

Moral Objectivism and a Punishing God

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## Abstract

Many moral philosophers have assumed that ordinary folk embrace moral objectivism. But, if so, why do folk embrace objectivism? One possibility is the pervasive connection between religion and morality in ordinary life. Some theorists contend that God is viewed as a divine guarantor of right and wrong, rendering morality universal and absolute. But is belief in God per se sufficient for moral objectivism? In this paper, we present original research exploring the connections between metaethics and particular conceptions of God among religious participants. Study 1 shows that, when controlling for religiosity, age, and belief in God's loving characteristics, it is belief in God's punishing characteristics (specifically, the existence of Hell) that uniquely predicts rejection of moral relativism. Study 2 shows that followers of Abrahamic faiths are more likely to endorse moral objectivism when thinking of the Divine, regardless of loving or punishing characteristics. And Study 3 shows that priming for moral objectivism makes theists more likely to endorse God's punishing characteristics. A general picture is suggested by these data. For Abrahamic theists, God's particular characteristics are not germane to the question of whether his moral commandments are real and objective. And while theists strongly endorse God's loving characteristics, focusing on the objective nature of morality can highlight God's punishing nature, reminding theists that objective morality requires a divine guarantor of justice to enforce it.

*Keywords:* Moral psychology, psychology of religion, conceptions of God, religion and morality, metaethics.

## Moral Objectivism and a Punishing God

*Nahum 1:2-3 “The Lord is a jealous God, filled with vengeance and wrath...The Lord is slow to get angry, but his power is great, and he never lets the guilty go unpunished.”*

*Exodus 34:6-7 “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin.”*

Since ancient times, great minds have drawn a connection between morality and the divine. For example, in the *Laws* (ca.4th century BCE) Plato writes that “the fear of such vengeance, exacted by the gods, should hold a man in check” (Cooper & Hutchinson, 1997, p. 1531) and that “no one who believes in gods as the law directs ever voluntarily commits an unholy act or lets any lawless word pass his lips” (p. 1542). Around the same time, the Mohists in pre-dynastic China (ca. 5th-4th century BCE) were arguing that “if the ability of ghosts and spirits to reward the worthy and punish the wicked could be firmly established as fact throughout the empire and among the common people, it would surely bring order to the state and great benefit to the people” (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2005, p. 104). This connection continues in modern times, as when, in a famous passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Ivan Fyodorovich opines that “if there is and has been any love on earth up to now, it has come not from natural law but solely from people’s belief in their own immortality” (Dostoevsky, 1990, p. 69). These thinkers suggest that religious belief is conducive to—perhaps even necessary

for—moral or prosocial behavior. And some contemporary psychological research has uncovered such a connection (Atkinson & Bourrat, 2011; Bourrat, Atkinson, & Dunbar, 2011; D. P. Johnson, 2005; K. A. Johnson, Li, Cohen, & Okun, 2013; see Saleam & Moustafa, 2016 for a review; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011; Watts et al., 2015; Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2016).

But the connection between morality and religious belief can also be drawn at a higher level of analysis. Some have maintained, for example, that God not only punishes people for disobeying his commands but also instantiates, realizes, or constructs objective morality *ex nihilo*. On this view, in the absence of God, morality *itself* (conceived in absolute, law-like terms) could not exist. Hobbes gives voice to such a position in *Leviathan*, when he writes that only principles, “delivered in the word of God, that by right commandeth all things” are “properly called Lawes” (Hobbes, 1996, p. 111). Nietzsche offers a radically different account that also affirms a strong connection between belief in God and belief in objective morality. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he speculates that slaves in the ancient world yearned for revenge against their masters, yet were powerless to act. Their frustration generated a compensatory belief that a noble God exists, is able to detect the objective evil in their masters, and will therefore punish them (even when the slaves themselves could not). The desire for revenge, then, generates not only belief in God, but also belief in supernatural punishment as well as the existence of objective moral facts (e.g. Sinhababu, 2007). Freud, too, maintained that people create a supernatural “supreme court of justice” to ensure that “all good is rewarded and all evil punished” (Gay, 1995, p. 696).

