

## **Morality Without God: an Examination of Theistic Explanation**

*Jeff Freelin*

What, if any, is the relation between morality and God? Presumably, most theists wish to claim that the relationship is one of dependency (i.e., morality depends upon God, in some way). As I thought about this, it occurred to me that the relation between morality and God was, for most theists, anyway, just a species of a more general claim that I take most theists make; namely, that *everything* depends upon God in some way. Both claims (i.e., the specific one about the relationship between God and morality, and the more general one about the relationship between God and everything), I will argue, are a result of the type of explanation that theists are after.

However, since this paper is about the relation between morality and God, I wish to narrow my discussion a bit. First note that the question posed (namely, ‘what is the relation between morality and God?’) is a question about the form, or structure, of morality, and not about the content. I will not be concerned here with what it is that makes right acts right (or good people good), but only with (for want of a better way of putting it) from whence moral considerations derive their authority. Of course, theistic moral

theorists will generally wish to claim that morality derives its authority from God. In other words, morality is about following commands (in some form or another), and moral law only will be justified if those issuing those commands have the right to do so. I take theistic moral theorists to make the claim that only God has such a right. Not to put too fine a point on it, theistic moral theorists will generally wish to claim that it is the very notion of 'good' that depends upon God, so that, as moral agents, we will not be able to make sense of the concept of good without God.

To investigate this relation between God and good, I will first take a look at some different possible meanings of 'morality depends upon God', and argue that theists must mean a relationship of what I will call ontological necessity and sufficiency between God and morality. In part two, I will speculate about the type of normativity that I take theistic moral theorists (TMT) to be after. In part three, I want to explicate two accounts of explanation, and argue that TMT are after what I will call a 'terminal total explanation'. Finally, I will argue that 1) given the type of explanation and the type of normativity theistic moral theorists are after, it is no surprise that

they would claim that God is necessary for morality (indeed, this claim as it stands may well be circular), and 2) we need seek neither that specific type of normativity nor that type of explanation. This, I will argue, frees us up to consider naturalistic (as opposed to supernatural) explanations for the good.

Before I begin, I want to say a few things about the limits of my thesis. First, I am not here interested in the question of the existence of God. While this is of course an important issue, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Second, I am attempting to criticize a specific type of theistic explanation of normativity; for brevity's sake, when referencing the account I wish to address, I am going to refer to 'theistic moral theorists'. This is not to be construed to mean that I am claiming that all theistic moral theorists hold the view that I am describing. My analysis is only meant to apply to a particular account of the relation between morality and God. Finally, I will not offer or endorse a specific naturalistic account of the good. My main purpose is to show that such accounts of the good are actual alternatives to the theistic account of the good.

## **I. What relation between God and morality are theistic moral theorists after?**

When we talk about the relation between God and morality, we can distinguish between ontological and epistemological relations, as well as necessity and sufficiency relations. Note that these distinctions will cut across one another, so that it is possible to have an epistemological necessity relation, an epistemological sufficiency relation, an ontological necessity relation, and an ontological sufficiency relation.

Some definitions first: I take an epistemological relation to be a relation between the knowledge of (or belief in) one (set of) concept(s) *A* and the knowledge of (or belief in) another (set of) concept(s) *B* such that knowledge of/belief in *A* is either necessary or sufficient for knowledge of/belief in *B*. An ontological relation would be a relation between two entities *A* and *B* such that the existence of *A* is either necessary or sufficient for the existence of *B*.

Given the above distinction, there are four ways to describe the relation between morality and God:

1) Epistemological sufficiency (**ES**): A concept of God is sufficient for a concept of good. This might be expressed in a material conditional: if one has a concept of God, then one has a concept of good. I think TMT would reject **ES**, because this would only constitute an explanation of *one* way we could get the concept of good, although it would not rule out acquiring the concept of good another way. Further, **ES** would only be an explanation of where our concept of good comes from, and not about whether good actually exists. Thus, it seems to me that on this account, we do not get the dependency of good on God like TMT want.

