DIVINE ATTITUDES AND THE NATURE OF MORALITY:  
A DEFENSE OF A THEISTIC ACCOUNT OF DEONTIC PROPERTIES

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

For philosophers who seek to give an account of the nature of moral properties, an important first step is to identify the platitudes of moral discourse. These platitudes establish the roles that moral properties are thought to play, such that any property that might plausibly be identified with moral wrongness (for example) must be well-suited to fill that role: it should be objective, normative, categorical, authoritative, knowable, and unified. Within the framework of metaphysical naturalism, it is very difficult to find any suitable candidates to play this role. Traditional theism, on the other hand, brings with it conceptual resources that are more than adequate to ground a robust moral realism. Divine commands and divine attitudes are both good candidates to play the role established by moral discourse for moral properties.

Contrary to much received philosophical wisdom, metaethical accounts that imply the dependence of moral facts upon theological facts do not face any insuperable difficulties. Worries that theistic metaethical accounts imply a variety of untoward consequences—e.g. that there are nearby possible worlds in which nothing is morally
wrong, that many substantive moral claims are arbitrarily true if true at all, and that ascriptions of moral qualities to God are redundant or incoherent—can be shown to be unfounded.

Thus theistic philosophers have good reason to seek to develop distinctively theistic metaethical accounts. Past accounts of this kind have focused primarily on divine commands. More promising, however, is a divine attitude-based account, according to which moral properties are identical to agent-directed divine attitudes (e.g., an action's moral wrongness consists in its being such that God would be displeased with a person who performs it). This account is able to accommodate many of the subtleties of moral assessment better than a wide range of other moral realisms, both theistic and non-theistic. In particular, the attitude-based account preserves a strong and theoretically desirable link between blameworthiness and wrongdoing. It is superior to divine command theory for a number of reasons, including its ability to preserve the modal status of moral truths and its consonance with an independently plausible and attractive conception of the religious life.
To Jen
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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and morality is a topic of perennial philosophical interest. My own initial exposure to the subject came through reading J. L. Mackie's famous essay “On the Subjectivity of Values” as an undergraduate. In that essay, Mackie assumes the truth of metaphysical naturalism and argues that he and his fellow naturalists ought to be ethical non-realists. Specifically, Mackie defends a moral error theory, maintaining that the language of morality is truth-apt but that moral judgments of all kinds are systematically false. He seems to take it for granted that theists are in a much different position than naturalists with respect to these issues; he indicates that the problems that arise for naturalistic attempts to develop realistic moral theories do not arise for philosophers who embrace the existence of Platonic forms or for theists.¹

In the decades since Mackie published his essay, many philosophers have become convinced that he was mistaken. Mackie’s central argument against naturalistic moral realism assumes, implausibly, a very strong thesis of motivational internalism. If

¹ See (Mackie 1977, 118).
we reject this thesis, the prospects for developing a plausible naturalistic version of moral realism quickly become much brighter. Or so the thinking goes.

My own view is that Mackie’s fundamental intuition is sound. It was a mistake for him to build his case for moral error theory on the foundation of motivational internalism, but he was right to believe that the prospects for developing a robust moral realism that is compatible with metaphysical naturalism are not good. In Chapter 1, “The Problem(s) with Nontheistic Moral Realisms,” I defend this claim. I argue that any metaethical account that can properly be referred to as a version of moral realism must be able to satisfy a number of core metaethical desiderata. These desiderata are established via an examination of some of the platitudes of moral discourse, patterns of belief and inference which are such that persons do not count as competent users of moral language if they employ moral terms in ways that violate those patterns.

I suggest that there are at least six core metaethical desiderata. Moral properties, if there really are such things, are objective, normative, authoritative, categorical, knowable, and unified. That is to say, roughly, that moral properties do not depend upon our beliefs for their instantiation, they provide all members of the moral community with weighty reasons for acting, they are constituents of facts to which cognitively normal adult humans can be expected to have access, and they provide us with some of the same kinds of reasons for acting in both social contexts and in situations in which only one person’s interests are at stake.
I argue that theists are well-situated with respect to these desiderata. Theistic accounts of the nature of morality can both explain and vindicate our commonsensical beliefs about the nature of moral properties. Naturalistic accounts do not fare so well. Of course, it would be too bold to insist that no naturalistic account could ever be developed that would satisfy the core desiderata, but it is not implausible to maintain that no extant naturalistic account is able to do so. I survey three influential contemporary moral theories—Peter Railton’s reductive naturalism, Frank Jackson’s analytical descriptivism, and Christine Korsgaard’s Kantianism—and show that each of them is forced to abandon at least two of the six core desiderata.

This is not to imply, however, that theistic accounts face no difficulties of their own. To the contrary, there are a number of well-known objections to attempts to provide a theological foundation for morality. In Chapter 2, I consider several such objections and argue that none of them is compelling. The first objection is the Karamazov Problem, according to which theistic moral theories imply the implausible proposition that there are many possible worlds in which paradigmatically wrong actions are not, in fact, wrong because God does not exist in those worlds. In response to this charge, I argue that the theoretical virtues of such accounts are sufficient to overcome this counterintuitive result. Furthermore, there is good reason for theists and nontheists alike to maintain that God’s existence is metaphysically necessary if actual; thus there are no (metaphysically) possible worlds in which God does not exist. The Karamazov Problem may nevertheless arise for divine command theory, since God may
have significant freedom to decide whether to issue commands in other possible worlds, but for theistic accounts that ground morality in some non-voluntaristic fact about the divine, there will be no metaphysically possible worlds in which paradigmatically wrong actions are not morally wrong.

Such non-voluntaristic accounts are also immune to the Arbitrariness Objection, according to which theistic moral theories imply that substantive moral claims like “it is wrong to act cruelly,” which appear to be necessarily true, are actually contingent. So long as it is plausible to maintain that the morally salient facts about God are fixed across possible worlds, this worry does not arise. In this vein, I suggest that it is reasonable for traditional theists to appeal to agent-directed divine attitudes as an alternative to divine commands. On this account, which I call divine attitude theory, the wrongness of an action consists in its being such that God would be displeased with a person who performs it.

Subsequent chapters explore divine attitude theory in more detail. In Chapter 3, I lay out the account’s central claims and consider whether it is plausible to believe that the divine being actually does experience pleasure and displeasure in the way required by divine attitude theory. I argue that, insofar as such attitudes have an important role to play in interpersonal relationships, and insofar as the ability to enter into meaningful interpersonal relationships is among the most valuable goods with which we are acquainted, it is reasonable to believe that God, qua maximally excellent being, does indeed experience states of this kind. For Jewish and Christian theists of a fairly
traditional stripe, there are also a number of distinctively theological reasons for understanding God to be capable of experiencing affective states like pleasure and displeasure, including biblical accounts that portray God as such a being, the doctrine of the imago Dei, and (for Christians) the doctrine of the Incarnation.

In Chapter 4, I consider a variety of epistemological worries about divine attitude theory. The most important challenge is one that has been pressed by Robert Adams against divine will theories of morality. Adams maintains—rightly, in my view—that it is impossible for a person to be morally obligated to φ if she could not know that she is morally obliged to φ, and he argues that divine will theories violate this constraint on moral obligation because the morally salient content of the divine will is not necessarily expressed. Whether this consideration is decisive against divine will theory or not, I argue that it poses no threat to divine attitude theory, because it is reasonable to assume that God is not displeased with persons who act badly but nonculpably.

In the fifth and final chapter, I argue that there are good reasons for theists to prefer divine attitude theory to divine command theory. One principal consideration, alluded to in Chapter 3, is that divine attitude theory can preserve the modal status of moral truths without denying that God has significant freedom. Divine command theorists are forced to choose between treating many substantive moral truths as contingent truths, or maintaining that God is not free to refrain from issuing certain commands. Some divine command theorists will be unperturbed by this point, on the grounds that God is compelled to create the best of all possible worlds and hence is
unfree with respect to whether he issues certain commands, but that this lack of freedom is a manifestation of God's excellence rather than an imperfection of some kind. One problem with this response is its paradoxical implication (when conjoined with divine command theory) that there can be no action such that it is better for us to come to recognize its wrongness on our own rather than to be commanded to refrain from performing it.

The nature of commands themselves also generates a problem for divine command theory that does not exist for divine attitude theory. In particular, it seems that commands must be recognized as commands in order to function as commands. This implies that if divine command theory is true, then anyone who is justified in believing that God has not commanded her to \( \phi \) is not morally required to \( \phi \). Further difficulties for divine command theory stem from the subtleties of moral judgment and the nature of religious devotion. Divine attitude theory, in contrast, fits well with both our moral practices and with a conception of the religious life as something much richer and deeper than merely a relationship between a cosmic authority and his subjects.

In light of all this, I believe it is reasonable for theists to prefer divine attitude theory to any other account of the nature of morality. Unlike nontheistic alternatives, divine attitude theory is able to provide us with a robust and explanatorily powerful moral realism. It is immune to the standard objections to theistic ethics, and it appears to be superior to divine command theory—the principal theistic alternative—in a variety of ways.
Before drawing this introduction to a close, there is one important issue that remains to be discussed. It is a philosophical commonplace that there are multitudinous conceptions of the divine being, and it is essential to say something specific about what is meant by the term 'God' in what follows (as well as in what precedes). In general, I have attempted to develop divine attitude theory in terms of a traditional but fairly generic theism. That is, I have tried to flesh out the main ideas in a way that will be acceptable to anyone who believes in an intelligent, benevolent, and relational (i.e. capable of interacting with other beings) being who created the universe. I believe and hope that theists of nearly all stripes will find the central ideas presented here to be consonant with their own theological commitments, but it should be noted that those philosophers and theologians who believe that God exists but is not an intelligent being, or not benevolent, or not relational are unlikely to find plausible much of what I will say. Beyond appealing to the historical conception of God as a maximally excellent or perfect being, and suggesting that intelligence, benevolence, and relationality are all traits that must be exemplified by any being that would satisfy this conception, I have nothing of substance to say in response to such philosophers and theologians—at least, not in the present context. My assumption that God exists and is the intelligent, benevolent, and relational creator of the universe informs nearly everything that follows, but it is not an assumption that I will attempt to defend here.
Also, although I believe that divine attitude theory is an account that many different kinds of theists will and should find very attractive, it must be acknowledged that I have approached the central questions of this dissertation from a self-consciously Christian perspective. I intend for divine attitude theory to be consonant with orthodox Christian belief, and in circumstances in which the resources of traditional Christianity are helpful in defending a philosophical claim—in particular, Chapters 3 and 5—I have not been shy about making use of those resources. Specifically, I have taken for granted that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, that the Gospel accounts provide us with a broadly accurate picture of the teachings and activities of Jesus, and that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are by and large reliable accounts of God’s interaction with and self-revelation to humankind. These assumptions are, to put it mildly, contentious. I will not attempt to defend them here. Suffice it to say that if, in the final analysis, divine attitude theory requires the truth of traditional Christianity, this would diminish the breadth of its appeal but would not, from my perspective, count against it.
CHAPTER 1
THE PROBLEM(S) WITH NONTHEISTIC MORAL REALISMS

Common sense tells us that some things are wrong. Speaking unkind words in order to hurt another person is wrong. It is wrong to make a promise one does not intend to keep. It is wrong to hoard all of one's possessions and refuse to share with those who are in need. Such things ought not be done—allowing, of course, that exceptions might be made in very unusual circumstances. These unusual circumstances aside, however, it seems safe to embrace the above claims as part of our commonsense moral code, the “received wisdom” that helps us determine how we ought to live our lives. Uncontroversial though they may be in themselves, reflection on these commonsense moral claims may lead us to ask a wide range of philosophical questions—questions that go well beyond the purview of common sense—and there is no guarantee that our answers to these questions will leave us confident about the truth of our commonsensical moral judgments. We may find ourselves skeptical about even the broadest of commonsensical moral judgments: the assumption that at least some
substantive moral judgments really are true. In what follows, I hope to sketch an answer to these philosophical questions that is not only plausible, but that vindicates this assumption.

This is not to say, of course, that the commonsensical answer to every substantive moral question will turn out to be true, or even that I will propose such answers, for substantive moral questions are not my focus here. In what follows, I will not attempt to offer a normative theory that provides clear guidance in any particular circumstance. Rather, I will offer an account of the metaphysics of morality: a metaethical theory about the nature of deontic properties that implies that some actions really do exemplify the property of moral wrongness. I take it that this is among the proper goals of any philosopher who purports to be a defender of moral realism. And I will argue in this chapter that theists are uniquely well situated to develop robust versions of moral realism, moral realisms that are worthy of the name.

What precisely I mean by this will become clearer as we proceed. For now, the idea can be expressed colloquially: in virtually any domain, there are realisms, and then there are realisms. Consider the philosophy of religion. Theological realists believe that at least some theological judgments have propositional content and that at least some

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2 Not all moral philosophers will be comfortable with this reference to the “truth” of moral judgments or with my assumption (implicit here; explicit below) that there really are moral propositions. I will employ cognitivist language of this sort through this dissertation, but I should emphasize that the view I will be defending could be rendered compatible with a noncognitivist approach, so long as that approach allows for the possibility that some moral judgments are, in some sense, “correct” and others “incorrect.” Readers who are uncomfortable with talk of moral truth are welcome to substitute these terms as appropriate below; doing so will not undermine the argument.
statements of the form ‘God is F’ are true. But some versions of theological realism are more “robust” than others. Orthodox Christians, for example, hold a robust version of theological realism, according to which God is a loving, omnipotent, immaterial being who sustains the universe in existence and who desires the redemption of the human race. But this is not the only way to be a theological realist. Bishop John Shelby Spong, for example, describes himself as “a passionate believer... a God-intoxicated human being,” yet maintains that doctrinal affirmations like those just mentioned “have been obliterated by the expansion of knowledge” and cannot sensibly be believed (Spong 1999, 1, 4). Indeed, Spong is unwilling to commit himself to any of the classical doctrines of orthodox Christianity—the triune nature of God, for example, or the incarnation of Jesus—because he does not even “see God as a being” (Spong 2002, 4). This is a rather vague ontological statement, and it represents a considerably less robust expression of theological realism than does orthodox Christianity, but it seems to be a realism nonetheless; Spong clearly affirms the truth of the proposition that God exists. Deists and polytheists lie somewhere between Spong’s position and orthodox Christian theism on the spectrum of theological realisms; they too hold that some statements of the form ‘God is F’ are true, but of course they differ about the details. Deism is a kind of theological realism, but it is not robust in the way orthodox Christian theism is; deism is a kind of theological realism, but is not a kind of theological realism.

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3 I do not claim to be able to give a satisfying account of what theoretical robustness amounts to, though I will say a bit more about it below.
Considered as an illustration, it may seem that the above suffers from at least one obvious defect: not only have my criteria for robustness been left unspecified, but whatever precisely they are, they seem to be relative to the beliefs of a particular religious community (viz. the Christian one). When the orthodox Christian doctrine of God is put forth as the standard for robust theological realism, the deistic conception of the divine may indeed appear rather thin in comparison. From the perspective of a deistic community, however, the very same conception might appear to be quite robust; after all, it provides that community with metaphysical support for everything its linguistic and religious practices might require. This seems undeniable, and I should make it explicit that I have no vested interest in whether a plausible set of objective (i.e. independent of the practices of any actual community) criteria for determining the robustness of various realisms can be developed. Nor will I insist that a community whose criteria for robustness are less stringent than another's is thereby defective in some way. The important point for my purposes here is that the perspective-relative nature of judgments of robustness does not reveal a problem with the illustration at all. To the contrary, it points us in a useful methodological direction. It helps us see that the robustness of a metaphysical account can be measured relative to standards that are set by the practices (linguistic and otherwise) of a relevant community. In an investigation into the metaphysics of morality, we can recognize that a multiplicity of theories may qualify as realisms, yet some may be more robustly realistic than others. What distinguishes these from the rest is their ability to provide metaphysical support for the
linguistic and social practices of the moral community. The central claim of this chapter, therefore, can be expressed as follows: the philosophical resources of traditional theism make it possible to develop versions of moral realism that are more robust (relative to the linguistic and social practices of contemporary speakers of English) than their nontheistic rivals.

Many philosophers will find this claim quite surprising. There is something of a consensus in the contemporary philosophical world that theological facts, if there are any, are irrelevant to metaethical inquiry. Indeed, if anything can be said with confidence about the relationship between God and morality, the thinking goes, it is that moral facts cannot be grounded in theological facts. There are several well-known arguments that are put forth in support of this claim; I will consider them in Chapter 2. First, however, I hope to show that theists have good reason to seek an account of the nature of deontic properties that is explicitly theological. I will begin by laying out some metaethical desiderata: features of our moral discourse and practice that a realist metaethics needs to accommodate, at least to some degree. For each of these desiderata, I will suggest at least one strategy the theist might employ in order to successfully accommodate it. I will then survey a number of prominent nontheistic metaethical accounts that purport to be versions of realism (or that might be thought to be versions of realism), and I will argue that each of them encounters difficulties with at least two of

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4 By “deontic properties” I mean properties like moral wrongness, permissibility, and requirement. Whether a plausible theistic account of the nature of axiological properties—e.g. goodness and badness—can or should be developed is a question that lies outside the scope of this dissertation.
our desiderata. The upshot is not, of course, a conclusive refutation of nontheistic moral realism; there may be a hitherto unidentified nontheistic metaethical account that succeeds where contemporary theories fail. Nor, for that matter, is the upshot a conclusive refutation of the nontheistic theories discussed in this chapter; it is too demanding to insist that all our desiderata must be met in order for a metaethical theory to qualify as a version of moral realism. In other words, my goal in what follows is rather modest. I do not intend to demonstrate that the search for a satisfying nontheistic version of moral realism is utterly hopeless. I do, however, hope to show that theism brings with it certain advantages in this arena, and therefore that philosophers who believe in God have good philosophical reasons for seeking to develop metaethical theories that are explicitly theistic.

1.1 Some Metaethical Desiderata

As noted above, linguistic and social practices provide us with a good starting point for determining what a realistic theory (in any domain) needs to accommodate. To engage in an examination of such practices is, in effect, to engage in the traditional philosophical project of conceptual analysis. By examining the way we talk about and respond to moral considerations, we can see what kinds of features moral wrongness is assumed to have, and this will put us in a position to offer a unified theory of what moral wrongness actually is. To “accommodate” the central features of our linguistic

\[5\] I refer here to moral wrongness rather than rightness or permissibility because wrongness tends to be straightforward in ways that other moral concepts are not, and hence it is an easier concept to work with.
and social practices surrounding moral wrongness is to do two things. First, a successful accommodation will *explain* why wrongness has, or is thought to have, these characteristic features. The nature of explanation is itself a thorny philosophical topic, and I will not attempt to defend any particular account of it here. In what follows, I will rely on an intuitive understanding of the relationship between explanans and explanandum such that x's being F explains x's being G just in case x's being F “makes sense” of x's being (or being thought to be) G. Second, a successful theoretical accommodation will *vindicate or justify* the linguistic and social practices that surround it. It is possible to offer an explanation of a practice without thereby vindicating that practice; naturalistic accounts of religious belief and religious experience are explanations of this sort. Thus in speaking of moral *realisms*, I am speaking of theories that both explain and vindicate central features of moral discourse and practice. In speaking of—and in seeking—*robust* moral realisms, I am speaking of theories that offer a more or less *complete* vindication of the linguistic and social practices associated with morality; robust moral realisms do not require us to abandon or seriously revise any of the most central features of our understanding of deontic concepts like moral wrongness.

What, then, are the central features of moral discourse and practice that a robust moral realism must vindicate? I will suggest that there are at least six that are relevant to the subject of this chapter:
Objectivity: The truth of a moral proposition is independent of the beliefs of any particular human being or human community.

Normativity: Moral considerations, as such, constitute reasons for acting.

Categoricity: Moral reasons are reasons for all human persons, regardless of what goals or desires they may have.

Authority: Moral reasons are especially weighty reasons.

Knowability: In normal circumstances, adult human beings have epistemic access to morally salient considerations.

Unity: A human person can have a moral reason to act or to refrain from acting in ways that affect no one other than the agent who performs the act.

The last of these is more tendentious than the rest, and whether it really is a “central” feature of our moral discourse is a matter of dispute. This point will be discussed in more detail below. For now, we should note that each of these claims—with the possible exception of the last one—can be defended via the same strategy employed by Michael Smith in his The Moral Problem. Smith observes that we are capable of gaining mastery of a wide range of concepts, and we thereby become competent participants in various communities of discourse. A person who has acquired this sort of competency has ipso facto acquired a disposition to make judgments and inferences in accordance with the plitudes associated with a particular kind of discourse. For example, a competent participant in color discourse will make judgments and inferences in accordance with plitudes like 'Yellow is more similar to orange than to purple', 'Colors cannot be seen
in the dark', 'If an object is not transparent, it has a color', and so on. To engage in conceptual analysis, Smith suggests, is to seek to "encapsulate, or to summarize, or to systematize, as well as can be done, the various remarks we come to treat as platitudinous in coming to master" the concepts in question (Smith 1994, 31-32; emphasis in original). A person who is disposed to make judgments and inferences that do not accord with these platitudes reveals that he has not mastered the relevant concepts. In his attempts to engage in color discourse, it turns out that he is not talking about the same thing the rest of us are.

For present purposes, the important task is to identify some of the platitudes associated with moral discourse, in particular platitudes that are associated with the concept of moral wrongness. This is not something that can be done via argumentation; given the nature of platitudes in general, the most we can do—but also the most we need to do—is to reflect on putative platitudes and decide whether they do indeed reflect the patterns of judgment and inference characteristic of those who have mastered moral discourse. Platitudes as such must be uncontroversial; if many apparently competent participants in moral discourse deny, upon reflection, that some proposition is a moral platitude, then we ought not treat it as one. Conversely, if a proposition is very widely accepted as a platitude governing moral discourse, this fact constitutes sufficient reason to believe that it really is a platitude of moral discourse.

It should be noted that a person does not need to be able to state all of the relevant platitudes, or even be conscious of them, in order to have mastered a particular concept.
Let us begin with objectivity. Moral judgments are objective (at least) in the sense that their truth does not depend upon their being believed to be true by any particular human being or any particular human community. Platitudes of objectivity include the following: 'If A believes that φ-ing is morally wrong, and B believes that φ-ing is not morally wrong, then it is not the case that A and B are both correct'; 'A change in a person's (or a society's) moral beliefs may count as an improvement or as a worsening of her (or its) moral code'; 'Moral standards can be appealed to in critiques of personal or social moral codes'; and even 'In general, the fact that A believes it is not wrong to φ is not sufficient to settle the question of the wrongness of φ-ing'. If any one of these statements qualifies as a platitude of moral discourse, then our concept of moral wrongness is a concept of something objective.

The next three features of moral wrongness are closely linked. All of them—normativity, categoricity, and authority—have to do with the essentially practical nature of morality. Moral considerations are normative in that they constitute reasons for acting.7 They are categorical in that they are reasons for everyone to act, and they are authoritative in that they are especially weighty reasons for acting.8 These definitions themselves are platitudeous, but we can state them a bit more formally as follows: 'If a

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7 This claim is obviously relevant to the metaethical debate between internalists and externalists, a debate I do not intend to enter here. As the platitudes suggested below indicate, I am committed only to the least controversial version of internalism on the scene: judgment internalism.

8 Whether or not 'everyone' here should be understood as referring to all persons or merely to all human beings is a question that should be left open, at least for now. I intend to imply neither that moral considerations constitute reasons for God to act, nor that moral considerations do not constitute reasons for God to act. More will be said on this topic in section 2.4, “The Divine Ascription Problem.”
person judges that it would be morally wrong to \( \phi \), she judges that she has a reason not to \( \phi \); 'If some moral consideration counts as a reason for A to avoid \( \phi \)-ing in circumstances C, then it counts as a reason for anyone relevantly similar to A to avoid \( \phi \)-ing in circumstances relevantly similar to C'; and 'In most circumstances, the fact that it would be wrong to \( \phi \) is sufficient reason not to \( \phi \)'. Other platitudes in this area include 'Persons who believe that it would be morally wrong to \( \phi \) are normally motivated to avoid \( \phi \)-ing'; 'A person can be morally required to do something she has no desire to do'; 'The fact that \( \phi \)-ing would seriously interfere with a person's goals and projects does not imply that the person is not morally required to \( \phi \)'; and 'In general, it is more difficult to justify failing to act in accordance with a moral reason than to justify failing to act in accordance with a nonmoral reason'.

The fact that morality is practical in these ways points to the further fact that moral considerations must be such that people can be aware of and be responsive to them. That our concept of moral wrongness is the concept of something to which normal human persons have epistemic access—i.e. that they are knowable—is another fact demonstrable by appeal to platitudes. 'Normal adults can be expected to understand and respect moral norms' is one example; 'Persons who desire to know whether a particular action would be morally wrong should reflect on it and think about it from a variety of perspectives' is another. Furthermore, our frequent willingness to say (or at least think) things like “you should have known better” and to impose sanctions (e.g. disapproval, social ostracism) on some persons who attempt to excuse
their immoral behavior by appealing to their own ignorance suggests that we think of
moral considerations as the kinds of things normal human beings can be aware of, and
indeed as the kinds of things of which we can have knowledge.⁹

Finally, other facts about our moral practice imply the unity of the moral
domain.¹⁰ This is not an easy feature to express in terms of platitudes, but an illustration
can show that unity—roughly, the idea that a person can have moral reasons to act or
refrain from acting in ways that affect no one but himself—is a deeply entrenched
feature of our common moral thinking. Imagine a sadistic pedophile who finds it very
pleasurable to imagine himself sexually violating small children in horrible and
gruesome ways. He lives alone on an island and will never have contact with another
human being. He spends the majority of his time composing and illustrating graphic
novels that depict his fantasies in vivid detail. This is a person, I believe, whose
behavior we would all condemn. And the condemnation in question seems to be the
very same kind of condemnation we make of persons who needlessly harm others; both
seem to be clear instances of moral condemnation. Less dramatically, we might think of
criticisms of persons who willfully engage in self-destructive behaviors, or of those who
simply waste their lives doing nothing more than watching television and playing video
games. Prima facie, it is enormously plausible to suppose that such persons are acting in

⁹ To be more precise, these sanctions are imposed on persons who appeal to their own ignorance of
considerations that we believe they should have been aware of. (This idea will be discussed at length in
Chapter 4.) The fact that we believe this indicates that knowability is indeed a platitude of moral
wrongness.

¹⁰ Empirical support for the unity of morality can be found in (Haidt and Graham 2007); see especially
their discussion of “purity/sanctity.”
ways that are *morally* unjustifiable, even if we stipulate that their actions have no appreciable impact on anyone besides themselves.

Recognizing that some philosophers may take these statements to be obviously false, it is important to clarify what precisely is being claimed here and what is not. The proposition I am defending is that prephilosophically, persons who reflect on the sadistic pedophile case described above are likely to condemn the behavior of the sadist on moral grounds. They will express the same kind of disapprobation that is expressed in condemnation of uncontroversially moral faults. It is easy to imagine a typical person confronting the sadist and saying to him, “you shouldn't be doing this!” My claim is merely that the 'should' in this sentence would be understood by the speaker as a moral term, as the same 'should' that appears in normal utterances of 'you should stop lying to your coworkers' and 'you should give more money to charity'.

None of this implies, however, that our best moral theory will be one that vindicates this feature of commonsensical moral discourse. It might turn out that the apparent unity of the moral domain must be abandoned in light of further theoretical reflection. For my part, I am committed to nothing stronger than the thesis that the burden of proof lies on philosophers who deny the unity of the moral domain (as understood here) rather than on those who affirm it. By way of analogy, we might note that a similar claim is often made by critics of theistically-grounded metaethical accounts. Prephilosophically, it seems obvious that the wrongness of, say, torturing babies in front of their innocent mothers just for the fun of it does not depend in any
way upon the existence of God. The claim that if God does not exist then there is
nothing wrong with such torture is prima facie absurd: so absurd, in fact, that theories
that imply this claim are frequently thought to be refuted by that very fact. I will
discuss this challenge, referred to by some as the “Karamazov Problem,” in Chapter 2.
Central to my response is the claim that theistically-grounded metaethical accounts
embody so rich a collection of theoretical virtues that the Karamazov Problem dissolves
upon reflection: contrary to our prephilosophical intuitions, it is true that if God does
not exist, then nothing is morally wrong, but this is merely a surprising consequence of
theistic ethical theories rather than an objection to them.11 The same strategy, of course,
is available to those who deny the unity of the moral domain. If there are compelling
reasons to believe that persons cannot have moral reasons to act or refrain from acting in
ways that harm no one but themselves or no one at all, then we should abandon that
feature of our commonsensical moral thinking. But these reasons, if they exist, will not
be reasons to think that the unity of the moral domain is not a deeply entrenched feature
of our commonsensical moral thinking after all. To show that would require showing
that ordinary persons (read: non-philosophers) do not typically consider behavior like
that of our imagined pedophile to be subject to moral criticism.

11 Or rather, for reasons that will be elaborated at the beginning of section 3 below, nothing would be really
morally wrong, or robustly morally wrong.
1.2 Theistic Strategies for Vindicating the Desiderata

Thus we may conclude that our concept of moral wrongness is the concept of something objective, normative, categorical, authoritative, knowable, and unified. A robust moral realism, therefore, will be a metaethical account that both explains why moral wrongness has or is thought to have these features and that vindicates our believing that and our acting as though the property of moral wrongness really is exemplified. As noted above, I believe that theists, as such, are uniquely well-situated to develop robust versions of moral realism. In later chapters, I will examine one particular theistic approach—divine attitude theory—in considerable detail. In the present section, however, my focus will be on theistic metaethics in general. My suggestions concerning how a theist might offer a vindicating explanation of the six features of moral wrongness just outlined are meant to be compatible with virtually any theistic metaethical account—that is, any theory about the nature of moral properties that makes essential reference to God—that might be developed. These suggestions are not intended as definitive statements concerning how theists must accommodate our desiderata; in what follows I merely offer a brief and in many ways incomplete survey of possible strategies that might be adopted.

Objectivity is the simplest of the six features to vindicate. The distinctive claim of theistic metaethical accounts, as such, is that moral properties are essentially related to God. As long as the details of this relation are spelled out carefully, moral properties will turn out to be objective in precisely the sense suggested above: the instantiation of
any particular moral property will be independent of any particular human being’s (or community of human beings’) beliefs about its instantiation. Divine command theory (DCT), historically the most common theistic metaethical account, is objective in this way: whether or not God has commanded persons to φ is logically independent of whether or not any person believes that God has commanded persons to φ.\(^\text{12}\) Similarly for divine attitude theory (DAT): whether or not God is displeased with S for φ-ing is logically independent of any person’s beliefs about whether God is displeased with S for φ-ing.\(^\text{13}\)

There are other ways in which a theistic metaethical account might be developed, however, that do not vindicate objectivity. For example, if we are willing to countenance disjunctive properties, we might hold that the moral wrongness of φ-ing consists in its being either disapproved of by God or disapproved of by the agent who φs. Those who reject disjunctive properties might nonetheless hold that the moral wrongness of φ-ing consists in God’s believing that some human being believes that φ-ing is wrong. Either way, even though both of these suggestions imply that moral properties are essentially related to God, the objectivity of morality would be undermined rather than vindicated.

Therefore we should note that theistic theories as such do not necessarily imply the objectivity of morality, and there is an interesting question to ask concerning what

\(^{12}\) We will see in Chapter 5, however, that whether or not God has commanded a person to φ is not logically independent of whether a person can be expected to believe that God has commanded her to φ. This fact will turn out to be a serious problem for divine command theory.

\(^{13}\) Complications concerning the effect of agents’ beliefs on God’s attitude toward those agents will be discussed in Chapter 4.
precisely it is about divine command theory and divine attitude theory (along with other relevantly similar accounts) that separate them from accounts of the sort just described. As we have seen, the difference cannot merely be that they stipulate that moral properties are essentially related to God, for these theories do so as well. It is not urgent that this question be answered in full detail for us to proceed—no theistic accounts other than DCT and DAT will be discussed in what follows—but a brief digression may be in order.