In this paper we set out to investigate the connection between morality and religious belief at this higher level of analysis—to wit, the connection between belief in God and belief in

moral objectivism. Many contemporary philosophers maintain that ordinary folk are objectivists about morality (e.g. Blackburn, 1998; Brink, 1989; Joyce, 2006; Shafer-Landau, 2003; Smith, 1994; see Sarkissian, 2016 for a review), and some research suggests they might be correct (Beebe, Qiaoan, Wysocki, & Endara, 2015; Beebe & Sackris, 2016; Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Heiphetz & Young, 2016; though see Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe, 2011 for evidence that folk might tacitly embrace relativism). While multiple explanations could be offered for this, it seems, *prima facie*, that morality grounded in a theistic conceptual framework could help explain why ordinary folk embrace objectivism; after all, when the philosophers mentioned above make claims about ‘ordinary folk’, they are primarily referring to individuals who believe in a monotheistic God (Hackett, Grim, Stonawski, Skirbekk, & Potančoková, 2012), whose commandments apply absolutely and to everyone, regardless of their contingent beliefs or desires (Piazza & Landy, 2013). So, it might seem only natural for someone who believed in God to believe that some moral dictates stem from Divine Command, are objectively true, and apply to all people.

Others have investigated this theistic explanation for folk objectivism. Goodwin and Darley (2008) support such an explanation, reporting that how people *ground* or *justify* their moral beliefs can predict whether they are objectivists about morality. In one of their experiments, they assessed participants’ commitments to moral objectivism by presenting them with a number of cases of moral disagreement, and asking whether they thought it was possible for both sides to be correct. Later, they asked participants how they grounded their moral beliefs by having them select from several metaethical justifications, including a divine command justification. This was followed by another question: “According to you, is it possible for there to

be right and wrong acts, without the existence of God?”. They found that participants who grounded their moral beliefs in divine command (“they are ordained by a supreme being”) were more objective than those who did not. What’s more, if participants answered the last question by claiming that there could be no right or wrong without God (or even if they were unsure), they were more objectivist still. However, these results failed to replicate in some further research (e.g. Wright, Grandjean, & McWhite, 2013).

More recently, Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015) explored the relationship between religious belief and moral objectivism in a more systematic way. In one of their priming studies, participants primed with divinity concepts in a scrambled sentence task (such as *spirit*, *divine*, and *God*) endorsed moral objectivism and rejected moral relativism to a greater extent than did participants in a neutral prime condition. Yet they also found evidence for a causal connection running the other way; in a subsequent study, when participants were primed to think of morality in subjective terms (by reading a text that contrasted a moral claim with a highly objective scientific claim), they evinced lower levels of confidence in their belief in God.

The studies by Goodwin and Darley suggest a *correlation* between belief in God and an objectivist conception of morality. Yilmaz and Bahçekapili suggest *causal* connections; when people think of religious concepts, they are more likely to endorse moral objectivism; conversely, when they are primed with moral subjectivism, they show lower levels of religiosity. Both of these studies provide support for the theistic explanation of folk objectivism.

However, a more nuanced possibility is suggested when considering these findings in light of other research suggesting that what matters for individual morality is not belief, per se, but *how* one thinks of God. For example, Shariff and Norenzayan (2011) found that how

participants characterized God predicted their moral behavior. When given a chance to cheat in an experimental setting, participants who emphasized punishing aspects of God were less likely to do so compared to those who emphasized loving and merciful aspects of God. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2013) found that belief in a punishing God correlated with more aggressive (and less forgiving) responses to imagined social transgressions, while Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015) found that priming participants with punishment, whether religious or secular, led to increased prosocial intentions. In other research, Shariff and Rhemtulla (2012) found that, across 67 countries, belief in Hell was negatively correlated with overall crime rates, whereas belief in Heaven was positively correlated with higher crime rates—even when controlling for GDP, income inequality, and other predictors of crime. Other findings support the diverging impact of endorsing God's loving as opposed to punishing aspects (e.g. Harrell, 2012; Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007).

How do we make sense of these results? One approach would emphasize relationships between conceptualizations of God and views about morality. If belief in moral objectivism is correlated with conceiving of God as 'punishing' or 'vengeful' as opposed to 'loving' or 'forgiving', the previous pattern of results begins to make sense. Those who believe in a punishing God may be less likely to cheat and also less likely to forgive because they consider moral transgressions as objectively wrong.

To investigate this idea, we conducted three studies. The first shows a correlation between believing in a punishing God and rejecting moral relativism. The second and third explore the causal connections between these two variables. This investigation is of interest in at least two ways. First, it is of theoretical interest because it constitutes a novel investigation into

the causal relationship between particular beliefs about God and moral objectivism. Second, it is of practical interest because, as noted, the connection between objectivist morality and belief in a punishing God could have implications for religious conflict, outgroup religious prosociality, and the prospects of tolerance and cosmopolitanism.

*A Note about Agnostics and Atheists:* In the following studies we investigate a potential relationship between belief in moral objectivism and conceptions of God. However, agnostics and atheists do not believe in God, and therefore cannot be predicted to conceive of God as having loving or punishing characteristics. Thus, for the studies below, we eliminated any participants who selected “Atheist/Agnostic/None” in response to the question, “What is your religion?” presented in the demographics phase of the following studies. However, for interest and transparency, we conducted analyses for atheists and report the single marginally significant result (for Study 3) in the Supplementary Materials (SM), along with a post-hoc interpretation of this finding.