2) Epistemological necessity (**EN**): A concept of God is necessary for a concept of good. This could be expressed by the conditional: if one has a concept of good, then one has a concept of God. I think that TMT would reject **EN** also, because even though one would have to have a concept of God in order to have a concept of good, a) this would again only be an explanation of where our *concept* of good comes from (and thus no claim about whether good actually exists), and b) **EN** seems to me to be false. That is, to accept **EN** would be to claim that if someone does not have a

concept of God, then that person cannot have a concept of good. I presume that there are many people who have a concept of good, but not a concept of God. I suppose that TMT could claim that such a concept would be mistaken (i.e., an incorrect concept of good), but this seems to me to be hopelessly *ad hoc*.

3) Ontological sufficiency (**OS**): The existence of God is sufficient for the existence of good. The conditional here would be: if God exists, then good exists. Again, I think that TMT would reject **OS** because under this relation, the good could still exist even if God does not, and hence the good would once again not depend on God.

4) Ontological necessity (**ON**): The existence of God is necessary for the existence of good. This conditional would be: if good exists, then God exists. This account, I think, ticks *most* of the boxes that TMT are after: on this account, there would be no good without God; good *depends* on God. Further, if the worry is about the existence of good (as opposed to the concept of good), **ON** addresses that, also. However, I do not think **ON** will be strong enough for most TMT; on the **ON** account, by the nature of the

logical relation, even though God is needed for good, there might be other conditions that would have to be fulfilled in order for good to actually exist (i.e., God is necessary, but not sufficient). I think most TMT would want to claim that the existence of God is not only necessary for the existence of good, but that the existence of God is both necessary and sufficient for the existence of good. It is only in this way that TMT will get what they need: the existence of God is needed for the existence of good, and that the existence of God is all that is needed. Thus, I think the considered view must be:

5) Ontological necessity and sufficiency (**ONS**): The existence of God is both necessary and sufficient for the existence of good, or 'Good exists if and only if God exists'.

I am still left with a couple of questions at this point: first, what exactly *is* the account? We know that the existence of good must depend upon the existence of God. What is this dependency relation? Is it a causal relation, is the claim that God *causes* good? Maybe the claim is that God creates/causes the conditions by which good arises. I am not sure this makes

much of a difference in the way I want to talk about the relation; I think that both the causal claim and **ONS** boil down to the same claim: that the existence of God somehow *explains* the existence of good (that is, the existence of God is needed to explain the existence of good, and that the existence of God is the only way we can explain the existence of good). I will look at what I take to be the nature of this explanation later. At this point, I want to address the concept of good that I take TMT to be after.

## **II. What kind of normativity are TMT after?**

So, what kind of good would satisfy most theistic moral theorists? First, I take it that TMT are after a notion of good that is universal (as opposed to relativistic). The type of good that will satisfy the theistic moral theorist would be one in which the truth values of moral claims are independent of (at the very least) individual beliefs/preferences, and the vagaries of specific cultures. Since I believe that this type of good is also what most moral theorists in general are after, I don't think I need to pursue this any farther.



Second, I think that most TMT are after a concept of good that is what I will call 'essentialist' (as opposed to an extensionalist account). An essentialist account will attempt to give necessary and sufficient conditions in any definition of 'good' that will hold in all possible worlds. For example, if I am a hedonist, I might say that pleasure is the only intrinsic good. I also might express this in biconditional form ' $x$  is good iff  $x$  either is pleasure, or a means to pleasure'. In this way, I can specify a theory of the good and (in conjunction with a theory of right action) produce an act-based moral theory. Whether this account of good is essentialist or extensionalist depends upon how I mean the biconditional to be taken. If I mean the biconditional to hold in all possible worlds, then I am claiming that, *in all possible worlds*, everything that is that is good is also either pleasure or a means to pleasure. I take it that many moral theorists are after just this type of account. Essentialist accounts are difficult to formulate, and are correspondingly easy to test; all essentialist accounts may be tested by possible-world counter-examples. So, to test any essentialist biconditional of the form  $x$  iff  $y$ , all we need to do to show the biconditional to be false is to find a possible world (i.e., imagine a non-contradictory scenario) in which  $x$  is either not necessary

or not sufficient for  $y$ . An extensionalist account of the good, on the other hand, will use biconditionals that are only designed to hold in the actual world. In other words, extensionalist accounts are designed to pick out extensions of good in the actual world. Thus, possible-world counter-examples will not tell against extensionalist accounts; to show an extensionalist biconditional of the form  $x$  iff  $y$  to be false, one would have to show that, *in the actual world* (not a logically possible imagined scenario) that  $x$  is either not sufficient or not necessary for  $y$ .