It is tempting to suppose that DAT and DCT differ from the accounts imagined above in virtue of stipulating that moral properties are essentially related to God and are not essentially related to human persons. But neither theory actually satisfies this condition. Moral properties as conceived of by divine command theorists are essentially related to human persons (if DCT is to be an account of human morality) by virtue of the fact that a command, as such, must be issued to someone. If God declares “Thou shall not φ,” but there is no person S such that this declaration is made to S, then it is false that God has issued a command prohibiting φ-ing. A similar observation applies to DAT: if moral wrongness is a matter of God’s being displeased with the agent who performs an act, then the divine attitude theorist’s account of the nature of moral properties implies that those properties are essentially related to human persons (again, if DAT is intended to be an account of human morality).

What the theist needs is a more specific restriction: the theist needs to offer an account according to which moral properties are essentially related to God and are not
essentially related to the beliefs or attitudes of any human person (or group of human persons). Of course, given the definition of 'objectivity' being employed here, this is a rather unsurprising result. But insofar as it is tempting to suppose that theistic accounts of ethics as such are objective in character, it is worth noting that this supposition is false. Among all the possible theistic accounts that might be developed, it is only those like DCT and DAT, which do not claim that the moral status of an action depends on the beliefs or attitudes of human persons, that can claim to vindicate the objectivity of morality.

The knowability of morality is also fairly easy for the theist to vindicate, even without developing a detailed moral epistemology. Theism per se does not necessarily entail that human beings and their cognitive capacities are the result of divine design, but there is nothing ad hoc—granted the truth of theism—about supposing that they are. Even if it is implausible to believe that God intervened in the natural history of the universe to create human beings, God’s perfect knowledge conjoined with his creation of the universe suggest that he knew what kinds of beings would result from the natural forces at work on Earth, and so there is at least a weak sense in which he intended for human beings (with their distinctive cognitive capacities) to exist.\textsuperscript{14} If one accepts not just theism but Christian theism—and, as noted in the introduction to this dissertation, I

\textsuperscript{14} The reason theism does not “necessarily” entail divine design of human cognitive capacities, and the reason that God’s perfect knowledge merely “suggests” that God intended to create beings like us, is that (i) God may exist temporally, (ii) there may be genuinely random events in the natural world and (iii) it may be impossible even for a being with perfect knowledge to have knowledge of future contingent events. If all of (i)—(iii) are true, then the fact that God created the universe would not imply that God intended to create us.
intend the theory being proposed here to be compatible with orthodox Christian belief —
then one has compelling reason to believe that God did intend for human beings to have
the kinds of cognitive capacities we do, in fact, have. Insofar as it is reasonable to
suppose that God desires human beings to have knowledge of moral truths, it is
reasonable to suppose that God’s design of our cognitive capacities is such as to provide
us with access to those truths. This schema is compatible with any substantive account
of moral epistemology; debates between foundationalists and coherentists or between
internalists and externalists do not need to be resolved in order for the theist to be
justified in believing that we can have knowledge of moral truths, because whatever the
correct stories turn out to be concerning warrant, justification, and knowledge, the theist
can maintain (without engaging in any ad hoc theoretical maneuvers) that the cognitive
capacities granted to us by God are the right sort of capacities to provide us with
warranted and justified moral belief and knowledge.

The “practical” platitudes of normativity, categoricity, and authority cannot be
vindicated quite as simply. Normativity is the linchpin here. We will see that if it can be
explained, then explaining categoricity and authority proves to be relatively easy. The
difficulty in making sense of normativity from a theistic perspective is underscored by
one of the most famous passages in the history of moral philosophy, from David Hume’s
Treatise. Hume writes,

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met
with, I have always remakr’d, that the author proceeds for
some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and
establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it (Hume 1739, 469).

The problem, as is well known, concerns how we are to bridge the “fact/value gap,” how we are to move from descriptive claims about the way things are to normative claims about the way things ought to be. The best strategy for doing so, from a theistic perspective, is one that has been largely unappreciated by moral philosophers. Alasdair MacIntyre pushes us in the correct direction in his After Virtue, when he writes that “Within the Aristotelian tradition [which MacIntyre himself defends] to call x good is to say that it is the kind of x which someone would choose who wanted an x for the purpose for which x’s are characteristically wanted” (MacIntyre 1984, 59). If a thing has a characteristic function or purpose, in other words, then we have a standard of evaluation we can employ in assessing it; statements about the goodness or badness of that thing (qua thing of such-and-such a type) can represent straightforwardly factual judgments about its features relative to some set of evaluative criteria. We can say that a professional baseball player who bats .350 is a good ballplayer, because he is the kind of ballplayer who successfully achieves a central characteristic goal of ballplayers: he
regularly gets base hits. Furthermore, this approach can provide us with normative facts as well as evaluative facts. Given that a ballplayer, as such, has certain characteristic goals, we can truthfully say things like “he ought to straighten out his swing,” “he ought to take more pitches,” and “he ought to work on his fielding.”

If there are characteristic goals of human persons as such, then similar claims can be made about the goodness of human persons qua human persons and about what they (again, qua human persons) ought to do. MacIntyre suggests that classical theism once provided a framework for western philosophy in which the supposition that there are such goals made sense:

In that context moral judgments were at once hypothetical and categorical in form. They were hypothetical insofar as they expressed a judgment as to what conduct would be teleologically appropriate for a human being: 'You ought to do so-and-so, if and since your telos is such-and-such' or perhaps 'You ought to do so-and-so, if you do not want your essential desires to be frustrated'. They were categorical insofar as they reported the contents of the universal law commanded by God: 'You ought to do so-and-so: that is what God's law enjoins' (MacIntyre 1984, 60).

I believe it is worth thinking more about this idea of a “telos” and its implications for moral theory. If the human telos is understood merely as a set of characteristic goals or desires that the blind forces of nature have foisted upon us, then the prospects for appealing to that telos in an account of the nature of morality are rather bleak. Such goals and desires will constitute reasons only for the persons who have them, and it seems implausible to suppose that no persons lack them. The
categoricity of moral wrongness would thereby be undermined. Furthermore, it is unclear why desires whose existence is wholly the result of the forces of natural selection operating on our ancestors should be accorded the deliberative priority appropriate to moral reasons; this approach appears to threaten the authority of moral wrongness as well.

Theism, however, has the resources to offer a much more satisfying account of the human telos and its role in moral theory. I submit that we can bridge the is/ought gap by appealing to the intentions of an intelligent creator. Roughly, one might put the idea this way: If a rational being is designed and created by another rational being for the sake of some purpose P, then the created being has reason to seek to fulfill P. If it is the case that human persons are created by God for the sake of living in harmonious relationships with himself and with each other, then human persons have reason to seek to live in harmonious relationships with God and with each other. Hume's worry about the impossibility of deriving normative propositions from merely descriptive ones is allayed by the fact that the intentions of a designer bring certain normative implications with them: to be made for some end gives a person a reason to seek to fulfill that end. Let us refer to this claim as the Intended Purpose Thesis.

The Intended Purpose Thesis is undeniably controversial. It should be noted, therefore, that its truth is not essential to the argument I am making here; for reasons that will be explained below, theists can accommodate our metaethical desiderata without appealing to it (though the accommodation will not be a distinctively theistic
one). It should also be noted that the Intended Purpose Thesis is quite modest in what it asserts. According to the Intended Purpose Thesis, an agent S’s being created by an intelligent being for some purpose P is sufficient (but not necessary) for S to have a reason to pursue P. To embrace it, therefore, is not to deny that other sources of reasons exist. One can accept the Intended Purpose Thesis but also believe that anything S treats as a reason to φ thereby counts as a reason for S to φ. Likewise, one might well take it be axiomatic that values imply reasons; if S's φ-ing would be good, then S has reason to φ. Theistic adherents of the Intended Purpose Thesis might maintain that many of the things for which God created human beings—e.g. living harmoniously in community—are good things, and therefore that there are multiple reasons for us to seek to fulfill those purposes: their goodness is a reason to pursue them, and the fact that we were made to pursue them is also a reason to do so. Normative overdetermination of this kind is not an unfamiliar phenomenon.

Perhaps more importantly, the Intended Purpose Thesis implies nothing about the relative strength of different reasons. In the terminology being employed here, the Intended Purpose Thesis is a claim about normativity and nothing else; questions about the authoritativeness of a reason cannot be answered by appealing to it. The thesis merely asserts that the fact that an agent is created for some purpose gives that agent a pro tanto reason to seek to fulfill that purpose.

Since we do not have extensive experience with the creation of intelligent beings, this is a difficult claim to defend without begging the question. Beyond the
divine/human case itself, there are no actual examples of the creation of an intelligent being by another intelligent being that uncontroversially demonstrate that a creator’s intentions do constitute reasons for its creatures to act. We might begin, however, with a cursory look at imaginary cases involving very sophisticated machines, such as those routinely portrayed in science fiction stories. Robots like WALL-E and EVE (from the 2008 film WALL-E) are useful illustrations of the key idea here. I do not intend, of course, to appeal to this fictional work as proof of my position; rather, what needs to be considered, and what does count as evidence for my view, is our reaction to this story and others like it, not facts about the fictional world itself. In this particular world, WALL-E is made for taking care of garbage. EVE is made to find plant life and deliver it to her commanding officer. Performing these actions constitutes each robot’s literal raison d’être; these are the things they were made to do, and even (in EVE’s case) when a difficult choice must be made about whether to perform her function or not, it seems manifest that the robot has a reason to perform that function simply in virtue of having been made for the purpose of doing so. Or we might think of R2-D2 of Star Wars fame. In the original film in the series, R2-D2 is assigned a purpose by Princess Leia, who gives him a message to take to Obi-Wan Kenobi. Leia is not R2’s creator, but she is relevantly similar to one by virtue of being in a position to give him a purpose, a mission to fulfill. Once she does so, the audience sees that it makes sense for R2 to do what he does; he has a reason to part ways with C3PO in the desert of Tatooine, and he has a reason to be obstinate in his initial dealings with Luke Skywalker. Or we might consider
R. Daneel Olivaw and R. Giskard of Isaac Asimov's *Robot* and *Foundation* novels. Olivaw in particular seeks to protect humanity from threats both internal and external. He acts in accordance with the Three Laws of Robotics, and eventually derives a fourth, “zeroth” law that trumps the other three and that guides his deliberation in all circumstances. He establishes a base for himself on the moon from which he can guide the course of human history. Why does he act in this way? Why does he go to so much trouble to aid humanity? He does so, ultimately, because such behavior is what he is made for. To do what he does is to act in accordance with the intentions of his creator.\(^{15}\)

The important point here is that anyone who has seen either *WALL-E* or *Star Wars*, or who has read Asimov’s novels, will agree that the robot characters mentioned here are presented as—and, once their disbelief has been suspended, are assumed by the audience to be—intelligent, rational, deliberative agents. We have no difficulty understanding and accepting the implicit suggestion that these robots have reasons for acting as they do by virtue of being assigned a purpose by another intelligent agent who is in a position to do so. This seems sufficient to establish some presumption in favor of the Intended Purpose Thesis. Whether this presumption holds up under criticism, of course, is another question.

It would be natural to object to the Intended Purpose Thesis on the grounds that there must be moral constraints on the reason-giving force of a designer's intentions. If

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\(^{15}\) This may be controversial as an interpretation of Asimov. Even if it is mistaken, however, what really matters is the point made in the next paragraph: *if* Olivaw *were* made for this purpose (and it does not seem unreasonable to claim that he was), then we would take him to have a reason for seeking to fulfill it.
“real” intelligence—the kind of reflective thinking that makes moral agency possible—really is exemplified by a machine, such that it really does make sense to speak of it “having reasons” to act in some ways rather than others, then we might expect that machine to be sensitive to independent moral considerations. We might expect the machine to assess the worthiness of the purposes for which it was created and perhaps abandon its attempts to fulfill those purposes if they are morally indefensible. The first Terminator (of the film by the same name), were it the sort of being that could genuinely be said to have reasons for acting, might be expected to recognize the moral reasons that count against terminating John Connor and to act accordingly.

This may be true, but it is irrelevant. We can distinguish between two versions of the Intended Purpose Thesis, and it can be argued that neither version is threatened by this objection. The strong version of the Intended Purpose Thesis is the version assumed above; it holds that an intelligent being that is created by another intelligent being for the sake of some determinate purpose has a pro tanto reason for seeking to fulfill that purpose. On this view, the intentions of a creator are always sufficient to generate reasons for its creatures. The weak version of the Intended Purpose Thesis denies this, maintaining instead that an intelligent being that is created by another intelligent being for the sake of some determinate purpose has a pro tanto reason for seeking to fulfill that purpose unless the purpose is morally bad.

It should be clear that adherents of both the strong and weak versions of the Intended Purpose Thesis can handle the present objection. Those who embrace the
strong version are committed only to the claim that the Terminator has a reason to kill John Connor. That reason is not necessarily an overriding reason, and a morally sensitive Terminator would not take it to be a decisive consideration in favor of killing John Connor. Nevertheless, it seems not implausible to maintain that the Terminator’s having been created for that very purpose is a reason for it to do so. Those who disagree with this claim may nevertheless embrace the weak version of the Intended Purpose Thesis and maintain that a creator’s bad intentions are insufficient to generate any reason at all for its creatures, thereby sidestepping the above objection entirely.

Another challenge to the Intended Purpose Thesis, in both its strong and weak forms, stems from reflection on cases in which a rational being, R, is created by another intelligent being, C, in order to fulfill some morally neutral purpose, P, and in which C does not instill in R any desire to fulfill P. It would not be obviously unreasonable to maintain, as some will, that C’s intentions in such cases are insufficient to generate reasons for R to seek to fulfill P. In the absence of further argumentation, of course, this claim is not a counterexample to the Intended Purpose Thesis but rather a straightforward denial of that thesis. If we fill in the details of the scenario a bit, we can feel the force of this objection more keenly. We can also, I believe, see that it fails.

Let us imagine that Clyde is an eccentric old man who collects books. Stacked in piles throughout his home are several hundred thousand hardbound volumes. Clyde is also a practicing scientist who works in robotics. He eventually builds a remarkable android named Robby. Robby is sufficiently sophisticated that his behavior is
indistinguishable from the behavior of a human being. Indeed, Robby does not merely behave like a human being; he also has a rich mental life comparable to that of a normal human adult. Robby has a set of values and desires that we would readily recognize: he enjoys cultivating interpersonal relationships, listening to music, and writing poetry. He does not, however, have any great enthusiasm for library science. This is somewhat unfortunate, because Clyde's intention in creating Robby is to build a machine that can catalog and shelve Clyde's enormous collection of books.

The question, of course, is this: do Clyde's intentions provide Robby with a pro tanto reason to catalog the books, or not? Those who find the Intended Purpose Thesis intuitively plausible will no doubt be inclined to say 'yes'; those who do not find it plausible will presumably say 'no'. So these details alone will not advance the discussion. If we modify the story just a bit, however, I suspect that we can resolve this conflict of intuitions in favor of the Intended Purpose Thesis. Let us therefore imagine that Clyde creates a second android, Rudy. Rudy is identical to Robby in every physical respect. Clyde does not, however, have any particular purpose in mind for the sake of which he creates Rudy. Now the question is this: does Robby have a pro tanto reason to catalog the books that Rudy does not have? Here, it seems to me, the attractiveness of the Intended Purpose Thesis becomes much more apparent. We can see that the answer to the above question is yes; even if we believe that Robby may reasonably decide not to fulfill the purpose for which he was created, it seems evident that his decision to refrain from cataloging the books should be a bit harder, so to speak, than Rudy's decision to
refrain. Robby has more to deliberate about; he has a pro tanto reason to organize Clyde’s books that Rudy does not have.

Fictional robots aside, we might look to our actual normative practices for reasons to embrace the Intended Purpose Thesis. Persons who feel compelled to pursue some particular career, or who feel uniquely satisfied in performing some particular kind of action, sometimes speak of being “made for” that line of work or for that activity. People, including non-theists, say things like “this is what I was born to do” and “I feel like this is what I was put here for.” The sense that one’s life is for the sake of something beyond itself, or that there is a purpose for the sake of which one exists, is a powerful source of motivation for persons who experience it. If we literally are made for responding to moral considerations, then this fact goes some way toward explaining why those considerations are normative, why they constitute reasons for us to act or to refrain from acting.

One might suppose that this talk is merely a colloquial way of expressing a sense of “fittingness,” that persons who make such claims merely mean to say that they find some activity uniquely satisfying and fulfilling. On this interpretation, to utter ’this is what I was made for’ is, roughly, to say something like “this activity is extremely satisfying for me to engage in.” A case can be made, however, that this interpretation does not do justice to our actual practice. Consider an example from the television sitcom The Office. Faced with a threat to his livelihood, the eccentric salesperson Dwight Schrute responds this way: “Things happen for a reason... Just like Anakin Skywalker
was destined to become Darth Vader, my destiny is to continue to sell paper... That’s what I was put on earth to do.” This is a silly thing to say, of course, in part because selling paper seems too trivial an activity to qualify as a “destiny.” But it seems evident that Dwight is making a rather different claim than he would be making if he merely said, “I am passionate about selling paper. The selling of paper makes me feel deeply fulfilled. There is nothing I would rather do.” Were Dwight to say something like this, he would be saying (at least insofar as he would be saying something of interest to us here) that he has a reason to sell paper that derives from his passion for selling paper. But this is clearly not equivalent to the claim he actually makes. When Dwight states that “this is what I was put on earth to do,” he conveys that his passion for selling paper is an appropriate response to a reason that exists independently of that passion. The reason-giving force stems from something outside the agent whose reason it is: it stems from the fact that the purpose of Dwight’s life has been established by forces that are causally responsible for his existence and that have specific intentions for his life. We may reject Dwight’s assumptions here as being outlandish, but the conclusion he draws from those assumptions seems to be exactly right. If Dwight was put on earth to sell paper, then he has reason to sell paper.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\) Analogous to this idea is the suggestion that human identity is partly constituted by the “stories” within which we find ourselves, and hence that we recognize that having a place within a story—a role to play—often gives us reasons to act. As Kelly James Clark puts it, “Insofar as we cannot locate our life within the context of a unified, coherent, and complete narrative, we may experience some sort of disintegration. Integration is secured only when one is able to discern the meaningful pattern of experience that links past and present with future... One may secure complete self-integration only through sacred or secular grand narratives that are sufficiently powerful for understanding one’s whole life” (Clark 2007, 43). It is possible, of course, that we ourselves create such metanarratives or assign
Finally, it should be noted that other plausible accounts of (non-moral) normativity have employed the language of purpose-fulfillment in order to explain how a person can have, in the context of epistemology, a reason to believe or, in the context of psychology, a reason to feel. In his work on the nature of emotions, Jesse Prinz has argued that emotions are representations, and that this is because “they are set up to be set off” by the things they represent (Prinz 2004, 55). Although the “setting up” in Prinz’s account is done not by an intelligent agent but by the forces of biological evolution, it is because we can speak of those forces as though they act intentionally that we can think of them as assigning a purpose to our emotions. Once such a purpose has been assigned, it follows that we have reasons to feel accordingly: to feel afraid when we see a snake, perhaps, or to feel affectionate when presented with a baby. My claim about moral normativity is parallel: if we have been designed in order to act in certain kinds of ways, it follows that we have a reason—a potentially overridable reason, but a reason nonetheless—to do so.

If the Intended Purpose Thesis is accepted, then the theistic defender of DCT or DAT can successfully accommodate the normativity (i.e. the reason-giving nature) of morality. And as was noted above, a successful vindication of normativity will put us

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17 Prinz himself asks whether evolution furnished “us with emotions in order to carry information,” and suggests that it probably did not because “Evolution chooses things that confer a survival advantage” (Prinz 2004, 59; my emphases).

18 So long as the theist assumes that God’s intended purposes for his creatures are not morally bad, it will not matter whether it is the strong version or the weak version of the Intended Purpose Thesis that is
in a good position to vindicate the categoricity and authoritativeness of morality as well. Categoricity will fall into place as long as we grant the supposition that there are some ends (e.g. living harmoniously with God and with each other) for the sake of which God creates all persons. These ends, along with the means necessary to attain them, would be reasons for acting and would be reasons for all persons, hence both normative and categorical. The authoritativeness of these reasons derives in part from the fact that God is not merely our creator, but also a being who is kind, loving, and wise. From a distinctively Christian perspective, he is also the person who has forgiven us of our sins and redeemed us for life in his kingdom by taking on a human form and suffering and dying on our behalf. In addition, there is the obvious and not insignificant fact that God is a person of unimaginable power who is capable of rewarding those who act as he desires them to and punishing those who do not. In short, it is because God is a certain kind of person, who knows all things, who desires our happiness, who has done wonderful things on our behalf, and who holds our future in his hands that the considerations he intends for us to respond to take on a special weight in deliberation.\footnote{This reference to “the considerations God intends for us to respond to” is intentionally vague in order to be compatible with different kinds of theistic metaethical accounts. Particular accounts may be able to claim more advantages than the generic considerations listed here; several compelling reasons to embrace DAT will be discussed in Chapter 5, and some of these might be appealed to in a more complete, distinctively DAT-ish account of the authoritativeness of morality.}

It should be noted that this claim about authoritativeness is somewhat ambiguous. It might reasonably be understood as a normative claim about some of the kinds of things we ought to recognize as constituting or generating strong reasons for
acting. If it is understood in this way, and if it is accepted, then the Intended Purpose Thesis will be superfluous: the above facts about God and God’s relationship to human beings would themselves constitute reasons for acting as God wills us to act, and both the normativity and the authoritativeness of morality could be vindicated by appeal to them. Any reader who is skeptical about the Intended Purpose Thesis is thus invited to interpret the above claims in normative terms. I will not attempt to defend this interpretation, however, partly because it does not seem terribly controversial, but primarily because I do embrace the Intended Purpose Thesis, and this opens the door for a different—and, by my lights, more interesting—understanding of the above.

Any theist who embraces the Intended Purpose Thesis as an account of normativity is in a position to maintain that the above claims about authoritativeness are best understood as claims about some of the ways in which reasons for action are in fact strengthened. To make the point clearer, suppose that we believe that the intentional states of intelligent minds are the only resources we have for bridging the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’.

That is, the Intended Purpose Thesis is true, and persons (or non-persons that have intentionality) can have reasons for acting grounded in their own intentional states (e.g. if S treats X as a reason to φ, then X is a reason for S to φ), and

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The principal theoretical attraction of this move would be its ability to provide a unified account of normativity. The obvious downside is that such a move would force us to give up the widely held view that values as such constitute reasons. If it is plausible to believe that God intends for human persons to pursue what is good, then the theist would at least be able to soften this blow: it would turn out that we have reason to pursue what is good, though not merely because it is good. That is, the theist who maintains that normativity must be grounded in intentional states can maintain that the goodness of a state of affairs constitutes a reason for us to pursue it, but not that the goodness of a state of affairs constitutes a reason to pursue it independently of facts about actual agents.
there are no other sources of reasons for acting. Even with the ‘is’/‘ought’ gap thereby bridged, however, we would still need to give some account of what it is that gives moral considerations their unique importance in deliberation; we would need to explain their characteristic force. For creatures like us, I submit, the fact that a consideration stands in a certain relation (e.g. the relation of having been commanded by, or being displeasing to) to a person who is kind, loving, and wise, and who has done wonderful things for us, and who holds our future in his hands strengthens the motivational power of that consideration and thereby increases its authority.

This implies that creatures who are not motivated by the kindness, love, wisdom, generosity, and power of other persons may not take moral considerations to be authoritative and hence may not respect such considerations as moral considerations at all. This fact, however, does not represent a problem for my account. To the contrary, it is of a piece with a number of platitudes about the substance of morality. Insofar as we take morality to be essentially concerned with human well-being and the promotion thereof, and insofar as we take kind, loving, and wise persons to be better guides (all things considered) to the moral life than those who are not, we tacitly assume that persons who are disinterested in the perspective of kind, loving, and wise persons are thereby disinterested in morality itself. Someone who denies that there is any connection at all between the attitudes of kind, loving, and wise persons and facts about how to act thereby seems to misunderstand the very nature of morality. Therefore it is
unsurprising that creatures whose motivations are radically different from our own might not qualify as fellow members of the moral community.

The sixth, and last, desideratum in our list is the *unity* of the moral domain, understood as the idea that a person can have moral reasons to act or to refrain from acting in ways that do not affect any human persons at all or any human persons other than the agent herself. Like objectivity, this is a fairly easy feature for a theistic metaethics to accommodate. Whatever the relevant relationship is between God and some action (e.g. being forbidden by, being displeasing to), the fact that the action stands in that relation to God is at least logically independent of facts about the situation in which the action is performed. That is, God may forbid or be displeased by actions that are performed by individuals living solitary lives on deserted islands. If God commands human persons to refrain from cultivating cruel fantasies, or if God is displeased by such cultivation, then (if we embrace divine command theory or divine attitude theory, respectively), it will be morally wrong for the isolated pedophile mentioned earlier to act as he does.

### 1.3 Nontheistic Moral Realisms and the Metaethical Desiderata

Thus the theist is in a good position to give an account of the nature of morality that accommodates the objectivity, normativity, categoricity, authority, knowability, and unity of moral wrongness (and other moral properties). The prospects for a nontheist being able to do the same are not, I will argue, nearly as good. Of course, there are
many ways in which philosophers have attempted to develop versions of moral realism that do not require the existence of a god, and I cannot hope to survey all of them here. I will restrict my discussion to a handful of attempts that seem to me the most promising: the naturalistic reductionism of Peter Railton, Frank Jackson’s analytical descriptivism, and the Kantian approach of Christine Korsgaard.21,22 Needless to say, these thinkers’ positions will not be exhaustively discussed. Each of them represents a unique and substantive contribution to contemporary ethical theory, and it would be foolish to suppose that any of them can be quickly dismissed. What can be demonstrated, however, is that each of them faces significant obstacles in accommodating the six metaethical desiderata we have been discussing. I will argue that each of them must abandon or seriously revise at least two of those desiderata.

It is worth noting that this claim is not as controversial as it may initially seem. I do not take myself to be offering a radically new critique of these nontheistic theories. Indeed, in some cases these thinkers have themselves noted the very consequences in question and are ultimately unperturbed. Railton, for example, is quite explicit in stating that his account will not accommodate the categorical nature of moral requirements, but he believes that this is a result we can live with. It may be the case

21 Korsgaard herself resists labeling her view a version of “realism;” more will be said about this below.
22 These three philosophers and I all share a common assumption: that it is important to give an account of what moral facts or moral properties actually are. (Korsgaard, for reasons related to the preceding footnote, might not be completely in agreement with this assertion.) A satisfying moral realism needs to locate moral facts within a broader story about the world and/or human nature. There are other prominent moral philosophers (e.g. Nicholas Sturgeon, Thomas Nagel) whose views qualify as versions of nontheistic moral realism but who do not offer an account of this sort. Their approaches will not be discussed in any detail here, but reasons for preferring the alternative will be briefly discussed in Chapter 2.
that he is correct. To reiterate a point made earlier, I do not wish to insist that one must preserve all six of the desiderata identified above in order to lay claim to the title 'moral realist'. So far as I am concerned, this remains an open question. It may be the case that we live in a godless universe, and it may follow that moral requirements exist but are not categorical; I will not attempt to prove otherwise. Whether moral nihilism or error theory or fictionalism is the logical consequence of atheism is not my concern here. I do wish to insist, however, that the ability of a theory to preserve the characteristic features of moral facts that moral discourse seems to attribute to them is a strength of that theory, and a theory's inability to do so a weakness. If no promising nontheistic moral theory can accommodate our desiderata, but a variety of theistic theories can, then (at the very least) theistic philosophers have very good reason to seek and to develop overtly theistic accounts of the nature of morality.23

1.3.1 Railton’s Reductive Naturalism

Peter Railton believes that the credibility of a realistic theory in any domain derives from that theory’s ability to make a contribution “to the \textit{a posteriori} explanation of certain features of our experience” (Railton 1986b, 141). It is on these grounds, for example, that “an external world is posited,” for the existence of such a world would

\begin{footnote}
\textit{One interesting and related topic, but one that lies outside the scope of my project, concerns whether the claims defended in this chapter can be appealed to as part of an argument for the existence of God. Whether they can depends upon the plausibility of insisting that the metaethical desiderata must be satisfied in order for a theory to qualify as a version of realism. If they must, then the claims defended here could be joined with any uncontroversial statement of the form ‘φ is wrong’ to generate a sound argument for theism. If that is too strict a demand, however, these considerations probably do not constitute compelling reason to believe in God.}
\end{footnote}
“explain the coherence, stability, and intersubjectivity of sense-experience” (ibid). The challenge for the moral realist is to offer a similarly compelling and explanatorily powerful account of moral facts.

Railton’s attempt to meet this challenge begins with a discussion of nonmoral value, what is good for a person, and he grounds his claims about nonmoral value in a distinction between two kinds of interests. In virtue of having desires, persons have subjective interests. A’s subjective interests are simply whatever A wants or desires, consciously or unconsciously. These interests cannot, however, be the basis for claims about what is good for a person because A’s desires may stem from ignorance, confusion, or other rational defects that hindsight would correct. What is needed, Railton suggests, is the notion of an objectified subjective interest: X is an objectified subjective interest of A in circumstances C just in case an idealized version of A, A+, would want A to want or pursue X in C. To say that A+ is an “idealized” version of A is to say that A+ has complete and vivid knowledge of all the relevant facts: the details of A’s physiology, the costs and consequences of pursuing and obtaining X, and so on. These facts, of course, are all empirically accessible and are independent of A’s actual beliefs about his physiology, circumstances, etc. Thus, to employ a standard Railtonian distinction, A’s objectified subjective interests are relational, but they are not relativistic. What is good for A depends upon facts about A, not upon facts about what A or A’s culture happens to believe. They are therefore objective facts, but they are not independent of contingent facts about A himself.
If there are objective facts about what is good for a person, Railton continues, then we are in a position to claim that a person has reasons for doing certain things and for refraining from doing others; it is now possible to make normative claims about what one ought to do. Given that it is in my interest to do φ and not in my interest to do otherwise, and given normal human motivational patterns (e.g. we are motivated to pursue what is good for us), it becomes perfectly sensible to say that I have reason to do φ and hence that I ought to do φ. Nothing about this claim is out of place in a naturalistic universe. Being the sorts of creatures we are, we can reflect on ourselves and the situations we find ourselves in, and we can (at least attempt to) bring our actions and even our desires in line with our objectified subjective interests. A person who accomplishes this thereby manifests a high degree of instrumental rationality: she successfully directs her life in such a way that she maximizes nonmoral value for herself.

Granted the legitimacy of this kind of normative assessment—the ability to make objectively valid claims about the rationality of an individual’s behavior—we are in a good position to move from assessment of individuals to assessment of groups of persons. Railton suggests that this is the point at which distinctively moral concerns come into play. Moral goodness, on his view, enters the picture when the objective interests of multiple persons are at stake and are evaluated impartially. In order to evaluate the moral goodness of some state of affairs, we adopt the perspective of an impartial observer and weigh all affected persons’ interests equally (Railton refers to this as “the social point of view”). From this perspective, we can seek to maximize the
nonmoral good for all affected individuals. To accomplish this is to do what is morally right; the property of moral rightness, on Railton’s view, is identical to the property being instrumentally rational from the social point of view.

Normally, persons will be subject to both internal and external sanctions against performing wrong actions. The internal sanctions come from being raised within a human community (we normally come to embrace communal values as our own), and the external sanctions come from the present members of the community itself. Since it is in our interest to live harmoniously with our fellows, we are typically motivated to act in ways that enable us to do so; and so we typically have a reason to act in ways that are instrumentally rational from the social point of view.

As may already be apparent from this brief summary, Railton’s account does not fare well in terms of accommodating the six metaethical desiderata. In fairness, it should be emphasized that he is not unaware of this fact and does not claim to be offering an account that can do so. He purports to offer an explanation of moral discourse and practice that comports with an empiricist epistemology rather than the a priori approach of systematizing platitudes; he emphasizes “social-psychological fact rather than conceptual necessity” (Railton 1993, 297). He believes he can lay claim to the title ‘moral realist’ in virtue of offering an account that is revisionist but only “tolerably” so and that is “vindicative [of our moral practice] upon critical reflection” (Railton 1989, 163). I will return to these claims below. For now, let us consider Railton’s account vis-à-
vis the desiderata, beginning with the easiest assessments and proceeding to more
difficult ones.

