

Article

A Critique of the Neo-Platonist Theory of Moral Value

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Abstract

Divine Command Theory holds that what is morally right is what is commanded by God. This view faces a form of the Euthyphro dilemma: either God commands actions because they are right, in which case moral standards are independent of God, or actions are right because God commands them, in which case morality appears arbitrary. A currently influential response among theistic philosophers draws on a distinction between moral duties and moral values. On this view, duties arise from God's commands, while values are understood—following a neo-Platonist approach—to be grounded in God's nature. Proponents of this account appeal to an analogy with the role of the standard metre in the metric system: just as a metre is defined by reference to a paradigmatic length, so goodness is defined by reference to God's character. On this basis, they argue that the existence of moral value depends on God's existence, and that moral objectivity requires theism. We argue, however, that moral language cannot be understood as involving God in a structurally analogous way to the standard metre. Moreover, the neo-Platonist account does not provide a successful explanation of the normativity of moral language.

Keywords: divine command theory; theory of value; ideal agent; Euthyphro dilemma

1. Divine Command Theory and the Neo-Platonist Account of Moral Value

Many theists maintain that an action is obligatory, permissible, or prohibited if and only if God commands, permits or prohibits it. Plato famously pointed out that material equivalences such as can be explained in different ways.¹ One explanation is that God commands an action because it is morally right. According to this explanation, there are moral facts or standards that exist independently of God's commands, and God issues commands that align with these facts, presumably because He knows the relevant facts and formulates His commands accordingly. The other explanation is divine command theory, which holds that an action is obligatory because and only because God commands it. On this view, moral standards do not exist independently of God's will; rather, an action becomes morally required, permissible, or forbidden solely in virtue of God's command.

It is often thought that each of these views has strengths and weaknesses that correspond to the weaknesses and strengths of the other. If there are independent moral standards or facts, then there are (moral) reasons that guide God's commands and allow us to (morally) appraise these commands. However, morality does not depend on God's existence, and His sovereignty is restricted, insofar as He is required to align his commands with an external standard.

Conversely, if there are no independent moral facts or standards, then there is nothing to restrict God's sovereignty in moral matters, and morality is ontologically dependent on



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God, insofar as moral properties exist only if God exists. It would seem, however, that, without independent standards, God's commands become morally arbitrary and incapable of being (morally) appraised.

While moral philosophers usually show little appreciation for the divine command theory, the view remains a popular option for many philosophers of religion. The currently most popular defence appeals to a neo-Platonist² conception of value (Alston 2002; Craig 1997, 2010; Craig and Kurtz 2009; Mawson 2009; Copan 2013; Zagzebski 2004, 2005, 2016). Advocates of this defence distinguish between values, which determine whether something is good or bad, and duties, which concern the rightness and wrongness of actions. It is then claimed that duties 'spring' from God's commands, while values 'exist in the nature of God' (Mawson 2009, p. 1036).

The latter idea is often illustrated through an analogy with the standard metre, first suggested by Alston (2002). On a (no longer operative) definition, an object counts as one metre long if and only if it is similar in length to the standard metre. This definition makes the sentence 'The standard metre is one metre long' true by definition. By analogy, a being counts as good if and only if it is similar in character to God.

This neo-Platonist account of moral value is supposed to show that God's commands are not morally arbitrary. Rather, they are motivated by the values embodied in God's nature. These values guide God's commands and allow us to appraise them. However, since these values are understood to derive from God's nature, they do not constitute independent standards of moral goodness (Zagzebski 2005, pp. 350–60).

In what follows, we shall critically examine the neo-Platonist account of value and the defence of the divine command theory based upon it.

2. The God of Scripture as the Moral Exemplar

Assessing the neo-Platonist account of value requires a proper understanding of its two key notions: God and character similarity. To understand which notion of God the account requires, let us consider again the metre analogy. Suppose we define the expression 'one metre long' the way the neo-Platonists suggest—by stipulating that it applies to just those objects that are similar in length to the standard metre. To say of the standard metre itself that it is one metre long will then be true by definition, since the sentence 'The standard metre is one metre long' involves no genuine comparison.

This definition works because the standard metre can be identified independently—for instance, by ostension or by specifying its location. We could not, on pain of circularity, define the standard metre as a stick that is exactly one metre long. For if we were to combine this definition of the standard metre with the above definition of 'one metre long', we would be stipulating that 'one metre long' applies an object if and only if it is as long as a stick that is one metre long.

