to murder innocents is explained by God's commanding us not to murder innocents. This does not require, necessarily, that we recognize the moral fact as a fact about what God commands, but divine command theory is a theory about what generates that moral fact, or makes the claim about murdering innocents true.

Divine command theory has two clear theoretical benefits. First, it fits with theological commitments many religious believers already have. For instance, certain strands of Christianity, as witnessed in the writings of Augustine, William of Ockham, Martin Luther, and John Calvin,

¹² The natural law theorist might make use of either recent work in metaphysics reviving a neo-Aristotelian picture of causation or theories aiming to vindicate talk of proper function in the philosophy of biology in order to vindicate the assumptions she needs. But such views in metaphysics and philosophy of biology are not widely accepted by secular philosophers, so natural law theorists can hardly expect to gain many converts through such appeals.

hold that *sovereignty* is a divine attribute. It is an equally important attribute in Islam and in Dvaita Vedanta. If God's sovereignty is unlimited and unqualified, as these traditions attest, then there is nothing distinct from God on which God depends and nothing distinct from God which is not dependent on God. It would seem to follow that moral facts cannot be independent of God (Murphy 2011: 67). If God is truly sovereign, God must ground or constitute the moral facts insofar as they exist. For if God were not the ground of moral facts and God's will were wholly or partly constrained by independent standards of value, divine action would not be sufficiently self-determined or free (Murphy 2021). As some have recently noted, however, this argument requires a controversial conception of divine freedom (Jeffrey 2021, Mariña 2021).

The very existence of independent, necessary moral truths might compromise God's sovereignty in another way. If moral facts are necessary or eternal truths, as many moral realists suggest (Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 2014), and are neither 'part' of God or created by God, then God's sovereignty does not extend over all being. Divine command theory avoids this problem by asserting that moral facts depend on God's will.

Any divine command theory must grapple with the well-known arbitrariness objection, which is part of the Euthyphro dilemma. If God loves the good because it is good, then God's loving it plays no role in the explanation of its goodness. Theism, then, is otiose with respect to goodness. But if it is good in virtue of God's loving it, presumably God could love anything; even the pain of innocent creatures could be good, should God love it. This is often called the arbitrariness horn of the dilemma.

The arbitrariness problem crops up for divine command theories of moral obligation as well as theories of moral goodness. Suppose what is obligatory is what God loves. The theory seems to imply that in logically possible worlds in which God fails to exist or commands nothing, actions like promise keeping and truth-telling wouldn't be obligatory, and gratuitous cruelty, treachery, and the like wouldn't be forbidden. It seems to many of us, however, that promise keeping and truth-telling would be *prima facie* obligatory in *all* possible circumstances, and that gratuitous cruelty and treachery likewise would be forbidden.

To make matters worse, divine command theories seem to imply that not only might things like gratuitous cruelty be permitted; they could be obligatory (Callahan 2021). For there appear to be logically possible worlds in which God exists and commands us to act cruelly. If there are, and divine command theory is correct, then cruelty is morally obligatory in those worlds. Yet surely one of our most deeply entrenched moral intuitions is that there is *no* possible world in which it would be *prima facie* obligatory to gratuitously inflict pain on others. In other words, 'It is *prima facie* wrong to inflict gratuitous cruelty on another' appears to be a *necessary* truth not explained by facts about God's commands.

Some divine command theorists have a response to this objection based on their particular conception of God as both a necessary being and not capable of commanding horrible acts. If we suppose that God necessarily exists then God is in every possible world. If God is not capable of commanding horrible acts like gratuitously inflicting pain, then on divine command theory, necessarily such horrible acts will be wrong.¹³ Notice that this does not require 'that there is a unique set of commands that would be issued by any supremely good God' (Adams 1999: 255). On Adams's view, for instance, a supremely good God might issue one set of ritual commands in

¹³ So, strictly speaking, what is necessarily true in worlds in which there are no appropriate recipients of a divine command to protect the innocent, say, (because no rational creatures exist in it or because, in those worlds, innocents can't be harmed) is that if there were beings like us, God would command them to protect the innocent, and hence they would have an obligation to do so.

one possible world, for example, and another set in another, but there are some commands that any supremely good God would necessarily issue to beings sufficiently like us. The second table of the Decalogue is, arguably, an example.¹⁴ Notice that this solution relies on a restriction of theological voluntarism to grounding facts about obligation, since Adams needs to make claims about what a supremely good being is capable of which do not derive from facts about what God commands.

We have mentioned theological reasons for holding divine command theory. But there are also philosophical reasons that favor divine command theory as well. Most saliently, it provides an attractive account of the objectivity of moral facts. What conditions must be met if moral facts are to be objective? Here is a plausible approach:

1. Claims about moral phenomena (facts, obligations, etc.) must be either true or false—this is the cognitivist criterion.
2. The universality criterion states that at least some moral obligations must apply universally—that is, they must be binding on all human or rational agents.¹⁵
3. Moral obligations and facts aren't products of our desires, interests, or other attitudes. The moral goodness of truthfulness or friendship, for example, does not depend on the fact that we desire them or would desire them if we were fully informed. Call this the mind-independence criterion.

These are necessary but not sufficient conditions for moral facts being objective (Miller 2009b).

Belief in the objectivity of moral values is embedded in most mainstream Western moral philosophy, and is presupposed in ordinary moral thought and discourse (Mackie 1977: 38-41; Enoch 2011: 50-83). Other things being equal, we should try to save the appearances by vindicating the objectivity of moral facts. If theists can provide an explanation of moral facts which respects the appearance of objectivity, so much the better for theistic accounts.

Even if theists can do this, they aren't home free, of course. For theistic accounts of the objectivity of moral values have rivals which preserve at least some of the appearances. Reductivist naturalists identify goodness with a natural (that is, empirical) property such as pleasure or happiness, or with a cluster of such properties. Richard Boyd, for instance, identifies goodness with what he calls a 'homeostatic property cluster' – 'things which satisfy important human needs' together with the 'homeostatic mechanisms which unify them' (Boyd 1998: 181-228). Boyd doesn't think that 'good' *means* 'things satisfying important human needs together with the mechanisms which unify them'. But he does think that this property cluster *constitutes*

¹⁴ The second table of the Decalogue comprises the last six of the Ten Commandments.