I think that TMT will be inclined toward offering an essentialist analysis due to the usually accepted concept of the nature of God. If God exists necessarily (i.e., exists in all possible worlds), then it seems to me that TMT would wish to claim that the sentence ‘Good exists iff God exists’ would be true in all the possible worlds in which God exists (i.e., all of them). Note here that the essentialist project will include the extensionalist project (that is, any essentialist project will also pick out the extensions of good in that actual world), but the essentialist project contains a stronger claim: that the good will be defined in just the same way in all possible

worlds. I think TMT will have to make this latter claim; otherwise theists would seem to have no grounds for asserting that the actual world is the best (i.e., contains the optimal ratio of good over evil) possible world. Since this latter claim is often an integral part of theistic responses to the problem of evil, I think theists will generally wish to hold on to it.

### **III. What kind of explanation are TMT after?**

What is an explanation, and what are explanations supposed to do? I will take it that any explanation *E* explains some phenomenon (or set of phenomena) *P* when *E* makes *P* intelligible. The tricky part is trying to figure out what ‘intelligible’ means, and this is where, I think, naturalists and theists part ways; the main difference is when each group is satisfied with an explanation. In this section, I wish to compare a naturalist account of ‘intelligible’ with the type of intelligibility that I take theists to be after, namely, a terminal total explanation (TTE).

I think naturalists are normally satisfied with the explanation of a phenomenon when we have either found its cause or exhibited “some other

uniform or near-uniform connection between it and something else.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, *P* is explained if it has been traced back to a group of factors *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, etc. which caused it. The explanation would only be a bad one if it failed to specify the correct factors. For example, on this type of explanation, I can make my presence here today intelligible by pointing out the factors that lead me to be here, e.g., I was asked to give this talk today, my car is operational, etc.. If you think this explanation is insufficient, we can go further back and talk about how I became interested in ethics specifically, or philosophy in general, what lead me to be in Missouri, and so forth. If I can make my presence here today intelligible without referencing an supernatural entities, I can have a natural explanation of my presence here today; that is, on the naturalist view, as long as the explanation is one that would allow people to ‘understand’ why I am here today (as opposed to being on my couch at home playing video games, or riding my bike, and so on), then the explanation is

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Edwards, “A Critique of the Cosmological Argument”, reprinted from *The Rationalist Annual* (1959) in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., edited by Louis Pojman, p. 13. I have also borrowed a version of Edwards’ notion of intelligibility in explanation.

not defective. There is no need to go back to Jurassic period, or the beginning of the universe, to make my presence here today intelligible.

So, what is a terminal total explanation (TTE)? I think theists would wish to claim that explanations of the type given in the preceding paragraph *are* only partial explanations. Thus, a theist would have a very different definition of 'intelligible' than a naturalist; roughly, a theist will wish to claim that a total explanation is one to which nothing further could be added. It is of no surprise that the claim is going to be that the only type of explanation to which nothing further can be added is one which terminates in the existence of God.

How would this explanation go regarding morality? Take a general type of secular explanation for the immorality of, say, torturing innocent people. We might say that torturing innocent people is wrong because it harms the individual being tortured, that it treats a person like a thing, or that it degrades humanity. We can add that the torturer has no logical ground for his torturing an innocent person because, presumably, the torturer would not himself want to be tortured. The torturer would want to claim that other

people should have a reason not to torture him (namely, he doesn't want to be tortured); if he in turn claims that it is permissible for him to torture others, then he involves himself in an inconsistency (i.e., he would claim that others ought not torture him because he doesn't want to be tortured, but he would in turn ignore others' preferences to not be tortured). If the torturer *does* want to be tortured, then we can say that the torturer himself is irrational, and that torturing such a person does not really constitute a harm to that person. The point is that we can adduce many reasons (the ones above are only a few) to believe that torturing an innocent person is wrong.

