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Abductive Moral Arguments and Godless Normative Realism: An Evaluation of Explanations for Moral Facts and Motivations for Moral Behavior

Jonathan Smith

Introduction

For the vast majority of people, religion and morality are – *prima facie* – closely related to one another. Hence, since moral arguments for the existence of God relate morality to religion, it is unsurprising that moral arguments are particularly appealing to the layman. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, there has been a multitude of attempts to ground morality in something other than religion with the hope that naturalism and certain moral intuitions might be compatible. One popular attempt is given by Erik Wielenberg, a philosopher at DePauw University. Wielenberg terms his foundation for morality *Godless normative realism*, wherein he posits that there exist necessary, basic, and brute ethical facts that ground the primary moral characteristics of the world. Since many moral arguments for the existence of God are abductive arguments moving from certain moral

characteristics of the world to the truth of theism, any non-theistic explanation of these moral characteristics weakens abductive moral arguments. Within this paper, I demonstrate that though Godless normative realism offers a possible explanation for the existence of objective moral facts and motivations for moral behavior, theism is a superior explanation. Consequently, though abductive moral arguments for theism are weakened by the possibility that Godless normative realism is the foundation of morality, one still has good reason to hold that theism is true given the existence of objective moral facts and motivations for moral behavior.

Exposition

The Moral Argument

Generally, moral arguments for the existence of God are arguments moving from certain moral characteristics of the world to the existence of God. There is a multitude of moral arguments, and many of the arguments are interrelated to one another. Within this paper, I am primarily concerned with whether Godless normative realism offers a solid foundation for the existence of both (1) objective moral facts and (2) sufficient motivations for individuals to be moral. Hence, the moral argument presented within this paper is an abductive argument proposing that theism is the best explanation for these two moral features of the world.¹ The argument can be given more formally as follows:

¹ David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

- (1) The best explanation for the existence of both objective moral facts and sufficient motivations for individuals to be moral is that theism is true.
- (2) There exist both objective moral facts and sufficient motivations for individuals to be moral.
- (3) Therefore, there is good reason to hold theism to be true.

As stated before, this argument is abductive, and hence, both of the premises could be true and yet theism could be false. However, if both of the premises are true, then the moral characteristics of the world offer good reason – at minimum – to hold that theism is true.

Both theists and Godless normative realists affirm the second premise of the above argument. However, theism and Godless normative realism are competing explanations of the truth of the second premise. As a result, to evaluate the truth of the conclusion of the argument, one must evaluate the strength of either explanation. Moreover, if one can show that a non-theistic hypothesis is far stronger than the theistic hypothesis, this serves to greatly weaken the conclusion of the argument. There are two primary methodologies that may be taken to refute the first premise of the moral argument given above. First, one may attempt to demonstrate that theism does not offer a sufficient ground for the existence of both objective moral facts and motivations for moral behavior. Second, one may offer an alternative, and highly plausible, explanation for the existence of objective moral facts and motivations for moral behavior. Wielenberg, in offering support for

Godless normative realism, applies both methodologies. Hence, in evaluating whether Godless normative realism offers a better explanation for the truth of premise (2), we will examine both the theistic and non-theistic accounts.

God as an Insufficient Foundation for Objective Moral Facts

In the Platonic dialogue, *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks his interlocutor, Euthyphro, an iconic question: “Is what is holy, holy because the Gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?”² The dilemma can be stated in terms more relevant to this paper as follows: “Is *X* good because God commands it, or does God command *X* because it is good?” where *X* is some objective moral fact. If the theist affirms the first disjunct, then morality seems – *prima facie* – to become arbitrary. However, if the theist affirms the second disjunct, then moral value exists independent of God; rather than *decreeing* what is good, God *recognizes* what is good. In this way, if one affirms the latter disjunct, then theism fails to offer an explanation for why certain moral facts obtain; the theist is in the same predicament as the naturalist.

Wielenberg’s primary argument against the sufficiency of theism as an explanation for objective moral facts rests on the success of the above dilemma. Ultimately, Wielenberg evaluates not only the affirmation of the two disjuncts, but also a popular method of escape through the horns of the dilemma. To understand

² Plato, “Euthyphro,” in *Classics of Philosophy*, ed. Louis P. Pojman and Lewis Vaughn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31.

the third option, it is helpful to begin with two propositions related to Divine command theory (DCT): the control thesis and the dependency thesis. The control thesis states that “Every *logically consistent* ethical claim, E, is such that God could make E true.”³ The dependency thesis, on the other hand, states that “Every true ethical claim is true in virtue of some act of will on the part of God.”⁴ Now, with respect to these two theses, two variations of DCT may be defined: strong DCT and weak DCT, where strong DCT affirms the truth of both theses while weak DCT affirms the truth of *only* the dependency thesis.⁵ In particular, Divine nature theory, the view that the nature of God is the foundation for necessary and objective moral facts, is one variation of weak DCT.