¹⁵ The authors are not in agreement about universality being a criterion for objectivity. But here is a minimalist way of thinking about this: every mature human or rational agent is morally obligated to avoid what they take to be evil and do what they believe to be all-things-considered good or required. See Jeffrey (2019) for a discussion of how Aquinas's conscience principle imposes such a minimal requirement on all humans.

If the condition on moral objectivity is so minimal, we might start to wonder what views are excluded by it. Moral particularists such as Jonathan Dancy (2004) argue that there are no significant or useful general moral principles—even a principle to not act contrary to conscience. This view would fail to have objectivity if we keep this minimalist criteria. For a discussion of this view see Pekka Väyrynen's chapter on moral particularism in this volume. Further, desire-based subjectivists like David Sobel deny that there are any obligations or reasons that apply to all agents because they do not think there is one desire that all agents have that could ground such an obligation or reason. It is conceivable for a subjectivism to meet this condition, though, as Mark Schroeder (2007) illustrates with his hypotheticalism. If every agent has some desire or another which would be promoted by performing action A, then every agent has a reason to A (even though the conative basis of each agent's reason might differ).

goodness, or is what goodness *really is*. (An analogy: ‘water’ doesn’t mean ‘H₂O.’ Nevertheless, H₂O constitutes water, is what water really is.) Thus, moral facts are ordinary empirical properties (or sets of them)—part of the furniture of the universe, and claims about them are either true or false so the cognitivist criterion is met. So is the universality criterion: if goodness is identical with Boyd’s homeostatic property cluster, for example, every instance of that property cluster is good regardless of where or when it is found.¹⁶

Whether naturalism preserves *all* the appearances, however, is doubtful; and here some theistic accounts might still hold an advantage. Mackie has pointed out that moral facts as ordinarily understood have ‘requiredness’ or ‘not-to-be-doneness’ built into them, and that the property (or set of properties) picked out by ‘goodness’ has ‘to-be-pursuedness’ built into it (Mackie 1977). Yet it is difficult to see how purely empirical properties *could* have characteristics like these built into them. Suppose, for instance that we identify goodness with the set of things which satisfies our more important needs. Given that we have wants and needs, we will pursue their satisfaction. But the to-be-pursuedness of the things that satisfy them appears, on this view, to be an artifact of our needs and wants, not an intrinsic feature of the things themselves.¹⁷ If so, then our third criterion of objectivity isn’t met; moral claims don’t have the requisite mind-independence.

Nonnaturalist realism also may offer the very same benefits of divine command theory without the theistic baggage. A need to represent moral properties and moral obligations as objective, having categorical normative force and authority over us drives contemporary nonnaturalism (Fitzpatrick 2018: 554). Moral properties admit of such complexity that no purely natural property or cluster of properties plausibly plays the roles in ethical theory and practice we think moral properties play. So there must be some irreducible values or reasons that just exist and ground moral obligations, moral properties, and moral facts generally (Ibid.: 555, Enoch 2011). Since these values or reasons are not reducible to our mental attitudes or desires, the obligations they give rise to do not discriminate between persons—they will apply to all people similarly situated equally. And claims made about them are claims about reality, so they are straightforwardly true or false. Thus, nonnaturalist realism easily meets all the conditions for objectivity without bringing divine speech acts into the picture.

But not all divine command theorists think it is possible to pull this off by claiming that mind-independent values or reasons exist. One religious argument meant to defend the unique ability of divine commands to account for moral objectivity owes to the Islamic Asha’ira school. Rational people can appreciate the goodness or badness of certain acts without revelation or religious commitment. For instance, most people can see that lying is bad because it erodes trust, and truth-telling is good since it is needed for strong relationships. But, the Asha’ira say, ‘“good” and “bad” are used here, not in the sense of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, but in the instrumental sense’ (Morvarid 2021: 8). In order for ‘good/bad’ to carry the semantic content of

¹⁶ More recently, Stephen Finlay offers an end-relational theory of normative language on which we can interpret moral uses of terms like ‘good’ and ‘ought’ completely naturalistically, as representing a combination of the probability of some occurrence and a background assumption about ends the speaker or audience have (Finlay 2014: 72-75). But of course, moral discourse seems objective in that we don’t relativize ‘oughts’ to others’ ends—e.g. ‘You ought to stop if you don’t want to get sued!’ Finlay proposes that, first, the end in question need not be the end of the person being addressed, and that speakers might use objective-sounding claims to put pressure on the audience to change their ends or desires or to share our ends (ibid.: 190).

¹⁷ Similarly, if our use of moral language is always end-relational, as Finlay supposes, then a moral claim like ‘you ought not steal’ depends on someone’s mind, even if not on the desires or commitments of the audience, since in that case they depend on the pragmatic ends of the speaker.

to-be-doneness, or deserving of moral praise or blame, the meaning *must* be tied to revelation. Only once we see our judgments of good and bad as tied to God's commands can we appreciate their normative authority and force.

On a suitably qualified divine command theory, facts about moral obligations meet all the criteria for objectivity. Statements of the form, 'God commands such and such' are either true or false, so moral claims are true or false. Basic moral obligations will also be universal, so long as God's commands prohibiting infidelity or murder, for example, extend to all humans at all times and places. Furthermore, while God's commands may depend on *God's* desires, they do not depend on ours. Truth telling, for instance is *prima facie* obligatory regardless of what *we* want or desire.¹⁸

Divine command theory countenances the objectivity of facts about moral obligation with comparative ease. It does not, however, obviously account for the objectivity of moral values such as the intrinsic goodness of pleasure or knowledge or human love. Consider how counterintuitive semantic divine command theories' accounts of these goods are: on the Asha'ira view, for example, claims like 'an act A is morally good' just *means* 'God commands us to A' or 'God rewards whomever performs A' (Morvarid 2021: 3). Our *prima facie* obligation to avoid inflicting needless pain on others may depend on a divine command, but it is difficult to see how the claim that pain is intrinsically bad could just *mean* that God has commanded the avoidance of pain. Further, such a view implausibly entails that, in attributing goodness to God, we simply mean to say something like, God commands Godself to be as God is.¹⁹

2.2 Restricted Divine Command Theory

Enter restricted divine command theories. These theories distinguish between the grounds of *moral obligations* and other moral phenomena like *moral goodness*, and hold that divine commands are relevant only for explaining moral *obligations*.