We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions in the studies below.

### Study 1

In this initial study, we tested for a correlation between belief in Hell (taken as a proxy for belief in a punishing God) and rejection of relativism about morality.

#### Method

**Participants.** Sample size was determined before any data analysis, using G\*Power 3.1. We took a medium sized effect (.30) as our threshold of interest. A 95% power of detecting such an effect required a sample of about 165 participants. We therefore recruited 360 participants using Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk service, expecting to eliminate a considerable number of



atheists and non-believers from the sample. In total, 356 participants completed the study, including 230 self-reported theists. Of these, 41 failed a basic comprehension check, leaving 189 for the analysis below (110 women; mean age = 40.15,  $SD = 11.85$ , range: 21-81). Of these, 84.1% identified some denomination of Christianity as their religious affiliation (see SM for full details). Based on our final sample of 189 participants, a 2-tailed test of significance, and an alpha level of .05, a sensitivity analysis using G\*Power 3.1 indicated an 80% power to detect an effect size of .20 in a bivariate correlational analysis.

Participants were given monetary compensation for their participation at the end of the study.

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants were presented with a 5-item Moral Relativism scale in randomized order (adapted from Forsyth, 1980 see SM), and asked to mark their agreement or disagreement with each on a 7-point scale. All relativism scale items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ), and were averaged to form a relativism score for each participant. Participants then answered a number of demographic questions, including the Duke University Religiosity (DUREL) scale (Koenig & Büssing, 2010). The DUREL scale consists of 5 questions which are subdivided into 3 subscales, measuring 1) organizational religious activity, 2) non-organizational religious activity, and 3) intrinsic religiosity (see SM). Since we are interested in how one's religious beliefs are related to one's thoughts about the nature and status of morality, we predicted that one's level of intrinsic religiosity could moderate the relationship between the other variables of interest in our studies. Thus, we use this subscale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ) in all analyses.

Finally, we assessed participants' endorsements of the loving and punishing aspects of

God by asking about their belief in Heaven and Hell on 7 point scales (following the logic of Shariff and Rhemtulla, 2012) as part of a final demographics questionnaire. Participants were then debriefed, and given \$0.50 for their participation.

### **Results and Discussion**

**Results.** Relativism was negatively correlated with intrinsic religiosity,  $r(187) = -.21, p = .004$ , belief in Hell,  $r(187) = -.21, p = .003$ , and belief in Heaven,  $r(187) = -.15, p = .034$ .

Intrinsic religiosity was highly correlated with both belief in Heaven,  $r(187) = .67, p < .001$  and belief in Hell,  $r(187) = .58, p < .001$ . Belief in Hell was negatively correlated with age,  $r(187) = -.15, p = .037$ , suggesting a form of motivated cognition (e.g. Mather & Carstensen, 2005).

To further test the significance of these predictors, we performed a multiple regression analysis using belief in Heaven, belief in Hell, intrinsic religiosity, and age (which has been shown to predict objectivism, Beebe & Sackris, 2016) as predictor variables, and objectivism as the outcome variable. In this complete model, belief in a punishing God emerged as the sole significant predictor of rejection of relativism for theists. See Table 1.

Taking belief in Hell as a proxy for belief in a punishing God, and relativism as the reverse of objectivism, this study finds an initial correlation between believing in a punishing God and endorsing moral objectivism.

**Discussion.** We might now ask: Does belief in a punishing conception of God drive theists toward moral objectivism, or does a commitment to moral objectivism make them conceive of God in punishing terms? We can see this question as at the heart of a very old debate in metaethics, one that harkens back to the discussions of Hobbes and Nietzsche over the relation between God and morality. However, whereas these previous discussions concerned belief in God generally, our correlational findings suggest a modification: Perhaps—in the spirit of Hobbes—individuals think of morality in objective terms when they conceive of God as an infallible, omnipotent punisher. Or perhaps—in the spirit of Nietzsche—they are likely to endorse a punishing God to the extent that they affirm moral objectivism.

Some observations support each of these models. For example, one does not generally select one's initial religious affiliation, but is rather reared in the religion of one's parents or community, where one might be exposed both to a particular conception of God and the conception of morality consistent with that God. This would support the Hobbesian model. By contrast, many individuals do switch religious affiliations later in life; by one count, 28% of U.S. adults forsake the religion they were raised in (e.g. changing from Catholicism to Protestantism or atheism), and this number increases to nearly half (44%) of U.S. adults if one considers changes within religious traditions (e.g. from Baptist to Methodist) (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). Adults might be gravitating toward religions that portray God as affirming their mature moral convictions. This would support the Nietzschean model. Of course, it could also be that both of these models contribute to the connection between belief in a punishing God and moral objectivism.