The TMT would, presumably, claim that the above explanation of the badness of torturing innocent people is incomplete. What exactly makes it incomplete? Well, one could claim that we do not have an explanation as to why harm itself is a bad thing, or why being inconsistent in one's dealings with others (in the way outlined above) is a bad thing, or why we ought to pay attention to others' preferences in the first place. The claim, of course, is going to be that the existence of God makes sense of all these things (and others). How does this work?

I can only speculate about one way that this would work. In a(n) (admittedly) very general sense, though, I think the account has to go something like this: God created the universe and everything in it with a purpose (i.e., a teleology). It is incumbent upon human beings to exercise their reason (as a pale echo of God's perfect rationality) on their observations of the world to tease out the purposes God has built into the fabric of the universe. Thus, the world depends ontologically upon God, and normativity (as a function of the purposes God built into the universe) also depends ontologically upon God. In a general sense, then, the theist makes use of the old Aristotelian point: we can only judge something as 'good' based on the function of the thing. Since the function of a thing depends upon what it is made for (i.e., its purpose), and such purposes come from God's design of the universe, then 'good' must depend upon God.

So, to sum up: if I am right, TMT wish to provide a theistic account of the good 1) whose existence has an ontologically necessary and sufficient relation to the existence of God, 2) that is universal and essentialist, and 3) for which there is a terminal total explanation. Note that, given the type of

good and the type of explanation that TMT are after, that there seems to be no other explanation that would fill the bill other than the theistic one.

#### **IV. Shortcomings in the theistic account of the good.**

I think that there are four main problems with the TMT account of the good:

1) We do not need a terminal total explanation of the good in order to make the word 'good' intelligible. I can give a perfectly lucid account of why it is bad to, say, enslave a person without appealing to the existence of God.

How might this account go? Well, I might say that to make someone a slave would be to run counter to that person's rational preferences as to how they wish their life to go, or that to do such a thing to them would be to treat them as a thing rather than as a person, or I might claim that, since having a certain amount of freedom is an important part of human well-being, to deprive someone of that would be a very bad thing to do. Regardless of the actual account, note that none of these accounts (or, presumably, many of the alternative accounts I could give in their place) appeals in any way to the existence of God.



2) In response, a TMT might claim that, again, we do not have a *complete* explanation of the good, because we do not have an explanation of *why* we ought to pay attention to a person's rational preferences, or why it is a bad thing to treat a person as a thing, or why a certain amount of freedom is a human good. The TMT will then, I suppose, suggest that adding God to the explanation will complete it; that we are meant to pay attention to someone's rational preferences, or their freedom, or their personhood because paying attention to such things is part of God's plan, or His purpose in creation. A version of this account might go like this: humans are social in nature, and want and need the company of other human to truly flourish. Thus, it is part of our natural make-up (i.e., human nature) to care for others. We might also note that God made humans to be rational, which not only confers a certain type of value on human life, but is the part of us that allows us to come to conclusions about the good based on observations about the world. In a broader sense, this account would set up an entire account of the good life, or human flourishing.

I maintain that adding the existence of God to the above explanation does not really make the notion of 'good' any more intelligible than an account that does not add the existence of God. Note the starting-point in the above account is just a list of attributes that are gotten from observation: that humans are social in nature, and thus it is in our make-up to care for one another, that we are rational, etc. The purported explanation of 'good' is that these attributes/states of affairs are part of God's plan, or come from God in some way.

The point of doing moral philosophy is, in part, to clarify moral concepts like 'good'. If I am right, we can have a secular account that makes notions like 'good' intelligible (note that these explanations will not be, and are not designed to be, a total terminal explanation). Does the addition of God add any explanatory power to the purported explanation of 'good'? Does the explanation clarify what 'good' means? We can still ask the same question: what is it that makes treating others as things bad? The theistic answer seems to be something along the lines of 'Because God has made it clear that He had deemed it so.' This answer, I think, does not in any way

deepen our understanding of the notion of ‘good’. It does add a supernatural element to the explanation; however, this raises more questions than it answers.