Such an approach is pioneered by Robert Adams, who holds that moral goodness is a kind of excellence and not reducible to divine commands. Excellence, Adams says, is a property of 'persons...; physical objects; some kinds of abstraction (such as poems and mathematical proofs); qualities (such as a beautiful shade of blue); deeds; lives---but not in general of states of affairs'. It is an object of *eros* both in 'its moments of admiration' and in its moments of pursuit. Now 'the character of our pursuit of excellence, including the character of the things we think are excellent', points in the direction of 'a single property or nature' that 'would best satisfy the pursuit.' 'That property or nature', whatever it may be, is what is referred to by 'excellence' (Adams 1999: 17, 22). In Adams's view, the nature or property in question is constituted by resemblance to the Good in such a way as to give God a reason for loving it. And because *God* is the Good, excellence is ultimately constituted by resemblance to God. So God grounds all moral phenomena, but in different ways: moral obligations—by God's command—and moral goodness—by resemblance to God.

¹⁸ Kant thought that grounding moral precepts in desires would subject morality to the fluctuations and variations of desire, and thus undercut its universality and inescapability. But if God necessarily exists, necessarily prizes truth telling, and as a result, necessarily commands it, then the moral rightness of truth telling isn't hostage to the potential fluctuations or variations of anyone's desires (either ours or God's). So a divine command theory which incorporates these claims isn't exposed to Kant's objection.

¹⁹ Thanks to Christian Miller for pointing out the application of this familiar objection to divine command theory here.

Why should the Good be identified with God? For several reasons, among the most important of which are these. The Good must be personal. Since most important excellences ‘are excellences of persons, or of qualities or actions or works or lives or stories of persons’, and since the excellence of finite things ‘consists in resembling or imaging’ the Good, the Good must be ‘a person or importantly like a person’ (Adams 1999: 42). The good must also be actual. For suppose that it isn’t. ‘Mere possibilities have no standing in the world except as objects of understanding’ (ibid: 44) Now ‘we [and other finite beings] do not understand the Good itself, in all its perfections’ (Wainwright 2017). Hence, the Good will have no standing in the world unless God understands it. If God understands it, however, then God exists and fulfills the role assigned to the Good. Assuming that he has the other characteristics needed to fit something for the role of the Good, it is therefore reasonable to identify him with the ‘objective standard of excellence’ (Adams 1999: 44-5).

Views like these are subject to an important objection, however. If we think of God as a person, we can only think of God as ‘fully and perfectly *exemplifying*’ ‘the order of values’, ‘not as *being*...it...He will be, so to say, the Great Exemplar,’ (Maclagen 1961: 88, original emphasis). God won’t be abstract Goodness itself if Goodness is a standard. God is a *particular*, and particulars can’t be standards. Furthermore, that God is to be praised and glorified for his goodness is fundamental to many religions. But that God is to be praised for goodness seems to imply that, rather than *being* a standard, God *meets* standards (Pittard 2021). We don’t praise standards. We praise things for meeting them. So, according to this objection, God is not Goodness.

The distinction between perfect exemplars and standards is not that sharp, however, as Linda Zagzebski has argued (Zagzebski 2004). Examples are sometimes *prior* to the rules or norms which state that things like the example are good or right, in the sense that the rules or norms are *derived from* the examples. A person, or a pattern of behavior, or a work of art, or a new wine strikes us as exemplary even though it fails to meet existing norms in some respects. Under the impact of the example, we construct new standards or reconstruct old ones. In situations like these, the example is more than a perfect instance of the new or reconstructed norm. It is, in a real sense, its ground or source.

Nor is the priority of the examples in most of these cases purely epistemological. It is not as if, under the impact of the examples, we discover standards that can be stated without reference to them. For, in many of the cases in question, the standards can only be stated in the form ‘Paintings like this (or behavior like this, or scientific work like this, or...) are good or right’. The standards, in other words ‘make essential reference to one or more individuals,’ (Alston 1989: 269). It is not clear, then, that there need be anything logically eccentric in suggesting that *God* is both Goodness’s perfect exemplar *and* its standard.

Moreover, where the standard *is* a particular, praise or commendation is sometimes in order. Arguably, where particulars function as standards, they do so because they are perfect instances of the class of things being evaluated. Thus, the standard meter bar is (*pace* Wittgenstein) exactly one meter long since it is the same length as itself. Upon seeing it in Paris we might admire it for setting the standard against which we evaluate so much else. So it isn’t clear that God’s being the standard of goodness is incompatible with praise.

Note that on Adams’s account, moral values meet all our criteria for objectivity. Since claims that things resemble God in the right way are either true or false, value claims are true or false. Goodness is also universal. If courage, say, or human fidelity faithfully images or resembles God, it does so at all times and places. Nor are the facts of resemblance in which excellence consists dependent on our desires. If visual beauty for instance faithfully images God, it does so

whether we admire and desire it or not. Finally, God and the facts of resemblance are part of the ‘furniture of the universe’. That human love resembles God’s love, for example, is as objectively real a feature of human love, as a photograph’s resemblance to its original or a child’s resemblance to its parents.