We set out to investigate each of these models in the studies below.

## Study 2

In this study, in line with a modified Hobbesian model, we predicted that priming theists with the concept of a punishing God would increase their avowals of moral objectivism.

### Method

**Participants.** Sample size was determined before any data analysis, using G\*Power 3.1. We took a medium effect ( $f$ ) of .25 as our threshold of interest for the current study, which required a total sample size of about 160 theists with an 80% chance of detecting any effect. Needing to eliminate atheists from our sample, and expecting to eliminate participants because of failure to correctly complete the task or the comprehension check, we decided to collect at least 500 participants.

In all, 538 participants were recruited using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk service. Self-reported atheists and agnostics ( $n = 202$ ) were excluded from the analyses, leaving a sample of 336 theists. Fifty-three of these participants failed a comprehension check and were removed from the sample, leaving 283 participants. Thirteen of these participants failed to follow the instructions for the sentence scramble task correctly and were removed from the sample, leaving 270 participants. Finally, each author independently coded participants' responses to three funnel questions testing for suspicion of the purpose of the study. Criteria were established through discussion of a sub-sample of the cases, and a dichotomous categorization was given to each participant, indicating either obliviousness to or awareness of the purpose of the study. Interrater reliability was substantial ( $Kappa = .798, p < .001$ ), with agreement on 269 of 270 cases. After resolving this disagreement, only two participants were removed for suspecting the purpose of the study. In all, 68 theists were excluded from our sample as follows: 14 from Divine-Loving, 6

from Divine-Punishing, 16 from Divine-Neutral, 13 from Neutral-Loving, 11 from Neutral-Punishing, and 8 from Neutral-Neutral.

The remaining sample of 268 participants (171 women; mean age = 35, SD = 11.48, range: 18-68) were distributed across our six conditions as follows: Divine-Loving = 37, Divine-Punishing = 49, Divine-Neutral = 46, Neutral-Loving = 36, Neutral-Punishing = 40, Neutral-Neutral = 60. Of these, 74.2% identified some denomination of Christianity as their religious affiliation (see SM for full details). Based on our final sample of 268 participants and an alpha level of .05, a sensitivity analysis using G\*Power 3.1 indicated an 80% power to detect an effect size of .19 in an ANOVA.

**Materials and Procedure.** In this 2 (Divinity: Divine Prime, Neutral Prime) x 3 (Attitude: Loving Prime, Punishing Prime, Neutral Prime) priming study, we investigated the modified Hobbesian model using a sentence scramble prime similar to that used by Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015, 2016) and originally devised by Shariff and Norenzayan (2007). Participants were given ten groups of five words each and were required to discard one and form a meaningful, four-word sentence. Those in the Divine conditions had to include words intended to prime concepts related to the divine (*spirit, divine, God, and sacred*) for four of these word groups, and those in the Loving (*love, forgave, peacefully, and kind*) and Punishing (*harsh, punishing, angry, and revenge*) conditions were similarly primed. Thus, participants in Divine-Loving and Divine-Punishing conditions unscrambled two neutral sentences and eight sentences containing prime words, four related to divinity and four related to loving or punishing respectively. Participants in Neutral-Loving, Neutral-Punishing, or Divine-Neutral conditions unscrambled six neutral sentences, and four sentences containing prime words related to loving,

punishing, or the divine, respectively. And participants in the Control condition unscrambled neutral sentences containing no prime words. See SM for further details.

After the priming task, participants completed a three-item moral objectivism questionnaire. In Study 1, we took relativism as the reverse of objectivism (from a folk psychological perspective) and, on that basis, interpreted our findings as supporting our primary thesis—namely, that belief in a punishing God is correlated with belief in moral objectivism (for theists). Here, we test for objectivism directly with the following new 3-item scale:

1. There exists a single moral code that is applicable to everyone, regardless of any individual person's beliefs or cultural identity.
2. If two people really disagree about a particular moral problem then at most one of them can be correct, since moral problems cannot have multiple correct answers.
3. It is possible to compare different cultures by a single, universal standard of moral rightness.

Responses to the three items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ) and they were averaged to form a single objectivism measure. Not only did this 3-item scale differ from the measure used in Study 1 by testing objectivism directly (as opposed to testing for rejection of relativism), it was also not based on previous measures. We were concerned that existing measures, such as the 5-item scale adapted from Forsyth (1980), did not capture metaethical views in a precise way, potentially limiting what we can infer from their use in this context. (See SM for further discussion.)