Ultimately, Wielenberg rejects both strong and weak DCT. Strong DCT appears to have trouble responding to the problem of evil since strong DCT entails that God could have determined every evil that obtains in the actual world to be good. However, since an omnibenevolent God would desire for the created world to be fully good, such a consequence of strong DCT appears to negate the possibility of an omnibenevolent God.⁶ Moreover, the thought of a possible world in which some horrendous evil is morally praiseworthy is practically inconceivable,

³ Erik Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 40.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 44.

at least to the majority of ethicists. Since the control thesis entails that, in some possible world, a multitude of horrendous evils are morally praiseworthy, the control thesis contradicts firmly held moral intuitions.

Unlike strong DCT, the problem of evil does not pose a threat for weak DCT, since weak DCT denies the control thesis. Moreover, weak DCT does not entail that there exist possible worlds in which horrendous evils are morally praiseworthy, and so, weak DCT coincides with our moral intuitions, at least in this regard. However, Wielenberg rejects weak DCT via appeals to a different moral intuition and the existence of *intrinsically* evil actions. Wielenberg states that the dependency thesis entails the truth of counterfactuals such as the following: “if, *per impossible*, God were not loving, He could make it the case that it is obligatory for someone to inflict a gratuitous pummeling on another human being.”⁷ However, this appears to contradict one’s moral intuition. Even if God is necessarily loving, to claim that God could vastly alter moral facts (if He were to will it), contradicts the tendency to believe that “there are some ethical claims that no being is *powerful enough* to make true.”⁸ Wielenberg also argues that the dependency thesis negates the possibility that objects distinct from God might be *intrinsically* good or evil.⁹ If any object is evil *only insofar as it relates to God*, then the property of being evil

⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

is conditional upon God, a being external to the object itself. However, Wielenberg proposes that certain objects distinct from God *are* intrinsically evil, and thus, the dependency thesis is false.

Lastly, Wielenberg offers a naturalistic explanation of the existence of objective moral facts. The explanation is rather simple: “some ethical truths are necessary truths,” in a similar manner to which the existence of God is a necessary truth for traditional theists.¹⁰ While the theist holds that God is a metaphysically necessary being and that moral facts necessarily obtain in light of the necessary existence of God, Wielenberg holds that the moral facts necessarily obtain *in and of themselves*. To justify such a proposal, Wielenberg appeals to the fact that traditional theists themselves posit that “the fact that God exists is a substantive, metaphysically necessary, brute fact.”¹¹ Analogously, Wielenberg holds that the moral facts are themselves brute facts and that these brute facts obtain in every possible world independent of the existence or non-existence of God.¹² Ultimately, Wielenberg posits that basic and necessary ethical truths are sufficient for the metaphysical grounding of objective moral facts.

Motivations to be Moral in a Godless Universe

¹⁰ Ibid., 51.

¹¹ Erik Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37.

¹² Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue*, 52.

Under theism, there are two primary motivations for one to be moral. The first motivation is the guarantee of Divine justice, the belief that moral and immoral activity will be rewarded or punished at some future time. If there will be recompense for every moral or immoral action, then it is always in one's self-interest to perform the moral action. The notion that, *in every circumstance*, one has sufficient reason to act morally is encapsulated in the *overriding reasons thesis*, stating that "the overriding (or strongest) reasons always favor doing what is morally required."¹³ If the consequences of some moral action were ultimately detrimental to the actor, a multitude of theists would posit that it is unreasonable for the actor to act morally. However, on Godless normative realism, there is no guarantee of Divine justice, and one can imagine a multitude of scenarios in which a moral action entails severely detrimental consequences for the actor. Thus, the overriding reasons thesis is false given Godless normative realism.