A restricted divine command theory like Adams’s also can avoid the ontological strangeness of objective moral value perhaps better than the nonnaturalist realist theories. The existence of objective value is no more odd than the existence of God. It can also explain our epistemic access to objective value. If theism is true, then it is reasonable to believe that ‘God causes...human beings to regard as excellent approximately those things that are Godlike in the relevant way’ (God may do so by fashioning their consciences, by endowing them with appropriate emotions and capacities for practical reasoning, by direct revelation, and the like.) If so, ‘there is a causal and explanatory connection between facts of excellence and beliefs that we may regard as justified about excellence’ (Adams 1999: 70). This demonstrates how restricted divine command theory might furnish a unique reply to evolutionary debunking arguments, and also resolve questions regarding how we know whether God has commanded something, such as the sacrifice of one’s child (Hare 2014: 111-112; Evans 2022; Novak 2014: 40). If the interpretive lens for divine commands is a prior account of God’s goodness, God will not command horrific acts.

The restricted version of divine command theory, however, seems especially exposed to the objection we mentioned earlier regarding the *necessity* of moral truths. If Adams is right, many claims about moral values are necessary, e.g. ‘loyalty is a moral excellence’ is *necessarily* true, that is, true in all possible worlds. But if they are, divine command theory and theistic theories of the good seem to do little of the work in establishing the objectivity of such claims; moral values and claims about them will meet all the criteria for objectivity *just in virtue of their necessity*. Claims about basic values are either necessarily *true* or necessarily *false*. The values in question are also universal. Since propositions expressing basic value facts are necessarily true, they are true in all possible worlds. Our third criterion is met as well. Necessary facts, such as the facts of logic or mathematics, aren’t constituted by our willing or desiring them. They thus have the necessary independence of our desires. Moreover, value properties are *real* properties of the things that have them. If it is necessarily true that loyalty is a moral excellence, then *prima facie* moral excellence is an *essential* property of loyalty, and essential properties of a thing are surely *real* properties of it. An appeal to theistic metaphysics is thus gratuitous.

Here, someone like Adams might appeal to an important difference between logical or mathematical facts, however, and necessary evaluative facts. The former are logically necessary in the ‘narrow’ sense. Their truth is analytic, a consequence of definitions and logical or syntactic rules. Some necessary truths, though, are *not* analytic. Typical examples are ‘Nothing is red and green all over’, or (more controversially) ‘No contingent being exists without at least a partial reason for its existence’. While propositions like these are true in all possible worlds, their truth can’t be deduced from definitions and logical rules. The constraints they impose are *substantive* and not merely *formal*. Perhaps analytic necessary truths stand in no need of explanation. But synthetic necessary truths do. That there is some reason for the existence of contingent beings, for instance, presupposes the world’s (partial) intelligibility, and that the world *is* intelligible cries out for explanation. This leaves significant work for divine commands or divine goodness to do. It explains why synthetically necessary moral truths are what they are and why they are necessary.

Erik Wielenberg disagrees. In his view, at least some ‘ethical states of affairs that obtain necessarily...are [simply] brute facts’. While they are synthetic, ‘to ask of such facts, “where do

they come from?” or “on what foundation do they rest?” is misguided in much the same way that, according to many theists, it is misguided to ask of God “where does He come from?” or “on what foundation does He rest?” (Wielenberg 2009: 26).

The two cases are relevantly dissimilar, however. In the first place, God is essentially causeless but basic moral facts are not. Since divine command theory isn't obviously incoherent, it appears that, conceivably, basic facts about moral obligation have causes.²⁰ If divine command theory is true, the facts expressed by statements of moral obligation do have causes or distinct grounds. Hence, if divine command theory is possibly true, it is possible that all facts of moral obligation have causes or external grounds, in which case facts of moral obligation are not essentially causeless. For the case of asking of God and of moral obligation ‘where does x come from’ to be genuinely parallel, then, Wielenberg would have to show that there are reasons for thinking that divine command theory isn't metaphysically possible which are at least as strong as the arguments offered by Leibniz and others for the metaphysical impossibility of God's non-existence. And Wielenberg hasn't done that. So then the claim that restricted divine command theory offers an explanation for synthetic necessary moral truths still stands.

Of course divine command theory isn't the only theistic (or religious) game in town. There is another way of both securing God's sovereignty and explaining the existence of objective moral obligations (and other values), and that is to insist that while facts of moral obligation *are* metaphysically dependent on God, they aren't metaphysically dependent on God's *commanding* them. Below we will look at divine will theories as one such example. Moral phenomena might be metaphysically dependent on God's willing or activity, which in turn depend on God's unified essence, for example (Pessin 2013). Scholars of Jewish ethics have pointed out that more common in that tradition is the thought that morality weakly depends on divine commands, but that commands themselves usually depend on some further reason of God's (Sagi and Statman 1995).

3. Divine Will Theory

A third class of theory, also theological voluntarist like divine command theory, is divine will theory. These accounts ground moral facts in facets of God's will, even if not in God's express commands. For instance, Philip Quinn (2000) grounds moral facts in God's intentions. Others, such as Christian Miller (2009a) and **Thomas Carson (2012)** ground moral facts in God's desires or preferences.²¹ Divine motivation theories make the ground of what is morally good and right God's motivational states ‘such as love and compassion’ (Zagzebski 2004: 357). We will focus here on divine motivation theory as a paradigmatic example.

For Zagzebski, God's motivational states ground moral facts, and ‘are components of God's virtues constitute the metaphysical basis for moral value’ (ibid). God serves as an exemplar of the moral, and moral properties are best defined by indexical reference to paradigmatically good persons. God, on Zagzebski's view, is the ultimate paradigm of a good person. So goodness depends on God.

²⁰ Wielenberg rightly insists that a lack of obvious incoherence isn't sufficient to establish a thing's metaphysical possibility; nor is inconceivability. I can imagine what backwards time travel is like, and it is not obviously incoherent, but plausible arguments purport to show that backwards time travel isn't metaphysically possible. Similarly, even though I can imagine ‘that there is a stone floating in space with nothing else (including God) in existence’ (Wielenberg, 2009, p. 29) and what I imagine isn't obviously incoherent, this is not sufficient to show that God's non-existence is metaphysically possible.

²¹ For a critical look at divine will theories see Robert Adams (Adams, 1996, and Adams, 2002, pp. 982-84).