After completing our objectivism measure, each participant answered a series of three funnel questions intended to assess suspicion of the purpose of the study. Finally, participants

completed a short demographic survey, including the DUREL intrinsic religiosity items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ), which were averaged to a single intrinsic religiosity measure. Participants were then debriefed and given \$1 for their participation.

### **Results and Discussion**

A 2 (Divinity) x 3 (Attitude) ANOVA was used to compare the influence that priming divinity and dispositional attitude had on endorsement of objectivism for the theists. There was no significant effect for Divinity  $F(1, 266) = 1.80, p = .181, \eta p^2 = .007$ , or Attitude,  $F(2, 265) = 0.13, p = .876, \eta p^2 = .001$ . Nor was there an interaction effect,  $F(2, 265) = 0.15, p = .862, \eta p^2 = .001$ . See SM for means and SDs by condition.

We did not find an effect in Study 2 supporting the modified Hobbesian explanation of the correlation between belief in a punishing God and metaethical objectivism. This might suggest that our methodology for priming concepts related to a punishing God did not work, especially when considering that Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015) found a medium-large effect for Divinity on objectivism in their second study, using a similar design. However, a closer examination of our results supports a different hypothesis.

First, whereas our sample consisted of 74% Christians (with no single denomination comprising more than 20%), 90% of the theists in Yilmaz and Bahçekapili's sample reported identification with Islam. . One possible explanation for the disparity between our result and theirs may be that Muslims, or followers of Abrahamic religions in general, are more susceptible to the religious primes. While our sample comprised only a small number of Muslims, we decided to test this hypothesis by focusing on self-reported followers of Abrahamic religions: Protestants, Catholics, Evangelicals, Other Christians, Jews, and Muslims ( $n = 209$ ). Indeed, an

ANOVA uncovered a main effect of Divinity on levels of objectivism for this group,  $F(1, 207) = 4.02, p = .046, \eta p^2 = .019$ . (See Figure 1.) Abrahamics primed with divinity concepts indicated higher levels of agreement ( $M = 4.11, SD = 1.59$ ) with our objectivist statements than those in non-religious, neutral conditions ( $M = 3.68, SD = 1.43$ ).<sup>1</sup> No other significant main or interaction effects were found for Abrahamics, nor were any significant main or interaction effects found for non-Abrahamic theists ( $n = 59$ ).

Our primary aim with this study was to test our modified Hobbesian model, the hypothesis that thinking of a punishing God influences one to adopt more objectivist metaethical beliefs. We did not find clear evidence for this hypothesis. However, we did find that priming members of Abrahamic traditions with concepts of the divine made them significantly more inclined to endorse metaethical objectivism. This suggests that our Divinity primes were successful. However, we also want to air a note of caution regarding these results, as controversies have arisen for priming studies (e.g. Cesario, 2014; cf. Willard, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2016), as well as for statistical methods that isolate and test for predicted effects in subpopulations (e.g. Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). We thus regard the results as provisional, even though their outlook may be somewhat strengthened by their concordance with the similar findings of Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015).

### Study 3

Here, in line with the Nietzschean model outlined above, we predicted that priming theists with moral objectivism would increase their endorsements of the concept of a punishing God.

### Method

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<sup>1</sup> Abrahamic Faith was examined as a moderator of the relation between Divinity and Objectivism using the Process Macro. The interaction term between Divinity and Abrahamic Faith just missed the significance threshold,  $\Delta R^2 = .012, F(1, 267) = 3.39, p = .067$ .



**Participants.** Sample size was determined before any data analysis, using G\*Power 3.1. We again took a medium effect ( $f$ ) of .25 as our threshold of interest, which required a total sample size of about 150 theists with an 80% chance of detecting any effect. As with the studies above, we expected to eliminate a large number of atheists from our sample. Thus, we set out to collect at least 360 participants.

In all, 365 participants (162 female) completed an online questionnaire, including 198 theists. Of these, 12 failed a basic comprehension check at the beginning (7 in the absolute condition, 2 in the relative condition, and 3 in the control condition), and another 18 were removed for failing a manipulation check after the prime (8 from the absolute condition, 10 from the relative condition) leaving 168. Finally, each author independently coded participants' responses to three funnel questions testing for suspicion of the purpose of the study, with agreement on 166 of 168 cases ( $Kappa = .661, p < .001$ ), and 3 additional participants were eliminated for suspecting the purpose of the study, all from the Relative condition. This left 165 for the analyses below (82 women; mean age = 34.80,  $SD = 12.69$ , range: 19-73), distributed across conditions as follows: 50 in objective, 51 in relative, and 64 in control. Detailed religious affiliation information can be found in the Supplementary Materials (SM), however, 80% of participants identified some denomination of Christianity as their religious affiliation. Based on our final sample of 165 participants and an alpha level of .05, a sensitivity analysis using G\*Power 3.1 indicated an 80% power to detect an effect size of .24 in a one-way ANOVA.