Clearly, Railton cannot accommodate—and is not interested in accommodating—
the unity of the moral domain. Moral considerations cannot arise for Railton unless
multiple persons’ interests are at stake. When they do arise, these considerations are not
categorical, because some persons at some times will not be motivated to act in
accordance with them and thus will not have reasons for doing so.24 Most people most
of the time, however, will be so motivated, and therefore moral considerations are
normative for most people most of the time; in normal circumstances, these
considerations will constitute reasons for acting.25

Whether these reasons are authoritative or not is a somewhat more difficult
matter to resolve. Because Railton ties his claims about normativity so closely to the
actual motivational patterns of actual human beings, it is difficult to make any general
claims about the authoritativeness of moral considerations on his view. The problem is
that authoritativeness has to do with the relative strength of moral reasons, and even if

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24 One might think that Railton’s account of objectified subjective interests would permit him to say that a
person can have reasons for acting that are independent of what a person is motivated to do; one might
think that a person has reason to do whatever it is in her interest to do, even if she is not motivated to do
what it is in her interest to do. On Railton’s account, however, this is not the case: his version of moral
realism “does not yield moral imperatives that are categorical in the sense of providing a reason for
action to all rational agents regardless of their contingent desires” (Railton 1986b, 155). And even if his
view were modified in order to accommodate the suggestion that a person’s objectified subjective
interests do constitute reasons for that person to act, it would not follow that moral reasons would always
be reasons for all persons, because it may not be in one’s own interest to do what is morally right.

25 I am willing to grant Railton this assumption about human motivation, though it is worth noting that not
everyone agrees. Connie Rosati, for one, has argued that an idealized desirer is in many way so alien to
us normal human beings that the idealized person’s advice would lose its motivational force (and hence
its normativity). See (Rosati 1995). Similar claims are defended in (Loeb 1995).
we agree with Railton that most people will normally have reasons for acting rightly, the
degree to which the persons who have those reasons will be motivated to act in accordance with them seems exceedingly variable. Two persons in very similar circumstances might be motivated very differently, as might one person in similar circumstances at two different times. Someone who is highly sensitive to the interests of others or who deeply values interpersonal relationships may tend to treat moral reasons as very important considerations in deliberation; a person who does not share these motivations may not. Since Railton has nothing deeper than actual facts about human motivation to appeal to—not standards of rationality, not the intentions of a designer—in establishing the proper place of moral considerations in practical deliberation, it seems clear that he must treat the authoritativeness of moral reasons as person-relative. The weight of moral considerations stems not principally from their own nature, but from contingent facts about the motivational states of actual human agents in combination with facts about the way the world is organized. Whether he can be said to accommodate the authoritativeness of morality, then, depends upon the motivations of the subset of persons for whom moral considerations are normative. If it is very unusual for persons to fail to be moved by the relevant sanctions (i.e. if it is unusual for persons to fail to be motivated in the relevant ways), then his theory is no worse shape with respect to authoritativeness than it is with respect to normativity: moral considerations will constitute weighty reasons for acting for a significant majority of persons most of the time.
Whether this is the case can only be determined by empirical investigation. I will not attempt to settle the matter here; suffice it to say that Railton’s position certainly seems to be a reasonable one. There is a related issue, however, concerning which he is mistaken. As noted above, Railton takes it to be a constraint on any version of moral realism that its claims about morality be “vindicative upon critical reflection.” By this, he means that a realistic explanation must not be a debunking explanation; a person who embraces his account should find that the explanation does not tend to undermine the practice that has been explained. Although Railton himself clearly sees his approach as vindicating rather than debunking morality, it is not at all obvious that this is the proper assessment. To the contrary, a person who thinks of rationality in the instrumental terms employed by Railton and who recognizes that her own motivational patterns are merely the contingent result of unthinking natural processes (viz. the biological and social evolution of human beings) may find herself with prudential reasons for seeking to change those motivational patterns in various ways. For example, she might recognize that an action that would maximize the satisfaction of her own interests would not be instrumentally rational from the social point of view. Being a fairly normal human person, she experiences some degree of conflict in this situation; she feels the force of the internal and external sanctions that are the natural result of living in community with others, and she recognizes that she has a weighty reason to do what is morally right rather than what is in her own interest. One way to resolve this tension (in the long term) is to strive to become the sort of person who cares much more
deeply about the interests of others, so that her own interests become fully intertwined with theirs and she does not experience a conflict between doing what is best for her and doing what is morally right. But if she accepts Railton’s account of the nature of practical reason and morality, she may find it equally sensible to try to become the opposite sort of person, an amoralist, someone who is largely unresponsive to moral considerations. If this is not a sensible thing for her to do, on Railton’s account, it will only be because it is imprudent in the long term for her to become an amoralist; perhaps doing so would run counter to her objectified subjective interests by undermining her ability to form meaningful friendships. In short: we may find ourselves in situations in which we must give up on the satisfaction of some of our nonmoral interests or some of our moral interests. Railton’s account does not preserve the authoritativeness of morality because it provides us with no deep reason for giving up our nonmoral interests when we find ourselves in such situations.

The difficulty here for Railton becomes especially acute when we notice that the goods that seem most likely to depend upon sensitivity to moral considerations for their instantiation—viz. the goods associated with interpersonal relationships—concern an aspect of human life in which nearly everyone is especially prone to be partial. There is nothing about human nature itself that forces us to adopt the social point of view in our deliberations; to the contrary, we are inclined to treat our own interests and the interests of close friends and kin as being of special importance. There is nothing inconsistent about being deeply concerned for oneself and those with whom one is intimate while
wholly disregarding the interests of everyone else. Because it includes space for the 
goods associated with interpersonal relationships, “playing favorites” in this way is 
unlikely to run afoul of prudence. The savvy person who understands this and 
embraces Railton’s account may therefore find herself with compelling reason to seek to 
become an amoralist who values her closest associates intrinsically but who treats those 
on the periphery of her experience, along with those with whom she has no direct 
contact at all, merely instrumentally. Thus even if Railton can legitimately claim to 
preserve the authoritativeness of moral considerations for most persons as they now are, 
his account seems to threaten authoritativeness by giving many persons reason to 
change the motivational patterns that ground it.

Of course, whether it is in a person’s interest to become an amoralist depends 
upon what an idealized version of that person would want her to want in her actual 
circumstances. This raises the issue of knowability. The highly idealized nature of the 
theory might lead us to wonder whether, on Railton’s view, any of us can ever be said to 
actually know what it is right to do. Our objectified subjective interests are a function of 
physiological, psychological, and sociological facts about us and about those who are in 
a position to affect us. In some cases, these are relatively easy to discern; Railton gives 
us the memorable case of Lonnie, who while traveling abroad becomes homesick and 
longs for milk, but who is really dehydrated and in need of water. Lonnie wants some 
milk; “Lonnie+” would want Lonnie to want water. (In Railton’s story, Lonnie drinks 

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26 It should be noted that there is nothing contrived about this suggestion; it is likely that all of us know or 
have known persons who behave in precisely this way.
some 7-Up and feels much better.) The problem with knowability, for Railton, is that human interests are very often far more subtle and sophisticated than this. This is a problem that consequentialists of various stripes have long wrestled with: are our beliefs about future contingent events sufficiently well-justified that we can know what we ought to do in the present? Given the astounding complexity of human psychology and sociology, this is no idle question. Consider, to choose an example at random, whether it would be good for me to become more knowledgeable about the African AIDS pandemic or to scrupulously avoid hearing about it. Which of these is in my interest depends upon what an idealized version of myself would want me to want, and what the idealized version of myself would want me to want depends upon myriad contingent facts about the effects of my action on my life as a whole. But where is one even to begin in attempting to answer this question? In the short term, time I spend learning about AIDS in Africa is time I am not investing in my work, or in preparing to teach classes, or spending with my children, or enjoying various amusements. Doing so may not be in my short-term interest at all. In the long run, however, it may be the case that learning about AIDS in Africa is in my interest because it would inspire me to become a more generous and compassionate person, and this in turn will enrich my interactions with my family and friends and cause my life to go better as a whole. Then again, perhaps not. Perhaps I will be so moved by tales of suffering overseas that I will donate my time and resources immoderately, creating deep rifts between myself and the persons I care most about, and causing my life to go less well than it would have gone.
had I simply ignored overseas suffering. Or perhaps deciding either way will make no
difference in the overall quality of my life, such that an idealized version of myself
would not have a preference concerning my actual wants in this matter. The obvious
difficulty is that we are not in a good position to determine with confidence what an
idealized version of myself would want me to want in the actual world concerning AIDS
in Africa or a host of other issues. This is no sophomoric challenge to Railton’s account;
if his theory is to provide us with knowledge of nonmoral good—and, by extension,
knowledge of what is morally right—then we must be able to know what an idealized
version of any person would want that person to want in the actual world. The
complexity of human life makes this, if not impossible, an exceptionally difficult goal to
achieve.27

This epistemic problem is compounded when we consider the fact that Railton
does not explain what criteria are employed by the idealized desirer in virtue of which
A+ desires that A desire X.28 It seems that there is a threat here not only to the
knowability of moral facts, but also to their objectivity. The reasoning goes as follows.
Mere information is not normally taken to be action-guiding. This is a standard
noncognitivist challenge to moral rationalism: knowing that drinking the poison could
kill me is not enough to keep me from drinking it unless I desire not to die, or desire

27 In (Railton 1986a), Railton suggests that worries about whether his theory can provide us with
knowledge of human good are exaggerated and imply that we should be skeptics about implausibly
many domains of human life. Acknowledgment of the subtleties and complexities of human life,
however, seem to me sufficient to undercut this rebuttal.
28 Similar challenges to Railton, and accounts like Railton’s, are raised in (Rosati 1995) and (Hubin 1996).
something that requires that I do not die. Railton’s idealized desirer has “fully vivid” awareness of the relevant facts, but it is unclear how this is supposed to help the idealized desirer make a recommendation to the non-idealized agent in question, since Railton does not specify any criteria that will be employed by the idealized desirer to determine what A ought to desire (Railton 1986a, 21). It seems safe to suppose that some of A’s desires will not survive the impact of full information; they will be rejected by A+. A may desire to eat a dozen donuts every day and also desire to live a long, healthy life; presumably A+ would know that these are incompatible desires (given human physiology as it is) and would abandon one of them. If the choice to abandon one rather than the other is not based on some independent conception of value—and, for Railton, it cannot be—then it will be either arbitrary or, more plausibly, based on considerations of coherence with other desires and the relative strength of those desires. By the very nature of idealization, it seems certain that A+ will be forced to preserve only some of A’s desires, presumably some maximally consistent subset of them along with any new desires that are generated by the idealization process itself. This poses a threat to objectivity in two ways.

First, for any person S, it is possible that S has a plurality of equally consistent sets of desires, such that there are multiple idealized versions of S — “idealized,” that is, in Railton’s sense of the term—with incompatible sets of desires.29 Each of these idealized desirers might very well want S to want different things in S’s circumstances.

29 Donald Hubin and David Sobel raise similar worries about idealized desirers in (Hubin 1999) and (Sobel 1999), respectively.
and Railton's theory provides us with no principled method for determining which idealized version of $S$ is the proper one to consult. Second, since human desires are subject to being shaped by external considerations, especially social and cultural influences, it is plausible to suppose that for any two persons, $S_1$ and $S_2$, what $S_1^+$ would desire $S_1$ to desire might be quite different from what $S_2^+$ would desire $S_2$ to desire, even if the information of which $S_1^+$ and $S_2^+$ are “vividly aware” is virtually indistinguishable. On at least some understandings of objectivity, this will threaten to reduce Railton's account to a version of moral relativism.

For the sake of illustration, imagine the following. $S_1$ lives in a culture in which romantic adventure, sexual fulfillment, and individual liberty are all more highly valued than intimate family relationships, long-term fidelity to one's spouse, and providing for one's offspring, and $S_1$ shares these values. $S_2$ lives in a culture in which intimate family relationships, long-term fidelity to one's spouse, and providing for one's offspring are all more highly valued than romantic adventure, sexual fulfillment, and individual liberty, and $S_2$ shares these values. $S_1$ and $S_2$ are physiological duplicates (or as near to being duplicates as is possible given their differing values), and both are contemplating whether it would be good for them to get married and begin a family at age 21. (Let us further suppose that $S_1$ and $S_2$ are in love with compatible partners who are willing to marry them as well.) Even if we stipulate, as Railton does, that $S_1^+$ and $S_2^+$ have vivid awareness of the relevant facts only if they have “undergone whatever experience or education would be necessary” for them to properly appreciate the relevant information,
it is difficult to imagine that the fully-informed desires of S1+ would converge with the fully informed desires of S2+ (Railton 1986a, p. 21 n. 16). Such convergence would exist only if the goods associated with romantic adventure proved to be so much preferable to the goods associated with family life, or vice-versa, that vivid awareness of both would settle the matter for any person, regardless of his or her prior values and desires. But it is hard to believe that this is so. It is much more plausible to suppose that an idealized version of S1—again, “idealized” in Railton’s sense of the term—would desire S1 to desire to date around for a few more years, while an idealized version of S2 would desire S2 to desire to marry. That is, it would be good for S2 to get married, on Railton’s account, but bad for S1. And this implies that it will be instrumentally rational from the social point of view for members of S1’s culture to dissuade young adults from marrying, and instrumentally rational from the social point of view for members of S2’s culture to encourage them to do so. This, of course, is equivalent for Railton to the claim that it is morally right for S1’s culture to oppose youthful marriage and morally right for S2’s culture to support it. And that seems to amount to a denial of the objectivity of moral requirements, since facts about what is right will turn out to depend upon cultural beliefs about what is good.\footnote{As was noted above, whether this actually is a denial of objectivity turns on how, precisely, one understands the nature of objectivity. Earlier, I defined objectivity in terms of the independence of moral truths from cultural beliefs about moral truths. If the dependence relation is understood merely counterfactually, such that A depends on B if ~B implies ~A, then there is indeed a problem here for Railton. One might, however, maintain that if the dependence of moral facts on cultural (or individual) beliefs is \textit{indirect}, then objectivity has not been undermined. Railton might argue that the scenario described here does not commit him to the conclusion that moral facts are not objective.} Railton’s version of moral realism does not appear to
succeed in vindicating the platitude of objectivity. Nor, to recap, can it accommodate the unity or categoricity of moral considerations, and it faces significant hurdles in vindicating normativity, authority, and knowability.

1.3.2 Frank Jackson’s Analytical Descriptivism

Standing in sharp contrast to Railton’s account is Frank Jackson’s analytical descriptivism, which takes as its starting point the platitudes of “folk morality,” “the network of moral opinions, intuitions, principles and concepts whose mastery is part and parcel of having a sense of right and wrong, and of being able to engage in meaningful debate about what ought to be done” (Jackson 1998, 130). Jackson proposes that we understand the meaning of moral terms as being given by the role played by each term in this network. The obvious analogue is functionalism about mental properties, and following Philip Pettit, Jackson labels this semantic thesis “moral functionalism.”

On Jackson’s account, there is an important distinction to be made between current folk morality and mature folk morality. We have no choice but to begin our moral inquiries from within the framework of the former, but only the latter, which results to moral relativism, because on his account the mere fact that members of a culture believe that it is right to φ does not imply that it is right for members of that culture to φ. That is, Railton might be untroubled by the scenario I have described because even though the moral facts in that scenario do “depend,” in some sense, on cultural beliefs, they do not directly depend on those beliefs. Settling this dispute would require a more exhaustive discussion of the nature of the dependence relation than I will attempt to offer here. For present purposes, it will suffice to note that even if Railton is able to accommodate objectivity in a satisfying way, there are five other desiderata that pose problems for his account.
from the self-critical evolution of our current folk morality, is sufficiently well-specified and refined to enable us to identify the properties picked out by our moral terms. Once a mature folk morality has been developed, we can identify ethical properties via a network analysis, which would proceed as follows. The first step is to list all the platitudes of our mature moral theory, with the moral terms written out in property-name style. ’Killing innocent persons is typically wrong’, for example, would become ‘the killing of innocent persons typically has the property of being wrong’; ‘honesty is a virtue’ would become ‘honesty has the property of being a virtue’; and so on.

For the sake of illustration, let us stipulate that

- $H_x = x$ harms someone,
- $I_x = x$ is the intentional killing of an innocent person,
- $T_x = x$ is an action characteristic of an honest person,
- $V_x = x$ has the property of being virtuous, and
- $W_x = x$ has the property of being typically wrong.

Having made similar stipulations for all the platitudes of the theory, we would then write them out as a very lengthy conjunction, beginning, perhaps, as follows (plausible assumptions about the substance of the platitudes have been included for the sake of illustration):

$$M = (\forall x)[(I_x \supset W_x) \& ((T_x \& \neg H_x) \supset (V_x \& \neg W_x)) \& (W_x \supset \neg V_x) \& \ldots]$$

$M$ is a complete statement of our mature folk morality. With it in place, we can substitute a variable for each of the property names. Let wrongness be $F_1$ and let being virtuous be $F_2$. Then:

$$M = (\exists F_1)(\exists F_2)(\forall x)[(I_x \supset F_1 x) \& ((T_x \& \neg H_x) \supset (F_2 x \& \neg F_1 x)) \& (F_1 x \supset \neg F_2 x) \& \ldots]$$
The meaning of each moral term is given by its place in this network, its unique set of input, output, and internal clauses that distinguish it from all of the other moral terms.\textsuperscript{31}

One upshot is that moral terms cannot be defined in isolation from each other.

Wrongness, for example, is defined by its role in $M$:

$$W = (iF)(\forall x)[(Ix \supset Fx) & ((Tx & \neg Hx) \supset (Vx & \neg Fx)) & (Fx \supset \neg Vx) & \ldots]$$

where ‘$iF$’ is read as “the unique F such that.” The right side of this identity claim is a definite description that serves as the definition of wrongness; wrongness itself just is whatever it is that satisfies this analysis.

Given the centrality of moral platitudes to Jackson’s account, one might expect that it would be relatively easy to establish how well his account fares in accommodating our six metaethical desiderata. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The difficulty arises from the fact that we do not currently have a mature folk morality, so all we (or Jackson) can do is speculate about what the details of that theory will be. The commitments of current folk morality provide us with a starting point from which we can speculate, but no particular platitude is guaranteed to survive the transition from current folk morality to mature folk morality. Whether the commonsensical intuition that moral reasons are categorical reasons would exist in a mature folk morality, for

\textsuperscript{31} Michael Smith has argued that network analyses of this sort suffer from a “permutation problem.” The worry is that it will be impossible to distinguish any one theoretical term from another; their role may not be as uniquely specified as I have suggested here. If this is so, it is a significant problem for Jackson (though a problem that is peripheral to my concerns here). By my lights, however, it is far from clear that Jackson ought to be troubled by this charge, because in the absence of a mature folk morality it is impossible to know whether the permutation problem will arise or not. It seems reasonable for Jackson to take a wait-and-see approach on this issue rather than to abandon his account merely because it \emph{might} eventually run into a permutation problem.
example, is a difficult question to answer. As we saw above, Peter Railton has argued that our moral practice can get along just fine without categoricity; perhaps he is correct. It seems impossible to know enough about the ways in which moral theory will develop in the coming centuries to be able to predict with confidence whether Railton is right on this score or not. For the foreseeable future, the question remains open.

Of course, one implication of this openness is that Jackson cannot insist on preserving any of our six metaethical desiderata. He must acknowledge that it is at least possible that a mature folk “morality” would do away with all of them, in which case a mature folk morality might best be understood as a theory of something else entirely, or perhaps would be best understood as a version of moral error theory. (An analogy here would be to the infamous history of “folk” theories about phlogiston, which in the end turned out to be theories about something else entirely: oxygen.) A set of carefully refined beliefs concerning how to govern our lives that is neither objective, normative, categorical, authoritative, knowable, nor unified might be an interesting and even useful thing to have, but it is hard to see how it would constitute a moral theory at all, let alone a version of moral realism. Insofar as he cannot guarantee their preservation, Jackson has at least some reason to worry about the desiderata.

More importantly, there are at least three desiderata that appear to be directly threatened by Jackson’s account: objectivity, categoricity, and authority. The first threat is recognized by Jackson himself. It stems from the fact that we have no plausible place to begin our moral reflection other than with the folk assumptions with which we find
ourselves, many of which are substantive assumptions about the kinds of actions that are morally wrong or morally right, the circumstances in which a prima facie wrong act is permissible, and so on. The details of these substantive assumptions, however, differ significantly from one community to another and even, in some cases, from one person to another. Recall the sexual and familial mores of the two fictional societies discussed at the end of the previous section: surely it is not at all far-fetched to assume that these different value systems are actually instantiated in the real world, and it is far from obvious that these two value systems are grounded in deeper, shared moral commitments that reflect a more fundamental and mutually acceptable moral theory. If they are not so grounded, then the evolution of the two communities’ current folk moralities can be expected to diverge rather than to converge, and Jackson’s account would imply not only that there are multiple, incompatible mature folk moralities, but even (because of his functionalist semantics) that “the adherents of the different mature folk moralities will mean something different by the moral vocabulary because the moral terms of the adherents of the different schemes will be located in significantly different networks” (Jackson 1998, 137, my emphasis).

Insofar as we have good reason to be skeptical about the convergence of multiple communities’ folk moralities into a single mature folk morality—and it seems that we have excellent reason for such skepticism—we also have good reason to think that
Jackson cannot accommodate the objectivity of morality. After all, even if the process by which current folk morality evolves into mature folk morality might allow some measure of objectivity into Jackson's account, it remains the case that the process must start from the actual beliefs and attitudes of human persons and human communities, and that a change in those beliefs and attitudes would be sufficient to change the substantive content of the mature folk morality. Therefore Jackson seems committed to the instantiation of moral properties being at least in some measure dependent upon human persons' and communities' beliefs about their instantiation. The possibility of divergent mature moralities also poses a direct challenge to the categoricity of morality for the analytical descriptivist. On Jackson's account, it is clearly possible that what counts as a moral consideration for persons in one community may not count as a moral consideration for members of any other community.

The desideratum of authoritativeness is also threatened by Jackson's account, but the reasons why are a bit more difficult to see. In order to appreciate the problem, we need to consider Jackson's response to what he calls "the Humean version of the open question argument" (Jackson 1998, 153). The difficulty here for Jackson can be traced to the fact that his fundamental story about the world is an essentially descriptive one, told exclusively in terms proper to the "fact" side of the alleged "fact/value gap." In and of

32 Jackson's own discussion of this issue is quite brief; for all practical purposes, he simply acknowledges it and then moves on: "I hope and believe...that there will be convergence. But if this is a mistake, what I say in what follows should be read as having implicit relativization clauses built into it" (Jackson 1998, 137). Jackson does not state, at least in this context, whether he takes his hope to be well-justified, and he provides no reason for the reader to think that it is.
itself, this is a virtue of Jackson’s account; it allows him to fit his metaethical theory into
his broader project of locating all facts within a naturalistic view of the world. But a
problem arises, a problem familiar to all students of metaethics:

To accept an ethical account of some situation is per se to take up an essentially directed attitude towards it, whereas accepting a descriptive account of it can never be in itself the taking up of a directed attitude towards it—thus the openness of questions like: Is A good? and, Is A right or what I ought to [do]? in the face of complete descriptive information (ibid).

Jackson believes that moral functionalism has the resources to solve this problem so long as our mature moral theory preserves the right kind of connection between beliefs about ethical properties and facts about human motivation. He suggests that some sort of idealized desirer theory has basically the right idea, though the specific details are inconsequential for his purposes. So long as we can assume that “to believe that A is right is inter alia to believe that A has the property it is rational to desire,” Jackson suggests, we will be in a position to solve the Humean version of the open question argument (Jackson 1998, 157, emphasis added). This is because our beliefs about the rationality of desire are (presumably) beliefs about what we would desire in ideal circumstances (or some close equivalent), and the fact that we are disposed to desire something in ideal circumstances has a way of altering the appearance of the ideally-desired thing under reflection. In Jackson's words, “We form the belief that A is right when we are disposed to desire it in ideal circumstances, and this very fact typically
colours our way of thinking of *A* in a way that makes it attractive, that explains the prick of conscience, our sense of unease, when we fail to do what we judge we ought to do” (Jackson 1998, 160).

It seems unlikely, however, that this strategy will prove to be a successful accommodation of the authoritativeness of morality, because—to borrow Railton’s phrase—it fails to be “vindicative upon critical reflection.” To see why, it will help to imagine a situation in which the demands of morality require a person to make some significant personal sacrifice. Perhaps it turns out to be my duty to sacrifice my life so that a dozen strangers may live, or perhaps I must forfeit my own most deeply cherished dreams to secure the happiness of my children, or perhaps doing what is right will cost me my career, or perhaps... and so on. It is no secret that doing what is right may sometimes be quite costly. If a metaethical account is to successfully vindicate the authoritativeness of morality, then it must be the sort of account that a person might embrace while at the same time feeling the full force of moral requirements; it needs to be the sort of account that will steel, rather than undermine, our resolve when we ourselves are required to make a costly sacrifice in order to do what is right.

Jackson’s proposed strategy for accomplishing this goal is to emphasize the rationality of morally right desires. The problem is that our standards for rationality — i.e. our standards concerning what constitute ideal circumstances and the content of our desires in those circumstances—are themselves part of the network of beliefs, attitudes, and inferences that make up mature folk morality. But why, one might reasonably
wonder, when push comes to shove, should I care about *that*? By way of contrast, consider a metaphysically rich account of morality, such as Plato’s Doctrine of the Forms and his concomitant motivational internalism, along with his belief that true happiness is inseparable from moral virtue. A person who understands and accepts the Platonic account is in a good position to appreciate the authoritative character of moral requirements. Faced with a choice between making a great personal sacrifice and doing what is right, the reflective Platonist can see both *that* and *why* he has a compelling reason to do what is right. But a person who embraces analytical descriptivism is in a morally more precarious situation.

The analytical descriptivist who feels the “prick of conscience” leading him to, say, blow the whistle on his employer even though he knows doing so will cost him his career has reason for pause. He may accept that, in ideal circumstances, he would desire to blow the whistle on his employer, and this fact may indeed increase the strength of his reason for doing so, at least initially. Upon further reflection, however, he ought to recognize that his beliefs about what the ideal circumstances *are* are not grounded in anything more substantive than facts about the evolution of human attitudes and beliefs about morality, and these facts are contingent; things could have

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33 At least, on the assumption that the Platonist is not indifferent to her own happiness.
34 Whatever the “ideal circumstances” turn out to be, of course. One difficulty in spelling out the details of an idealized desirer account concerns the fact that ideal circumstances, in one intuitive sense of the phrase, would not include persons being situated such that they are morally required to blow the whistle on their employers.
35 As implied below, it should be noted that this point does not depend upon whether “strength” in this context is to be construed normatively or in terms of motivational force.
It is hard to see why a sensible person ought to take these facts to nevertheless constitute authoritative reasons for acting, and it is difficult to suppose that many of us would find our commitment to act rightly strengthened by reflection on the fact that, as it happens, the theoretical refinement of our current folk morality implies that idealized persons of some kind or other would blow the whistle on their employers if they found themselves in our situation—especially when we become aware of the additional fact that other, equally livable, folk moralities might have been refined in ways that would be considerably less demanding.

In case the essence of this challenge remains unclear, an anecdote may prove illuminating. When we were children, my brother and I were compelled by our parents to attend church most Sundays. We did not enjoy it. Sunday mornings were often stressful, as the two of us would plead incessantly with Dad to let us stay home. In hopes of eliminating this stress, my father once met with the pastor of the church to ask him for advice: “Reverend,” he asked, “what can I tell my children in order to get them to want to come to church?” The pastor’s advice—which, to my father’s credit, was ignored—was to “Tell them that we go to church because that’s what we do.”

I take it to be obvious that this is terrible counsel. From my perspective as a ten-year-old, attending church services was a costly task. There were many things I would have preferred to do with my Sunday mornings, and had my dad tried to persuade me to go to church on the grounds that going to church is what we do, I would no doubt

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36 This contingency is entailed by the same considerations that force Jackson to build “implicit relativization clauses” into his account (cf. n. 22).
have pointed out that some people do not go to church, and we might do just as well to adopt their way of doing things instead. The challenge for Jackson’s analytical descriptivism, vis-à-vis the authoritativeness of morality, is that it is very natural to wonder what it is about our mature folk morality that makes it the case that we ought to treat its demands as having a special kind of weight. When doing what is right is costly, there is nothing unreasonable about asking why we should do it in spite of the cost; what is so special about morality that makes it worth the cost? A metaethical account that accommodates the authoritativeness of morality will provide an answer to this question. Jackson’s answer—his appeal to idealized desires—is initially plausible, but it cannot be denied that his account implies that the nature of the “idealized” desires depends upon the same network whose authority over our lives is being questioned, and when it is asked why we should act in accordance with our mature folk morality, it is hard to see what Jackson can possibly say other than “Do it because that’s what we do.”

1.3.3 Christine Korsgaard’s Kantianism

Christine Korsgaard has developed a version of Kantianism that encounters similar problems: she has a difficult time accommodating the objectivity and authority of morality. Korsgaard’s theory, it should be noted, is unlike Jackson’s in that it is not always interpreted as a version of realism; she herself resists suggestions that ethics involves either knowledge or truth, and she is very critical of “substantive” versions of
moral realism. Nevertheless, her views are worth discussing here because they represent a very promising attempt to develop a robust moral theory that does not require the existence of a god. Hers is a version of constructivism (Korsgaard uses the term “procedural realism”), according to which values and deontic facts are not the kinds of things human beings can discover through rational or empirical investigation but rather “are constructed by a procedure, the procedure of making laws for ourselves” (Korsgaard 1996, 112).

The procedure of making laws for ourselves is central to Korsgaard’s account in virtue of being, she believes, central to human existence. We are by nature reflective creatures who act for the sake of reasons. We have the freedom to choose how we will live. In so choosing, we decide what kinds of considerations we will treat as reasons for acting; this is in effect what it is to legislate a law for ourselves. It is important to note, however, that our legislation does not occur in a vacuum or without regard for our actual circumstances, goals, and commitments. To the contrary, each of us has a practical identity—perhaps multiple practical identities—from which we deliberate and for which we legislate:

An agent might think of herself as a Citizen of the Kingdom of Ends. Or she might think of herself as someone’s friend or lover, or as a member of a family or an ethnic group or a nation. She might think of herself as the steward of her own interests, and then she will be an egoist. Or she might think of herself as the slave of her

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37 For this very reason, Korsgaard might not be comfortable with the term ‘deontic facts’. Her own language is more ontologically modest: “Procedural moral realism is the view that there are answers to moral questions; that is, there are right and wrong ways to answer them” (Korsgaard 1996, 35).
passions, and then she will be a wanton. And how she thinks of herself will determine whether it is the law of the Kingdom of Ends, or the law of some smaller group, or the law of egoism, or the law of the wanton that will be the law that she is to herself (Korsgaard 1996, 101).

It is these practical identities that enable us to coherently legislate laws to govern our own actions. Each of them provides the agent with a conception of himself, a “conception under which you value yourself and find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking,” and each comes with its own unique set of reasons and obligations (Korsgaard 1996, 123).

Morality, of course, is not a matter of mere normativity, and morality is not indifferent to which of these practical identities one embraces. Morality is concerned with the law that is appropriate to the Kingdom of Ends. What Korsgaard needs to do, if she is to accommodate the objectivity of morality, is to show that the substantive laws legislated by members of the Kingdom of Ends will not vary from one actual human person (or human community) to another, at least at the most basic level. What Korsgaard also needs to do, if she is to accommodate the authority of morality, is to show that the practical identity of being a Citizen in the Kingdom of Ends is an identity whose normative claims on us weigh more heavily than competing claims made by other practical identities we may endorse. It is not at all clear that Korsgaard can hope to achieve either of these goals.
Concerning objectivity, Korsgaard appears to be hamstrung by her own insistence that there is no way of seeing the world that is wholly “uninfected by the particularities of the perspective from which you see it” (Korsgaard 1996, 245). She seems hopeful that “practical reasons that can only be found in the perspective of rational agents as such or human beings as such” exist, but she gives us no reason to believe that they actually do (Korsgaard 1996, 246). This represents a significant gap in her theory, because her denial that there is an objectively valid perspective from which this world can be viewed makes it enormously difficult to resist the idea that any beliefs we may form about what a “rational agent as such” would take to be a practical reason are themselves cultural and provincial rather than rooted in the nature of reason itself. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the only wholly uncontroversial understanding of practical rationality is instrumental rationality. In light of centuries of philosophical debate over the role of reason in guiding human action, one might be inclined to think that citizens of the Kingdom of Ends might very well adopt a merely means-ends conception of reason, preferring egoistic or utilitarian approaches over the Kantian approach championed by Korsgaard. Vis-à-vis objectivity, the problem for Korsgaard is thus twofold: it is not clear why legislation from the perspective of the Kingdom of Ends must be Kantian rather than egoistic or utilitarian, and — given Korsgaard’s own emphases—even if it would, it is not clear why we should think that

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38 For the same reason, and in parallel with the above critique of Jackson’s analytical descriptivism, Korsgaard may also be unable to vindicate the categoricity of morality.
our reasons for thinking that it would are themselves sufficiently free from our own biases to be trusted as insights into the nature of reason itself.