Divine motivation theory is wedded to a particular normative ethical theory. It is ‘a virtue theory because’ it regards ‘the moral properties of persons’ (namely, virtues and vices) as ‘more basic than the moral properties of acts and outcomes...Outcomes [and acts] get their moral value by their relation to good and bad motivations’.²² Good acts, for example, are the sort of acts which express the good emotional dispositions that are constituents of the virtues (Zagzebski 2004: 358).²³ More fundamentally, ‘God’s motives are perfectly good and human motives are good in so far as they are like the divine motives as those motives would be expressed in finite and embodied human beings’ (Zagzebski 1998: 539). Zagzebski defines a virtue as ‘an enduring trait consisting of a good motive-disposition and reliable success in bringing about the aim’ (2004: 132). What motive-dispositions count as good? Those that God would have were God in similar circumstances. God’s motives form the basis of both moral metaphysics and moral concepts. All moral properties can be reduced to properties of divine motivation, and concepts ranging from moral virtue to morally right acts are understood in reference to God’s motivation.

Divine motivation theory (and perhaps divine will theory generally) promises several advantages over divine command theory. In divine command theory, ‘God’s own goodness and the rightness of God’s own acts...are not connected to divine commands because God does not give commands to himself’ (Zagzebski 2007: 140). But divine motivation theory offers a unitary explanation of all moral concepts because it, ‘makes the features of the divine nature in virtue of which God is morally good the foundation for the moral goodness of those same features in creatures. Both divine and human goodness are explained in terms of good motives, and the goodness of human motives is derived from the goodness of the divine motives’ (Ibid.). The same could be said of divine will theories which make God’s intentions fundamental for morality.

Recall, too, that divine command theory faces the prior obligations objection. Divine motivation theory does not attempt to ground moral phenomena like obligations in an *act* of divine will. It analyzes moral phenomena and concepts in terms of stable states of divine psychology, and so avoids this problem.

Whether to prefer divine motivation theory to divine command theory on other counts is less clear. It does seem to do an equally good job of protecting God’s sovereignty and independence. If God’s motivational states are the metaphysical basis of the goodness or badness of persons and the rightness or wrongness of their actions, then the fact that certain motivational states are good and others bad, and that some human actions are morally right while others are wrong, is not metaphysically independent of God.

The emphasis which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam place on obedience to God, however, seems more at home in a divine command theory than in divine motivation theory considered simply. Furthermore, the plausibility of divine motivation theory depends on the plausibility of virtue theory. Whether virtue theory can adequately account for the ordinary sense of moral obligation, though, is controversial. Those sympathetic toward Kantian accounts of moral duty and moral obligation will probably judge that it can’t since Kantian ethics doesn’t comport well with virtue theory. Relatedly, notions of law and moral obligation are central to divine command theory; indeed some have read Anscombe as asserting that such concepts are bankrupt without a commitment to a divine lawmaker (Alvarez 2007). Virtue theories such as Zagzebski’s downplay

²² Notice that this is what Zagzebski admits is an instance of ‘the strongest form of pure virtue theory’ in that the concept of virtue grounds even the notion of flourishing and good outcomes (not just right acts). She argues that this way of structuring the theory holds an advantage over eudaimonistic views that analyze the concept of virtue in terms of what dispositions are most likely to secure flourishing (Zagzebski, 2004, pp. 115-117).

²³ For more on virtue theory see the chapter by Christine Swanton on virtue ethics in this volume.

their importance. She denies that ‘obligation...logically entails law’, for example. In her view, our sense of obligation is identical with our felt response to situations in which it noninferentially seems to us that only one response is appropriate (‘We must do it’) or that a response is clearly inappropriate (‘We must not do it’). The moral imperatives experienced by ‘the Homeric heroes’ or the protagonists of the Greek tragedies, for instance, were real but ‘not the modern one[s] of law’ (2004: 146). They were, instead, felt compulsions arising from strong emotional responses to the highly specific but existentially fraught situations in which they found themselves. Laws, on the other hand, are no more than,

generalizations of particular obligations and [particular] obligation precedes...law... It is probably [also] true that if the move from [e.g.] ‘She is suffering’ to ‘I ought to help her’ is an inference, then it uses or [at least] presupposes a general principle or law (Zagzebski 2004: 146-9).

What Zagzebski denies, however, is that our obligation *depends* on the possibility of generalizing it, or that when I feel compelled to help a person whom I see suffering, for example, I am typically making an inference. It is by no means clear that a sense of obligation or duty should be identified with a feeling of compulsion. While a sense of compulsion often accompanies a sense of obligation, not all examples of legitimate felt compulsion are instances of a sense of moral obligation. The feeling that I can do no other than follow a certain calling, for example (that of an actor, say, or a philosopher, or baseball pitcher) seems qualitatively different from believing or recognizing that it is my *duty* to do so, and acting on that feeling seems qualitatively distinct from acting out of Kantian respect for the moral law.

More importantly, it is by no means clear that value as such is capable of generating moral obligation, such that a divine motivation theory can ground all moral obligation in the value of divine motives. That something is good and hence, an appropriate object of desire, may ground a *hypothetical* imperative; it isn’t clear that it can ground a *categorical* one. While the fact that the happiness of others is intrinsically good may give me a *reason* to promote it, it is *not* clearly sufficient to establish a moral obligation to do so. This objection trades on the instinct that there is a difference between prudential and moral requirements, which we saw above made trouble for natural law theory.

4. Normative Ethical Theories and Theistic Metaethics

Note that divine command theories, divine will theories, and natural law theories are *theories in metaethics*, explanations of the ontological status and origins of moral phenomena. They are typically compatible with a wide variety of substantive moral theories. **We mentioned** that Zagzebski develops divine motivation theory as a metaethical view that supports a virtue ethical normative theory. Here we will consider how theistic metaethical theories have been combined with other popular substantive normative theories.

4.1 Utilitarianism

Theological utilitarianism is the view that:

1. God’s will is the source of moral obligation, and

2. *What God wills is the general happiness.*

Therefore, the utilitarian principle that we are obligated to promote general happiness turns out to be correct for theological reasons.