**Materials and Procedure.** In order to induce participants to think of morality as either absolute on the one hand, or relative on the other, they were randomly assigned to one of three

conditions (modified from Young & Durwin, 2013). Those in the Relativism condition received the following prompt:

Many thoughtful, reflective people maintain that moral rightness and wrongness are relative--that they are determined solely by one's background or cultural upbringing. In other words, there are no universal moral truths.

Do you agree that moral rightness and wrongness are relative, that they are determined by one's background or cultural upbringing?

Those in the Objectivism condition received this prompt:

Many thoughtful, reflective people maintain that moral rightness and wrongness are universal--that they are independent of one's background or cultural upbringing. In other words, there are universal moral truths.

Do you agree that moral rightness and wrongness are universal, that they are independent of one's background or cultural upbringing?

Those in the Control condition received this prompt:

Many people agree that online studies have proven beneficial, as they speed up the process of data collection and allow participants to take part in the studies easily and from a variety of venues.

Do you agree that online studies are beneficial for researchers and participants?

Participants marked their agreement on a 7-item agreement scale. (Their answers were ignored in the analyses.)

Next, subjects were provided with a 14-item conceptions of God scale (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011 see SM), asking to what extent they endorsed God's loving characteristics (e.g. 'forgiving', 'compassionate') or punishing characteristics (e.g. 'fearsome', 'vengeful'). All Loving God items loaded on Factor 1, and all Punishing God items loaded on factor 2. There were no cross loadings. The 'Loving God' items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ) were averaged into a single Loving God scale, and the 'Punishing God' items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ) were averaged into a single Punishing God scale. This was followed by a series of funnel questions to assess their awareness of the purpose of the metaethics questions. Finally, they provided demographic information, including the 3-item DUREL intrinsic religiosity scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). Participants were then debriefed and given \$1 for their participation.

### **Results and Discussion**

A one way, multivariate ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the manipulation for ratings of Loving God and Punishing God in the objectivist, relativist, and control conditions. There was no significant effect of condition on theists' conception of god as a loving being,

$F(2,162) = 1.55, p = .216, \eta p^2 = .019$ . However, there was a significant effect of condition on theists' conception of god as a punishing being,  $F(2,162) = 6.09, p = .003, \eta p^2 = .070$ . (See Figure 2.) Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for Punishing God in the Objective condition ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.41$ ) was significantly higher than both the Control condition ( $M = 2.85, SD = 1.31, p = .002, \text{Cohen's } d = .67$ ) and the Relative condition ( $M = 3.09, SD = 1.49, p = .047, \text{Cohen's } d = .46$ ). The Relative condition did not significantly differ from the Control condition ( $p = .634, \text{Cohen's } d = .17$ ).

As in study 2, we also ran an analysis focusing only on those in the Abrahamic tradition ( $n = 141$ ). We discovered the same pattern with a larger effect size,  $F(2,138) = 6.94, p = .001, \eta p^2 = .091$ .<sup>2</sup> Once again, post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for Punishing God in the Objective condition ( $M = 3.94, SD = 1.28$ ) was significantly higher than both the Control condition ( $M = 2.98, SD = 1.27, p = .002, \text{Cohen's } d = .76$ ) and the Relative condition ( $M = 3.12, SD = 1.49, p = .015, \text{Cohen's } d = .60$ ). The Relative condition did not significantly differ from the Control condition ( $p = .870, \text{Cohen's } d = .11$ ).

In this study we investigated the causal connection suggested by the tradition of thought associated with Nietzsche and Freud--namely, that one's views about morality shape one's religious views (and not the other way around). As that view might predict, being primed to think of morality as objective makes theists think of God as more punishing.

### General Discussion

In Study 1, we found that, even though belief in moral objectivism correlated with intrinsic religiosity, belief in a Loving God (as measured by belief in Heaven), and belief in a

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<sup>2</sup> Abrahamic Faith was examined as a moderator of the relation between Condition and Objectivism using the Process Macro. The interaction term was not significant,  $\Delta R^2 = .001, F(2,162) = .23, p = .630$ .

Punishing God (as measured by belief in Hell), only the latter uniquely predicted objectivism. So we decided to further investigate the causal relationship between these variables.