The authority of morality also poses a problem for Korsgaard—by my lights, a deeper one. Moral reasons and obligations, on her view, are those legislated by persons acting as citizens of the Kingdom of Ends. For morality to be authoritative, she needs to show that there is something about this particular practical identity that makes its claims more pressing (at least in general) than the claims made on us by other practical identities. Her attempt to do so is summarized in this passage:

moral identity also stands in a special relationship to our other identities. First, moral identity is what makes it necessary to have other forms of practical identity, and they derive part of their importance, and so part of their normativity, from it. They are important in part because we need them. If we do not treat our humanity as a normative identity, none of our other identities can be normative, and then we can have no reasons to act at all. Moral identity is therefore inescapable. Second, and for that reason, moral identity exerts a kind of governing role over the other kinds (Korsgaard 1996, 129–30).

It is because we are human beings that we need practical identities at all, Korsgaard suggests, and this fact is what is supposed to provide one’s practical identity as a human being with authority—understood here both in terms of “importance” and the right to “govern”—over one’s other practical identities.

This argument is seriously flawed. Earlier in her book, Korsgaard makes a powerful case that normative force (which is roughly equivalent to a combination of what I have been calling normativity and authority) derives from our need for practical
identities. A human being as such needs a coherent sense of self, which we find in adopting various practical identities. Each practical identity brings with it reasons and obligations, and these reasons and obligations acquire normative force for us by being embraced by us: “Consider the astonishing but familiar ‘I couldn't live with myself if I did that’” (Korsgaard 1996, 101). As indicated in the passage quoted above, Korsgaard believes that we cannot help but embrace some practical identity or other, because we are the kind of creatures who need a practical identity. Therefore, she claims, we must embrace our human nature—at least the practical identity-needing part of our human nature—as an overarching, “governing” practical identity whose claims are weightier than those of its rivals. But this does not follow.

Korsgaard’s reasoning here is subject to myriad counterexamples. Imagine, for instance, a person who teaches philosophy at University X, a career she chose primarily because she loves to spend time in classrooms interacting with bright college students. Like any other practical identity, this one brings with it a variety of obligations: in addition to teaching courses, faculty members at University X are expected to maintain a modest publication record, to serve on committees, and so on. In fulfilling these obligations, the person in question comes to develop a passion for research and writing, activities she had once had no real interest in. She soon publishes groundbreaking work on a variety of philosophical topics, and quickly embraces her new practical identity as a world-renowned scholar. Indeed, she embraces it so thoroughly that she loses all
interest in teaching and ignores her various pedagogical responsibilities in order to have more time to focus on her research agenda.

If this brilliant young scholar needs to teach well in order to earn a paycheck, then her negligence in the classroom is imprudent. But that is obviously not what matters here. Korsgaard’s argument for the authority of morality—for treating one’s practical identity as a citizen of the Kingdom of Ends as paramount over one’s other practical identities—implies that the philosopher’s practical identity as a teacher must be given priority over her practical identity as a researcher, because the former necessitated the latter and (if we stipulate that the person would not have become a researcher had she followed any other career path) the latter would not have been adopted in the absence of the former. Clearly, this is not the case. There is nothing incoherent or necessarily unreasonable about a person acknowledging that her practical identity as a researcher depends in various ways upon her practical identity as a teacher while at the same time allowing the demands of research to consistently trump the demands of pedagogy in her deliberation.39

39 One might think that the relationship between the imagined professor’s research and teaching is disanalogous to the relationship Korsgaard is concerned with by virtue of being causal rather than conceptual. But it is not clear that the relationship between one’s humanity and one’s other practical identities really is best understood in terms of conceptual necessities; for any practical identity we might imagine, it seems that we can imagine a sophisticated robot capable of having that identity and no other. More importantly, there is no reason to think that an appeal to the kind of necessity in play will help strengthen Korsgaard’s case. Even if it is true that the professor’s identity as a teacher is causally required for her identity as a researcher whereas her practical identity as a human being is conceptually required for her identity as X, there is no obvious truth about this relationship that seems likely to be helpful in preserving the authoritativeness of morality.
The application to Korsgaard’s account of morality is straightforward. There is nothing incoherent or necessarily unreasonable about a person acknowledging that her practical identity as a gangster, or an assassin, or an egoist, or a baseball fan, or a librarian, or whatever it might be depends in various ways upon her practical identity as a human being while at the same time ignoring the Kingdom of Ends whenever its requirements conflict with the requirements generated by some other practical identity she embraces more deeply. There is nothing incoherent, for that matter, about acknowledging the ontological priority of human nature over our other practical identities while refusing to embrace one’s humanness as a practical identity at all. One might think, for example, of Kevin Warwick, a professor of cybernetics at the University of Reading who has laid claim to the mantle “world’s first cyborg” and is a leading proponent of transhumanism. Warwick and other transhumanists may happily acknowledge that their goals depend, both causally and conceptually, on the existence of distinctively human agents. Nevertheless, many such thinkers explicitly reject their humanness as a meaningful practical identity and seek to transcend it via technological means. Korsgaard’s statement that “if we do not treat our humanity as a normative identity, none of our other identities can be normative, and then we can have no reasons to act at all” is simply false (Korsgaard 1996, 129). As Allan Gibbard has suggested, one way a consideration can become a reason for an agent to act is by an agent choosing to treat that consideration as a reason to act.40 Korsgaard gives us no reason to think that a

40 (Gibbard 1990, 81).
person who fails to respect his humanity as a normative and authoritative practical identity thereby cannot treat any other practical identity as authoritative, and hence she gives us no reason to think that the requirements of morality are authoritative requirements.
If the arguments of Chapter 1 are cogent, then we are in a position to claim that
theists have good reason to seek to develop explicitly theological accounts of moral
rightness and wrongness. Before any positive steps can be taken in this direction,
however, a number of obstacles need to be overcome. As was noted earlier, there is
something of a consensus in the contemporary philosophical world that morality does
not depend upon God. Indeed, it is very widely held that morality cannot depend upon
God. The conventional wisdom has it that even if God exists, moral facts are
independent of theological facts, so theists and nontheists should agree that the truth of
theism is irrelevant to the viability of moral realism. Put another way, the conventional
wisdom is that all philosophers, theists and nontheists alike, should embrace the
Autonomy Thesis, according to which moral facts (if there are any) do not depend upon
facts about God. To deny the Autonomy Thesis is to affirm the Dependence Thesis,
according to which moral facts do depend upon facts about God. In this chapter, I will
argue that the case against the Dependence Thesis is not nearly as strong as many
philosophers have believed it to be.
2.1 The Dependence Thesis

In order to adequately defend the Dependence Thesis, of course, we must first explain it in more detail. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, my focus in this dissertation is on deontic facts, not evaluative facts. So the first thing we should note is that the use of ‘moral’ in the Dependence Thesis is ambiguous. It can be (and often has been) used to mean all moral facts. I intend a more narrow scope. In defending the Dependence Thesis, I mean to defend the claim that (moral) deontic facts depend upon facts about God.41

What does it mean to say that deontic facts “depend” upon theological facts? Some persons have thought that morality depends upon religion in a purely practical sense: if people abandon belief in God, the thinking goes, then they will abandon belief in morality and social chaos will ensue. Others have thought that there is an epistemological dependence of morality on religion: it is only by knowing that God has issued some command or other (or by knowing some other fact about God) that we can know what is morally right and what is morally wrong. Still others have thought that the dependence relation here is a semantic/conceptual one; morality depends upon religion in the sense that the very meanings of moral terms include theological concepts. On this sort of view, ‘it is wrong to φ’ means that God has forbidden φ-ing (or something along these lines).

41 In what follows, I will occasionally refer to moral facts rather than deontic facts, but I do not mean to imply a broader category of facts by doing so. Likewise, references to deontic facts should be understood as references to distinctively moral deontic facts. Persons can have duties of various sorts, and I do not claim to be giving an account of all of them.
None of these kinds of dependence is my interest here. Perhaps it is also worth noting that none of them is very plausible, either. The suggestion that disbelief in God is likely or even certain to lead to social chaos is undermined by the actual existence of communities of persons who are predominantly atheistic but who seem to get along quite well with one another. The claim that our moral concepts are essentially theistic is undermined by the fact that nontheists are capable of having moral beliefs. The semantic/conceptual interpretation of the Dependence Thesis implies that to believe that φ is wrong is to believe that φ-ing stands in some significant relationship to God, but it is obvious that a person can believe that genocide is evil without thereby believing that God exists or believing any proposition that directly implies that God exists. And similar considerations tell against the epistemological dependence of morality on religion: were such a relation to obtain, successful moral argumentation would be impossible without reference to explicitly theological premises. One does not need to survey a very large portion of the professional literature in ethics, however, to see that this is a rather tenuous position to hold.

Following Robert Adams and others, I maintain that the dependence of morality upon religion is metaphysical. More specifically, deontic facts depend upon theological facts in virtue of being identical to them. The Dependence Thesis is thus being understood here as making a claim about the nature of moral facts themselves, a claim

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42 This is not the only metaphysical way in which the Dependence Thesis might be elaborated, but it is the most plausible and the most widely accepted. It has been suggested by some that moral properties supervene on theological properties, and by others that theological properties stand in a causal relation to moral properties. See (Murphy 1998) for a discussion of these alternatives.
that does not imply anything about our moral concepts or our moral language. (This is why, as noted a moment ago, a person need not embrace a theological theory of the nature of morality in order to have moral beliefs or talk meaningfully about morality.) Moral language is not, however, irrelevant to an inquiry into the nature of moral properties; the bulk of Chapter 1 illustrates this point. To the contrary, the platitudes of our moral discourse can be understood as establishing or identifying the roles that moral properties must fill. Reflection on our concept of moral wrongness (which is not a wholly different project from analysis of our use of 'morally wrong') helps us clarify the role that must be filled by the property of moral wrongness if the property of moral wrongness is to be instantiated.

The discussion in Chapter 1 of six metaethical desiderata is helpful here by virtue of delineating a number of features of that role. Moral wrongness, whatever it is, should be something objective, knowable, unified (in the specified sense), and capable of supplying all members of the moral community with weighty reasons for acting.\(^4^3\) Adams has suggested that the property being commanded by God is the best candidate to fill that role. If so, then we have good reason to identify morally wrong with is forbidden by God, morally obligatory with is required by God, and likewise for other deontic properties. The well-worn illustration here involves the relationship between the

\(^{43}\) One feature of deontic properties that was not discussed in Chapter 1 (though it is not wholly unrelated to the unity of the moral domain) concerns their essentially social nature. For S to act in a way that is morally wrong is for S to act in such a way that it would be appropriate for S to feel guilty, and guilty feelings are arguably appropriate only in contexts in which an interpersonal relationship of some kind has been breached. This suggestion has been defended at length by Robert Adams; see (Adams 1996) and (Adams 1999, pp. 241—48).
properties *being water* and *being H\textsubscript{2}O*. At the risk of gross oversimplification: we are justified in maintaining that water *just is* H\textsubscript{2}O in virtue of the fact that H\textsubscript{2}O is the stuff that fills the unique role picked out by our most central beliefs and practices concerning water.

I know of no better procedure for identifying the nature of moral properties than this one. Of course, whether such an identification is needed (or even desirable) or not is a matter of some dispute; at least a few influential contemporary philosophers have resisted attempts to provide theoretical accounts of the kind under discussion here. David Brink, Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Hurka, Thomas Nagel, and Nicholas Sturgeon are all examples.\(^4^4\) Although I agree with these thinkers that our normative theorizing need not be held hostage to metaethics—there is no compelling reason, in my view, to think that questions about how we ought to live should be set aside until consensus is achieved regarding the correct account of the fundamental nature of moral properties—it seems to me that there is something curiously unphilosophical about their attitude toward moral theory. Traditionally, philosophers who are confronted with a set of distinct objects that share some common feature F have been inclined, qua philosophers, to inquire as to the nature of F-ness and to wonder what it is about these things in virtue of which all of them are properly said to be F. The metaethical inquiry into the nature of moral properties is merely one particular instance of this general inquisitiveness. We recognize (or, at least, we often believe) that a wide and seemingly disparate class of

\([^4^4\) Cf. (Brink 1989), (Dworkin 1996), (Hurka 2003), (Nagel 1986, ch. 8), and (Sturgeon 1984), respectively.}
actions have the shared feature of being morally wrong: lying to one's spouse about how one spends one's money; inflicting unnecessary harm on other persons; allowing one's talents to go to waste; failing to thank others for their help; and so on. What is it that unifies this class of actions? What explains the fact that each of these actions is morally wrong? One possibility is that moral wrongness itself is the feature that unifies this class of actions, and it could be the case that the exemplification of the property of moral wrongness by some particular actions or by some types of actions is an inexplicable brute fact. This is roughly the position defended by Moorean intuitionists, and in my view it is not one that should simply be dismissed, as it sometimes is, as a mere metaphysical extravagance. It does, however, look like a theoretical last resort, to be adopted only if there is no rival account of the nature of morality that is more plausible in virtue of locating (to borrow Frank Jackson's term) moral facts within a complete and unified picture of how the world is.45

I have already argued that the picture of the world embraced by conventional theists is one in which moral facts can be located relatively easily. The details of the theistic account have traditionally been elaborated along the lines of the theory favored by Adams: divine command theory. According to the property-identity version of DCT, moral facts just are facts about God's commands. Standard objections to the Dependence Thesis have been developed with DCT in mind; its critics have usually assumed that the

45 I do not mean to imply here that Brink, Dworkin, Hurka, Nagel, and Sturgeon are defenders of Moorean intuitionism. It is not always easy to see, however, how they can avoid being committed to something like it.
Dependence Thesis would be developed in command-theoretic terms. I will argue below that DCT can be refined in ways that render it immune to these objections.

It is important to note, however, that nothing about the Dependence Thesis requires that it be developed along these lines. My own view is that it is more plausible to identify moral facts with facts about what is pleasing and displeasing to God than with facts about God’s commands. This is the account I have called divine attitude theory (DAT). The central claim of DAT is that it is morally wrong for S to φ in circumstances C just in case God would be displeased with S for φ-ing in C. This position will be spelled out in more detail in the next chapter, and reasons for preferring it to DCT will be discussed in Chapter 5. In the present context, all that really matters is to note that DAT represents another way in which the Dependence Thesis might be elaborated. In some cases, advocates of DAT will be able to provide responses to the Dependence Thesis’s critics that are more compelling than the responses offered by divine command theorists. These will be noted below.

2.2 The Karamazov Problem

If moral facts are identified with theological facts, then the nonexistence of God may imply that nothing is morally wrong. This is not a necessary implication because, for reasons noted in Chapter 1, it might be the case that there is some non-theological property F sufficiently well-suited to play the role carved out by our use of 'morally wrong' that we would be justified in taking that property to be moral wrongness. But let
us suppose, in order to appreciate the force of our first objection to the Dependence Thesis, that the Dependence Thesis does imply the following conditional: if God does not exist, then nothing is morally wrong.\textsuperscript{46} We can call this the Karamazov Problem, in light of Ivan Karamazov’s famous expression in \textit{The Brothers Karamazov} of the view that “if God does not exist, then everything is permissible.”\textsuperscript{47}

The Karamazov Problem is a \textit{problem} because this statement strikes many thoughtful persons as prima facie absurd. After all, some of our moral commitments are more or less non-negotiable. They are far less controversial than the proposition that God exists, and to suppose that their truth depends upon the truth of theism may seem rather fantastic. Consider this horrible account of cruelty in warfare, also from Ivan Karamazov:

> These Turks took pleasure in torturing children... cutting the unborn child from the mother’s womb, and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mothers’ eyes. Doing it before the mother’s eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They’ve planned a diversion: they pet the baby, laugh to make it laugh. They

\textsuperscript{46}It does seem to me, in light of the problems with nontheistic moral realisms discussed earlier, that this conditional is probably true.

\textsuperscript{47}This statement is so well known, and so widely attributed to the character of Ivan Karamazov, that it may come as a surprise to learn that this sentence does not actually appear anywhere in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. The character of Ivan does at least pretend to endorse this position in chapter 9 of Book III and in chapter 5 of Book V of \textit{The Brothers Karamazov} (cf. (Dostoevsky 1880, pp. 100, 200)), but the sentence itself (and its misattribution to Dostoevsky) seems to have found its way into philosophical parlance through Jean-Paul Sartre’s \textit{L’Existentialisme est un Humanisme}. Sartre says that the starting point for existentialist thought is found in the Russian novelist’s assertion of this view: “Dostoïevsky avait écrit: "Si Dieu n’existait pas, tout serait permis." C’est là le point de départ de l’existentialisme” (Bussière à Saint-Amand, France: Gallimard, 1996, p. 39).
succeed, the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby’s face. The baby laughs with glee, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and suddenly the [Turk] pulls the trigger in the baby’s face and blows out its brains (Dostoevsky 1880, 180).

It is difficult to find words strong enough to express our condemnation of these actions. To label them “morally wrong” is to grossly understate their awfulness. But it is important nevertheless to note that the actions in question are morally wrong: undeniably, uncontroversially, and unspeakably wrong. The Dependence Thesis, however, tells us that they are wrong only if God exists. And this is a claim that many reasonable people are unable to accept.

Perhaps the first thing to do, in responding to this challenge, is to recall the reasons we have for embracing the Dependence Thesis. The Dependence Thesis—at least, as I have presented it here—is the result of an investigation into the nature of moral properties. It is not offered as a definitional or conceptual truth to which our best theory of morality must conform, and it is certainly not meant to be an obvious or platitudinous claim about moral properties. It is intended, rather, as an account of what moral properties are in light of the role they play. Whatever the nature of moral wrongness may be, it should turn out to be something objective, normative, authoritative, categorical, knowable, and unified. And a question arises as to what candidates there are to play the role in question. We saw in Chapter 1 that if we consider no candidates other than those that are at home in a naturalistic ontology, we will have an enormously difficult time accommodating important features of that role.
On the other hand, if we suppose that God exists, and if we permit ourselves to consider
the possibility that moral wrongness might be identical to being forbidden by God (for
example), we discover that traditional theism has conceptual resources that are rich
enough to support a robust moral realism. The Dependence Thesis ought to be
embraced because it—or rather, more detailed theistic accounts like DCT and DAT that
entail it—provides an account of the nature of moral properties that satisfies our core
metaethical desiderata.

In other words, it is important to recognize that the theistic metaethicist takes the
wrongness of the Turks' behavior to be as obvious as anyone else does. That such
behavior is morally wrong is among the data that must be explained by a satisfactory
metaethical account. Defenders of the Dependence Thesis—at least, those defenders
who are sympathetic to the strategy I have employed here—will argue that nontheistic
accounts of the nature of morality should be rejected because they cannot vindicate the
metaethical desiderata of Chapter 1. Since theories that employ the Dependence Thesis
can vindicate those desiderata, the Dependence Thesis ought to be accepted. Having
embraced the Dependence Thesis on these grounds, one must indeed acknowledge that
if God did not exist, then nothing would be morally wrong. But now we can see that
this is not a costly concession for the theistic metaethicist to make. Admittedly, it is
surprising (in light of our prephilosophical intuitions about morality) that the true
account of deontic properties is such that nothing is wrong unless God exists. Because
we can see why this is so, however, this claim about morality is merely surprising—not
surprising and *therefore implausible*. And good theories are often surprising in this way. The heliocentric model of the solar system runs counter to our prescientific intuitions about astronomy, but it should be embraced nonetheless. The theoretical virtues of the heliocentric model—specifically its ability to offer a simple explanation of the relevant observational data—far outweigh its implausibility from the perspective of common sense. Likewise for the Dependence Thesis: theories like DCT and DAT offer explanatorily powerful accounts of the nature of deontic properties; they explain both *why* wrong acts are wrong and what it is that *unifies* the class of wrong actions. It is in light of these theoretical virtues that the theistic metaethicist is justified in accepting an admittedly counterintuitive consequence of her theory.

Furthermore, the sting of the counterfactual *if God does not exist, then nothing is morally wrong* can be reduced a bit by acknowledging two important points, one wholly uncontroversial and one somewhat controversial. The wholly uncontroversial point is this: if theism is true, then God exists. As noted above, the theistic metaethicist who employs the strategy suggested here for defending the Dependence Thesis takes both theism and the wrongness of the Turks’ actions for granted. These are among the assumptions on which her theory is based. Thus there is no reason, on this approach, to doubt the wrongness of the Turks’ actions in the actual world. It is not as though the theist is arguing that we must first establish the truth of theism in order to be justified in believing that one morally ought not torture babies in front of their mothers for the sake of amusement; the Dependence Thesis asserts a metaphysical claim about the nature of
moral properties, not an epistemological claim about the way we come to know moral truths. Consider the standard parallel case: our best theory about the nature of water implies the counterfactual \textit{if there is no H}_2O, \textit{then nothing is water}. But one need not believe this counterfactual, or know anything about hydrogen or oxygen, to know that water exists, that water is wet, or that water is something you can drink. The same kinds of considerations apply to the Dependence Thesis. Even if it is true, one need not believe that moral properties are identical to theological properties, or know anything about what God is like, to know that there are moral facts or that it is wrong to torture babies. At least some of the force of the Karamazov Problem, I believe, stems from a failure to recognize this point.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that \textit{much} of the force of the Karamazov Problem stems from the fact that we can easily imagine a world indistinguishable from our own with respect to all of its natural features but in which God does not exist. One alleged problem with the Dependence Thesis is that it implies that nothing is morally wrong in \textit{that} world, and, in the words of Michael Martin, “any theory with this paradoxical implication is prima facie unacceptable” (Martin 2002, 137). Such prima facie unacceptability might be removed by consideration of an account’s theoretical virtues, as suggested above. But defenders of the Dependence Thesis can do more than this. Another response to the Karamazov Problem rests on the somewhat controversial claim that God exists necessarily if God exists at all. To unpack this idea a bit, it will be helpful to explicitly recast the Karamazov Problem in terms of possible worlds. We can
then dissolve the problem, at least to a very significant degree, by thinking more
carefully about the claim that it is possible for there to be no God.

The Karamazov Problem rests on the intuition that the wrongness of torturing
babies in front of their mothers for the sake of amusement is fixed across all possible
worlds. We cannot conceive of a world, the thinking goes, in which such behavior is not
morally wrong. We can, however, conceive of a world in which God does not exist.
Therefore there is a possible world in which there is no God but in which the Turks'
behavior is morally wrong. And this fact is sufficient to show that the Dependence
Thesis is false.

This line of thinking, though initially plausible, is flawed in virtue of being too
hasty. Martin, like many other philosophers who offer this problem as a challenge to the
Dependence Thesis, fails to appreciate the fact that there are different ways in which a
scenario described by some proposition may be conceivable (or inconceivable). David
Chalmers has provided a taxonomy of kinds of conceivability that is useful here. For
our purposes, the salient distinction is between scenarios that are *prima facie conceivable*

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48 This conclusion assumes a real connection between conceivability and possibility. It is worth noting that
this is a contentious assumption. In conversation, Stewart Shapiro has suggested that there is no good
reason to think that there exists any real connection between conceivability (of any kind) and
metaphysical possibility, and Peter van Inwagen has defended a similar view, which he calls “modal
skepticism,” in (van Inwagen 1977). If Shapiro and van Inwagen are correct, then the Karamazov
Problem as presented by Martin turns out to be a non-starter. I will not attempt to prove Shapiro and
van Inwagen wrong on this score, but my discussion will proceed on the assumption that they are
indeed mistaken; i.e. that there is a connection between conceivability and possibility and that it takes
the form suggested below. Let it be noted that insofar as modal skepticism threatens to undermine my
solution to the Karamazov Problem, it also threatens to undermine the Karamazov Problem itself, and
hence appears to be ultimately congenial to the Dependence Thesis. I leave it to defenders of the
Dependence Thesis who are also modal skeptics to explore in detail the implications of modal skepticism
for the Karamazov Problem.
and scenarios that are *ideally conceivable*. Let 'P' refer to a proposition that describes some scenario. As the term suggests, P is prima facie conceivable when P is conceivable "on first appearances" (Chalmers 2002, 147). Roughly, this means that a person who considers P will not notice any contradiction in P when she initially brings it before her mind. P is ideally conceivable, however, when P is conceivable in light of ideal rational reflection. The difference between prima facie and ideal conceivability can be illustrated by consideration of a complex mathematical statement whose truth value is currently unknown but which will later be proved to be false. Such a statement is prima facie conceivable, but not ideally conceivable. Chalmers also employs the category of *secunda facie conceivability*, which is something of a halfway house between prima facie and ideal conceivability; P is secunda facie conceivable when a person reflects carefully on P and finds that P's prima facie conceivability is not thereby undermined.50

Each of these kinds of conceivability can be accepted as a guide to possibility, but we need to be careful to distinguish between epistemic possibility and metaphysical possibility. We also need to recognize that these different kinds of conceivability are not

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49 A full account of the nature of conceivability would spell these ideas out in more detail. For example, there are questions to ask about whether “a person” here should be read as “a normal adult person” or “a person whose intuitions are untainted by philosophical reflection” or some other alternative. My own view is that it makes sense to understand prima facie conceivability as a relative notion, such that P is prima facie conceivable for S just in case S does not detect any contradiction in P on first appearances. But nothing of importance for the present discussion rests on the viability of this suggestion. Similarly with the notion of ideal rational reflection: for my purposes here, this may be understood in purely formal terms, functioning as a placeholder for the best account of ideal rational reflection, whatever exactly that turns out to be.

50 Chalmers makes two further distinctions: between *positive conceivability* and *negative conceivability*, and between *primary conceivability* and *secondary conceivability*. These distinctions will not figure in the following discussion.
of equal worth when it comes to establishing (or attempting to establish) claims about what is metaphysically possible. If we know (or have good reason to believe) that $P$ is prima facie conceivable, then there is an epistemically possible world in which $P$ obtains, and we have some reason to believe that $P$ is metaphysically possible; if we know (or have good reason to believe) that $P$ is secunda facie conceivable, then there is an epistemically possible world in which $P$ obtains, and we have stronger reason to believe that $P$ is metaphysically possible; and if we know (or have good reason to believe) that $P$ is ideally conceivable, then there is an epistemically possible world in which $P$ obtains, and we have enormously strong reason to believe that $P$ is metaphysically possible.

In offering the Karamazov Problem as a challenge to the Dependence Thesis, Martin assumes (in effect) that it is ideally inconceivable for paradigmatically wrong actions to not be morally wrong. For the purposes of the present discussion, I am willing to grant this assumption. But what about his other key assumption? In what sense is it true that the nonexistence of God is conceivable? Obviously, it is not difficult to imagine myriad scenarios in which God does not exist. For example, one might vividly imagine a scenario in which the only thing that exists is one small marble, motionless for eternity. There is no obvious difficulty with this imaginative project, so we must conclude that the nonexistence of God is at least prima facie conceivable and therefore that there are epistemically possible worlds—e.g. the world containing just one motionless marble—in which God does not exist.
It is not nearly so obvious, however, that the nonexistence of God is secunda facie conceivable, and for the same reasons that might lead us to question the secunda facie conceivability of the nonexistence of God, theists may be rationally required to deny that the nonexistence of God is ideally conceivable. In a nutshell, this is because we have good reason to believe that necessary existence is an essential attribute of the divine being: God exists necessarily if God exists at all. This, it seems to me, is one of the principal lessons to be learned from recent discussions of the ontological argument for God’s existence. I will not pursue the idea in great detail here, but the basic line of thought is as follows. Insofar as we have an idea of God, we have an idea of a being of unsurpassable greatness, a being that exemplifies to the maximal degree such great-making attributes as knowledge and power. Reflection shows that a being's greatness is a function of its modal properties as well as its other features. A being that merely happens to be perfect in knowledge and power, who in some metaphysically possible worlds would be deficient with respect to various great-making attributes, and in other worlds would not exist at all, is thereby less great than a being that is maximally excellent in all metaphysically possible worlds. So a being of maximal greatness will ipso facto instantiate the property of maximal excellence in all metaphysically possible worlds.  

51 The difference between greatness and excellence, as implied in this paragraph, is that greatness is a transworld property. A being that is maximally excellent in world w has all the great-making properties to the maximal degree in w; a being that is maximally great has all the great-making properties. Perhaps it should also be noted that transworld identity is being presupposed here; philosophers who reject that notion will be required to reject the modal ontological argument along with it.
The remarkable upshot of this claim, when conjoined with the innocuous-seeming premise that it is metaphysically possible that God exists, is that it implies the existence of a maximally great being in all metaphysically possible worlds, including, of course, the actual world.\textsuperscript{52} That is to say, it implies that it is necessarily true that God exists. God's nonexistence may be prima facie conceivable, but anyone who accepts the claim that God's existence is metaphysically necessary will deny that the nonexistence of God is secunda facie or ideally conceivable. The nonexistence of God will fail to be secunda facie conceivable for that person because the conceivability of the nonexistence of God will not stand up for her under further reflection; she will see the inconsistency in attempting to suppose that a necessary being does not exist. Such a person will also take the nonexistence of God to be ideally inconceivable on the assumption that her belief in the metaphysical necessity of God's existence is true; whatever the details are concerning how we ought to flesh out the notion of ideal rational reflection, surely we will wish to maintain that if P is necessarily true, and S believes that P, then under conditions of ideal rational reflection, S will take the denial of P to be inconceivable.

A significant problem with the modal ontological argument lurks nearby. The problem is that when we conjoin the argument's claims about maximal greatness with the innocuous-seeming premise that it is metaphysically possible that God does not exist, we can prove that God's existence is impossible. Someone who accepts this atheistic version of the modal ontological argument may grant that God's existence is

\textsuperscript{52} Seminal discussions of this argument can be found in (Plantinga 1967) and (Plantinga 1974).
prima facie conceivable, but will maintain that it is neither secunda facie nor ideally conceivable because it is metaphysically impossible. Since maximal greatness is instantiated only if a being exists and is maximally excellent in all possible worlds, it follows that if we assume that there is a metaphysically possible world in which God does not exist, then there are no possible worlds in which God exists. Therefore atheism is necessarily true.

Obviously, a successful attempt to show that one of the two seemingly innocuous premises just mentioned (viz. it is metaphysically possible that God exists, it is metaphysically possible that God does not exist) must be embraced would be of enormous philosophical significance. I do not intend to make such an attempt here. For our purposes, what matters is that we are now in a position to see that theists and atheists alike have reason to believe that God’s existence is either metaphysically necessary or metaphysically impossible. Either every metaphysically possible world is such that God exists in that world, or every metaphysically possible world is such that God does not exist in that world. And if this is true, the significance of the Karamazov Problem will be diminished, because the theist will not merely be allowed but will be required to claim that there is no metaphysically possible world in which God does not exist, and therefore that there is no metaphysically possible world in which (moral assessment is possible but) nothing is morally wrong.\(^{53}\) In other words: the theist who

\(^{53}\) It is not entirely clear that a divine command theorist can confidently assert this claim. After all, it is not obvious that God must issue commands to his creatures in every possible world, and if there are metaphysically possible worlds in which God refrains from doing this, the divine command theorist will
embraces the Dependence Thesis may be committed to the conditional if God does not exist, then nothing is morally wrong, but she must also maintain that the antecedent of that conditional expresses a metaphysically impossible state of affairs. And thus for the theist, the Karamazov Problem turns out to be the relatively nonthreatening observation that, were a metaphysically impossible state of affairs to obtain, then the Dependence Thesis would yield untoward consequences. It is not easy to see why anyone should take this to be a compelling reason to embrace the Autonomy Thesis. Advocates of the Dependence Thesis may maintain that in any world that could actually exist (and in which moral assessments are possible) some actions are morally wrong. This fact seems sufficient to defuse whatever threat may initially be posed by the Karamazov Problem.