This view emerges in the 17th century (before Jeremy Bentham defends classical utilitarianism) in the writings of British thinkers such as Richard Cumberland and John Gay (Driver 2009). Gay argues: ‘It is evident from the nature of God, viz, his being infinitely happy in himself...and his goodness manifested in his works, that he could have no other design in creating mankind than their happiness; and therefore he wills their happiness; therefore the means of their happiness; therefore that my behavior, as far as it may be the means of the happiness of mankind should be such’ (Gay 1731: xix). When asked how one determines which actions promote or hinder the happiness of humanity, Gay responds, by ‘experience or reason’ (Gay 1731: xx).

William Paley, an influential theologian and contemporary of Bentham’s, grants a more substantial role to divine revelation in his moral epistemology. We ascertain God’s will, on his view, both by what reason can discover of God’s designs and dispositions from God’s works and by the ‘express declaration of scripture’. These ways of ascertaining God’s will complement each other. Where scriptural ‘instructions are clear...there is an end of all further deliberation’. In such cases, we can infer what promotes general happiness from God’s expressed will in scripture, given that God wills that we promote general happiness (Wierenga 1984: 313-14). Where revelation is ‘silent or dubious,’ a person should consider by the ‘light of nature’ ‘the tendency of the action to promote or diminish the general happiness’ (Paley 1785: 54-7).²⁴

Theological utilitarians maintain, against their secular counterparts, that we need divine will and the threat of divine sanctions to explain why maximizing happiness is *obligatory*. Gay, for example, says the concept of obligation entails the concept of sanctions, something impinging on my happiness as a consequence of my action. Gay thinks that only sanctions arising from God’s commands can make certain actions universally obligatory or prohibited. For instance, suppose I rob a bank. Now consider four ways I might experience sanctions for this action:

1. By ‘natural consequence’
2. ‘As producing the esteem and favor of our fellow creatures, or the contrary’,
3. By the penalties or rewards ‘arising from the authority of the civil magistrate’, or
4. By penalties or rewards ‘from the authority of God’ (Schneewind 2003: 404).

The first three types of sanctions may fail to actually impinge on my happiness, if, for example, my gang of thieves heartily approves of the robbery or I manage to escape detection from the bank and legal authorities. God’s authority alone can give rise to ‘a full and complete obligation which will extend to all cases’ since only he ‘can in all cases make a man happy or miserable’ (Gay 1731: xvii-xix).²⁵

Relatedly, Paley and Gay believe that the threat of sanctions in an afterlife provide us with the necessary motivation to promote general happiness, while secular utilitarianism cannot account for reliable moral motivation. Both assume a kind of psychological egoism: that people are

²⁴ Paley adopted a form of rule utilitarianism, as he thought the tendency of an act type to produce happiness formed the basis of its evaluation rather than whether in a particular circumstance the act does produce rather than diminish general happiness (see Rosen, 2003, p. 135).

²⁵ Including those in which, my wrong having escaped detection, I am not exposed to any adverse natural, social, or civic consequences.

ultimately moved only by what they believe will contribute to their own happiness. The problem for secular theories, they argue, is that they cannot establish a sufficiently tight connection between doing what will promote general happiness and securing one's own happiness. Paley criticizes Hume's account of the motivation to be virtuous on these grounds. Hume writes:

[Virtue] declares that her sole purpose is, to make her votaries and all mankind, during every instant of their existence, if possible, cheerful and happy... The sole trouble, which she demands, is that of just calculation, and a steady preference of the greater happiness (Hume 1998: 9.15).

Regarding readers of this passage from Hume's *Enquiry* he says:

When they have read it over, let them consider, whether any motives there proposed are likely to be found sufficient to withhold men from the gratification of lust, revenge, envy, ambition, avarice; or to prevent the existence of these passions. Unless they rise up from this celebrated essay, with stronger impressions upon their minds than it ever left on mine, they will acknowledge the necessity of additional sanctions (Paley 1819: II.IV, i.49).

Paley doubts that virtue's promise of reward in this life will be adequate to motivate people to act in ways that tend to promote general happiness, rather than to follow their own baser passions. But what will motivate people to pursue general happiness is the promise of reward or punishment by God in the afterlife:

... We can be obliged to nothing but what ourselves are to gain or lose something by; for nothing else can be a violent motive to us...if it is asked why I am obliged to keep my word? [for example] the answer will be, because 'I am urged to do so by a violent motive', (namely, the expectation of being after this life rewarded, if I do or punished for it, if I do not) resulting from the command of another (namely, God)...Therefore, private happiness is our motive, and the will of God our rule (Paley 1785: 49-52).

The implication of Gay's and Paley's reflections is that there are *two* criteria of virtue. 'The will of God is [its] immediate criterion...and the happiness of mankind is the criterion of the will of God; and therefore the happiness of mankind may be said to be the criterion of virtue, but once removed' (Gay 1731: xix). Neither criterion alone furnishes us with the motivation to be moral, but jointly we can get moral motivation up and running. On Gay's and Paley's view, we should promote the general happiness because God commands us to. We should do what God commands us to do, however, because doing so will make us happy in the life to come.

Early modern theological utilitarianism may be incompatible with certain other theological doctrines and traditions. For one thing, many theological anthropologies deny that psychological egoism is true. For another, many religious traditions condemn the idea that a desire for our own happiness could be a proper motivation for obeying God or doing our duty. Further, Gay and Paley make God out to be a prudential utility maximizer, someone who promotes *our* happiness only because doing so promotes God's own happiness.²⁶ Yet this characterization is inconsistent with

²⁶ If they had thought that God wasn't ultimately motivated by his own happiness, they would have surely recognized that they owed us an explanation of why human and divine motivations are so different. There is no evidence that they did, however.

an important strand in at least some theistic thinking, namely, the insistence on God's self-giving love.

In spite of these problems with the historical view, Gay and Paley may be right to insist that God's command is the source of the *obligatoriness* of promoting the general happiness if not of the *goodness* of doing so.²⁷ We can imagine a version of theological utilitarianism on which God's authority doesn't rest on the power to make us miserable or happy through sanctions,²⁸ and which holds that God's will for us is to promote general happiness. In that case, actions that promote general happiness are morally obligatory even if psychological and ethical egoism are false.