Kant alluded to the second motivation in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, wherein Kant proposes that if theism is false, then one is not justified in believing that the highest good is in fact attainable.¹⁴ In other words, theism seems to entail that the universe is created in such a way that humanity is capable of arriving at the

¹³ C. Stephen Layman, "A Moral Argument for the Existence of God," in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?*, ed. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 52.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1788).

end or goal of moral activity. The “ought” implies “can” principle entails that the moral obligation (and I would add motivation) to act morally necessitates that humanity is capable of attaining the highest good. If humanity is incapable of attaining the highest good, then humanity has neither an obligation nor sufficient motivation to strive after the highest good. Thus, if Godless normative realism is to offer sufficient motivation for individuals to act morally, this motivation must not depend upon the attainability of the highest good.

Though it is clear that any naturalistic explanation of morality is incompatible with these two motivations to act morally, Wielenberg offers an alternative motivation to act morally. For Wielenberg, the motivation to act morally is contained within the concept of moral obligation itself: “that a given course of action would satisfy one of your desires is one sort of reason for performing an action; that a given course of action is morally obligatory is another sort of reason for performing it.”¹⁵ This distinction appears to be the same distinction drawn between hypothetical and categorical imperatives in *The Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*.¹⁶ Moreover, Wielenberg finds any motivation for ethical behavior grounded in self-interest to be contrary to the very nature of morality.¹⁷

¹⁵ Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue*, 78.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. J. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

¹⁷ Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue*, 79.

For example, if I sacrifice myself for another person because it is of great benefit to myself, the sacrifice is not morally praiseworthy, at least not in the Kantian sense. Hence, the first theistic motivation for moral action is insufficient to explain truly moral behavior.

Lastly, Wielenberg offers a few examples of virtues that individuals ought to cultivate given the truth of Godless normative realism. For the sake of space, I will offer only one such virtue: humility. On theism, one ought to cultivate humility because he recognizes that any impressive feature he possesses was instantiated by God. Thus, one is not ultimately responsible for the good qualities that he possesses. However, Wielenberg attempts to demonstrate that humility has a similar justification on Godless normative realism, and in fact, naturalism in general. For Wielenberg, the virtue of humility is sensible on theism because one recognizes that he has little control over his own good fortune. Rather, God is the ultimate reason for his good fortune. Similarly, on Godless normative realism, one ought to realize that he has little control over his own good fortune, yet chance, as opposed to God, is the ultimate reason for his good fortune. In this way, the virtue of humility, on Godless normative realism, is the realization that one is subject to chance, and that he is not ultimately responsible for the good that comes his way.

Response

Intrinsic Evil and the Divine Nature

Within this section, I seek to offer a few thoughts related to the relationship

between evil objects and God (seen as a standard of morality). Wielenberg, when refuting weak DCT, argued that the dependency thesis negates the possibility of intrinsically evil actions. However, whether this refutes weak DCT is not yet obvious and ought to be addressed more thoroughly. Wielenberg defines intrinsic and extrinsic properties as follows: “the intrinsic value of a given thing is the value it has, if any, solely in virtue of its intrinsic properties. The extrinsic value of a given thing, by contrast, is the value it has in virtue of how it is related to things distinct from itself.”¹⁸ With this definition, it would seem that if the evil nature of an object is dependent upon the will of God, then this object is not intrinsically evil, but rather extrinsically evil.

There are two propositions that must be affirmed in order for Wielenberg’s argument to be successful: (1) If the dependency thesis is true, then there do not exist intrinsically evil objects, and (2) there exist intrinsically evil objects. I will focus here on solely proposition (2). For Wielenberg, moral obligations are the result of either human relationships or ethical principles that are intrinsically good. For example, Wielenberg might maintain that one ought to keep a promise to a friend because it is an implicit requirement within a friendship, while one ought not torture innocent children for fun because such an action is intrinsically evil. The first type of moral obligation focuses primarily on a contractarian understanding of

¹⁸ Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 2.

human relationships, while the second appeals to a more categorical understanding of moral principles. Regardless, Wielenberg admits that relationships are often sufficient to demand some kind of moral behavior.

Now, on Godless normative realism, the absence of intrinsically evil actions could be problematic, since, if the only source of moral obligation is human relationships, then, when one is not constrained by a human relationship, he has no moral obligations. For example, consider an individual who, when he is by himself, is self-absorbed, and yet, when interacting with others, is self-sacrificing. On Godless normative realism, this individual has no obligation to change his behavior, though intuitively, we affirm that he ought not be self-absorbed even when his self-absorption is unrelated to his human relationships. Thus, for Godless normative realism to align with moral intuitions, there must exist some other source of moral obligation, such as the intrinsic value of a character trait. If one posits that it is intrinsically wrong to be self-absorbed and further posits that this is a sufficient condition for the moral obligation not to be self-absorbed, then the self-absorbed individual ought not be self-absorbed, even when he is alone.