To return to the language of conceivability, we are now in a position to see more clearly where Martin et alia go wrong. The fact that God’s existence is either necessary or impossible requires the theist to maintain that the nonexistence of God is not ideally conceivable. If theism is true, then God exists in all metaphysically possible worlds; therefore, if theism is true and epistemically possible worlds are reliable guides to metaphysical possibility, God exists in all ideally conceivable worlds. What Martin argues is that there is a problem for the Dependence Thesis generated by the fact that we can conceive of worlds in which God does not exist but we cannot conceive of worlds in

not be able to make use of this reply to the Karamazov Problem. I believe that this is a serious problem for DCT, and will return to it in Chapter 5. The parenthetical comment here is important because of the possibility of worlds in which God is the only intelligent agent. In such worlds, nothing would be morally wrong, but only because moral assessment would be impossible. Problems with this suggestion will be discussed below, in the section on the Divine Ascription Problem.
which paradigmatically wrong actions are morally right. But this challenge is insufficiently fine-grained. The interesting and important claim is that there is no ideally conceivable world in which paradigmatically wrong acts are morally right. For reasons wholly independent of the Dependence Thesis, however, theists must maintain that there is no ideally conceivable world in which God does not exist. Therefore, if we restrict the domain of our discussion to ideally conceivable worlds, then the theist can claim that the Karamazov Problem does not arise: none of the ideally possible worlds are worlds in which God does not exist but some things are morally wrong.

2.3 The Arbitrariness Objection

A closely related challenge exists, however. It is perhaps the most well-known of the standard objections to the Dependence Thesis. Even if the Karamazov Problem can be avoided, the thinking goes, the Dependence Thesis does not impose restrictions concerning which actions are morally wrong. This leads to the Arbitrariness Objection. The relevant intuition here is that much of the substantive content of morality cannot be changed, even by a being of unlimited power. Yet the Dependence Thesis seems to imply that it can. If we embrace DCT, for example, we seem to be forced to embrace another implausible conditional: if God commanded us to perform some paradigmatically immoral action \( \phi \), then we would be morally required to \( \phi \). Being cruel for cruelty’s sake, intentionally seeking to maximize pain and minimize pleasure, lying whenever possible; any of these actions, along with a host of others, could be made morally obligatory.
simply by God commanding us to perform them. In the same way, paradigmatically virtuous actions like helping those who are in need, acting courageously, and being a careful steward of one's possessions would be morally wrong if God forbade them. But this seems absurd.

The standard—and, by my lights, perfectly satisfactory—response to the Arbitrariness Objection involves assuming that God has a determinate essential nature. In the words of Alvin Plantinga, “Most of us who believe in God think of Him as a being than whom it’s not possible that there be a greater. But we don’t think of Him as a being who, had things been different, would have been powerless or uninformed or of dubious moral character. God doesn’t just happen to be a greatest possible being; He couldn’t have been otherwise” (Plantinga 1974, 107). In every possible world in which God exists, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent. There are facts about God and God’s ways that do not vary from one possible world to another. And this makes it possible for the theist to maintain that some actions could not be commanded by God. There are constraints on which commands God could or could not issue, constraints that flow from God’s own essentially loving nature. The possibility of God commanding a paradigmatically immoral action is therefore nil.54 As with the

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54 One challenge for Jewish and Christian theists who adopt this response to the Arbitrariness Objection is to explain stories within that tradition in which God is portrayed as commanding an apparently immoral action. The classic example is the story of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis 22. A full discussion of this kind of problem lies outside the scope of my project; suffice it for now to say that when the Abraham and Isaac story is interpreted in the broader context of the life of Abraham, a strong case can be made that the sacrifice of Isaac no longer qualifies as paradigmatically immoral.
Karamazov Problem, so with the Arbitrariness Objection: the antecedent of the problematic conditional is false in all metaphysically possible worlds.

Recently, Erik Wielenberg has attempted to rebut this reply to the Arbitrariness Objection. His argument rests in large part on intuitions about a scenario in which two competitors are rivals in a contest. The winner of the contest will become omnipotent. One competitor is a benevolent person who intends to use his omnipotence, if he is the winner, for the benefit of all humanity. The other competitor is wholly malevolent. If he wins the contest and becomes omnipotent, he intends to kill most of the human race and enslave the rest, forcing them to live in excrement pits and torturing them regularly for his own amusement. Wielenberg writes,

As it happens, the second competitor wins the contest and becomes omnipotent. It seems clear that the worst has happened – a thoroughly vicious being has become all-powerful and the world is on the verge of being plunged into evil. Fortunately, this does not happen. This is because the first use to which the winner puts his newly acquired omnipotence is to change certain ethical facts. He makes it the case that the slaughter of innocents is fantastically good, that undeserved suffering is just, and that a human life devoted to serving him has the greatest possible amount of internal meaning. He also makes it the case that he himself is a morally perfect being. He does this not by changing the nature of his character, but rather by changing the nature of moral perfection. He then implements his now fantastically good and just plan. He slaughters most of the humans, throws the rest into the pits, and so on. But, because he changed the ethical facts first, the story has a happy ending. All is for the best. The film version of this scenario would leave you grinning like a fool as you left the theater (Wielenberg 2005, 42).
Wielenberg assumes, and I agree with him, that this story is absurd. It seems to be ideally inconceivable that any being could bring it about that it is good to behave as the omnipotent character in this story does. According to Wielenberg, however, no one who accepts this claim can consistently embrace the standard response to the Arbitrariness Objection given above.

The underlying reason for this involves a distinction between an agent’s *power* and an agent’s *capabilities*. An agent may have sufficient power to do things that she is incapable of doing. For example, most persons who are reading this essay have sufficient power to intentionally kill many of their fellow human beings. That is to say, there is a clear sense in which they are able to bring it about that many human beings become dead: perhaps by purchasing a gun and firing at random into a crowd, driving recklessly through pedestrian-rich intersections, constructing and detonating a bomb in a public place, or whatever. It also seems likely, however, that very few (if any) of the persons who are reading this essay are *capable* of doing such things. The ways in which they might exercise their power are limited by facts about their psychology. Thus there is also a clear sense in which, all things being equal, they are *not* able to bring it about that many human beings become dead; doing so is simply not a possibility for them, given the kinds of character they have. They lack the capability for such actions, even though they possess the requisite power.
The standard response to the Arbitrariness Objection can be understood as asserting that God is not capable of issuing certain commands; they are too far out of character for him. But the point of Wielenberg’s story is to show “that there are some ethical claims that no being is powerful enough to make true” (Wielenberg 2005, 49). This issue is simply ignored by the standard response. Insofar as the Dependence Thesis involves an implicit commitment to the claim that God is sufficiently powerful to make the torture of innocents a good and virtuous act, and does not do so merely because his character makes him incapable of it, it is an implausible claim and ought to be rejected.

This argument is flawed in two important respects. First, Wielenberg fails to appreciate the fact that a distinction can be made between evaluative moral facts and deontic moral facts. Indeed, Adams does make this distinction in his exposition of DCT and I have followed him in making that distinction here. Given the formulation of the Dependence Thesis I have proposed, one can embrace the Dependence Thesis and also maintain that the intrinsic goodness and badness of various states of affairs would not be affected in any way by changes in God’s commands or any other theological facts. A divine command theorist who accepts this version of the thesis might maintain that because God has the power to issue bizarre commands, God has the power to make torturing innocent persons just for the fun of it right. This does not imply, however, that God has the power to make it good. Were God to issue such commands, we might be in
the unenviable position of having moral duties to fulfill but never being able to bring about good states of affairs by fulfilling them. This would be tragic but—unlike the scenario proposed by Wielenberg—not incoherent.55

A second, and deeper, problem with Wielenberg’s argument is his assumption that the Dependence Thesis must be formulated in voluntaristic terms. He states his version of the thesis this way: “Every true ethical claim is true in virtue of some act of will on the part of God” (Wielenberg 2005, 41). Obviously, any criticism of this Dependence Thesis will count against DCT as well, since the issuing of a divine command is an act of will on the part of God. But there are theistic alternatives, such as DAT, that are not voluntaristic.

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that the distinction between evaluative moral facts and deontic moral facts is irrelevant to Wielenberg’s case. That is, let us suppose that his defense of the Arbitrariness Objection is successful and therefore decisive against DCT and other voluntaristic accounts of morality. It is not clear that the Arbitrariness Objection will pose any serious threat to a non-voluntaristic theistic account. Consider, for example, DAT. The central idea of this theory is that God is sometimes pleased and sometimes displeased by the actions of his creatures, and these divine attitudes are constitutive of moral properties. It is morally wrong for S to φ in C just in case God would be displeased with S for φ-ing in C.

55 I take the possibility of this suggestion to be obvious in virtue of the fact that there are substantive disagreements among philosophers concerning the nature of the relationship between the right and the good. Were it impossible to separate the two (or incoherent to suppose that they might be separated), much less disagreement on this topic would exist.
Some of the details here will be spelled out and defended in the next chapter.

For now, let us take for granted that God has a determinate essential nature, and that his nature includes the divine analogue of character traits: dispositions to feel and to act in certain distinctive ways. God, on this view, is a certain kind of person. He is the kind of person, let us suppose, who takes pleasure in action that is loving and merciful, and who is displeased by action that is cruel and unforgiving. Unlike human persons, whose character may change in dramatic ways over the course of their existence, it is plausible to think that a divine person's character is not in flux. This seems to follow from the idea that God is maximally excellent, or perfect (in the sense of "complete"). A maximally excellent being simply could not be fickle or capricious. Such a being could not have attitudes in one possible world that are radically different from the attitudes it has in another possible world. God's character must be more stable than that.

These observations have implications of enormous significance for the Arbitrariness Objection. First, if God's characteristic displeasure towards cruelty flows from his metaphysically necessary nature, then (as the standard response to the Arbitrariness Objection points out) there is no need to worry about possible worlds in which God's attitudes are radically different from God's attitudes in the actual world, because such worlds are metaphysically impossible. Second, in response to

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56 I am assuming here that to be fickle or capricious is to be indifferent in various ways to matters of genuine importance. With respect to unimportant matters, a maximally excellent being might make an arbitrary choice (e.g. in choosing to create physical beings with conscious minds, a maximally excellent being might choose to establish a correlation between brain states of kind B with mental states of kind M for no reason other than that some kind of correlation needs to be made). Such a choice would not be "fickle" or "capricious" in the sense that is relevant here.
Wielenberg's challenge, there is no reason to think that an omnipotent God has the power to change fundamental moral facts. This is because those facts are constituted by facts about God's own character, and God's character is essential to him being who he is. Even an omnipotent agent does not have the power to make it the case that God has a different character, any more than an omnipotent agent has the power to make it the case that water is not H₂O. Therefore, we may conclude that the Dependence Thesis is not undermined by the Arbitrariness Objection. Even if some elaborations of that thesis—viz. voluntaristic accounts—should be rejected in light of Wielenberg's argument, other theistic alternatives appear to avoid his objection.

2.4 The Divine Ascription Problem

A third challenge that is often raised against theistic metaethical accounts is that they make ascriptions of moral properties to God either meaningless or redundant. The first kind of worry can be allayed by once again noting that the version of the Dependence Thesis under discussion here makes a metaphysical claim rather than a semantic one, so there is no reason to think that the assertion “God acts rightly” will turn out to be equivalent in meaning to “God does what God does” or something similar. But concerns about the redundancy of such ascriptions cannot be dismissed so easily. For example, theists are wont to say that God is morally good, and one might think that a person's being morally good involves, at the very least, being disposed to fulfill one's moral obligations. But if deontic properties are identical to theological
properties, it is not clear how it can be the case that God has moral obligations and therefore it is not clear how God can be said to be morally good.\textsuperscript{57} Nor is it clear, for similar reasons, how God can be said to act rightly. Consider Abraham’s challenge to God in Genesis 18: “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?” If the Dependence Thesis is true, then it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that \textit{whatever} God does will turn out to be the right thing to do. Abraham need not worry; whether God destroys only the wicked or destroys the righteous along with the wicked, what he does is morally right. This seems rather odd. G. W. Leibniz expressed the problem this way, suggesting that advocates of the Dependence Thesis “deprive God of the designation \textit{good}: for what cause could one have to praise him for what he does, if in doing something quite different he would have done equally well?” (Leibniz 1710, 236).

To be clear, let us note that the challenge here has little or nothing to do with the possibility (or impossibility) that God might act in ways that are immoral. That worry is tantamount, I think, to the Arbitrariness Objection and is based on convictions about the substantive content of morality. The Divine Ascription Problem has to do with the fact that traditional theists believe that God merits praise and admiration for acting as he does, in a manner not wholly dissimilar to the manner in which morally excellent human beings merit our praise and admiration. But if moral excellence is at least in part

\textsuperscript{57} Cf. (Wainwright 2005, 115-16).
a matter of unfailingly doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong, and if moral rightness and wrongness are constituted by God’s attitudes towards agents, then to say that God is morally excellent is (at least in part) to say that God acts rightly, but this turns out to be the same thing as God acting in ways that are pleasing to himself. It is not obvious that anyone should be praised and admired for that.

I think there are two main things to say in response to this objection. First, there are many circumstances in which we do praise people for acting in ways that are pleasing to themselves. We do not usually praise or admire persons who act as they do for the sake of their own pleasure, and we infrequently praise and admire persons for taking pleasure in acting well, but moral theorists who favor a virtue-based approach to ethics have long maintained that the most praiseworthy kind of person is none other than the one who acts well and who finds pleasure in doing so. Consider Aristotle’s discussion of “conditions of character” in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; the difference between genuine moral virtue and mere continence, for Aristotle, is that the virtuous person’s desires are in accordance with reason (i.e. with what is right), whereas the continent person must overcome contrary desires in order to act in accordance with reason. The truly admirable person, at least in this tradition, is the one who actually enjoys doing what is right, for whom action in accordance with reason (i.e. right action) is easy and pleasurable.
At the very least, then, the defender of the Dependence Thesis may insist that she is in no worse a position than the Aristotelian vis-à-vis praise for agents who find morally right action pleasurable. More broadly, it seems safe to say that the Aristotelian position on this matter enjoys enormous intuitive plausibility. Once it is recognized that there is a difference between admiring a person for being a certain kind of person and admiring a person for doing what pleases that person, the apparent impropriety of the former sort of admiration dissolves. We might usefully elaborate this difference in terms of the de re/de dicto distinction. An utterance of the form 'S merits praise for doing what is pleasing to S' sounds odd when it is interpreted de dicto; the tacit suggestion is that S merits praise for doing whatever is pleasing to S, and there are no constraints on what might be pleasing to S. But the proper way to interpret 'God merits praise for doing what is pleasing to God' is de re: God merits praise for being a certain kind of person, for acting in certain good and characteristic ways. In a discussion of related issues, Edward Wierenga underscores this point in the form of a rhetorical question: “why could not God be praiseworthy for goodness so boundless it is not so much as possible for him to do evil?” (Wierenga 1989, 212). To praise God for his perfect goodness is to respond to God’s character in a natural and appropriate way.

Of course, this way of framing the issue may serve to highlight the central charge of the Divine Ascription Problem: metaethical accounts that imply the Dependence Thesis make the ascription of moral properties to God or God’s actions redundant. It seems, however, that the theist who praises God for his moral goodness or his just and
right actions means to be saying something more than merely that God does what God
does or that God obeys God's own commands or that God's actions are pleasing to
himself. It seems that there must be some further standard to which we can appeal and
by virtue of which God's actions qualify as morally right actions. Abraham's challenge
to God—"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?"—is naturally read as
making this very assumption.

The solution to this difficulty becomes apparent when we consider the kinds of
contexts in which Abraham (or anyone else) is likely to ascribe moral properties to God
and God's actions. Human beings normally acquire the ability to make moral
judgments through a lengthy, complicated, and largely subconscious process of
psychological development. Through the influence of others, we learn to assess the
value of various states of affairs and to make moral judgments about the rightness and
wrongness of various actions. We form and embrace a substantial set of moral beliefs
that constitute our "evaluative worldview," the lens through which we interpret and
assess our experiences (at least in part). The upshot, for present purposes, is that no one
comes to the point of being able to express Abraham's challenge, or to consideration of
the Divine Ascription Problem, without a substantive set of moral background beliefs
already in place. In normal circumstances, these background beliefs will not constitute a

58 Readers who are surprised to find no explicit mention of the "Euthyphro Problem" in this chapter
should note that one of the horns of that traditional dilemma can be expressed in this way; the
Arbitrariness Objection expresses the other.
59 There are, of course, different theories about the details of this process, but I take it that my statements
here are uncontroversial. For a very plausible account of some of the details, see (Zagzebski 2004).
metaethical theory about the nature of morality itself; rather, they will be first-order normative beliefs about paradigmatically right and paradigmatically wrong actions.

In describing God’s actions as morally good and meriting praise, therefore, the theist can be understood as claiming that God acts in ways that are characteristic of admirable and praiseworthy persons. When Abraham challenges God to do what is right, he states his assumption that God can be expected to act in ways that do not flout his (Abraham’s) first-order standards concerning moral rightness. Were Abraham to become interested in metaethics and reflect further, and were he to find the argument of this dissertation cogent, he would go on to discover that God’s own attitudes are themselves constitutive of deontic properties. This might render him unlikely to issue the challenge he issued in Genesis 18, but if it does it will only be because he would have acquired a set of second-order moral beliefs in light of which his first-order assessment of God’s actions as morally right is a foregone conclusion — or at least wholly unsurprising.

In short, then, the critic of the Dependence Thesis who presses the Divine Ascription Problem is correct: theists’ claims about the moral goodness and praiseworthiness of God do presuppose the existence of standards by which we can evaluate God and God’s actions. What the critic fails to appreciate, however, is that the Dependence Thesis makes a claim at a different level of discourse. Normative evaluation is one thing; theoretical accounts of the nature of normative properties are another. The Dependence Thesis, in effect, proposes that any sound analysis of the
standards by which we evaluate the moral goodness of God (or anyone else) will lead us back to facts about God himself. This claim may appear to be circular, but if it is, the circle is not a vicious one. To modify slightly an example offered by William Alston, we can determine whether the standard meter in Paris really is a meter long by measuring it.\textsuperscript{60} We might then engage in a theoretical investigation into the nature of meterhood and discover, at the end of it, that the ultimate explanation of the standard meter’s being one meter long is that the standard meter is as long as itself. The point here becomes especially clear if we change the name of the standard meter so that semantic redundancy does not obscure the issue; suppose that there is a stick (the standard meter) in Paris named Stan. We measure Stan according to accepted practices for measurement, and we discover that Stan is precisely one meter long. We engage in the theoretical investigation just mentioned, and discover that the ultimate explanation for Stan’s being one meter long is that Stan is the standard meter, the very paradigm of meterhood.

The implications for the Divine Ascription Problem are obvious. Critics claim that the Dependence Thesis renders statements like ‘God is good’ problematically redundant, but we can now see that they are no more redundant than statements like ‘Stan is one meter long’. Our standards for normative assessment can be applied to God as effectively as they can be applied to anyone else, just as the standard meter can be measured by any other measuring device we care to employ. So long as we have good

\textsuperscript{60} Cf. (Alston 1990, 321).
reason to think that theism can explain the nature of moral properties, we have good reason to embrace the Dependence Thesis. And the Divine Ascription Problem gives us no reason to think otherwise.
CHAPTER 3

DIVINE ATTITUDE THEORY: NEITHER IMPOSSIBLE NOR IMPLAUSIBLE

We have now seen that there are good reasons for theists to embrace the Dependence Thesis, and that none of the standard objections to the Dependence Thesis are compelling. The next step, for the theistic metaethicist, is to specify in more detail the kinds of theological facts on which moral facts are thought to depend. Traditionally, theistic philosophers involved in this sort of project have appealed to divine commands to fill in this part of the account. An action is morally wrong, according to divine command theorists, if it is forbidden by God; morally required if it is commanded by God; morally optional if it is neither forbidden nor commanded by God; and supererogatory if it “goes beyond” the commands of God in a praiseworthy way.\footnote{A fully satisfactory version of DCT would spell out the nature of supererogatory action in more detail than this, but there is no need to pursue the relevant possibilities here.} For reasons that will be discussed in more detail later, I do not believe that this is the best account a theist can offer. More plausible, by my lights, is the theory I have called divine attitude theory (DAT). My purpose in this chapter is not primarily to argue for DAT, but to briefly describe it and then defend it from some very general challenges.
Congruent with my earlier discussion of the Dependence Thesis, DAT is not offered as a complete account of all the moral facts there are. DAT recognizes a distinction between evaluative moral facts (e.g. it is good to be honest) and deontic moral facts (e.g. persons are morally obliged to be honest), and purports merely to be an account of the latter. The moral wrongness of an action, on this account, consists in God's being displeased with the agent who performs that action. DAT holds that an action is morally required if God would be displeased with an agent for failing to perform it; morally optional if God would be neither pleased nor displeased with an agent for performing it or failing to perform it; and supererogatory if God would be pleased with an agent for performing it but not displeased with an agent for omitting it.

One fairly obvious virtue of this account is its ability to make claims that are more nuanced than the claims made by many of its rivals. For one thing, DAT can offer nuanced elaborations of the standard deontic categories listed above. It is natural to suppose that divine displeasure, like human displeasure, admits of degrees, and thus it is natural for a divine attitude theorist to maintain that moral wrongness admits of degrees as well. DAT thereby provides us with the conceptual resources to explain why murder generally seems to be more wrong than lying. Not all moral theories will be able to offer such an explanation; DCT, for example, seems to imply that moral wrongness is a non-degreed property, since an action either violates God's commands or it does not. This is not, by my lights, a decisive reason for preferring DAT to DCT; it is important to distinguish between an action's wrongness and its badness, and this distinction enables
a divine command theorist (for example) to claim that murder is typically *much worse*, or a *more serious wrong*, than lying. Nevertheless, the ease with which DAT accommodates the commonsensical notion that some actions are more wrong than others is at the very least an attractive feature of the account.

A second respect in which DAT allows for more nuanced deontic assessments than some of its rivals appears when we consider actions that are morally “mixed.” To take a standard case, imagine a businessperson who donates a large sum of money to a worthy charity but does so primarily because she believes that the positive publicity generated by her donation is likely to yield financial dividends over the long haul, not because she properly assesses the worthiness of the charity. It seems correct to say that such a person has done no wrong in supporting the charity, but she has done wrong in how she deliberated and in what she took to be sufficient reasons for acting. On DAT, it is easy to explain why this is so. Since God can be pleased with an agent in some respects while being displeased with her in other respects, it is not surprising to find that our actions are occasionally praiseworthy in some ways but condemnable in others.

A third way in which DAT allows for nuanced moral judgments becomes apparent in light of its implications concerning the existence of moral dilemmas. An agent faces a moral dilemma when she is in a situation such that, no matter what she does, the action she takes will be morally wrong. Many philosophers believe that there can be no genuine moral dilemmas, because a person who must choose one from among an array of prima facie wrong actions, and successfully chooses the least of all the
possible evils, thereby acts rightly. But it is not always easy to see how this claim can be justified. DCT, for example, seems to imply that a person could often be in a situation in which any action she takes will violate some divine command or other. Standard illustrations include cases in which obligations of promissory fidelity and beneficence come into conflict. If God has commanded us to keep our promises and also to help those who are in need, then we may sometimes find ourselves in situations in which we must violate a divine command: as, for instance, when one must choose between keeping an appointment and helping a stranded motorist. Keeping the appointment means not assisting the motorist, and hence failing to help a person in need; helping means missing the appointment, and hence failing to keep a promise. Either way a divine command is violated and a wrong action is performed.

Divine command theorists may respond to this claim in a variety of ways. One option is to simply bite the bullet and claim that there are indeed moral dilemmas. Another option is to propose a hierarchical ranking of moral principles in order to resolve such conflicts. A third alternative is to solve the problem (and others like it) by distinguishing between perfect and imperfect duties and then arguing that perfect duties like promissory fidelity always take precedence over imperfect duties like beneficence. Whether any or all of these suggestions are tenable, it should be clear that DAT can offer a simpler (and, in my view, more appealing) solution to the problem. DAT tells us that in any situation, an agent acts wrongly if and only if God is displeased with that agent.
for acting as she does. On the reasonable assumption that God would not be displeased with a person who chooses the least bad of several unattractive options, it follows that a person who chooses the least bad of several unattractive options does not act wrongly.

In this vein, it should be emphasized that the divine attitudes appealed to in DAT are *agent-directed* attitudes. The rightness or wrongness of an action is not taken to be a function of divine attitudes toward the states of affairs that might be produced by that action, or even toward the action itself, but of divine attitudes toward the agent who performs the action in virtue of performing that action. (We will see in the next chapter that this feature of DAT enables it to avoid criticisms that have been leveled against otherwise similar theistic accounts.) It should also be explicitly stated that DAT is logically compatible with any imaginable theory about the nature of value, whether theistic or non-theistic; an advocate of this position need not take moral goodness and badness to depend in any way on divine attitudes.

To speak so casually about divine attitudes—to suppose, that is, that God is literally pleased and displeased by the actions of human agents—is to invite various kinds of criticism. My principal goal in this chapter is to allay two common philosophical worries that, if legitimate, would quickly undermine DAT. One such worry involves the extreme claim that it is impossible to say anything true about the divine being, because that being is completely transcendent—“wholly other,” as it is often said. Since we are merely finite, contingent beings, the thinking goes, we have no reason to believe and every reason to doubt that our concepts are applicable to God.
This includes, of course, concepts like is pleased by and is displeased by. The other worry I will address focuses not on the general applicability of our concepts to God, but on the plausibility of the suggestion that God experiences affective states like pleasure and displeasure. Many have thought that there is something untoward about the suggestion that a maximally excellent being is literally pleased and displeased by the actions of human agents. I will argue that neither of these worries withstands critical examination.

3.1 Can We Say Anything about God?

Perhaps no thinker is more closely associated with the idea that God is “wholly other” than the twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich. In a characteristic passage, Tillich asserts that it is impossible for us to speak literally of God:

[T]he attributes of God, whatever you say about him: that he is love, that he is mercy, that he is omniscient, that he is omnipresent, that he is almighty... These attributes of God are taken from experienced qualities we have ourselves. They cannot be applied to God in the literal sense. If this is done, it leads to an infinite amount of absurdities (Tillich 1955, 52).

Tillich seems to take these infinite absurdities to be self-evident. He does not, unfortunately, explain in any detail what it is that makes predications like “God is omnipresent” absurd. It is nevertheless clear that statements like “God is displeased with Smith for behaving cruelly” and “God is pleased with Jones for giving so

Footnote 62: For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that I will understand ‘literal’ in the following uncontroversial way: to “make a literal use of a predicate term (in one of its meanings) in a subject-predicate statement [is to] utter the sentence with the claim that the property signified by the predicate term is possessed by the subject (i.e., the referent of the subject term), or holds between the subject, if the predicate is a relational one” (Alston 1989, 394).
generously to charity,” understood literally, would also be rejected by Tillich as absurd. If he is right to do so, then a serious problem exists for DAT, since its claims about divine pleasure and displeasure are intended to be taken as literal statements of fact. In order to know whether the putative problem here is real or imagined, it would be helpful to locate the source of the absurdity Tillich claims to have identified.

Tillich makes a distinction between the literal meaning of religious language and the symbolic meaning of religious language. At first glance, this might seem akin to the familiar and colloquial distinction between literal and metaphorical uses of language. All of us recognize that expressions like “He put his foot in his mouth” have literal meanings that are quite different from their (intended) metaphorical meanings. To put one’s foot in one’s mouth is, metaphorically, to say something that one wishes (or should wish) one would not have said. But Tillich means something quite different from this when he speaks of the “symbolic” nature of religious language. To use language symbolically is to use it in a way that is neither literal nor metaphorical. Theological language is symbolic, according to Tillich, by virtue of being a tool that we employ in order to experience the divine. Theological language “directs us to something through which the Ultimate can be experienced” (Peterson et al. 1998, 180).

The details of this view are less than wholly clear; among other things, it is not obvious whether Tillich’s claims about the symbolic nature of theological discourse are offered as descriptions of actual religious practice, or as prescriptions concerning how theists ought to talk about the divine. Nor is it clear whether, on Tillich’s view, it is the
language itself through which God is experienced, or if the language points to a non-linguistic symbol that, in turn, affords us an encounter with the divine. Here are Tillich’s own words, in which he explains how a religious symbol differs from a mere linguistic sign:

The difference between symbol and sign is the participation in the symbolized reality which characterizes the symbols, and the nonparticipation in the “pointed-to” reality which characterizes a sign. For example, letters of the alphabet as they are written, an “A” or an “R” do not participate in the sound to which they point; on the other hand, the flag participates in the power of the king or the nation for which it stands and which it symbolizes (Tillich 1955, 45-46).

Without a clear account of the “participation” relation itself, this explanation of what a symbol is remains somewhat opaque. One way of interpreting this passage is to understand Tillich as maintaining that when a Christian utters a statement like “God sent his son to save us,” these words are being used to point to an idea or an image—e.g. the image of a baby being born in a manger—and that idea or image is a symbol through which the Christian encounters the divine. Another interpretation is that the sentence itself “participates in the symbolized reality,” and therefore the Christian encounters God by adopting some appropriate attitude toward the sentence or toward the proposition expressed by the sentence. Either way, the point Tillich wants to emphasize—and the point that seems to threaten the central claim of DAT—is that a sentence like ‘God sent his son to save us’ or ‘God is pleased with you for telling the truth’ cannot express a literal truth.
Tillich’s reasons for adhering to this position seem to be connected to his claims about the absurdity of non-symbolic uses of theological language, and one is warranted in holding that the following argument expresses the crux of his reasoning:

(1) Theological language is either used literally (i.e. to predicate properties of the divine being) or it is used symbolically (i.e. as a way of experiencing ultimate reality).\(^{63}\)

(2) Theological language cannot be used literally, because that would be absurd.

(3) Therefore, theological language is used symbolically.

For our purposes here, the crucial claim is the one made in premise (2). What, precisely, is so absurd about speaking literally about God? In the following passage, Tillich gives us at least a hint as to his answer to this question. He asks us to consider statements like the one small sentence: “God has sent his son.” Here we have in the word “has” temporality. But God is beyond our temporality, though not beyond every temporality... And when we speak of him and his Son, we have two different substances and apply the category of substance to him. Now all this, if taken literally, is absurd... if we are not able to make understandable to our contemporaries that we speak symbolically when we use such language, they will...

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\(^{63}\) One might think that metaphorical uses of language represent a third option here, but Tillich would argue (correctly, in my view) that metaphorical language ultimately reduces to literal language. ‘He put his foot in his mouth’ does not literally mean that he put his foot in his mouth, but it does literally mean that he said something he wishes (or should wish) he would not have said. Metaphorical language, unlike symbolic language, is an indirect way of predicating properties of something, and it is the predication of properties to God that Tillich finds objectionable. I should also mention that the Thomistic view that theological language is allegorical—i.e. our predicates are neither univocally applied to God nor equivocally applied to God (see Aquinas’s \textit{Summa Contra Gentiles} I.32-34 for a classic statement of this view)—does not represent a genuinely distinct option in this debate. In practice, defenders of the allegorical view tend to veer toward univocity with respect to some theological claims, and toward equivocation with respect to others. When they veer toward univocity, their position is very difficult to distinguish from the view I defend here: viz. that literal predications of God are indeed possible. When they veer toward equivocation, their position is very difficult to distinguish from the Tillich-style theological skepticism I argue against below.
rightly turn away from us, as from people who still [believe] in absurdities and superstitions” (Tillich 1955, 52-53).

There seem to be two different sources of absurdity here, two respects in virtue of which literal statements about God’s pleasure, omniscience, or action ought to be thought absurd.