Another theistic utilitarian theory is Mozi's divine will theory. According to some interpreters, Mozi conceives of Heaven's will as grounding the principle that we ought to avoid harm and maximize benefits (Johnson 2011). Even if Heaven is viewed as an impersonal eschaton, Mozi seems to argue that this transcendent final end generates the utilitarian moral principle (Lu 2006). Other interpreters claim that the only role Heaven plays in the theory is epistemological: we learn what will be of benefit to the world by looking to Heaven's will; since Heaven wills only what is good, whatever Heaven wills must be good for the world (Fraser 2007).

4.2 Kantianism

Kantianism may be compatible with some version of divine command theory. If basic moral truths are necessarily true, for example, it would appear open to divine command theorists to identify them with Kant's synthetically necessary categorical imperatives.²⁹ For instance, C. Stephen Evans suggests that 'The command to love the neighbor as oneself is, I believe, equivalent to the Kantian principle that all human persons have an intrinsic dignity that ought to be acknowledged' (Evans 2013: 143-4). Kant thinks that their content governs the conduct of *all* rational beings, including God. The major difference between us and God, however, is that God's will necessarily conforms to morality whereas our wills do not. The wills of finite rational beings like us are subject to inclinations—desires, urges, and feelings that can keep us from choosing to act according to the moral law. Thus morality appears to us as a set of imperatives, obligations, or constraints; not so for a divine being with a will that perfectly and effortlessly conforms to moral norms (Hare 2007: 143).³⁰

Insofar as moral laws bear on us, Kant is quite willing to speak of them as divine commands: 'As soon as anything is recognized as a duty...obedience to it is also a divine command.' 'Religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands.'

²⁷ There is no suggestion in either Gay or Paley that the goodness of happiness isn't intrinsic or that, whether God commands it or not, the pursuit of happiness isn't a good thing.

²⁸ Some divine command theorists derive his authority from the fact that he has created us and bestowed so many benefits upon us. Others derive it from his superlative goodness. Still others believe that the commands of a perfect being would be intrinsically authoritative. For a critique of the claim that God's commands can be intrinsically authoritative see Murphy, 2002, chapter 3. For a response to Murphy's critique see Wainwright, 2005, pp. 136-41.

²⁹ Cf. Kant, 1959: 'One should only act on maxims which one can will to be universal laws,' 'One should only act on maxims which respect people's status as ends in themselves,' and (derivatively) maxims that pass these tests, e.g., 'If one has made a promise, one ought to keep it'.

³⁰ That acting according to the moral law is not demanding for God presents a peculiar puzzle recently articulated by John Pittard (Pittard, 2021). We admire agents when their morally good actions and character constitute a significant achievement; but on the classical conception of God as essentially loving, God's love of humans could not constitute such an achievement. Thus, it is hard to see how such a God could be worthy of agential admiration. If God is worthy of worship, then, we need to construe worship as somehow distinct from agential admiration.

Just as earthly commonwealths depend for their existence on a legislator so, too, ‘an ethical commonwealth’ cannot exist without ‘a public lawgiver’, namely, God conceived of as ‘the moral ruler of the world’ (Kant 1960: 90-91, 142).

How, though, can claims like these be reconciled with Kant’s apparent *repudiation* of divine command ethics? He says, for example, that the Bible, or any other purported divine revelation, should be interpreted according to our moral concepts, not the other way around: if something were ‘represented as commanded by God, through a direct manifestation of Him, yet if it flatly contradicts morality, it cannot, despite all appearances be of God (for example, were a father ordered to kill his son who is, so far as he knows, perfectly innocent)’ (Kant 1960: 81-2). But if we claim that some action, like killing an innocent, is morally wrong because God prohibits it, and that we know God must prohibit it because it is wrong according to our moral concepts, then our explanation for the wrongness of the action is plainly circular (Hare 2007: 152).

R. T. Nuyen suggests that we look at Kant’s distinction between a thing’s *ratio essendi* and its *ratio cognoscendi* to understand Kant’s theological view of the moral law (Nuyen 1998). A is the *ratio cognoscendi* of B if B is known through A. A is the *ratio essendi* of B if, when ‘the first is not supplied, the determined thing is not intelligible’ (Kant 1929: p. 220). Kant thinks, ‘freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law’---it is what makes the moral law possible. The moral law, however, ‘is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, that through which we become aware of it’ (Nuyen 1998: 448). Similarly, Nuyen suggests, Kant thinks that while the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of God, God is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law: ‘The holiness, the universal authority, the binding force of moral laws derives from God’s nature itself as a holy, universally authoritative Being capable of commanding obedience’. Yet if God really is the ground of the moral law, how can Kant be so sure that no divine command can contradict what we perceive to be the demands of morality? Because, on Kant’s view, we come to know God through the moral law. There is thus no possible world in which we would have reason to believe that God commands what clearly seems to us to be evil (Nuyen 1998: 449, 451).

One might worry that Kantianism ultimately renders the divine command theory otiose. Why think that commands are needed to explain moral norms’ obligatory force if they are synthetically necessary? For starters, perhaps if we were to prescind from divine commands and other sources of authority, then deviations from the norms would still involve departures from what an ideally functioning practical reason would prescribe, with the consequence that one’s life would fall short of what it ideally could be. But we still need an explanation for why we are obligated to live up to that ideal. What, then, is the source of the moral ideals’ *prescriptive* force?