However, with respect to traditional theism, there do not exist actions independent of the relationship between God and man. Hence, if theism is true, then one ought not be self-absorbed even when he is alone since he is obligated, in the relational sense, not to be self-absorbed. Consequently, on theism, if no actions are intrinsically evil, this does not alter one's moral obligations. Hence, why should the

theist not claim that all moral and immoral actions possess only extrinsic value and maintain that one is obligated to act morally due to the relationship between man and his Creator? Would such a position be detrimental to the theistic explanation of morality? Such a theory appears to be extensionally equivalent to a theistic explanation incorporating intrinsically good actions. Moreover, the affirmation of intrinsically evil or intrinsically good actions appears to be quite Kantian, and as such, might not gain support from a multitude of ethicists, since metaethical theories such as egoism and utilitarianism already deny the intrinsic good of ethical actions. As a result of these considerations, Wielenberg's insistence that certain moral facts must possess intrinsic value, as he defines intrinsic value, appears unjustified.

Equivocating the Term 'Ought'

It is common for the naturalist to claim that naturalism offers a solid foundation for morality because belief in God is not necessary for moral behavior. However, it ought to be noted that such a statement, though true, does not refute the first premise of the moral argument given within this paper. This paper is not concerned with whether one is *capable* of being moral while naturalism obtains, but rather whether it is *reasonable* for one to be moral while naturalism obtains. It is simple to argue that "a person can be moral without belief in God," but much more difficult to give rational justification for the performance of particular moral

actions.¹⁹ However, even demonstrating that it is reasonable for an individual to perform a moral action *X*, given naturalism, is not equivalent to the claim that an individual *ought* to perform *X* given naturalism.

In evaluating whether Wielenberg's theory offers a robust explanation of moral facts, one should recognize a couple of subtle distinctions between different uses of the term 'ought'. There are two uses of the word 'ought' with which I am interested. The first use is related to an expected consequence of previously obtaining states of affairs. For example, we often say things such as "The air-conditioner has been turned off for a few weeks, so the electric bill ought to be fairly cheap this month." Ought, when used in this sense, is not an inherently moral term, but rather a term referring to rational consequences of a group of facts. The other meaning of the term 'ought' is related to the deviation from a standard. For example, the phrase "He ought not to have stolen from her" is not concerned with whether stealing follows rationally from previously known facts, but rather with whether stealing corresponds to a standard of human conduct.

Ultimately, the first use of the term 'ought' is insufficient for *moral* obligation, though it might be sufficient for a *rational* obligation. When discussing the foundation of virtue on Godless normative realism, Wielenberg demonstrates that an individual ought to cultivate humility as a *rational* response to facts

¹⁹ Paul Kurtz, "The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness without God Good Enough?," in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?*, trans. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 25.

obtaining in the world, namely, that one has little control over his own good fortune, and chance is ultimately responsible for one's good fortune. However, demonstrating that one ought to be humble where 'ought' is used in the first sense does not imply that one has a *moral* obligation to be humble. Hence, Wielenberg's argumentation, as it stands, fails to explain why one is *morally* obligated to be humble, though it is successful in demonstrating the rationality of humility given naturalism.

DCT and Arbitrary Moral Principles

Since the majority of Wielenberg's argumentation in opposition to the theistic account of morality is dependent on the Euthyphro Dilemma, defending a theistic response to the Euthyphro Dilemma serves to remove much of the support for Godless normative realism. There are three primary responses to the Euthyphro dilemma: (1) strong DCT, (2) weak DCT, and (3) the autonomy thesis, where the autonomy thesis is the proposition that necessary and objective moral facts exist ontologically independent of God. Both Wielenberg's argument from the problem of evil and his argument from the fact that moral facts become arbitrary as a result of the control thesis supply good reason to reject strong DCT. Moreover, because the autonomy thesis affirms that objective moral facts exist independently of God, the foundation for these facts is independent of God. Therefore, if the autonomy thesis is true, premise (1) of the moral argument within this paper is probably false. Consequently, weak DCT seems to be the response to the Euthyphro dilemma with

the most optimistic outlook.