It may seem initially more likely that a causal connection runs from belief in God to moral objectivism, and we do find provisional evidence for such a connection. In Study 2, prompting Abrahamic theists to think of God (whether in loving, punishing, or neutral terms) had a small but significant effect on their views concerning morality, making them more likely to endorse objectivism. This coheres with the findings of Yilmaz and Bahçekapili provocatively titled paper, “Without God, everything is permitted?” (2015). However, it may be most accurate to conclude that *for followers of Abrahamic religions*, without God, everything is permitted. Future research might target individuals from other religious traditions to further explore this relationship. We note that Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2016) found punishing primes (whether religious or secular) increased prosociality, whereas religious primes alone did not. Our findings here raise the possibility that one’s prosocial tendencies are responsive to different primes than one’s metaethical perspectives. Future research might compare these two dimensions of the moral landscape explicitly.

In Study 3, we tested the Nietzschean model, whereby one’s metaethical commitments shape how one conceives of God. We found that being prompted to think of morality in an objectivist fashion strengthened theists’ conception of God as a divine punisher, but had no effect on their conception of God as a loving being, which were uniformly high across conditions. Indeed, it is possible that ratings of loving God were at ceiling. Across conditions, the *SD* for loving God was 1.02, compared to 1.44 for punishing God. This suggests that theists may invariably conceive of God as loving, forgiving, and merciful, but recognize God’s

punishing nature when prompted to think that there are objectively right and wrong answers to moral questions. Indeed, the most salient connection between morality and God lies in prohibitions which emphasize God's restriction of behavior; all but one of the Ten Commandments, for example, consist in prohibitions ('thou shalt not kill; bear false witness; steal; commit adultery', etc.) that imply punishments if violated.

The causal story from study 3 is in line with other studies suggesting a link between an individual's values and ideals on the one hand, and how they conceive of the divine on the other. For example, Ross et al (2012) found that American Christians project their own moral ideals onto the figure of Jesus, and take issues important to their own ideological orientations (fellowship and caring for liberals, moral teaching for conservatives) to be central to Christianity. So Christians tend to think Jesus must be like them. Our findings suggest, similarly, that theists tend to modify their conceptions of God based on their beliefs about the nature of morality.

One way to explain this result is to note that moral education may occur at an earlier age (and independently of) one's religious education, especially as the latter pertains to the attributes of God. There is also some evidence that one's metaethical views are correlated with one's basic personality traits (Feltz & Cokely, 2008). This suggests that how one conceives of the nature of morality (for example, whether diverging moralities could be equally valid) comes first, and later renders some characteristics of God more salient or attractive than others. In fact, this may partly explain the previously noted finding that people often change their religious affiliation in adulthood (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008).

A general picture is suggested by these data, then. For Abrahamic theists, God's particular characteristics are not germane to the question of whether his moral commandments

are real and objective. His divine and univocal rule is sufficient for objective moral command, and even while God punishes immoral behavior, his commandments are issued out of care for his believers. And whereas theists in general strongly endorse God's loving characteristics, focusing on the objective nature of morality can highlight God's punishing characteristics, reminding theists that objective morality requires a divine guarantor of justice to enforce it.

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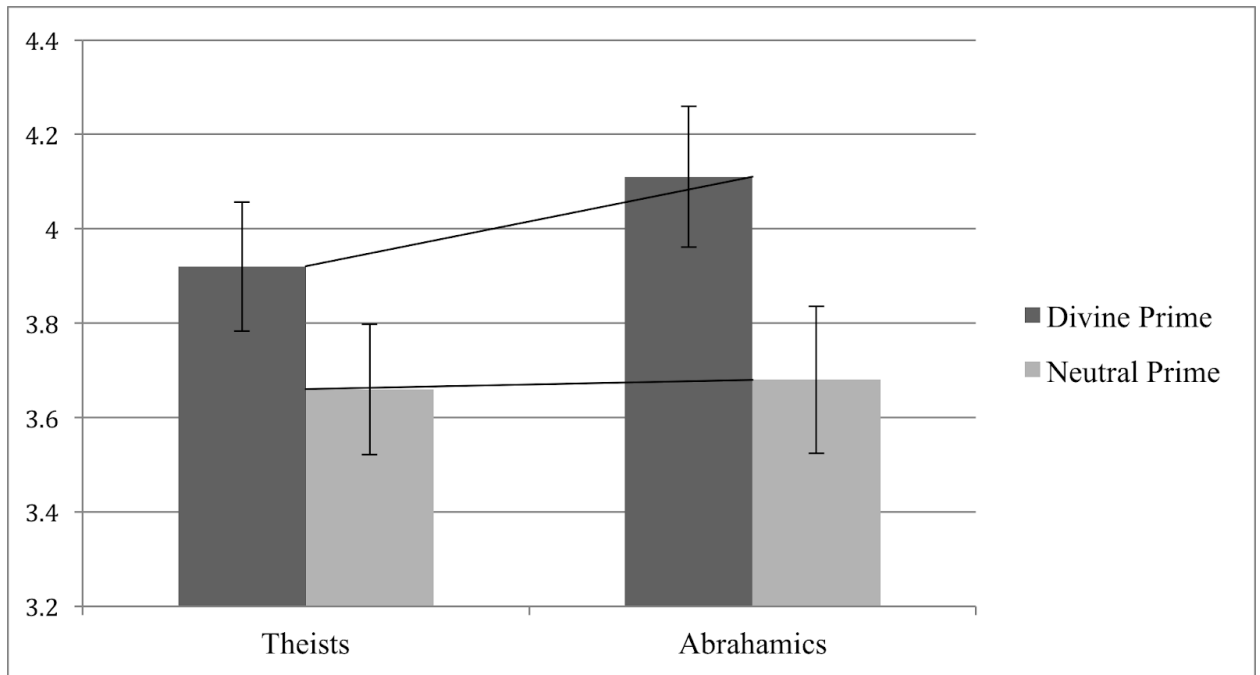
**Tables**