Kant rather clearly thinks that at least part of the answer is the moral agent’s capacity for self-legislation, i.e., the property the will has of being ‘a law to itself’ (Kant 1959: 59). But Kant also appears to think that ‘the binding force of moral laws derives from God’s nature itself, as a holy, universally authoritative Being capable of commanding obedience’ (Nuyen 1998: 449). John Hare argues that Kant’s final position is that neither we nor God are authors of the moral law in one sense but that we are both its authors in another (Hare 2001). Neither of us is the law’s ‘creator’, i.e., the source of its content. That is, we don’t simply make up or *choose* the law’s content by fiat. But both of us are the authors of the law’s *obligatoriness*. That is, the law derives its prescriptive character from our ‘endorsements,’ although ‘our contributions’ aren’t ‘symmetrical’ since ‘we ordinary moral agents have to see our role as [merely] recapitulating in our own wills the declaration in God’s will of our duties...For me to will the law autonomously is to declare it my law’, i.e., to existentially appropriate it (ibid.: 94-6).

Whether this resolution is successful, however, is doubtful given Kant's view of human nature. Our wills are corrupted and we do not endorse moral maxims when they conflict with our own inclinations (Hare 1996: 53). If the moral law latter binds us only in so far as we endorse it, then categorical imperative does *not* bind us. Kant claims that 'a seed of goodness remains in us, despite the propensity to evil, and this seed is still pure and uncorrupted, even though we are not' (Ibid.: 61).³¹ But this would resolve Kant's apparent inconsistency³² only if our possession of this seed involved an implicit endorsement of moral maxims,³³ and it is difficult to see how it could do so if our willing nature is corrupt at its root.³⁴ Moreover, Kant's insistence that principles and maxims lack moral authority if they aren't self-legislated seems inconsistent with any standard form of divine command theory on which God's commands are sufficient to create moral obligations.

5. Expanding the Conversation: Other Religious Traditions

We said at the outset that we would focus on theories in metaethics that disproportionately emphasize ideas and questions raised in three major Western religions, namely Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Yet as one can see by perusing the recent Colin Marshall's *Comparative Metaethics* volume (2020), other lines of philosophical inquiry at the intersection of religion and metaethics can be opened up by including other religious traditions in anglophone discussion.

The mystical strands in the world's major religious traditions provide yet other interesting questions about the relationship between religion and morality. While many like Walter Stace (Stace 1960) believe that mysticism *supports* morality, others such as Arthur Danto (Danto 1972) and Jeffrey Kripal (Kripal 2002) think that it *undercuts* it.³⁵ The issue is far from settled, however, and given the important role mysticism plays in the spiritual traditions of both eastern and western religions, warrants further investigation.

Consider two other questions regarding religion and morality that are made salient by investigating Buddhist texts. First, to what extent are general theoretical principles important for ethics? For instance, Charles Goodman explains that classical Buddhist texts 'more often tend to lay down a variety of particular moral rules, guidelines, virtues, and vices' and these views resist classification into standard western categories for ethical theory such as 'consequentialist' or 'virtue ethical.' The absence of systematized moral principles in these Buddhist writings suggest that particular, contextualized guidance is more important for ethics than a theory with a set structure. Second, in Theravāda Buddhism, moral rules seem to fade in importance for human life the more a person advances on the road to sainthood. In Pali Canon we read 'that Saints have "abandoned goodness and vile actions' (Goodman 2021). We might ask, then, whether morality as a system takes on a different and more limited purpose within such a religious worldview—whether it is something we aim to transcend, for instance. Further, Buddhism offers a unique perspective on questions about morality and religion, since its adherents unambiguously and universally reject the idea that anything divine could make a difference to what is moral, though it is a religious worldview.³⁶

³¹ Cf. Kant, 1960, pp. 23-4 and 41-2.

³² Between 'Principles bind us only if we endorse them' and 'The good principle binds us even though we do not in fact endorse it because our wills are corrupt at their root.'

³³ I. e., an actual endorsement. That the good seed involves the potentiality of an endorsement isn't sufficient.

³⁴ For a good discussion of Kant's views on 'original sin' see Quinn, 1998, pp. 89-118.

³⁵ See, for example, Wainwright, 2005, chapter 11.

³⁶ Thanks to Nic Bommarito for discussion on this point.

If we turn to an investigation of moral values embedded in many African cultures, where religion and spirituality are pervasive but not considered revealed, we get yet another importantly different picture of the relationship between religion and morality. For instance, in parts of indigenous Ghanaian culture we see the idea that supernatural beings can be censured by humans on the basis of their failure to conform to moral ideals that are independent of such beings (Busia 1954: 205). Here we see a distinctive model of how religion and morality might be regarded as simultaneously important without morality being grounded in pre-moral concepts or properties of the divine, as in natural law theory, divine command theory, or divine motivation theory (Gyekye 2011).

Taking into account a wider range of religious traditions and views may yield important resources for advancing and addressing longstanding objections to first order moral theories popular in contemporary analytic philosophy. For example, Keshav Singh argues that in Sikh ethics, the Divine is an ‘all-encompassing unity’ and human enlightenment consists in rejecting the illusion of duality, including between the self and others, and experiencing this unity (Singh 2021: 321). The disposition to find oneself all-important, and more important from others, *haumai*, is thus the chief vice in Sikh ethics. Singh points out that this metaphysical foundation for virtue ethics indicates that virtue is fundamentally other-regarding. This enables a Sikh version of virtue ethics to avoid the objection to Aristotelian virtue ethics we came across earlier, namely that it is objectionably egoistic or self-regarding. The Jainist religious movement also houses a serious philosophical tradition. Jaina metaethics is a variety of moral realism which countenances certain claims we might associate with relativism, as Alex King and Nicholas Bommarito have argued; its reason for doing so, according to Matilal, is that “the total truth... may be derived from integration of all different viewpoints,” (quoted in King and Bommarito 2019: 150).

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have offered an overview of prominent theistic metaethical theories in contemporary Western philosophy. While analytic philosophers of religion and moral philosophers have done extensive work on these issues as they relate to Christianity, less of the rich traditions of the world’s other major religions have been engaged in the mainstream analytic discussions. We have suggested a few directions for future research and pointed to examples of scholars exploring important areas, ranging from Sikh ethics to recovering Protestant varieties of natural law theories. What becomes clear, when investigating questions about the relationship between morality and religion, is that answers are heterogenous even within and especially between religious traditions, and that there are further depths to mine for the intellectually curious.

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