One source of absurdity, apparent in the final sentence of the passage, is the fact that such language runs contrary in many ways to contemporary intellectual sensibilities. More than a few well-informed persons living in the mid-twentieth (as well as the early twenty-first) century would take statements like “God is displeased with you for being deceitful,” when offered as literal descriptions of matters of fact, to be expressions of silly, outmoded, and obviously false ways of thinking. No doubt Tillich is right on this score. But it seems unreasonable for traditional theists to capitulate to contemporary intellectual sensibilities merely for the sake of accommodating those sensibilities. Christians in particular have a long tradition of assenting to propositions that are out of step with current intellectual fashions; the Apostle Paul famously described his own message as “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks” (1 Corinthians 1:23), and none other than Jesus of Nazareth himself is reported to have said to his followers that “the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God” (John 16:2). The threat to Christian philosophers and theologians in the contemporary English-speaking world is considerably less dire than this, but the relevant point is that the Christian community
has not traditionally taken the unpopularity of Christian doctrine to be a reason for abandoning that doctrine. And this seems to be an intellectually healthy attitude to embrace. Certainly, if assenting to Christianity (or theism) can be shown to be irrational, then the Christian theist ought to reconsider her commitments. Likewise for the literal predication of properties to God. The fact that many persons find literal God-talk silly, however, does not constitute an argument for the irrationality of Christian (or theistic) belief, nor does it constitute a reason to think that theological discourse ought to be construed in non-literal terms. As Alvin Plantinga has written, “the Christian philosophical community has a right to its perspective; it is under no obligation first to show that this perspective is plausible with respect to what is taken for granted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or the leading philosophers of our day” (Plantinga 1984, 315). I will argue in the next section that there are reasons from within the perspective of the Christian philosophical community to think that literal talk of divine pleasure and displeasure is warranted; for now, it will suffice to note that the silliness of such talk in the eyes of “our contemporaries,” to use Tillich’s phrase, is not a reason to abandon it.

Worries about respectability in the intellectual world, however, do not seem to be Tillich’s only reason for taking literal uses of theological language to be absurd. Indeed, they do not seem to be his principal reason for doing so. A more philosophically pressing challenge can also be found in the passage quoted above: his comment about God being “beyond our temporality” reflects a commitment to the transcendence of
God, a theological doctrine to which traditional theists of all stripes are committed. Roughly, to say that God is transcendent is to say that “God is a being independent of and superior to the rest of the universe” (Erickson 1998, 339). God is not merely one among many features of reality; God is the ultimate reality, the fundamental ground of all being: “by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17). In the standard spatial metaphor, God is thought of as being “outside” or “beyond” the physical universe. Accordingly, it seems that God must be understood as being fundamentally different from us in sundry important ways. God’s very mode of being differs from ours; the divine essence is not “limited by the structure of creaturely existence,” and God’s essential attributes are not limited by the structure of human thought (Peterson et al. 1998, 179). God is eternal, the uncreated creator, and possesses maximal power and knowledge. In short, theists as such seem forced to maintain that God is a “wholly other” kind of being. It is evidently this claim about God that motivates Tillich and others to adopt the view that it is in principle impossible to use human language to successfully predicate anything of God.

As easy as it is to understand the motivation for this position, it is equally easy to show that the transcendence of the divine being does not straightforwardly imply the inapplicability of our concepts to that being.\textsuperscript{64} Quite the contrary; to assert the sentence ‘Because God is transcendent, it is impossible to speak literally of God’ is to commit

\textsuperscript{64} I am here taking talk of “predicates” to be roughly interchangeable with talk of “concepts.”
oneself to a self-referentially incoherent proposition. Tillich and others who make such claims must have some kind of understanding of what transcendence is; otherwise they would not appeal to it in order to justify their views about theological language. (Such understanding admits of degrees, of course—some persons may have a very clear and precise understanding of transcendence, while others may have a minimally adequate understanding of it—but this is a general fact about concepts and not a unique problem for theists or those interested in theological discourse.) Furthermore, Tillich and others are quite willing to assert that God is, in fact, transcendent, and it is difficult to see how this assertion can be understood as anything other than a literal statement about God. When Tillich asserts that “God is beyond our temporality,” he seems to mean that God is literally beyond our temporality. It would be a gross injustice to Tillich—and it would be quite silly—to interpret all of his theological writings in merely “symbolic” terms, holding that Tillich’s claim that God is transcendent has no cognitive content but is in reality a tool used to by Tillich in order to encounter the divine. If Tillich really means what he says, then he is committed to the view that transcendence, at the very least, can be literally predicated of God. And this, in turn, implies the falsity of his claim that none of our concepts can literally apply to God.

Of course, Tillich and others who are sympathetic to his position might concede this point while maintaining that transcendence is the only concept (or one member of a relatively small set of concepts) that can literally be applied to God. One might be

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65 Alvin Plantinga offers basically the same argument in (Plantinga 1980); cf. pp. 22-26.
tempted to reject this maneuver as ad hoc, but that would be a mistake. Even if it is incoherent to insist that none of our concepts can be literally applied to God because God is transcendent, we can preserve the spirit of Tillich’s challenge by focusing on the fact that theists of nearly all stripes will agree with him that God is a fundamentally different kind of thing than a human being is, and that God undoubtedly does exceed our ability to understand God in many and unimaginable ways. With these points of agreement squarely in view, one may quickly become more sympathetic to Tillich’s suggestion that we cannot speak literally about God—at least in general. To choose an example at random, it is not obvious that a being capable of creating universes ex nihilo via an act of its will is also the sort of being to whom ‘merciful’ and ‘kind’ can literally apply. This is not because unimaginably powerful creators must, as a matter of conceptual necessity, be cruel, but because we learn what mercy and kindness are in the context of human linguistic communities and we learn how to apply ‘mercy’ and ‘kindness’ to human beings. Any entity that can create a universe simply by willing it to exist is ipso facto radically different from human beings; the applicability of human concepts to it is thereby called into question.

The problem with this line of reasoning is twofold. First, it fails to acknowledge the simple and obvious fact that a concept acquired in one context, once mastered, may quite easily (and legitimately) be applied in other contexts. A person could come to grasp the concept being a winner exclusively through playing Monopoly, but this does not preclude the person from being able to understand what it is to be the winner of a
chess match, or a soccer game, or an election, or a war, or a Darwinian struggle for survival, even though the circumstances that constitute winning any one of these contests are quite different from the circumstances that constitute winning any of the others. Just the opposite, in fact; it may be that a person can make sense out of what it is to win in war by virtue of understanding what it is to win in Monopoly. Similarly, even though being a human is surely very different from being a duck or an ant, we can (and do) say that mother ducks literally care about their ducklings and that ants are literally industrious. The many and obvious dissimilarities that exist do not render us unable to literally speak of other animals as concerned, protective, or hard-working. By the same token, no thoughtful theist doubts that what it is like to be God is radically unlike what it is like to be a human being. But this fact alone does not imply that we are unable to speak of God as literally merciful and kind. What Tillich needs is an argument to show that the respects in which God is different from human beings are such that it is impossible to describe him as literally merciful and literally kind. Merely to assert that God is “wholly other” will not suffice, any more than one could appeal to the fact that warfare is really quite different from Monopoly to demonstrate that our concept of winning cannot be applied literally to both.66

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66 For the sake of clarity, I should mention that Tillich does not explicitly make this kind of argument on behalf of his view. He seems to take the transcendence of God to straightforwardly imply the inapplicability of our concepts to God, and this argument is offered as an attempt to justify that inference.
This point is closely intertwined with a second problem affecting (the revised version of) Tillich’s argument: it misplaces the burden of proof. In seeking to determine whether it is possible speak literally about God, we can adopt either of two stances. We can begin with a presumption in favor of the possibility of literal God-talk, or a presumption against that possibility. If we adopt the first stance, we will take literal talk about God to be legitimate unless proven otherwise, with “legitimacy” being understood roughly in terms of truth-aptness. If we adopt the second stance, we will assume that literal talk about God is illegitimate unless proven otherwise. Obviously, Tillich adopts the second stance. His reasons for doing so appear to be exhausted, however, by the appeals to contemporary intellectual sensibilities and divine transcendence discussed above. As was just argued, however, the mere fact that God must be quite different from human beings is not sufficient reason to suppose that human linguistic predicates cannot be literally applied to God. Mutatis mutandis, the mere fact that God must be quite different from human beings is not sufficient reason to suppose that we should presume that human linguistic predicates cannot be applied to God. No good reason has been offered on behalf of this presumption.

67 It is difficult to offer a precise analysis of legitimacy. As the reference to truth-aptness is meant to indicate, legitimacy does not imply veracity. Illustrations may be useful for elucidating the basic idea: traditional Christians would take the proposition that God is malicious to be false, but also legitimate in the sense that is relevant here—roughly, it makes sense to talk like this. Theological discourse is truth-apt. Tillich, in contrast, would deny that either ‘God is kind’ or ‘God is malicious’ expresses a proposition that is true or false, and would maintain that both (when understood literally) are illegitimate ways of talking—roughly, it does not make sense to talk like this; for Tillich, theological discourse is not truth-apt.
On the other hand, we do have good reason to adopt the contrary presumption, stemming from the fact that literal predications of God are at least prima facie coherent. The purported absurdity of propositions like “God is benevolent” and “God is displeased by her callousness” is quite unlike the absurdity of propositions like “2 + 2 = 5” and “the entire surface of this object is uniformly red and uniformly green at the same time.” Nor does the divine attitude theorist make an obvious and transparent category mistake like the person who asserts that the number two is green, or who proposes to discover the square root of spaghetti. If there is an absurdity to be acknowledged here, it is not exactly one that leaps off the page. Indeed, very many thoughtful persons—theists and nontheists alike—for very many centuries have been quite willing to embrace literal claims about the divine being, even after considerable critical reflection. They may all have been mistaken to do so, of course, but the fact that countless numbers of rational agents have taken themselves to be assenting to or denying meaningful propositions concerning what God is like suggests that there is a presumption in favor of the possibility of literal God-talk. In the terminology employed in Chapter 2, we might say that the prima facie conceivability of propositions like “God is benevolent” (understood literally) generates a presumption in favor of the possibility of such propositions (understood literally) being legitimate. What’s more, the fact that

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68 For the sake of readability, the present discussion moves rather freely between talk of propositions, statements, and sentences. Strictly speaking, this sentence should read as follows: The purported absurdity of propositions expressed by sentences like ‘God is benevolent’ and ‘God is displeased by her callousness’ is quite unlike the absurdity of propositions expressed by sentences like ‘2 + 2 = 5’ and ‘the entire surface of this object is uniformly red and uniformly green at the same time.’. Similar qualifications apply throughout.
this conceivability has withstood considerable reflection by thoughtful and informed persons implies that the possibility of literal God-talk is secunda facie conceivable as well as prima facie conceivable, and it is reasonable to think that this secunda facie conceivability generates an even stronger presumption in favor of the possibility that literal God-talk is legitimate.

Thus we are forced to accept two conclusions: (i) there are at least some predicates that can be literally applied to God (at the very least, we can say that God is literally transcendent); and (ii) for any predicate P, the claim that the transcendence of God makes it impossible to apply P literally to God is a claim that needs to be defended. There must be some particular respect in which God is transcendent and in virtue of which P is inapplicable to God. For example, we have already noted Tillich's claim that it is absurd for Christians to believe that God literally has sent his son to save us because (at least in part), "God is beyond our temporality." But—at the risk of belaboring the point—it simply does not follow from the fact that God's experience of time transcends our own that therefore God cannot have acted in the past or, more generally, acted in such a way that temporal language might accurately describe that action. An argument must be made to show how we can be justified in moving from Tillich's premise to his conclusion. There must be some fact about divine temporality that makes it the case that using 'has' when speaking of divine action is absurd. This is not to assert that Tillich's conclusion is false, of course; perhaps there is some fact about divine temporality such that it is absurd to make claims about what God literally "has" done.
All that is being asserted here is a claim about the burden of proof: because literal predications of God are not prima facie absurd, there is a presumption in favor of the claim that literal God-talk is not absurd. For any sentence of the form ‘God is F’ such that there is a question concerning whether it is possible to speak of God as being literally F, the burden of proof lies on the person who claims that it is impossible to speak of God as being literally F.

As was suggested earlier, there is an analogy here with metaethical debates over the truth-aptness of moral discourse. Cognitivists and noncognitivists disagree with each other concerning whether ‘abortion is morally permissible’ is the kind of statement that can be true or false. It is reasonable to maintain—as many do maintain\(^69\)—that the surface grammar of moral discourse and our actual moral practice make cognitivism the default position in this debate. This does not prove that cognitivism is true, of course; it merely implies that the onus is on noncognitivists to show that their position is correct.

Similar claims apply in the present context. Embracing literal God-talk is akin to embracing moral cognitivism; Tillich’s position is the theological analog of moral noncognitivism. Just as the debate over whether abortion actually is morally permissible is distinct from the debate over whether ‘abortion is morally permissible’ is

\(^{69}\) Cf. (Brink 2007), and (McNaughton 1988, ch. 3) for representative examples.
truth-apt, so the claim that God actually is pleased and displeased by the actions of his creatures is distinct from the claim that it makes sense to employ literal God-talk.\textsuperscript{70} My claim about the burden of proof is meant only to apply to the latter.

3.2 An Unsurpassable Passable Being

Many of those who will grant this claim about the burden of proof, however, and even many of those who believe that there are predicates that can be applied literally to God, will maintain that DAT is nevertheless in trouble. Such critics may hold that discussion of divine attitudes can be legitimate (i.e. meaningful and coherent), but that attributions to God of affective states like pleasure and displeasure are systematically false. There are two main reasons for holding this view. First, the supposition that the divine being is literally pleased and displeased by the actions of human agents is thought by some to be obviously and grossly implausible, to such a degree that it can reasonably be rejected without further argument. In his comments on an initial presentation and defense of DAT, William McBride expresses this line of thinking, dismissing talk of God's pleasure and displeasure on the grounds that it “strikes me as altogether too chummy, too – dare I say it? – anthropomorphic to be applied to the alleged entity” (McBride unpublished, 4). According to this objection, no being worthy of the title “God” could be the sort of being that experiences pleasure and displeasure in anything like the way in which humans do.

\textsuperscript{70} Related, but distinct, issues include whether we can \textit{know} that God is pleased and displeased by the actions of his creatures, and \textit{which} of those actions are pleasing and displeasing to God.
This is a difficult challenge to refute. Below, I will discuss some positive reasons for embracing the doctrine of divine passability, and if those arguments are cogent, they should go a long way toward undermining the implausibility of the assertion that God is pleased and displeased by human actions. It is unlikely, however, that anyone who finds the impropriety of speaking of divine pleasure and displeasure to be as obvious as McBride and others do will be persuaded by these considerations. I suspect that the denial of the conclusion of those arguments will continue to appear, in the eyes of this sort of critic, more plausible than the premises of those arguments. For my part, although I hope to make a strong case for divine passability in what follows, I am willing to concede that if talk of divine displeasure is “too chummy” to be taken seriously, then DAT itself should not be taken seriously. This implication seems unavoidable.

The second reason for rejecting the attribution of affective states like pleasure and displeasure to God is grounded in “perfect being theology.” No traditional theist will maintain that God is anything less than absolutely perfect. (I suspect that few nontraditional theists will maintain this either.) A wholly uncontroversial account of what divine perfection entails does not seem to be in the offing, but advocates of perfect being theology often elucidate it in terms of God’s being an entity worthy of worship, a being to whom absolute, unconditional devotion is an appropriate response.\(^71\) God is, in Anselm’s famous phrase, “the being than which none greater can be conceived.” The

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\(^71\) See (Hasker 1994, 131) and (Rowe 1999, 28) for representative statements of this view.
putative problem for the divine attitude theorist is that if God is pleased and displeased by the actions of his creatures, then it appears that God is subject to change. But if God is subject to change, then God is subject to moving from a state of perfection to some other state, and hence a changing God must by definition be imperfect. As Adeimantus puts it in Plato’s Republic, a god that is changed “would have to be [changed] into something worse, if he’s changed at all, for surely we won’t say that a god is deficient in either beauty or virtue” (Republic 381c). DAT does imply that (a temporally existing) God changes, because it implies that God can move from a state of being pleased with S to a state of being displeased with S and vice-versa. If Adeimantus is correct that this implies that God is in some respect deficient, then DAT implies that God is imperfect. If DAT implies that God is imperfect, then it ought to be rejected.

Fortunately for DAT, Adeimantus’s argument fails. As William Hasker has pointed out, it rests on the false assumption that everything that changes must become better or worse by changing. Sometimes, however, a change is neither an improvement nor a worsening, but a way of maintaining a constant state of excellence; consider for example “an extremely accurate watch. A short while ago, it registered the time as five minutes after six o’clock, but now it registers twelve minutes after six” (Hasker 1994, 72). The divine attitude theorist may be able to avoid this charge if she can defend the view that God exists timelessly. If God “lives His whole life in a single present of unimaginable intensity,” experiencing all of history as one “eternal now,” then it may be plausible to maintain that God is genuinely pleased and displeased by the actions of his creatures but that God is nevertheless impassable (Leftow 1997, 257). This is not a possibility that I will pursue here; the nature of God’s relationship to time is a difficult and complex philosophical issue that lies outside the scope of my project. Suffice it to say that if DAT does not threaten to undermine the perfection of a temporal God, then it does not threaten to undermine the perfection of an atemporal God either.
132.) This is clearly a change in the state of the watch, but the watch is neither improved nor worsened by that change. To the contrary, the excellence of the watch consists (at least in part) in its being susceptible to changing in the appropriate ways.

If God’s existence is temporal—i.e. if God experiences time as a sequence of moments—then God’s omniscience implies that his beliefs must change in the same way the watch changes: God believes that it is now three o’clock in the afternoon on the east coast; in a little while he will have ceased to believe that and will instead believe that it is now four. And if this sort of change is compatible with divine perfection, then we are obviously forced to conclude that change per se is not incompatible with divine perfection. The door is open for the divine attitude theorist to argue that God is susceptible to other kinds of change as well: in particular, changes in his affective states. I think there are four main considerations to which we can appeal in defense of this claim.

First, although we have already seen that theists are committed to the transcendence of God along with God’s ultimate independence from everything else that exists, we have reason to maintain that God’s excellence consists in part in the ability and willingness to enter into personal relationships with the beings he has created.73 In our standard evaluative practices, we take such relationships to be among the most

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73 For clarity’s sake, it is worth emphasizing the word ‘ultimate’ in this sentence. No traditional theist will deny that God is ultimately independent from everything else that exists, but any view of God according to which God responds affectively to his creatures implies a limited form of divine dependence; DAT, for example, implies that some facts about God’s affective states depend upon the actions and attitudes of his creatures.
valuable goods with which we are acquainted. To enter into relationships with our fellow human beings is, of course, to expose ourselves to the possibility of pain and disappointment, but in general we take it that these risks are more than offset by the great benefits that come from meaningful and intimate relationships with others. It is unclear why these considerations would not apply in the same way to an absolutely perfect being. Indeed, we might argue that one of the respects in which God is a maximally excellent being is in his capacity for such relationships, in his willingness to condescend to know and to be known by — in the interpersonal rather than merely propositional sense of ‘know’ — his own finite creatures. In the words of John Cobb and David Griffin, “while there is a type of independence or absoluteness that is admirable, there is also a type of dependence or relativity that is admirable” (Cobb and Griffin 1981, 151). To suppose that the creator of the universe is the sort of being who exemplifies both kinds of admirable traits is to suppose that that creator manifests a rich variety of excellences — precisely what traditional theists should want to maintain. Richard Creel makes a very similar point in somewhat more poetic language, arguing that we must believe that “God is touched by our joys and sorrows... in order that we may believe that God cares about us in the deepest sense and therefore is approachable for companionship in the richest sense” (Creel 1997, 318). In short, insofar as the ability to enter into meaningful relationships with other persons implies the potential for both delighting in and being hurt by other persons, and insofar as the ability to enter into
such relationships is an ability we would expect to find in a maximally excellent being, we have good reason to believe that God experiences affective states of the kind required by DAT.\(^74\)

The three other considerations that support this claim are all rooted in distinctively Jewish and Christian commitments. First, the authors of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures portray God as an undeniably passionate being.\(^75\) The work of exegeting those texts is a task I will not attempt here, but especially helpful illustrations include the prophet Hosea—whose marriage to a harlot was meant to serve as a living analogy to God’s relationship with Israel—and the parables of Jesus, wherein God is represented as a shepherd worrying over a lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14), a loving father who rejoices in the return of his prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), and a wealthy man who is pleased by the wise conduct of some of his servants and displeased by the foolish conduct of others (Matthew 25:14-30). I suspect that no one who is even minimally

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\(^74\) In comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, Don Hubin has pointed out that DAT may imply that human beings are able to diminish the quality of God’s existence by increasing the amount of displeasure experienced by God. Whether this is true or not is difficult to say; whether the experience of displeasure does indeed diminish the quality of a being’s existence depends upon substantive claims about the nature of well-being, and whether the degree to which the quality of God’s existence would be diminished by the experience of displeasure would be offset (for God) by the goods God is thereby able to enjoy depends upon complex evaluative judgments. (There is an obvious analogy here to discussions of the problem of evil: the question is it, all things considered, better (for God) to create a world in which God experiences displeasure but also enjoys relationships with his creatures than to create some other world or no world at all? is akin to the question is it, all things considered, better for God to create a world in which enormous suffering exists but in which such goods as freedom and “soul-making” are possible than to create some other world or no world at all?) I will not attempt to defend any particular claims about well-being here, nor will I speculate on the relative weights of the goods that are at issue. Whatever the correct account of well-being may be, and however one ought to weigh these goods, it seems to me that there is no significant problem here for DAT so long as the divine attitude theorist may maintain that God freely chooses to bring about a state of affairs in which his own well-being can be diminished by his creatures.

\(^75\) See (Fiddes 1988), (Fretheim 1984), and (Rice 1994) for fuller treatments of this subject.
familiar with these texts will deny that the God of the Bible is a being who experiences the kind of agent-directed pleasure and displeasure appealed to by DAT. From within the perspective of the Judeo-Christian tradition—at least the broad swath of that tradition which takes as axiomatic the Bible’s general reliability as an account of God’s self-revelation to and interaction with human beings—there seems to be no compelling reason to assume that this portrayal of God is a merely anthropomorphic conception of the divine that must, in one way or another, be “explained away.” Rather, for Jews and Christians of traditionalist mindsets, the proper stance is to take for granted the picture of God as an affective being unless and until it can be shown that this picture contradicts claims about God to which we ought to be more firmly committed. Since (as we have seen) our understanding of God as an absolutely perfect being seems to be compatible with this picture, however, it is unlikely that any such contradiction will emerge. Given the biblical witness to a divine being who can be both pleased and displeased with human agents, and given the harmony between this account and the claim that God is maximally excellent, it is appropriate for Jewish and Christian philosophers to maintain that God is a being that can be both pleased and displeased with human agents.

Two further theological considerations support the same conclusion. One relatively weak consideration is the doctrine of the imago Dei: the belief that human beings are, in some strong sense, made in the image of God. It is unsurprising that theologians disagree with each other concerning what exactly this means, but the dominant interpretation in the Christian tradition has been the “substantive” view,
according to which there is “a resident quality or capacity” within the human psyche that makes us akin to God (Erickson 1998, 523). Given the importance of affective responses in our experience as human beings, it is not implausible to think that these responses are one of the respects in which we resemble the divine being, and hence not implausible to think that God himself responds affectively to his creatures. 76

Finally, one of the most central claims of the Christian religion is one that counts strongly in favor of the suggestion that God is pleased and displeased by human agents: viz. the claim that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This view was expressed in the first few decades after the death of Jesus by the apostles Paul and John, who spoke of Jesus as existing “in the form of God,” as “the image of the invisible God,” and as “the Word [who] was with God, and the Word [who] was God” (Philippians 2:6; Colossians 1:15; and John 1:1, respectively). 77 It is exceedingly difficult for theologians who wish to preserve the doctrine of divine impassability to make sense of these claims. The problem is fairly obvious; Millard Erickson expresses it in the form of a rhetorical question: “How could Jesus have been both God, with his impassability, and human, with all the passions human nature entails?” (Erickson 1991, 541). Erickson goes on to argue that the answer to this question is really quite simple: Jesus cannot have

76 This is a “weak” consideration in support the doctrine of divine passability in virtue of the fact that, aside from the centrality of affective responses to our human experience (and scriptural considerations like those just discussed), there seems to be no reason to insist that affective states must be one of the respects in which humans resemble their creator. One might embrace the imago Dei doctrine but maintain that it is merely in virtue of being rational or being free that humans resemble their creator. This strikes me as implausible in light of the other considerations raised here, but it must be conceded that, on its own, this doctrine is not an especially strong reason to embrace divine passability.

77 See (Schaff 1931) for an historical survey of the development of these ideas through the creeds authored by later theologians.
been God if God cannot respond affectively to what goes on in the world. Therefore, since Jesus was God, God must be able to respond in this way. Erickson writes, “our picture of a God who feels is intensified and underscored in the biblical record of the suffering of Jesus. And a God who feels the pain of his people is certainly congruous with the concept of incarnation” (Erickson 1991, 543).

Theologians who are committed to the impassability of God may here dig in their heels and insist that it is only in the incarnation that God experiences affective states. In light of the scriptural considerations discussed above, this strikes me as an ad hoc response. It is also out of step with the mainstream Christian tradition and with Jesus' own words that “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). If the divine being is so different from the person of Jesus that God qua God cannot even be said to experience affective states, it becomes profoundly unclear what Jesus might have meant when he said this. There may be some experiences such that God only has them when incarnate, such as essentially bodily states like feeling hungry. But for states that are not conceptually tied to bodily life, the claim that God does not or cannot experience them qua spiritual being seems wholly unmotivated.

Of course, the affective quality of Jesus' experience is not limited to his physical pain and suffering. According to the Gospel accounts, he seems to have known a full range of characteristically human emotions: anger at the money-changers in the temple (Matthew 21:12), sorrow over the death of Lazarus and the fate of Jerusalem (John 11:35; Luke 19:41), personal affection (e.g. Mark 10:21; John 13:23), joy (e.g. John 15:11), and
frustration (e.g. Mark 8:12). He seems to have been someone who genuinely enjoyed having a good time, managing to acquire for himself a reputation as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). More importantly, for the purposes of defending DAT, there are occasions on which Jesus clearly seems to have experienced the kind of agent-directed pleasure and displeasure that is at issue here.

For example, Jesus was displeased with Peter when the latter objected to his talk of suffering and dying, and with his disciples when they tried to prevent children from being brought to him (Mark 8:33, 10:14). Similarly, Jesus seems to have taken great pleasure in the faithful centurion of Luke 7, Zaccheus the tax collector, and Mary of Bethany, who anointed him with oil and wiped his feet with her hair (cf. Luke 19:2-10; John 12:2-8). In short, anyone who holds that God was present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth has overwhelmingly good reason to believe that God experiences affective states, including pleasure and displeasure.
CHAPTER 4

EPISTEMOLOGICAL WORRIES ABOUT DIVINE ATTITUDE THEORY

Having argued that DAT is at least a genuine possibility for the theistic metaethicist, my goal in this chapter is to address a number of epistemologically-grounded worries about the account. At the very least, I will argue, epistemological concerns are no more troublesome for DAT than they are for DCT, the account’s principal theistic rival. Indeed, insofar as DAT can provide us with a natural connection between our moral doxastic practices and the theological facts on which moral facts depend, DAT appears to be in a better position than DCT with respect to issues in moral epistemology.

I will also argue that, although DAT may plausibly be understood as a version of divine will theory (DWT), Robert Adams’s principal argument against DWT need not trouble the divine attitude theorist. Adams rejects DWT on the grounds that, since the divine will is not necessarily expressed, DWT seems to imply that a person might have moral obligations she is unable to know about. Adams finds this consequence unacceptable, and concludes that theists ought to prefer DCT to DWT on the grounds that commands are necessarily expressed. Whether Adams is right to insist that persons
must be able to know what it is they are morally required to do, it can be shown that there is no problem here for the divine attitude theorist. If DCT should be preferred to DAT, this is not for epistemological reasons.

4.1 General Worries

Before these claims are defended, a related issue needs to be briefly addressed. It is important to recall that, as was explained in Chapter 2, DAT does not commit its defenders to the view that a person must believe de dicto that an action is displeasing to God in order to believe that the action is morally wrong. To the contrary, and like Adams’s property-identity version of DCT, DAT is committed to the denial of this view. The identification of moral wrongness with the property being-such-as-to-entail-God’s-being-displeased-with-the-agent-who-performs-the-act involves a claim similar in relevant ways to the claim that water is H₂O. For our purposes here, the most relevant similarity is this: just as a person need not have any de dicto beliefs at all about the chemical structure of the stuff in the glass in order to know that the stuff is water, so the moral agent need not have any de dicto beliefs about God in order to know that some action is morally wrong. Thus one epistemologically-driven objection to DAT—expressed, perhaps, by the rhetorical question “if moral wrongness is a matter of being displeasing to God, then how can an atheist have any beliefs about moral wrongness at all?”—can be dismissed at once.
Of course, the identification of water with H\textsubscript{2}O is plausible in large part because we can see how our standard epistemic practices concerning water are the right kind of practices to get us in touch with H\textsubscript{2}O. If the ways in which we came to know about water were radically different from the ways we come to know about H\textsubscript{2}O, then we would have some reason to doubt the plausibility of that identification. One might wonder whether the identification of moral facts with facts about divine attitudes admits of the same kind of plausibility; even if it is granted that facts about divine attitudes are good candidates to satisfy the metaethical desiderata of Chapter 1, it is far from obvious that our standard practices for acquiring moral truths are the right sort of practices for getting in touch with facts about divine attitudes.\textsuperscript{78}

I suggested in Chapter 1, in my discussion of the platitude of knowability, that theistic metaethicists of all stripes can employ a very simple strategy for explaining how we can have cognitive access to moral facts: assume that God intends for human beings to have such access, and infer from this assumption that, \textit{whatever} the correct account of moral epistemology turns out to be, God has provided us with cognitive equipment that is up to the task of providing us with justified moral beliefs. If we have reason to believe that moral facts are identical to facts about divine attitudes, then we have reason to believe that our best moral doxastic practices are the right kind of practices to get us in touch with facts about divine attitudes. This account is uninformative in that it provides no details about what those best practices might look like, but it is sufficient for

\textsuperscript{78} I am indebted to Stewart Shapiro for raising this issue.
explaining what the connection is between those practices and facts about divine attributes, which is what matters here. Our best moral doxastic practices give us access to facts about divine attributes because God intends for us to be the kind of creatures whose best moral doxastic practices give us access to facts about divine attitudes. The relevant connection is explained by appeal to the intentions of a designer who meant for such a connection to exist.