Table 1

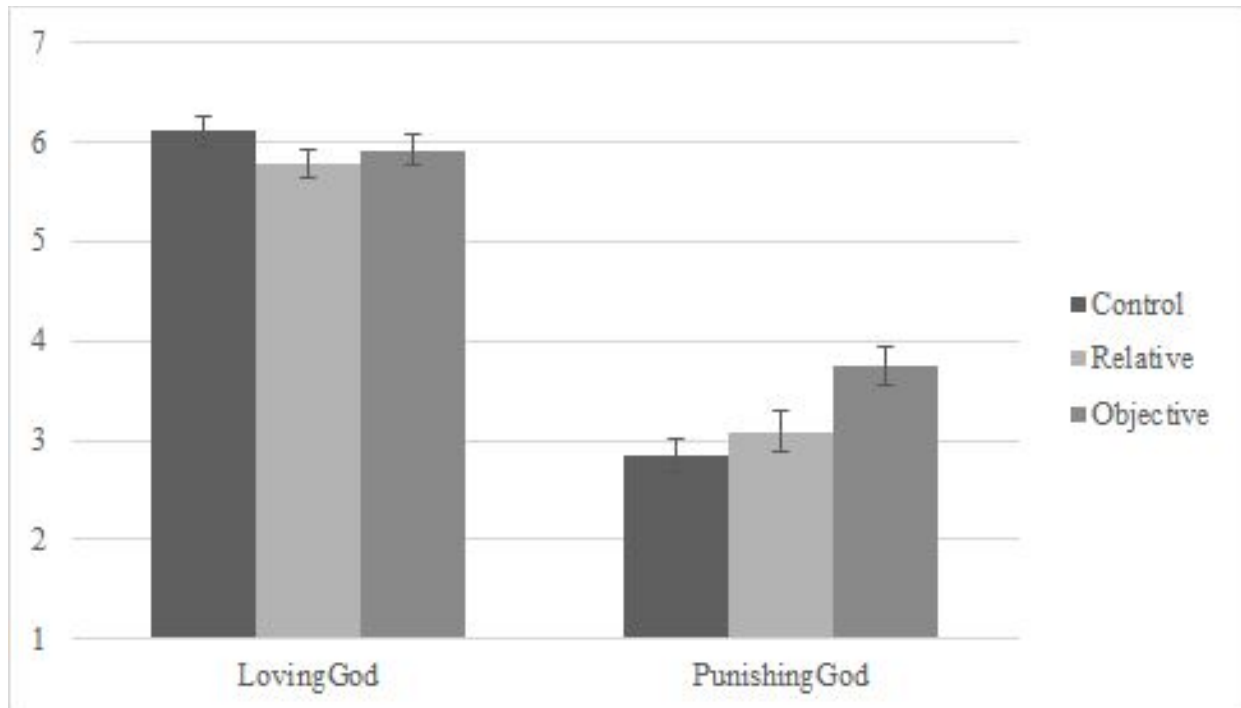
Multiple linear regression on theists, predicting relativism (Study 1)

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	sr <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i>
Belief in Hell	-.14	.07	-.23	-2.08	-.15	.039
Belief in Heaven	.07	.08	.10	.88	.06	.382
Intrinsic Religiosity	-.13	.11	-.14	-1.36	-.10	.176
Age	-.01	.01	-.11	-1.54	-.11	.125

Figures



**Fig. 1.** Mean Objectivist Responses for Divine and Neutral Prime. Error bars show Standard Error of the Mean.



**Fig. 2.** Means for LovingGod and PunishingGod by Condition. Errors bars show Standard Error of the Mean.