Similar observations apply to the definition of moral value proposed by the neo-Platonists. If moral goodness is defined as being similar in character to God, then it becomes tautological to say that God is good. Just as with the definition of a metre, however, this definition will only work if the object of comparison can be identified without appealing to the concept being defined. And so this definition cannot be combined with a definition of God that already includes His moral goodness. Surprisingly, some neo-Platonists commit just this mistake by attempting to combine their account of moral value with the definition of God as being a that is perfect in any respect, including morally (Craig 2009, p. 168, 2010, p. 180; Mawson 2009, p. 1034; Copan 2013, p. 94). This means that God is partly defined by being morally good, while moral goodness in turn is defined as being similar in character to God. The result is a vicious circularity: what the combination of the two definitions tells

us is that a being is morally good if it is similar in character to a being that is morally good (and also flawless in every other respect).

The problem just described can be illustrated with a passage from Craig ([Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2004](#), pp. 68–69). He rightly observes that, so long as the standard meter bar is used as the metric length unit, asking whether it really is one meter long makes no sense: it is indeed one meter long because this is how ‘one meter long’ is defined. Analogously, he suggests, if God is selected as the defining standard of moral goodness, then it makes no sense to ask whether God really is morally good, since this is just how being morally good is defined. However, Craig immediately continues: ‘If it be asked, “Why pick God’s nature as constitutive of the Good?” the answer is that God, by definition, is worthy of worship and only a being that is morally perfect is so worthy.’ ([Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2004](#), p. 69) This justification makes no more sense than justifying the choice of the standard meter bar as the metric length unit by arguing that it is one meter long by definition. The choice of the unit is part of the definition of ‘one meter long’. Accordingly, no object can be said to be one meter long—or not to be one meter long—prior to, or independently of, the choice of a metric length unit; and whatever object is chosen will be one meter long simply in virtue of that choice. By the same token, if, as the neo-Platonists assume, moral goodness is to be defined by reference to a moral paradigm, then the application of moral predicates like ‘morally good’ or ‘morally perfect’ is not determined prior to, or independently of, the choice of the paradigm. Such moral predicates cannot, therefore, be used to justify the selection of the paradigm to be used in the neo-Platonist account of moral value, or indeed to identify it in the first place. To their credit, some advocates of the neo-Platonist theory of value, such as Zagzebski, do not in fact claim that the selection of the exemplar of moral goodness can be justified in moral terms.

For the neo-Platonist definition of moral value to work, God’s character must be specified in non-moral terms. Advocates of this approach typically provide such specifications. Relying on revelation, typically scripture, God is assumed to be loving and compassionate, among other things ([Craig 1997, 2010](#), p. 17; [Copan 2013](#), p. 92). By using such scriptural characterizations of God’s nature, the circularity indicated can indeed be avoided. One first defines a morally good being as one that is similar in character to the loving and compassionate being described in the Bible. God can then be defined as morally good in the sense just defined, while also being flawless in every other respect. In what follows, we shall construe the neo-Platonist account of value in this way—as awarding the role of moral exemplar to the God of scripture.

It is important to note that the resulting account operates with two notions of God: the God of scripture and revelation, on the one hand, and the notion of a God as a perfect being on the other. The former is used to define moral value; and this notion of moral value is then used to define the notion of a perfect being. It is easy to conflate these two notions of God and to overlook the circularity described above—especially if one assumes that these notions must co-apply. But this assumption depends on how moral value is defined. On an alternative understanding of moral perfection, one can coherently deny that the God of scripture is morally perfect. The neo-Platonist definition of moral value is so formulated as to render this denial incoherent and thereby to allow the God of scripture to be identified with God conceived as a perfect being.

Character similarity—the other key notion of the neo-Platonist account of moral values—can be understood in more than one way. Some neo-Platonist passages suggest that character similarity is a matter of sharing specific traits, such as being loving or compassionate. On this view, a being is morally good if it possesses the character traits that scripture ascribes to God.

However, since character traits manifest in behaviour, character similarity could also be understood in terms of acting similarly in similar circumstances. This interpretation naturally leads to a narrative account of goodness: to grasp what God's love, compassion, and other character traits truly consist in, one must study His actions—and, in the Christian case, those of Jesus—as narrated in scripture. This understanding enables us to project how God or Jesus would act in situations not narrated in scripture. And a being counts as good if it acts in any given situation as God or Jesus would act in the same circumstances.

These two accounts of character similarity are not incompatible. Rather, the narrative account elaborates and deepens the trait-based account. One might argue that the latter would be incomplete without the former. Only through engagement with the Biblical narratives can believers gain a proper understanding of what God's or Jesus's love or kindness genuinely consist in. And when resolving moral problems in their lives, Christians will not simply consult a memorized list of divine character traits. Instead, they will return to scripture to discern what course of action would be consistent with the character of God or Jesus.