The first argument in refutation of weak DCT, the argument from the existence of intrinsically good and intrinsically evil moral actions, was discussed previously. The second argument against weak DCT, the argument from the intuition that no being could possess the power to alter moral facts, will be addressed here. If this second objection can be overcome, weak DCT is still a tenable response to the Euthyphro dilemma. To begin, if some fact necessarily obtains, this does not entail that this fact is ontologically independent of other necessary facts. For example, consider the fact “ $2+2=4$.” This fact is dependent on the Peano axioms of arithmetic, meaning that “ $2+2=4$ ” obtains because the Peano axioms obtain. However, the fact “ $2+2=4$ ” still obtains *necessarily*. In the same way, we can maintain that moral facts obtain necessarily, and yet, are dependent upon the existence of God: “If necessary truths can stand to one another in asymmetric relations of explanatory priority, then there is no objection so far to holding that moral values exist because God exists.”²⁰

Now, the objector to weak DCT might argue as follows. Assume that the dependency thesis is true. Then, for some evil action x , if God were to will that x is good, then x would be good. The difficulty with such an argument is that “the counterfactual in question has an impossible antecedent, and so, on the customary

²⁰ William Lane Craig, “The Most Gruesome of Guests,” in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?*, trans. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 170.

semantics, has no nonvacuous truth value.”²¹ In other words, there does not exist a possible world in which God wills that x is good, and moreover, neither does there exist a possible world in which x is morally good. Both the nature of God and the fact that x is an evil action obtain in all possible worlds. Hence, it is difficult to ascertain the meaning of such a counterfactual. Consequently, I am unconvinced that the dependency thesis leads to conflicts with strongly held moral intuitions or moral presuppositions. It seems sufficient to know that moral facts obtain necessarily, regardless of whether these facts are explanatorily dependent upon the existence of God. Finally, if the dependency thesis is unscathed by Wielenberg’s objections, then weak DCT is at least one plausible theistic explanation for the existence of objective moral facts.

The Autonomy Thesis and the Need for God

Lastly, let us assume that the Autonomy Thesis is in fact correct. Are there still moral characteristics of the world that are unexplained by Godless normative realism? So far within this paper, we have focused particularly upon the explanatory power of theism and Godless normative realism as they relate to the existence of objective moral facts and motivations for moral behaviors. However, even if theism is an insufficient foundation for these two aspects of morality, theism seems to offer a few explanations for separate aspects of morality. Particularly, theism offers an

²¹ Ibid., 172.

explanation for the possibility of moral knowledge, and theism offers an explanation for why necessary and objective moral facts pertain to humanity.

First, if theism is true, then one would expect that God created humans with the capability of possessing moral knowledge since a good God would desire his creatures to know and uphold the standard for moral living. However, if naturalism is true, there is little to no reason to expect that the beliefs we possess about morality correspond to objective moral facts. Rather, our moral beliefs are likely to correspond to those beliefs that are most evolutionarily beneficial, and the beliefs that are most evolutionarily beneficial need not be the same as the beliefs corresponding to objective moral facts. Since humans do in fact possess moral knowledge, these considerations offer good support for the truth of theism.

Second, theism offers an explanation of the fact that objective moral facts pertain to humanity and alter human behavior since an intelligent creator of the universe is capable of intentionally organizing creation in such a way as to incorporate necessary moral facts into daily human life. If naturalism is true, we do not have an explanation for why humans are moral beings, beings concerned with objective moral facts. For example, humans appear to be the only beings on earth capable of ascertaining moral facts. This means that somewhere within the evolutionary process, humans must have become cognizant of objective moral facts, yet offering an explanation for this phenomenon on naturalism is difficult, if not, impossible.

These additional moral features of the world, though not contained within the moral argument with which we are primarily concerned, again support the notion that the explanatory scope of theism is greater than that of Godless normative realism. Therefore, though Godless normative realism may offer a partial explanation for the moral characteristics of the world, theism ultimately appears to be a superior explanation.

Conclusion

Within this paper, it has been demonstrated that Godless normative realism is one possible explanation for the existence of objective moral facts and motivations for moral behavior. However, the explanation for these two moral aspects of the world given by Godless normative realism appears to be less powerful, though plausible, than the theistic explanation. Also, the theistic explanation of morality appears to span a broad range of moral characteristics of the world, while the scope of Godless normative realism is more modest. Therefore, though Godless normative realism diminishes the strength of the abductive moral argument given at the beginning of this paper, it does so minimally, and consequently, the existence of objective moral facts and motivations for moral behavior still offer good reasons to hold that theism is true.

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