3) The TMT may answer at this point that a naturalistic conception of the good cannot give us an answer to the question ‘why ought we be moral all the time?’<sup>2</sup> What account would a TMT give us in answer to this question?

Well, I suppose one could claim that a world without ‘deeper’ moral commitments (in which ‘good’ is defined by reference only to the well-being of sentient things, and not by reference to a God-imposed purpose in everything in the universe) there really would be no overriding reason to sacrifice one’s own interests to do the right thing. This idea is often expressed in the claim that all secular morality must boil down to self-interest; that moral action in a purely naturalistic world must have, at root, a self-interested motivation.

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<sup>2</sup> This issue was famously raised by George Mavrodes in ‘Religion and the Queerness of Morality’ in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, Cornell University, 1986.

There are two things I wish to say about this. First, what non-self-interested motivation would a TMT endorse? It's obvious that 'be moral so you can reap rewards in the afterlife (i.e., go to heaven)' will not do. 'Do the right thing out of concern for moral law' does not seem to fill the bill, either. Secularists would also seem to be able to have *that* motivation, although they will understand it differently than theists will. How about 'do the right thing, because you care about others' interests'? There is, of course, nothing that prevents secular moral theorists from having this motivation, although of course they will again understand it differently than TMT. There may be a theist-specific moral motivation, something like 'do the right thing, because you love and revere God' that secular moral theorists would not have (by definition), but a secular moral theorist *could* be motivated by a love and respect for human beings.

Second, it is unclear to me that the account of good offered by TMT here is non-circular. Again, what kind of explanation is on offer here? It seems to boil down to 'Q: why is  $x$  good? A: Because  $x$  has been discovered, by dint of reason, to be in accordance with God's plan (or the purposes built

in by God during creation).’ What can the answer possibly be if the secularist then asks ‘what is it that makes God’s plan (or purposes) good?’ I think that any answer the TMT gives at this point must presuppose an account of good. That is, it seems to me that the TMT needs an account of good to already be in place in order to make the claim that both the purposes of God are good, and that the process that we use to find the good (i.e., reason) is itself good.

4) Finally (and this is a small point), it seems to me that there are reasons to favor an extensionalist account of the good as opposed to an essentialist account. Since the essentialist account will be designed to pick out the good in all possible worlds, any essentialist account will necessarily have to worry about possible-world counter-examples. I take it that moral theorists not only do not have to be worried about moral obligation or moral goodness in possible worlds, but that they actively should not be worried about such things. What we ought to be interested in is moral goodness and moral obligation in the actual world. The confusion of these two projects has led to many false-starts in the formulation of moral theory. I think many moral

theorists have taken the default project to be an essentialist project, to the detriment of moral philosophy. We've simply been worried about too much.

This being said, I think that the shortcomings I have enumerated in this section will tell against both accounts of the good that take the existence of God to be both necessary and sufficient for the existence of the good, and accounts that take the existence of God to be only necessary for the existence of the good.

## **V. Conclusion.**

To conclude, I wish to make my main point a slightly different way. I take the problem in explanation here to be similar to the so-called Cartesian problem in epistemology. Descartes, in the *Meditations*, subjected his beliefs to the strongest doubts possible in order to come to a belief that could serve as a foundation for knowledge. He did a very good job of this; even going so far as to suppose that an evil being could be deceiving him about even beliefs that are analytically true. So, for every belief (save the famous *Cogito*), Descartes could answer 'there is reason to doubt that'. If I were to say 'I believe that I am sitting here typing this paper at my computer',

Descartes would have said at that point in the *Meditations* that I could be thoroughly deceived about this. Of course, this kind of doubt, if unchecked (Descartes thought that he could do away with it, but ultimately, I think, failed) would result in a death-knell for epistemic justification about external-world beliefs. We simply wouldn't be justified in believing anything about the world as it exists 'outside' our heads, so to speak.