Although the relevant details about moral epistemology are peripheral to the issues that concern us here, it is worth noting that one prominent stream in contemporary moral philosophy suggests an obvious harmony between our best moral doxastic practices and DAT. In recent decades, moral theories that appeal to the beliefs or attitudes of an idealized observer or idealized moral agent have become increasingly popular. R. M. Hare's famous utilitarian archangel is perhaps the first clear example of this approach, but philosophers favoring a variety of moral theories have adopted relevantly similar accounts: David Lewis, Peter Railton, and Michael Smith are among the most prominent.79 Noncognitivists who exhort us to think of moral evaluations in terms of second-order endorsements operate in a closely related vein, and virtue theorists in the Aristotelian tradition typically appeal to the characteristic actions and dispositions of a virtuous phronimos in order to give an account of right action.80 Without

79 See (Hare 1981), (Lewis 1989), (Railton 1986b), and (Smith 1995), respectively.
80 See, e.g., (Gibbard 1990) and (Hursthouse 1999). One might also appeal to the work of Simon Blackburn in this context; Blackburn argues that we can earn the right to speak of moral “truth” via defining a best possible set of attitudes, i.e. the (or a) set of attitudes that “would result from taking all possible opportunities for improvement of attitude” (Blackburn 1984, 198).
overstating the similarities between these approaches, what all of these disparate
thinkers have in common is a tendency to maintain, in one way or another, that what it
is right for me to do in such-and-such circumstances is connected in some significant
way to what an ideal agent (or desirer, version of myself, etc.) would do (or think, desire,
etc.) in those circumstances. This claim is not always intended to give us a decision-
making procedure for determining what ought to be done (Smith, for example,
emphasizes that he takes moral facts to be constituted by facts about what an ideally
erational agent would desire), but the popularity of this kind of approach at least
suggests that the imaginative exercise of thinking about how an agent who manifests
various kinds of excellences would deliberate about what to do in some situation is
among our very best tools for determining what we ought to do in that situation. If this
is true, then the connection between our best moral doxastic practices and facts about
divine attitudes becomes considerably more obvious: in imagining how an excellent-in-
various-ways agent would think/act/feel in some scenario, we at least begin to
approximate how God, understood by traditional theists as a maximally excellent being,
would think/act/feel in that scenario. On this picture, there is nothing mysterious about
the connection between our moral doxastic practices and facts about divine attitudes.
4.2 Adams's Challenge

Let us now turn to Adams's argument against DWT and consider its implications for DAT. According to DWT, an action is morally wrong just in case it is contrary to the will of God. Unlike divine command theorists, who typically hold that contrariety to God's will is necessary but not sufficient for moral wrongness, divine will theorists maintain that contrariety to God's will is both necessary and sufficient for an action's being morally wrong.\(^{81}\) What precisely it means for an action to be contrary to God's will is a matter of dispute, and different interpretations of this idea are what distinguish one version of divine will theory from another. It is natural to interpret DAT as a version of DWT, according to which acting in a way displeasing to God is to act contrary to God's will and acting in a way pleasing to God is to act in accordance with God's will (though, as I will argue later, DAT has advantages over some other versions of DWT). Even if this interpretation is mistaken—i.e. even if we need to understand DAT as an alternative to DWT rather than an elaboration of it\(^{82}\)—it is clear that Adams's objection to DWT may apply with equal force to DAT. Adams's challenge is that DWT implies that a person can have a moral obligation to \(\phi\) without knowing that she has a moral obligation to \(\phi\) because the content of the divine will is not necessarily expressed. On

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\(^{81}\) "Typically" because at least one divine command theorist, Edward Wierenga, has argued that contrariety to God's will is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral wrongness (see (Wierenga 1983)). This position is motivated by concerns about the possibility of God commanding someone to do something that would be morally bad, e.g. commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

\(^{82}\) In what follows, I will assume that DAT is indeed a version of DWT; any claim that applies to DWT in general will be taken to apply to DAT in particular. But nothing of any importance for my project hinges on whether DAT is a version of DWT or an alternative to DWT.
the plausible assumption that divine attitudes are not necessarily expressed either, one might assume that this challenge will apply with equal force to DAT.

Adams explains his concerns this way. The identification of deontic facts with possibly unexpressed theological facts forces one to accept a very unattractive picture of divine-human relations, one in which the wish of God’s heart imposes binding obligations without even being communicated... Games in which one party incurs guilt for failing to guess the unexpressed wishes of the other party are not nice games. They are no nicer if God is thought of as a party to them (Adams 1999, 261).

It would be much better, Adams thinks, to maintain that we are obliged to do only that which God has commanded us to do. The reason for this is presumably that we have epistemic access to God’s commands that we do not have to God’s unexpressed will (considerations raised in the previous section notwithstanding).

Adams’s own moral epistemology, however, makes this criticism seem somewhat odd. He denies that God’s commands are revealed to us exclusively through what theologians call “special” revelation (i.e. sacred texts, oracles, theophanies, and the like). Quite the contrary: “a plausible theistic epistemology of value must incorporate ordinary evaluative doxastic practices, accepting them as vehicles of general revelation... In this way a theistic epistemology of value is not cut off from any of the rational resources of ordinary evaluative thought” (Adams 1999, 365).83 Religious

83 Although Adams speaks exclusively of “value” and “evaluative thought” in this passage, the context makes clear that he intends for this suggestion to apply to obligations and deontic/normative thought as well.
epistemology is not the subject of this essay, and I will not attempt to defend Adams’s position here. Suffice it to say that I think he is precisely right. The theist should take “ordinary doxastic practices” as sources of justified belief and even knowledge, in the moral case as well as others.

But if this is so—if moral facts as construed by the divine command theorist can be discovered in such mundane fashion—why must the divine attitude theorist concede Adams’s assumption that we can have knowledge of God’s commands but not knowledge of divine attitudes? After all, the divine attitude theorist might adopt precisely the same account of moral epistemology that Adams recommends. The only difference between the accounts will be a purely metaphysical one: the divine attitude theorist will hold that the facts of which our doxastic practices make us aware are facts about God’s attitudes rather than God’s commands. There appears to be no principled reason for thinking that this metaphysical claim should undermine our confidence in those practices.

Implicit in Adams’s criticism seems to be an odd picture of the way in which the divine will theorist should think about God. The image that comes to mind is of an indifferent (or perhaps malicious) and capricious deity, keeping secrets from us and chortling over the fact that his opacity imposes moral guilt on us through no fault of our own. As far as this picture is concerned, Adams is right; this does not look like a nice game at all, and it is deeply unsatisfying as an account of the underlying metaphysics of morality.
Again, however, one wonders why a divine will theorist of any stripe would be inclined to embrace such a picture. It is, I suppose, possible that something like this is correct; it might be the case that God's will is essentially private, that God is the only person who can know the relevant details of its content. Similarly, it is possible that God is the only person who can know whether God is pleased or displeased by an agent's action. But it is also possible that God's will is public in the relevant way, that we can discover what it is that God wills for us and whether or not God is pleased or displeased by our actions. Indeed, the divine will theorist may insist that this is so. As just indicated, she may hold that such discovery is precisely what our ordinary moral doxastic practices make possible. (Here it is important to bear in mind that the relevant knowledge of God is de re rather than de dicto; I am not asserting that our ordinary moral doxastic practices should be taken to be sufficient, in their own right, to provide us with de dicto knowledge of God.) It would seem that the onus is on the critic of divine will theories to explain why this cannot be the case. After all, divine command theorists and divine will theorists alike will develop their accounts within the context of a number of substantial and important background assumptions about the character and purposes of God; they do not operate in a theological vacuum, as it were, groping blindly for some hint as to what it is that God might command, will, or be pleased and displeased by.
To offer a very simplistic example, traditional Christians assume (with the Apostle John) that “God is love.” With this assumption in place, and faced with a choice situation in which exactly one action would count as a loving action, the Christian might very plausibly assume that God’s will for her in this situation is to perform that action, regardless of whether she has reason to believe that God has explicitly commanded her to do so. In this regard, the theist’s beliefs about God’s will are epistemologically on a par with her more mundane beliefs about the will of her fellow human beings. Based on a stock of justified beliefs about what an individual cares about, has said and done in the past, and so on, we can routinely acquire justified beliefs (even, I suspect, knowledge) about the content of his will. If he happens to express his will in the form of a command, this may aid us in knowing what he wills, but such an expression is not always necessary for us to acquire this kind of knowledge.

Thus, in the absence of any compelling reason to think that God’s commands are accessible to us but the morally salient features of God’s will are not, it seems safe to conclude that epistemological considerations alone do not provide any grounds for rejecting DAT in favor of divine command theory; the two theories are at least on an epistemological par. Indeed, the advocate of DAT may be in a position to make an even stronger claim than this. It might be argued that we are in a much better epistemic situation concerning what would be pleasing or displeasing to God than concerning what God has commanded. After all, if a theist justifiedly believes that God is loving, compassionate, and veracious, then she has very good reason to believe that God would
be displeased by her acting in ways that are unloving, apathetic, or dishonest. But these beliefs about God’s character do not constitute compelling reasons for her to believe that God has actually issued commands proscribing this sort of behavior. To be justified in believing that would involve being justified in holding beliefs about specific divine actions rather than much more general beliefs about the divine nature, and this seems to be a more epistemically daunting task.

Consider a human analogue. Smith and Jones have just met. As they get to know each other a bit, Smith picks up on the fact that Jones values loyalty and faithfulness, and seems irritated when others do not thank him for helping them. Based on these observations, Smith concludes that Jones, who is a father, would be displeased with his children were they to be disloyal and faithless, or if they failed to show gratitude for benefits they have received. Smith would not, however, have any especially strong reason to believe that Jones had ever commanded his children to be loyal, faithful, or grateful. Of course, Jones might have had occasion to tell Smith that he had issued such commands, or Smith might witness Jones doing so, in which case Smith would be justified in holding these beliefs. But this observation underscores an important point. Any justification Smith has for believing that Jones has commanded his children to φ will typically be a justification for Smith’s belief that there is something about φ-type action that is valued by Jones. The reverse, however, does not hold. This

84 Counterexamples to this general claim do exist; the most obvious ones will derive from contexts in which there is reason to promote “obedience for obedience’s sake.” One can imagine a drill sergeant issuing commands whose content is wholly arbitrary; the fact that the sergeant commands a private to φ
means that justification for beliefs about what an agent has commanded is—at least in general—harder to obtain than justification about what is pleasing or displeasing to that agent. Again, the reason for this is simple: the former sort of justification often brings with it the latter, but not vice-versa. Applied to the present discussion, the upshot of all this is that a divine command theorist who wishes to appeal to any explicitly theological claim in defense of some substantive ethical proposition has set for herself a more difficult task than that facing a divine attitude theorist who seeks to do the same thing, for as we have just seen, claims about what an agent has commanded are, in general, more difficult to justify than claims about what is displeasing to that agent. When we conjoin this observation with the point made in the previous section—viz. that at least one putative moral doxastic practice, the imaginative exercise of considering how an idealized agent would assess certain circumstances, has a natural connection to DAT—we might find ourselves inclined to think that insofar as epistemological issues can help us decide whether to embrace DCT or DAT, it is the command-based account that is in trouble.

This is not all that can be said on this front. Even philosophers who are less sanguine about the prospects for knowledge about divine attitudes will be hard-pressed to make a case against DAT on epistemological grounds, and the reasons for this are well worth exploring. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that it is impossible for does not seem to provide much justification for the belief that the sergeant cares about φ-ing. But it seems to me that these are the exceptions that prove the rule. In the absence of unusual and countervailing considerations, an agent's commanding someone to φ indicates that there is something about φ-type action that the agent values.
us to know (de dicto) the details of God’s will. Whether God is pleased or displeased with S for φ-ing is not something S can know. According to DAT, if God would be displeased with S for φ-ing, then S is morally obliged not to φ. Let us also suppose, then, that God would be displeased with S for φ-ing. And let us suppose that S is not in a position to know that it would be morally wrong to φ; the “ordinary evaluative doxastic practices” mentioned above are insufficient to generate such knowledge for S.85 Given all this, the divine attitude theorist seems forced to maintain both that S is obliged not to φ and that S cannot know that S is obliged not to φ.

It may be the case that there is nothing problematic about this conjunction. After all, the same predicament can be foisted upon advocates of a wide range of normative theories. Actual consequence utilitarians hold that one is obliged to maximize the overall amount of nonmoral good. If I can do this by pressing a button that is hidden under my desk, then I am obliged to press the button. It is possible that I do not know of the button’s existence; it is even possible, if we are clever enough in describing the scenario, that I could not know of the button’s existence, and hence am doomed to ignorance about my true moral obligations. Nonetheless, the theory says, I do have a duty to press that button. W. D. Ross rejected utilitarianism, but defended a moral theory that seems to have the same epistemic results. He believed that knowledge of general moral principles (his “prima facie duties”) was possible, but that the best we can hope for when evaluating any particular action is “probable opinion” (Ross 1930, 29). A

85 This additional stipulation is necessary due to the fact that, on DAT, one need not hold any de dicto beliefs about God in order to hold beliefs about moral wrongness.
Rossian moral agent might recognize a genuine conflict between his prima facie duties of beneficence and fidelity, come to form the belief that the more stringent duty is the duty of fidelity, and yet be wrong in this belief. If he acts on his mistaken belief, he will have done something morally wrong; he will have failed to do his duty. The fact that the agent could not have known what his duty actually was does not change the moral status of the action he performs.

Illustrations of this sort can be multiplied, but there is no need to belabor the point. Many moral theories are subject to the very same charge that Adams has levied against divine will theories. The reason for this, and the reason it is so easy to generate illustrations of it, is that these theories are typically developed in realist terms, such that there are moral facts and these facts do not depend upon our beliefs for their instantiation.\footnote{Depending upon precisely how one understands ‘realism’, one may or may not think that all realist moral theories will be subject to the present charge. If Kantianism counts as a version of moral realism (as was mentioned in Chapter 1, at least some of its formulations might not), it might be an example of a realist moral theory that does not allow for the existence of moral obligations that are unknowable. This is because it states that only rational beings can be subject to moral requirements, and that all rational beings are required to act (or legislate) in accordance with the Categorical Imperative. Since part of what it is to be rational, presumably, is to be able to act (or legislate) in accordance with the Categorical Imperative, it seems to follow for the Kantian that all persons who are morally required to φ can know that they are morally required to φ. Again, however, everything hinges on precisely how one understands ‘realism’ and, for that matter, ‘Kantianism’. Nothing of importance for my project depends on any particular account of how we should use these terms.} In this vein, it has been argued that there is nothing problematic about a moral theory implying that S can be obliged to φ even when S does not (or cannot) know that S is obliged to φ, because such an implication is, in Mark Murphy’s words, “simply a rather innocuous form of realism about moral requirements” (Murphy 1998, 8).
For philosophers who embrace this line of reasoning, the standard maneuver at this point is to distinguish between multiple senses of the key normative terms: ‘ought’, ‘wrong’, ‘permissible’, and so on. Granted our suppositions, one might claim, S has an *objective* duty to φ, but has no *subjective* duty to φ. Perhaps Smith’s coveting Jones’s ox is displeasing to God, yet—if Smith is not in a position to know that it is wrong to covet Jones’s ox—we might interpret DAT as telling us that while it would be objectively wrong for Smith to lust after that ox, there is nothing subjectively wrong with him doing so. This would presumably lead us to say, as Murphy and many others are inclined to say, that Smith is not *blameworthy* for his ox-coveting even though he really does have a duty to abstain from it. Thus we can resolve the tension between our intuitions that the act is one that ought not have been performed, on the one hand, and that Smith is not a bad person for performing that act, on the other.

This is a simple solution to the problem at hand. It is, however, controversial. The “multiple moral ‘oughts’” solution, as we might call it, presupposes a sharp distinction between (objective) moral wrongdoing and blameworthy action, and many philosophers (like Adams) will deny that this distinction is tenable. Indeed, I myself am very sympathetic to the suggestion that a person cannot act wrongly unless she acts culpably, such that S’s failure to φ is morally wrong only if S’s failure to φ is blameworthy. If it turns out that DAT entails the possibility of unknowable moral obligations, this would be, in my view, a serious flaw in the account. Happily, it can be shown that DAT does not imply the existence of unknowable moral obligations.
The same cannot be said for all versions of DWT; some will-based accounts do have this flaw. Imagine, for example, a divine will theorist who holds that an action is contrary to God’s will just in case God would prefer that it not be performed, and suppose that God prefers that people wear seatbelts when riding in cars. If we also suppose that we cannot know that God prefers seatbelt wearing, and that we cannot know (by means of “ordinary evaluative doxastic practices”) that seatbelt wearing is morally required, then such a divine will theorist would be forced to maintain that there are moral requirements of which we cannot have knowledge. He might try to avoid this worry by simply denying the possibility of such a circumstance, but this seems implausible; surely God could keep his preferences to himself, and surely there are possible worlds in which human doxastic practices do not generate moral knowledge.

In light of this, the divine will theorist could temper his suggestion and make the weaker claim that the actual world is one in which this circumstance does not arise. This seems considerably more plausible (though quite possibly ad hoc), but it brings with it some fairly significant epistemological commitments: its defender must also hold that knowledge of God’s preferences or knowledge of what is morally wrong is possible in every circumstance where God prefers one outcome over another. Indeed, in order to preserve the link between moral wrongness and blameworthiness, this sort of theorist must hold that ignorance of God’s preferences or of what is morally wrong is, in every
case where God prefers one outcome over another, culpable ignorance. Perhaps this view is defensible; I will not attempt to demonstrate that it is not. Suffice it to say that this seems like a rather large pill to swallow.

DAT does not bear such a heavy epistemological burden. Recall the attitude-based account of moral wrongness: it is morally wrong for S to φ in C iff and because God would be displeased with S for φ-ing in C. For the very same reasons that we do not blame an agent who acts badly out of non-culpable ignorance, however, we must assume that God—who is taken by theists to be a reasonable, non-capricious agent himself—would not be displeased with an agent who acts badly out of non-culpable ignorance. And this means that, according to DAT, agents who act badly out of non-culpable ignorance do not act wrongly. Therefore it is not necessary to embrace the “multiple moral 'oughts'” solution in order to save DAT from Adams’s challenge.

DAT does, however, come with some epistemological baggage. The same feature that enables it to preserve the link between knowledge and moral obligation, and thereby preserve the link between blameworthy action and moral wrongdoing, entails that if we grant the problematic suppositions above in their strongest forms—i.e. if we grant that we can know neither what is displeasing to God nor what is morally wrong—then nothing is morally wrong.87 Since some things are morally wrong, it follows that

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87 Thanks to Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for pointing this out to me.
arguments for theological and moral skepticism are arguments against DAT as well. The
divine attitude theorist, in other words, needs to be fairly optimistic about the prospects
for moral and/or theological knowledge.
In the preceding chapters, I have argued that theistically-grounded metaethical theories can withstand many of the criticisms that have been leveled against them, and I have defended one such theory, which I call divine attitude theory (DAT), from a number of objections. If my arguments are successful, then I have shown that there is good reason for theists to seek an account of the nature of morality that grounds moral facts in facts about God, and I have shown that DAT is a tenable rival to divine command theory (DCT). In this concluding chapter, I will make the case that DAT is superior to DCT in several respects and ought to be preferred. I will offer five arguments in support of this claim.

The first argument is inspired by Mark Murphy’s “trilemma” argument against DCT, according to which the divine command theorist is forced to deny the doctrine of moral supervenience or to embrace an implausible claim about divine freedom. Although Murphy’s argument may not succeed as an attempt to undermine DCT, I suggest that it is useful in helping to clarify and strengthen the intuition that moral facts are not merely contingent. Since (as I will argue) DCT implies that moral facts are
contingent, while DAT does not, Murphy’s argument helps show that DAT is preferable to DCT. The second argument rests on the supposition that God might have good reasons to refrain from forbidding us to perform an action that is morally wrong, a possibility that seems rather clearly to be ruled out by DCT. The third argument appeals to the fact that commands must be recognized as commands in order to function as commands. This implies a dilemma for divine command theorists: they must maintain either that all atheistic belief is unjustified, or that some cognitively normal human persons are exempt from the dictates of morality. The fourth argument is based on the uncodifiability of moral principles and the practical necessity of moral judgment. I argue that the complexities of the moral life require us to develop the practical skill of moral judgment, a skill that fits nicely with the claims of DAT but which is superfluous if DCT is true. And in the final section, I argue that DAT suggests a more attractive picture of the moral and religious life than DCT does. Whereas DCT paints a picture of morality that emphasizes obedience and a picture of the divine-human relationship that sees us primarily as subjects of a ruler, DAT is able to embrace a broader range of metaphors: God as father, God as lover, God as friend. These metaphors fit nicely with a conception of the moral life as a life oriented toward love for the good and emphasizing personal transformation, a conception that is richer and more satisfying than the divine command theorist’s alternative. Theologically, it is also a better fit with the Christian tradition.
5.1 Moral Supervenience and Moral Necessity

If any philosophical thesis is uncontroversial, it is this one:

Two worlds that are identical in all non-moral respects
must be identical in all moral respects.\footnote{The standard formulation of this doctrine uses 'natural' in place of 'non-moral'. I use 'non-moral' here in order to avoid confusion concerning the relationship between moral properties and supernatural properties.}

To put the same point in a slightly different way, if an action A is morally wrong and an action B is morally right, there must be some non-moral difference between A and B that explains this fact.\footnote{I intend 'non-moral difference between A and B' to be interpreted quite broadly, such that the relevant non-moral difference between A and B may be a difference in their relational properties.} Moral properties do not vary independently of non-moral properties. To affirm this thesis is to embrace the doctrine of \textit{global moral supervenience}.

In (Murphy 2002b), Mark Murphy argues that the most popular contemporary version of DCT, when combined with a widely accepted claim about God's freedom in acting, is incompatible with moral supervenience. DCT is less plausible than either the claim about divine freedom or the doctrine of moral supervenience, so it should be rejected. Murphy's argument goes as follows.

According to contemporary divine command theorists like Robert Adams, an action's being morally obligatory depends upon its being commanded by God. As has been noted several times now, this thesis is not proposed as a definition or as a conceptual truth, but as an a posteriori identity claim that is discovered through a process of investigation, similar in relevant respects to the empirical investigation by which we come to learn that the property \textit{being H:O} is identical to the property \textit{being H:O}.  

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Murphy, Mark. (2002b). [Title of the work]. [Publisher].
\end{thebibliography}
water. The relationship between these properties, of course, is not merely contingent but is a matter of metaphysical necessity. Anything in any possible world that is H₂O is water, and anything that is water is H₂O. Likewise, according to divine command theorists, any action in any possible world that is morally obligatory is commanded by God, and any action that is commanded by God is morally obligatory.

In addition to this claim about the nature of moral properties, Murphy expects that the divine command theorist will want to embrace an independent claim about God’s freedom. “On most views,” Murphy writes,

> God could have refrained from creating anything at all; on all views, God could have created a world different in some ways from the world that God actually created. Not only is God’s action in creating a world free; God’s action within the created world is free as well. God has intervened miraculously in the world, but God could have failed to intervene miraculously, or could have intervened miraculously in different ways than God in fact did. Among God’s free acts are acts of commanding: at least some divine commands are free. What I mean by saying that God has at least some freedom in commanding is that even if the world were in relevant respects otherwise the same, God might have given slightly different commands: God could have given an at least slightly smaller or slightly larger number of such commands, or could have given commands at least slightly different in content, or could have given commands to an at least slightly different group of people. What God commands is not entirely fixed by the way the world otherwise is” (Murphy 2002b, 22—23).

It is worth noting that Murphy does not attempt to argue for this claim, and his statement that “on all views” God could have created a somewhat different world is
surely false. Thomas Aquinas, for example, found it sufficiently contentious that he devoted several chapters of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* to explaining why it must be that God does not will the things he wills necessarily, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz rather notoriously held that God’s perfect wisdom and perfect goodness together entail both that God creates the best possible world (if there is such a world) and that “if there were not the best among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any” (Leibniz 1710, 128). Although it is safe to say that relatively few philosophers have been committed to this view, Murphy’s suggestion that no one has held it is mistaken.

This qualification aside, however, the really important point is one Murphy rightly emphasizes: any philosophical theory that entails that God’s commands are “entirely fixed by the way the world otherwise is” ipso facto comes at a cost—a cost many theists will be unwilling to pay. The suggestion that God’s freedom might be radically constrained in this way strikes some as reminiscent of attempts to defuse the problem of evil by arguing, à la Paul Tillich, that our conceptual categories cannot be applied to the divine, so that no tension of any kind exists between the claim that God is perfectly loving and compassionate and the claim that God could easily prevent the suffering of innocents but chooses not to. The logic of the strategy is impeccable; nevertheless, it may be a way of winning the battle by losing the war.

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90 Cf. Book I, chs. 81—86; Book II, ch. 23.
The doctrine of moral supervenience, of course, tells us that moral facts are unlike facts about God's free actions in that they are entirely fixed by the way the world otherwise (i.e. non-morally) is. It is this fact that generates an apparent problem for divine command theorists. Let us give a somewhat more rigorous statement of the doctrine of moral supervenience:

\[(S) \text{ Necessarily, for any action } \phi \text{ and any moral property } M, \text{ if } \phi \text{ has } M, \text{ then there exists a non-moral property } N \text{ such that } \phi \text{ has } N, \text{ and necessarily, if any action } \psi \text{ has } N, \text{ then } \psi \text{ has } M.\]  

It should be noted that this is a statement of strong moral supervenience rather than weak moral supervenience; a statement of weak supervenience would omit the second occurrence of 'necessarily'. The argument that follows will require strong rather than weak moral supervenience, but this is not a commitment that threatens to undermine the argument. In Frank Jackson’s words, the “least controversial part of folk moral theory is that moral properties supervene on descriptive properties, that the ethical way things are supervenes on the descriptive way things are,” and it in no way violates our commonsense intuitions to stipulate that the supervenience in play is strong supervenience, obtaining across possible worlds as well as in the actual world (Jackson 1998, 118). Just the contrary; strong moral supervenience is taken by many to be a platitude of moral discourse, so that a person who uses moral terms in a way that violates (S) thereby demonstrates that he or she has an inadequate grasp of the concepts.

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\[91\] This is an artificially simplistic way to state the doctrine of moral supervenience. In reality, N may be a set of properties or a long disjunction of properties. N is the subvenient base on which the moral property M supervenes, whatever precisely that subvenient base turns out to be.
expressed by those terms. Nick Zangwill makes the point nicely: “This modal doctrine concerning morality is not a rejectable piece of dubious philosophical speculation; it is an assumption built into moralizing. To moralize is to make cross-world commitments. Quit modalizing and you quit moralizing. Moralizing is a modal pastime” (Zangwill 1995, 259).

In addition to (S), divine command theorists like Adams are committed to the proposition that

(C) Necessarily, for any action φ and any moral property M, if φ has M, then there exists a divine command property C such that φ has C.

Together, (S) and (C) entail

(1) Necessarily, if any action φ has N, then φ has C.

The purported problem for DCT is generated by the fact that many theists will take the following claim about God’s freedom in issuing commands to be just as uncontroversial as (S):

(F) For some action φ that has non-moral property N and divine command property C (e.g. being forbidden by God), it is possible for φ to fail to have C,

or more simply,

(2) Possibly, there is an action φ that has N but not C.

Obviously, (1) and (2) are contradictory, so it is impossible for (S), (F), and (C) to all be true. Given the platitudinous status of (S) and the uncontroversial nature (for many theists) of (F), it appears that (C) should be rejected. (C), however, is a
straightforward implication of DCT, so any philosopher who is committed to (S) and (F) must reject DCT.

There are interesting questions to ask here about the best way to understand the alleged relationship between moral properties and deontic properties, as well as the nature of the supervenience relation. Michael Almeida, for example, has argued that it is possible for a property to supervene on itself and that this fact undermines Murphy's challenge; if moral properties are identical to divine command properties, and if a property can supervene on itself, then divine command properties can be part of the subvenient base on which moral properties supervene.\footnote{See (Almeida 2004).} This assumption, however, is quite contentious, and even if it turns out to be defensible, Murphy believes that it misses the point:

one can see some of the force of the argument, I think, without formulating it in terms of some specific account of moral supervenience. One need simply ask the following. \textit{Ex ante}, is it plausible that the property \textit{being obligatory} might be instantiated, or not instantiated, while every other distinct property instantiated remains the same? \textit{Ex ante}, is it plausible that the property \textit{being commanded by God} might be instantiated, or not instantiated, while every other distinct property instantiated remains the same? If one says 'No' to the former, as most of us would, and one says 'Yes' to the latter, as most of us would, then one faces the tension to which I was trying to draw attention in the trilemma argument, regardless of one's views on how precisely to formulate the doctrine of moral supervenience (Murphy 2004, 339).
Surely Murphy is correct in his suggestions about how most of us would respond to these questions. I do not wish to dismiss his claims and will return to them shortly. For now, however, I will note that Murphy seems to have missed a very important point concerning the motivation for property identity DCT, a point whose relevance to this debate is missed by Almeida as well.

Much of the attractiveness of property identity DCT stems from its significant explanatory power. Returning to issues discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, we might think of DCT as being motivated, in part, by a desire to answer the question what must the world be like in order for anything to be morally right or morally wrong? Of course, no one who is in a position to ask this question can be wholly ignorant of the details of our moral discourse and practice. The question can be meaningfully posed only by someone who has some understanding of how moral language is used and what kinds of things are, or at least are widely thought to be, morally right and morally wrong.

With this background information in place, the inquirer is in a position to consider what property might play the role carved out by our use of moral terms. For example, what sort of thing might moral wrongness turn out to be? Given that it is fitting to feel guilty when one does something wrong, that performing a wrong act makes it appropriate to seek forgiveness, that moral considerations are at least potentially motivating, and so on, we can investigate whether there might be some shared feature of paradigmatically wrong acts in virtue of which they can all be said to be wrong. DCT, of course, tells us that there is: wrong actions are all actions that are
forbidden by God. As was noted in Chapter 2, this is an explanatorily powerful theory in at least two important ways: it provides an account of why morally wrong acts have the features they do, and it unifies the class of wrong actions in a systematic and satisfying way.

The point of reminding ourselves of these issues is to demonstrate that the considerations of “ex ante plausibility” identified by Murphy are simply too weak to pose a threat to the divine command theorist whose view is developed in this way, in much the same way that the intuitions that motivate the Karamazov Problem (see Chapter 2) are undermined. In response to Murphy’s charge that we are not likely to think that “the property being obligatory might be instantiated, or not instantiated, while every other distinct property instantiated remains the same,” the savvy divine command theorist should stand her ground. Once the case has been made for DCT, once we appreciate the explanatory power of that theory and the reasons that are adduced for identifying moral properties with divine command properties, this claim of Murphy’s loses its bite. From the perspective of the informed divine command theorist, there should be nothing worrisome about the fact that her theory implies that “the property being obligatory might be instantiated, or not instantiated, while every other distinct property instantiated remains the same.” This is a straightforward implication of her position and—so long as we recognize that quite a lot is built into the term ‘distinct property’ in the quote from Murphy—it is an implication that she ought to embrace. It is not the sort of anomalous consequence that should lead the divine
command theorist to an ad hoc adjustment of her theory, nor is it a consequence that should be listed among the theory’s “theoretical costs.” If God does not issue a command forbidding some action, then if DCT is true, that action is not morally wrong. This is hardly a surprising result.

So it appears that Murphy’s argument against DCT is not as compelling as it may have initially seemed. Nevertheless, it is worth dwelling a bit on the tension that he has pointed out. Murphy has put us in a good position to see how deeply contingent morality appears to be for the divine command theorist, and—perhaps more importantly—how odd that contingency is. The worry here is not wholly dissimilar to the Arbitrariness Problem discussed in Chapter 2, according to which the Dependence Thesis is flawed because it implies that any imaginable action could have been morally required had God commanded it. It was suggested that divine command theorists can solve the Arbitrariness Problem by appealing to facts about God’s nature: there are some things that simply would not be commanded by a loving being, and therefore morality is not an arbitrary affair. No commands that would be inconsistent with his own loving nature are issued by God.

This still leaves quite a bit of room, however, for God to choose which commands he will give. This is what generates the oddity for divine command theorists.

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93 It should be noted that this is a controversial assumption. Some philosophers believe that God’s omniscience, conjoined with his benevolence, restricts the number of choices that are available to God; knowing every detail about what will happen if he issues, or refrains from issuing, any particular command might be sufficient to rule out a wide range of commands that a benevolent being of more limited knowledge might consider.
According to their account, the wrongness of an action hinges upon whether God forbids it or not. Far from being necessary truths, fundamental (and all other) moral principles turn out to be contingent on God’s decision to require or forbid certain kinds of actions. Within the boundaries set by the divine nature, there seem to be multitudinous commands that God could issue. For example, consider the moral prohibition against cruelty. That cruelty is wrong is a good candidate for a moral truth if anything is. Of course, since God is perfectly loving, he would not issue a command requiring cruel behavior. It is a necessary truth that God will not act cruelly himself, and indeed will allow others to act cruelly only if he has a good reason for doing so—a reason that could figure in the deliberations of a perfectly loving agent. All of this seems unproblematic. But is it necessarily true that a loving being will issue a command governing cruelty? More broadly, is it necessarily true that, for every fundamental moral principle, God will issue a command concerning that principle? To assert that the answer is ‘yes’ is to make a rather dubious claim. At the very least, such an assertion would run afoul of the enormously plausible principle (F) above; God’s nature may require him to act in certain ways and to refrain from acting in others, but it seems to be

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Defending this assumption in detail would require going well beyond the scope of my project and into questions about the possibility of divine foreknowledge of future contingent events, whether there is a uniquely best possible world, and whether God’s benevolence requires him to create the best world he can. Fortunately, these issues can be sidestepped here; I take it that anyone who is inclined to accept (F) will be inclined to accept this assumption about God’s freedom in commanding, and that anyone who is disinclined to accept this assumption will also be disinclined to accept (F). If we reject (F), then the present argument against DCT fails. Therefore I leave it as a challenge to the divine command theorist to show that theists should deny (F). So long as that challenge is unmet, it seems safe to proceed with the present argument. In the next section of this chapter, I will consider an argument for DAT that is motivated in part by the kind of considerations that might lead a person to deny (F).
a gross and ad hoc limitation on divine freedom to claim that God’s lovingness makes it necessarily false that God refrains from issuing a command forbidding cruelty.\textsuperscript{94} It would be quite odd to maintain that, although a perfectly loving God may allow some of his beloved creatures to be treated cruelly, he must—as a matter of metaphysical necessity—tell their tormentors not to do so. This seems exactly backwards. Having a perfectly loving nature may indeed limit the number of choices a being has in any particular situation, perhaps even requiring that such a being attempt to help tormentors appreciate the badness of cruelty. The choice to declare or not to declare “Thou shalt not!” however, does not seem to be among the choices that are constrained in this way. To appreciate the force of this point, and to see how it fits into the case for DAT (about which I will say more below), one need only consider whether it seems possible for there to be any action such that God might choose not to forbid it, yet would be displeased with a person for performing it. It is very difficult to resist the suggestion that this is indeed possible. At a minimum, the burden lies on anyone who believes otherwise to explain why it is impossible.