The problem here is that, with this kind of doubt, the word 'doubt' lacks content, or meaning. If I have a pain in my side and go to the doctor, where he diagnoses appendicitis, I might ask for a second opinion (that is, I may doubt that I have appendicitis). So I might go to a second doctor, who confirms the diagnosis of the first. I may still doubt that I have appendicitis, but submit to an exploratory surgery (because the pain is unbearable). Suppose then that the doctor, during the surgery, discovers that my appendix is diseased, and removes it; after I wake up in the recovery room, my pain is greatly decreased. She then gives me a crash course in what diseased appendixes look like, and shows me my appendix which she removed from me. I suppose that at this point I could still doubt that I had appendicitis, but

it might seem a bit silly of me at this point to continue to doubt. If I do doubt, however, the doctor could ask me this question: what test, if it were performed, would do away with your doubt? The point is that, if I cannot specify any test that, if performed, would remove my doubt, then *the word 'doubt', as I am using it, doesn't mean anything.*

I think TMT are in the same boat as our doubting Cartesian. For any secular account of good that anyone gives, the TMT will claim that that account is incomplete. What the explanation really needs, say the TMT, is God. Anything short of an explanation that terminates in God will count as incomplete for TMT (or, indeed, I suspect, for any other theistic theorist in any discipline). It has been my contention that this sort of explanation does not shed any more light on the good than secular accounts (of course, some secular accounts may be better than others), but is just an exercise in asking 'why is *that* good?' (analogous to 'I doubt that'). The final question is 'why is God's plan good?', and the TMT will, I think, not have an answer. We will thus have our terminus in explanation, but at the cost of making 'good' even more murky than before.



## **5 God and Morality: Comments on Jeff Freelin's "Morality without God"**

*Bruce Ballard*

First, thanks to Jeff for a probing and challenging paper which tries to be fair to both sides. At certain points Jeff seems to suggest an incommensurability to the two sides which would obviate debate. He grants, for example, that when it comes to what 'intelligible' means, "the main difference is when each group is satisfied with an explanation." So it seems like neither side will make headway against the other given their disparate starting points. All points will seem question-begging to the opponent.

Nevertheless, Freelin goes on to argue for the sufficiency and economy of the secular approach and the redundancy and circularity of the theistic view.

A lot depends upon the notion of intelligibility in Freelin's account. One of his central claims is that the secular approach supplies all that is needed to make moral claims intelligible. Several times he uses Kant on moral rationality as an example of a secularly sufficient definition. He correctly represents the theistic objection that no reason has been given for *why* I am obliged to be rational or to care about others' rational preferences. Attempting to show a parity, he accurately portrays the motivations of the opposed parties. The theist, in acting morally, does so out of love and reverence for God while the secularist *could* act out of love for people.

But to say that it is not impossible for the secularist to act humanitarially is quite different from saying that someone, in fact, acts out of love and reverence for God. His or her motivation makes sense from the point of view of one who has experienced the love of God. There is a coherent logic of motivation here along with a clear sense of obligation. Such a logic is unavailable to the secularist as is any basis for moral

obligation. It would be unaccountable to hold that I, the accidental product of blind physical causes and whose future is oblivion, had fixed moral obligations to anyone.

Further, at certain key points Freelin may (unintentionally) misrepresent the theist's view and so miss the target of criticism. His use of the Euthyphro dilemma and divine command theory as though they typified theistic belief generally is an example here. The theist is charged with circularity when something is called good because God says it is good and God says it is good because it is good. Of course this view would represent a vicious circularity. But Christian belief, for example, has long held that our knowledge of good and evil is based on our conscience which is itself created by God. So when God commands what is good, he is reiterating what we have been designed to know, not introducing a heteronomous fiat. Further, when we recognize that an act is good or evil we are recognizing real aspects of the world through our conscience.

The theistic account, as I have interpreted it makes sense of the conscience in a way the secularist cannot. Conscience is peculiar in several

ways. It doesn't seem to care what we might want but tells us what we should or should not do. And it speaks as though it should be obeyed (it commands). Now these are the marks of another's voice, the voice of God to the theist. How the secularist might account for these features is altogether unclear and adds weight to the uncertainty of secularist ethics.