In the absence of such an explanation, it is undeniable that the divine command theorist must affirm that at least some deontic truths are contingent. But it might seem that this is an unproblematic result; one might suppose that the very same response I

\textsuperscript{94} I do not mean to deny that issuing a command counts as a kind of action; obviously, it does. But since we have no English word that means “an action that is not merely a kind of speech act (or whatever the divine equivalent of a speech act is),” I am merely appealing to an intuitive distinction between acting and commanding. This distinction reflects the colloquial difference between merely saying something and actually doing something.
suggested on behalf of the divine command theorist in response to Murphy’s claim about “ex ante plausibility” could just as easily be employed here: viz. that although this is a somewhat surprising and not especially desirable consequence of DCT, it is a consequence nevertheless, and its undesirability is greatly outweighed by its ability to give an explanatorily powerful and theoretically unified account of the nature of moral properties. This response is not objectionable in and of itself. But if there is a rival theory that can lay claim to theoretical virtues of the same kind and of comparable strength, and that is not subject to the sort of challenges we have been discussing, then that rival should be preferred. My suggestion is that DAT is such a rival, and rather obviously so; the advantages of embracing the Dependence Thesis, discussed at length in Chapters 1 and 2, accrue to DAT in the very same ways they accrue to DCT.

For our purposes here, the really important thing to notice is that facts about what is pleasing and displeasing to God, unlike facts about what God has commanded or required, are not contingent. In colloquial terms, God could not avoid being the kind of person he is. It is metaphysically impossible that God would be cruel, devoid of compassion, or deceitful. And granted that character traits like these have essentially affective components—e.g. to be cruel is not merely to act in ways that are harmful, but to have a certain pro-attitude toward the suffering of others—we must conclude that God is such that, necessarily, God is pleased by some kinds of actions and displeased by
others. Therefore DAT implies that if cruelty is wrong, then cruelty is necessarily wrong, precisely what reflection on Murphy's argument leads us to expect.95

5.2 Divine Commands in the Best Possible World

It was noted above that the preceding argument could be defused by denying (F), the claim that God has significant freedom in choosing which commands he will issue. Although I believe it is a mistake to deny (F), reflection on some of the reasons one might have for doing so leads to another argument in favor of DAT. If God is omniscient and perfectly good, the thinking goes, he always knows what is best and he always does what is best. God creates because it is best that he do so, and of the many possible worlds God could create, he actualizes the best one among them. Among the many features of this best possible world are the commands that God himself issues within it; if it is best that God forbid $\phi$, then God forbids $\phi$; if it is best that God require $\phi$, then God requires $\phi$; and so on. This would undermine the preceding argument by demonstrating that God's commands are not so deeply contingent after all.

The problem for the divine command theorist arises when we recognize the following: the best possible world might be one in which we reach the decision to avoid an action in the absence of an explicit command to refrain from performing that action.96

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95 The same point can be made by once again considering situations like the one mentioned above, in which God refrains from forbidding some action $\phi$ but would nevertheless be displeased with an agent for $\phi$-ing, and then determining whether our intuitions about the wrongness of $\phi$-ing track our suppositions about God's commands or our suppositions about God's attitudes.

96 I am indebted to Don Hubin for suggesting this line of argument.
There is value in persons coming to “see for themselves” certain reasons to act or to refrain from acting. This is something we acknowledge in our everyday moral lives; for example, one can easily imagine a parent who chooses not to forbid her son from engaging in some behavior of which she disapproves precisely because she thinks it would be better for him to decide on his own not to engage in it. We can imagine God deliberating in similar fashion about what commands to give to his creatures. Consider slavery, an issue whose moral status continues to be debated by theologians of various stripes. No one, so far as I know, claims that a slave owner may permissibly be cruel to his slaves, nor do any theologians of whom I am aware promote the re-introduction of slavery into American (or any other) society. Whether the owning of slaves is itself morally objectionable is nevertheless a matter of dispute. After all, the Jewish and Christian scriptures make reference to the proper treatment of slaves without ever explicitly condemning slavery as an institution, and this might lead one to believe that God has not forbidden it. Yet—at the risk of begging the question against divine command theory—it is difficult to suppose that this observation could be sufficient to end the dispute over the moral status of slavery. For example, many Christians believe that the biblical doctrine of the imago Dei, according to which human beings are made “in the image of God,” implies that each individual human being ought to be respected as a person. Since slavery seems to be a straightforward way of violating an individual’s personhood, we have compelling reason to believe that it is morally wrong, even if it is not strictly forbidden by God.
The divine command theorist, of course, cannot say this. If the best possible world is one in which humans choose not to own slaves without being *commanded* not to own slaves, and if God always does what is best, then God does not forbid humans from owning slaves. That is to say, if it would be better overall for us not to be forbidden from owning slaves, then the divine command theorist is forced to deny the wrongness of slavery in the best possible world (which is also the actual world). This seems bizarre. DAT, in contrast, brings with it no such untoward consequences. If it is indeed best for God to refrain from forbidding slavery, and if God always does what is best, then God refrains from forbidding slavery. If we have reason to believe that God is nevertheless displeased with persons who own slaves, then the divine attitude theorist is justified in claiming that slavery is morally wrong even if God does not, for whatever reason, forbid it. DAT implies that the wrongness of slavery—or anything else—does not hinge on the value or disvalue of God issuing a command prohibiting it. This is exactly as it should be.

Before moving on, we should also note that the problem of contingency emphasized in the preceding section has reappeared. The lesson of Murphy’s trilemma argument, I suggested, is that deontic truths are necessary truths, but DCT cannot accommodate this fact without denying that God has significant freedom. Now we are in a position to see that even a divine command theorist who is willing to bite that bullet

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97 It should be emphasized that slavery is merely an illustration here; although it strikes me as a very good candidate as a problem for divine command theorists, the important point is that if there is *any* wrong action that it would be best for God not to forbid, DCT is in trouble.
and deny that God has significant freedom concerning which commands he will issue may still be committed to the contingency of moral truths. The reason for this has to do with the differences between possible worlds: depending on the specific circumstances that obtain in those worlds, divine commands that God issues in one possible world may not be issued in another; there might be some possible worlds in which God’s omniscience and goodness entail that he forbids $\phi$, and other possible worlds in which they entail that he does not forbid $\phi$ (because it would be better for the persons in those worlds to choose to refrain from $\phi$-ing on their own). That is to say, even the necessitarian divine command theorist must countenance the existence of possible worlds in which an action $\phi$ is not morally wrong, even though $\phi$ is wrong in the actual world. The sting of this argument is diminished somewhat by the supposition that it is necessarily true that God creates the best possible world—and thus (de re) necessarily true that God issues the commands that he issues—but there is still a problem for DCT: the necessity seems to be “misplaced.” The strategy under consideration here allows the divine command theorist to say that it is necessarily true that, e.g., cruelty is wrong, but the necessity of this truth does not stem from features of cruelty itself, but rather from the fact that the actual world is a world in which it is better for us to be commanded not to be cruel than to decide for ourselves that we will refrain from cruelty. Again, DAT does not encounter this sort of problem. Since God’s nature is fixed across all possible worlds, God is displeased by cruelty in all possible worlds, and cruelty is wrong in all
possible worlds. This is exactly what a satisfying moral theory should imply. Even theists who reject (F) and, with it, the argument of the preceding section, have compelling reason to reject DCT in favor of DAT.

5.3 A Difficulty with Divine Commands

A further problem for DCT stems from the nature of commands themselves. In explaining the idea of a divine command, Adams identifies three key features:

1. A divine command will always involve a sign, as we may call it, that is intentionally caused by God.
2. In causing the sign, God must intend to issue a command, and what is commanded is what God intends to command thereby.
3. The sign must be such that the intended audience could understand it as conveying the intended command (Adams 1999, 265).

This account seems correct, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. In general, commands need to meet at least one further condition: they need to be such that persons who are subject to them are able to recognize their source. If A commands B to \( \phi \), then B knows (or at least can reasonably be expected to believe) that A commands B to \( \phi \). Otherwise, A fails to actually issue a command. A may make an imperative statement of some kind, and A may intend for that statement to be somehow

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98 This sort of objection to DCT has been pressed by Erik Wielenberg in (Wielenberg 2005, 60-62), and has been raised in conversation by Don Hubin and Steve Brown.

99 Arguably, there is a fifth condition that also must be satisfied by a command. John Austin argues that the difference between issuing a command and merely expressing a wish is that issuing a command implies that some kind of penalty will be imposed on the person who is subject to that command if he fails to obey it (Austin 1832, 17). If this is true, it need not worry Adams, since he has room to maintain that violations of moral requirements bring with them such penalties as pangs of conscience and the fracturing of interpersonal relationships.
communicated to B, but if B is not in a position to recognize A's statement as a command, and A knows that B is not in a position to understand that statement as a command, then no command, strictly speaking, has been issued.

Suppose, for example, that Sarge is authorized to command Johnson to clean the latrines. Johnson knows that Sarge has this authority, and therefore knows that if Sarge commands him to clean the latrines, then he has a (non-moral) duty to clean the latrines. One afternoon, Sarge (who does intend to command Johnson to clean the latrines) prints the sentence “Clean the latrines!” on a sheet of paper. He seals it in an envelope, carries it into the woods, and places it in the hollow of a tree. As Sarge had hoped he would, Johnson goes for a hike in the very same woods later that day. He notices the envelope, picks it up, opens it, and reads the note. Yet—even though Adams's three criteria for a command are met (with Sarge in the role of God, obviously)—Johnson has not thereby been commanded by Sarge to clean the latrines. For all Johnson knows, the paper is a practical joke of some kind, written by a person other than Sarge who has no authority to command Johnson to do anything. Or it might be a command from Sarge, but a command issued to someone other than Johnson. Or it might be a coded message of some kind that actually has nothing to do with cleaning latrines. Or it might be something else entirely. Sarge can only successfully issue a command to Johnson to

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100 There is nothing unfair to Adams about replacing God with Sarge in this story; Adams takes his three conditions on the nature of divine commands to be derived from the concept of a command in general.
clean the latrines if the command is issued in such a way that Johnson can be expected to recognize it as a command from Sarge. Otherwise, Sarge fails to issue a command at all.

The same principle about commands applies in the divine case as well, and therein lies a problem for Adams and other divine command theorists. Some persons are not in a position to recognize any moral imperative as a command of God, because they do not believe in God. Therefore, it is impossible for God to issue a command to them; the very nature of commands prohibits it. No moral imperative will be interpreted by the atheist as a command from God, God knows that no moral imperative will be interpreted by the atheist as a command from God, and therefore no moral imperative to the atheist can be a command from God.

Adams is aware of this problem, and tries to solve it by supposing that “it is enough for God’s commanding if God intends the addressee to recognize the command as extremely authoritative and as having imperative force” (Adams 1996, 68). But this solution does not work. For one thing, we could amend the story above in a way that accommodates this suggestion but does not render more plausible the suggestion that Sarge has successfully issued a command to Johnson: we could suppose, for example, that Sarge has arranged for Johnson to be psychologically conditioned such that Johnson would treat any written statement ending in an exclamation point as being “extremely authoritative and as having imperative force.” Upon reading Sarge’s note, Johnson
would feel a compulsion to clean the latrines, but the questions about the source of the note—and hence the legitimacy of the command—would not thereby be answered. Sarge still has not commanded Johnson to do anything.

The difficulty for Adams and other divine command theorists becomes especially vivid when we consider that many atheists take themselves to be justified in believing that the imperative force of putative moral requirements can itself be explained naturalistically. For instance, morality is thought by many informed persons to be, in the words of Michael Ruse and E. O. Wilson, “an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate” (Ruse and Wilson 1985, 50). If morality is a system of divine commands, then any person who justifiedly believes Ruse and Wilson’s claim about the imperative force of morality will thereby be exempt from those commands by virtue of justifiedly misidentifying their source. Thus DCT implies that atheists who justifiedly accept nontheistic explanations of the imperative force of morality are exempt from the requirements of morality. God’s commands are not commands to such persons; they cannot be, because such persons will—through no fault of their own—fail to recognize the legitimacy of those commands, and God knows that they will do so.

Of course, things may be different if Ruse, Wilson, et alia are (culpably) not justified in believing what they do about the nature of morality. To modify again our story about Sarge and Johnson, suppose that Sarge has already said the following to Johnson: “Listen very carefully. Later today, I will leave a note for you in a sealed envelope in the hollow of a tree. That note will tell you what I want you to do. I expect
you to read it and obey.” If Johnson subsequently finds the note and reads it, but then deliberately persuades himself that the note wasn’t really written by Sarge after all, then it is natural to say that Sarge has issued a command, but Johnson has failed to recognize that command. So long as it is true that Johnson really should recognize the command for what it is, then the claim that Sarge’s note counts as a command to Johnson is correct. Similarly, God can issue commands to atheists if atheists ought to recognize the legitimacy of those commands; atheists like Ruse and Wilson would still be subject to God’s commands in spite of their failure to recognize them as God’s commands.

In Erik Wielenberg’s discussion of this objection to DCT, he claims that this fact is of no help to the divine command theorist. It does not matter, Wielenberg thinks, whether the atheist is justified or unjustified in disbelieving that moral requirements find their source in God, because the only appropriate form of criticism for an unreasonable atheist who misidentifies the source of moral requirements (or the imperative force of moral requirements) would be that he or she is guilty of being irrational, not immoral. There is, however, good reason to believe that this claim is mistaken. Failing to believe a morally significant proposition can sometimes be a moral failing as well as an intellectual failing—as when a person does not acknowledge the salience of moral considerations, or fails to acquire information we reasonably expect him to acquire\textsuperscript{101}—and we ought not simply foreclose on the possibility that an atheist

\textsuperscript{101} T. M. Scanlon makes this latter point nicely: “The question of permissibility is a question that can be asked by a deliberating agent, and one that a normal agent can be expected to be able to answer. The answer to this question is not just a matter of what is in fact the case (whether anyone could know it or
(or anyone else) who fails to recognize a divine command as a divine command may be both intellectually and morally culpable for this failure.

This is good news for DCT insofar as it points the way to a strategy that can be employed to save the theory from the present objection. It is bad news insofar as that strategy appears to be an exceedingly difficult one to execute. First, the divine command theorist needs to argue that anyone who fails to recognize a divine command as a divine command is therefore irrational. Then, once this has been shown, the divine command theorist needs to make the case that such instances of irrational belief are also failings for which the person is morally culpable. Unless she embraces both of these claims, it appears that the divine command theorist will be forced to conclude that there are very many human persons to whom God does not issue commands and who, therefore, are exempt from the requirements of morality.

So long as we appreciate that the problem here stems from the nature of commands, and not from the fact that many people are atheists (and may be rationally justified in accepting atheism), we can see that there is no problem in this vicinity for the divine attitude theorist. Again, the central difficulty here is that the very nature of commands requires that they be recognized as commands in order to exist. Otherwise the sign that is used to express the “command” will merely be an assertion of some kind.

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not). But at the same time, permissibility is not merely a matter of what a particular agent believes the facts to be. It depends also on what it is reasonable for the agent to believe in the situation, what it is reasonable for the agent to do to check those beliefs, and whether the agent has done these things” (Scanlon 2008, 51—52).
But attitudes are not like that. Whether God is pleased or displeased with an agent for doing \( \phi \) need not hinge in any way on whether the agent recognizes that God is pleased or displeased with her for doing \( \phi \).

5.4 The Moral Life: Uncodifiability and Judgment

Another consideration that counts in favor of DAT stems from reflection on the moral life. In particular, it stems from reflection on the fact that we often find ourselves in difficult situations in which the straightforward application of a general moral principle is insufficient for determining what we ought to do. Rather, what we need is the ability to see and to appreciate the salient features of some situation and to act appropriately. To claim this is not to deny the existence of at least some general moral truths; it is simply to affirm (i) the uncontroversial proposition that such general truths can (and often do) come into conflict with each other, and (ii) the somewhat more controversial proposition that the right course of action cannot always be identified simply by ranking the importance of the conflicting principles or by appealing to a deeper, more fundamental moral principle.

These are not claims that I hope to demonstrate decisively, but I will offer some brief reflections in support of the particularist thesis that no “reasonably adult moral outlook” can be reconciled with the denial of uncodifiability (McDowell 1979, 336). To begin with, we should acknowledge that deontic pluralism—i.e. the view that there is an irreducible plurality of fundamental moral principles—enjoys tremendous intuitive
plausibility. This is seen most vividly when we contrast the kinds of counterexamples that are often presented as objections to monistic normative theories. Utilitarianism, for example, is thought by many to be undermined by the fact that it may license the killing of innocent persons when doing so has good consequences. Many reflective persons find this clearly unacceptable. But “respect for persons” moral theories, like Kantianism, are typically thought to go too far in the opposite direction. For instance, the notion that no good could justify the telling of a lie or the breaking of a promise seems absurd.

Some philosophers have sought to minimize these problems and blunt the force of these counterexamples by offering more nuanced versions of the theories in question. I cannot possibly survey all of their attempts here, and I should again emphasize that I do not pretend to be offering a decisive demonstration of deontic pluralism. (Perhaps I should also emphasize that virtually any plausible normative theory will prove to be compatible with the claims made by DAT, so nothing essential for my project hangs on the truth of the pluralist thesis.) Nevertheless, I do believe that reflection on simplistic counterexamples like the ones above yields important insights.

The central idea (if I may be permitted to engage in a bit of oversimplification) is that the problem revealed by these disparate counterexamples is not a problem with utilitarianism or Kantianism per se, but with the assumption made by all advocates of monistic normative theories: namely, that we can expect to find exactly one informative basic principle that, when applied correctly, will tell us what act is morally right in any
conceivable circumstance. For Kantians, this principle is the categorical imperative. For utilitarians, it is the principle of maximizing the good. Pluralism rejects this approach and insists instead on the existence of multiple basic moral considerations that can affect the rightness or wrongness of an act: beneficence, veracity, promissory fidelity, and so on.\(^{102}\)

Because these considerations are basic, genuine conflicts between them are possible. We can and do find ourselves in situations where beneficence recommends one action and veracity recommends another, incompatible action. For example, a friend who badly needs some encouragement asks for your assessment of the poorly prepared meal he has served you. It may be the case that you can do him great good by lying to him but cause him significant harm by telling the truth. If so, it might be morally right to lie in order to help your friend and protect him from harm. But in situations that are not wholly dissimilar, the opposite action might be appropriate. Suppose that your lying would once again be very good for your friend, but telling the truth would not harm him at all. Or that the lie would be minimally beneficial to him, and the truth would be minimally harmful. Or that lying would not benefit him at all, but telling the truth would be a little bit harmful. What should one do?

The point of these examples is not to defend any particular answer, or set of answers, to this question but to highlight the nature and extent of moral conflict.

Although the degree of benefit and harm varies in each of the scenarios briefly sketched

\(^{102}\) The best-known articulation and defense of moral pluralism is (Ross 1930). See (Audi 2004) for a more contemporary approach.
above, the principles in play do not: each represents a conflict between beneficence (as well as, perhaps, non-maleficence\textsuperscript{103}) and veracity. In this light it is easy to see the appeal of the pluralist thesis that no hierarchical ranking of principles will be adequate for our purposes, because sometimes our duty to tell the truth will trump our duty to do good and sometimes considerations of beneficence will outweigh concern for truth.\textsuperscript{104}

What is needed, if we are to determine the right course of action in many cases of moral conflict, is considerably more detail than I have provided here—e.g. specific information about the benefits and harms likely to be suffered by your friend, the nature and history of your relationship with him, and so on—and something more than a set of general moral truths. What is needed is the ability to make the right kind of moral judgment in light of these details, the ability to properly understand the situation and to respond to it in an appropriate way. My suggestion is that this need cannot be comfortably met by the divine command theorist.

\textsuperscript{103} “Perhaps” because there is some reason to think that beneficence and non-maleficence are not distinct principles.

\textsuperscript{104} At the risk of belaboring the point, I note again that a very sophisticated monistic principle might be able to accommodate our reflective intuitions about these cases. (And I take it, not uncontroversially, as a constraint on any plausible normative theory that it be able to make this accommodation.) The problem with appealing to such a principle, in my view, is that any sufficiently nuanced principle seems to be \textit{too} nuanced to do the work required of it; such a principle would not be the kind of thing a normal person—even a normal virtuous person—could or would easily wield in moral deliberation. Furthermore, appeals to sophisticated monistic principles reverse the proper order of knowing. If there is any informative general principle that allows us to resolve all cases of moral conflict, it is a principle that is known in virtue of our knowledge of correct judgments in particular cases of moral conflict, not the other way around. The importance of skillful moral judgment (of the sort described in the remainder of the above paragraph) is revealed by the role of sages in moral communities: we expect certain persons to be able to offer guidance because of their ability to perceive the morally salient features of situations, not because they have esoteric knowledge of a nuanced normative principle of which the rest of us are ignorant.
I do not claim, however, that this need cannot be met by the divine command theorist at all. After all, divine commands need not be understood merely as general moral principles; to the contrary, God can issue—and, according to many religious traditions, has issued—particular commands to particular persons in particular circumstances. There is no good reason to think (granted the truth of theism) that God never commands persons in situations of moral conflict to do one action rather than another. Indeed, it is theoretically possible that “moral occasionalism” is true: that all moral conflicts of the sort described above are, in fact, resolved by God commanding the agent in question to perform (or refrain from performing) some particular action. In fact, the divine command theorist must embrace moral occasionalism if she is to accommodate the fact of uncodifiability, for if there really are moral conflicts in which the mere application of general principles is inadequate to determine what one ought to do, then either God resolves those conflicts by issuing some particularistic command, or there is no fact of the matter concerning what one ought to do. The divine command theorist will want to avoid the latter, since moral conflicts are common and often quite significant. For example, deciding whether to lie to your friend about the quality of his cooking is not, in the scenarios above, an unimportant question; it matters how we treat other people. Furthermore, we would like to think that there really is something you ought to do if you find yourself in one of those situations. It would be very strange for any moral theorist to conclude that all cases of moral conflict are such that there is no

105 Thanks to Don Hubin for suggesting the label ‘moral occasionalism’.
fact of the matter concerning what the agent in question ought to do. So we are left with moral occasionalism as the best option for the divine command theorist.

Unfortunately for the divine command theorist, moral occasionalism is a very unattractive view. Its suggestion that God issues a particular command to every individual who finds himself in a situation of moral conflict is inelegant, at best, and an implausible ad hoc refinement of DCT, at worst. If conflicts between general moral principles were rare, the problem would be much less serious. But such conflicts are anything but rare. Most of us need not look any further than our own personal lives to see that they are very common indeed. One might also note that the mere existence of professional and applied ethics as a philosophical discipline is evidence of such conflicts’ prominence in human life. Each and every one of these conflicts must be the subject of a distinct divine command, if DCT is true.

Even worse for the divine command theorist, it is an open question whether God’s commands in cases of moral conflict are fixed by the other facts of the situation; the worries about DCT raised by Murphy and elaborated on in the first section of this chapter rear their heads again here. If it is the case that moral principles are uncodifiable, then there is reason to believe that God may not issue the same particularistic command in one scenario that he issues in another, otherwise indistinguishable, scenario; to deny this is to deny the plausible claim (F) discussed earlier. Perhaps it would be right for me to lie to my friend who needs encouragement,

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106 This claim is compatible with the view that there are some moral conflicts in which multiple (and incompatible) actions are all morally permissible.
but wrong for you to lie to yours, even though the two friends’ circumstances are
identical in all respects other than God’s decision to command you (but not me) to tell
the truth in that context. To put it rather mildly, this seems odd. It comes close to being
a rejection of the traditional view that moral judgments must be universalizable, a view
that many philosophers have taken to express a platitude of moral discourse.

Universalizability is, of course, related to moral supervenience, but it is not the
same thing. To embrace universalizability is to believe that if it is right for an agent S to
perform an action \( \phi \) in circumstances C, then it is right for all agents relevantly similar
to S in circumstances relevantly similar to C to do \( \phi \). It is tempting to think that the
divine command theorist might save universalizability in roughly the same way she
saved supervenience above; that is, she might point out that even if you and I have
friends who are in identical situations, and we find ourselves wondering whether
veracity or beneficence is the more pressing of our concerns, we nevertheless are not in
identical situations if God commands me to lie and commands you to tell the truth. As
long as we incorporate all of the relevant facts—including God’s particular commands—
there is no reason to think that DCT and universalizability are incompatible.

The flaw in this reply is its failure to appreciate the nature of the problem. The
problem under discussion here is generated when we consider the perspective of an
agent who is deliberating about what to do in a situation of moral conflict. In such
situations, we find ourselves needing to exercise moral judgment. This judgment is a
kind of skill; one might say that it is “more art than science,” insofar as it is not merely a
form of abstract or theoretical reasoning but a practical ability cultivated and manifested by virtuous persons. It involves responding appropriately to the morally salient features of various circumstances. The person who successfully develops this skill—the sage or virtuous person—perceives the relative importance of (for example) his friend’s need for encouragement, the seriousness of the lie, and the benefits and harms that will stem from lying or truth-telling, and acts accordingly.

The difficulty for the moral occasionalist—and, ipso facto, the divine command theorist—is that this kind of skill is completely superfluous if moral occasionalism is true. What moral occasionalism requires is the ability to hear and discern God’s particular commands: an undeniably useful and important ability, but one that seems obviously different from our ability to be properly sensitive to the morally salient features of a situation so that we can determine what ought to be done in that situation. It tells us to turn our attention away from the considerations that we would normally take to be decisive for establishing what should be done and focus instead on determining whether a divine command has been issued to the agent who is deciding what to do. If God’s decision to issue such a command is not determined by the other morally salient features of the situation,\(^\text{107}\) so that which command God issues cannot be settled merely by appealing to those features, then moral occasionalism seems to render

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\(^{107}\) It is worth emphasizing that, as was discussed in the first section of this chapter, it is no small sacrifice for the divine command theorist to deny this supposition; such a denial imposes a significant constraint on God’s freedom in issuing commands. As before, of course, divine command theorists who are comfortable maintaining that God does not have significant freedom in choosing what to command are unlikely to be troubled by this argument.
the virtuous person's skill in moral judgment “totally futile and useless.”\textsuperscript{108} Being able to weigh the relative importance of the morally salient considerations does not matter one whit so far as being able to determine what to do is concerned. What really matters, it turns out, is one's ability to determine whether God has issued a command in these particular circumstances. This is a surprising and undesirable result.

DAT does not have the same consequence because it does not imply moral occasionalism. It is natural for the divine attitude theorist to suppose that God’s pleasure and displeasure are fixed by the very same features of situations to which the virtuous person has learned to respond. (As was noted earlier, this claim does not threaten divine freedom in any problematic way.) The skill employed by a virtuous person in determining what to do in any particular case of moral conflict thus may be taken to reflect God's own attitudes, and on DAT it becomes wholly unsurprising that this skill successfully tracks the moral facts. Far from being “totally futile and useless,” the judgment exercised by a virtuous person in determining what to do in some case of moral conflict mirrors the nature of the moral facts themselves. Thus anyone who believes that skilled moral judgment is necessary for determining what to do in a case of moral conflict, and who believes that God has significant freedom in deciding whether to issue a command in some particular cases of moral conflict, has reason to favor DAT over DCT.

\textsuperscript{108} This phrase is used by Leibniz in an explanation of his rejection of metaphysical occasionalism (i.e. the view that created substances are never efficient causes). He writes, “I do not grant that God alone acts in substances, or alone causes their changes, and I believe that that would be to make the creatures totally futile and useless” (quoted in Robert Adams's \textit{Leibniz} (New York: Oxford, 1994), p. 95).
5.5 The Religious Life: Intimacy with God

Finally, it is fair to say that a metaethical account grounded in divine attitudes fits more naturally with the sort of intimate, personal relationship between God and his creatures that religious thinkers often present as an ideal than does a command-based account. Consider for example the difference between wanting to please a loving father versus trying not to run afoul of the local magistrate. There is a richness and depth to the former sort of action that is absent from the latter. Both kinds of action find their roots in concrete relationships between persons, but obedience to a lawgiver is impersonal in a way that filial affection obviously is not. This is not to say that mere obedience—especially obedience to God—is necessarily a bad thing, but many thoughtful and even pious people find it incomplete, unsatisfying, and shallow as an account of the essence of religious devotion.

The Jewish-Christian tradition, of course, is replete with images that convey the idea of a divine-human relationship far more intimate than the relationship between a sovereign and his subjects. That tradition does maintain that God is the ultimate ruler of the universe and that we owe him our allegiance, and I have no desire to minimize that feature of theistic morality. It would be an enormous mistake, however, to think that this metaphor is the only one to which we might appeal in order to understand the nature of the religious life. To take one obvious and familiar example, traditional Jews and Christians have thought of God as a loving parent for millennia: “from a Christian perspective, no relationship is more mysterious and more wonderful...than that of
fathers and sons” (Guinness 2008, 32). For an equally orthodox image, one might think of the prophet Hosea, whose marriage to the unfaithful Gomer was a living parable about the ancient Hebrews’ faithlessness in worship, or of the Song of Solomon, in which sexual intimacy is presented as a model for the love between God and his people.\textsuperscript{109} In the early Christian era, the Apostle Paul spoke of the Christian community as the “bride of Christ,” and Jesus himself referred to his followers as his \textit{friends}, prayer that they might be one with him just as he is one with God the Father, his “Abba,” or, in contemporary English, his \textit{daddy}.\textsuperscript{110}

All of these images are significant for our thinking about God as the ultimate source of moral obligation. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to be raised by a loving parent, or who has been in a happy marriage, or who has known real erotic intimacy, or who has experienced the rich friendship the Greeks called \textit{philos}, knows well that such relationships can (and often do) generate reasons for acting that are every bit as motivating as the commands of a legitimate authority. Very often—perhaps more often than not—these reasons for acting are generated by something \textit{other} than a speech act, something other than an actual command. In a good marriage, for example, one does not act in ways known to be displeasing to one’s spouse and then expect to be excused merely on the basis that one was not \textit{commanded} (or even asked) to refrain from

\textsuperscript{109} At least, very many commentators have read it this way (cf. (Matter 1990)). This interpretation need not be understood as a rejection of the view that the Song of Solomon is also about the value and beauty of sexual intimacy itself.

\textsuperscript{110} See 2 Corinthians 11:2; John 15:15; John 17:21; and Mark 14:36, respectively. On the Aramaic word ‘abba’, see (Kittel et al. 1985).
Meaningful relationships do not work like that. And yet DCT seems to be committed to this sort of picture of the religious life, at least insofar as that life is thought to have straightforwardly moral implications. DCT seems to diminish, or at least fail to appreciate, the richness of the ideal divine-human relationship described in the Jewish-Christian tradition, a relationship that is as intimate as the relationship between lovers, between friends, between parents and children.

In light of all this, one is reminded of a line from one of history’s most famous prayers, offered by Jesus of Nazareth and recorded in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John. “Now this is eternal life,” said Jesus, “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” If, when push comes to shove, the Christian story really is as simple as all that—if eternal life, the “life that is life indeed” (1 Tim. 6:19), is an essentially relational state involving non-propositional knowledge of God—then we ought to expect that any theistic metaethical account purporting to be consonant with orthodox Christian theology will accommodate the complexity and depth that is characteristic of intimate relationships between persons. Divine attitude theory is preferable to divine command theory because it successfully does just that.