Although neo-Platonists insist on distinguishing moral values from moral duties, they also affirm an intimate connection between the two. Craig describes this connection in the following way: "God's moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commands, which constitute our moral duties or obligations. [...] [T]hese commands flow necessarily from His moral nature." (Craig 1997; Copan 2013, p. 97)

Craig does not specify the kind of necessity involved. The most plausible interpretation is that the necessity is conceptual, since character traits are generally defined in terms of their behavioural expressions. A brave person acts in pursuit of ends they judge worthwhile, knowingly accepting significant personal risk and not allowing fear to deter them. Certainly, we cannot properly call a person brave who consistently fails to act in this fashion when the situation arises.³

On this understanding, Craig's thesis that God's commands 'flow necessarily from His moral nature' implies that God's moral character is at least partially defined by the moral standards expressed in His commands. Since God is supposed to be morally perfect by definition, divine commands thereby also partially define what counts as morally good. A good God could not have failed to issue commands encoding fundamental moral principles—not because divine goodness *causes* them, but because a being would not qualify as morally good unless it endorses the moral principles those commands reflect.

Whether intended or not, Craig's proposal implies a broader principle: that the behavioural manifestations of moral character include the endorsement of certain moral codes. This principle is not implausible. To count as loving, compassionate, and kind, a being must not only refrain from gratuitous violence or cruelty—it must also oppose such behaviour and support its general prohibition. Achilles, for instance, acts with compassion in his final gesture of mercy toward Priam. Yet we would hesitate to call Achilles truly compassionate, given his warrior ethos that exalts honour, pride, and vengeance. In this sense, a person's moral worth depends not only on how they act, but also on the moral judgments they endorse.

3. Preliminary Difficulties for the Approach

An initial problem of the neo-Platonist account of moral value concerns the key notion of character similarity. If we simply define moral goodness as character similarity to God, we implausibly assign moral valency to any aspect of character whatsoever. To exclude some aspects as morally neutral or irrelevant, the neo-Platonist must use a more restricted notion of *similarity in moral character*. However, defining such a notion is a subtle task which, contrary to the neo-Platonists' ambitions, appears to require an appeal to

prior moral convictions. Humour, for instance, is certainly an aspect of character, which, intuitively judged, lacks moral valency. However, this attitude already expresses a certain moral stance. It would also be coherent to consider the presence or absence of a particular kind of humour as morally relevant. Jorge of Burgos, in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, treats humour as a vice which undermines reverence and discipline.

Further difficulties of the neo-Platonist approach are the result of choosing God as the moral paradigm. If we are to derive a criterion of human goodness from our understanding of God's character, then two conditions must be met. First, we must have an account of God's character that is consistent in morally relevant respects. Second, it must be possible to deduce from this account a criterion of goodness that is applicable to human life.

The first condition is already problematic. Many authors have argued that scriptural representations of God ascribe incompatible character traits to Him (see [Barr 1973](#); [Anderson 2007](#); [Seibert 2009](#); [Barton 2019](#)). Resolving any such inconsistencies will require a criterion of selection: one must choose which aspects of the depiction are morally authoritative. But if such choices are made on the basis of what is judged to be good, then a standard of goodness independent of the scriptural account is already being assumed. Put more generally: if our understanding of God's character is to determine our criterion of what is good, then it must be possible to determine God's character without appeal to that criterion.

The narrative form of scripture raises further difficulties. The scriptural picture of God emerges not primarily in the form of a list of character traits but from stories. In order to determine a standard of action from narratives we need to form a general rule from particular acts. Since the particular case can be generalised in any number of ways, interpretation of these narratives to yield a general moral standard involves considerable indeterminacy.

Even if a consistent and normatively authoritative conception of God's character can be derived, further difficulties arise when attempting to apply the conception to human life. Traits that are virtues for finite and fallible beings may not apply to a perfect being. Humility and courage, for instance, depend on the existence of limitations, or vulnerabilities—conditions that do not apply to an omnipotent and omniscient being. As such, these traits may be absent in God, yet central to human moral life. Nor is the difficulty solved by appealing to Jesus as the moral paradigm. Although Jesus lived a human life, a morally blameless individual will never be in a position that requires contrition, something that is often called for in the lives of ordinary human beings.

Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, we shall assume from this point on that the these problems have somehow been resolved. That is, we shall suppose that the term 'good' can be given a consistent applicability condition, one that determines an intuitively reasonable extension.

4. Neo-Platonist Values Do Not Presuppose God's Existence

Theists often claim that morality presupposes religion. This claim can be interpreted in various ways, helpfully distinguished by [Craig \(1997, 2010, pp. 172–74\)](#). We shall focus on the interpretation he and other neo-Platonists defend: moral values exist if and only if God exists. Accordingly, there would be neither good nor evil in a purely naturalistic universe. God's existence, by contrast, would guarantee at least the existence of moral goodness. Surprisingly, the arguments in favour of these claims are nowhere clearly spelled out, as critics of the neo-Platonists have rightly complained ([Morrison 2012](#); [Sinnott-Armstrong 2009](#)).

According to Craig, moral values are properties of persons and cannot exist in abstraction from them ([Craig 2010, p. 177](#)). Moral goodness exists only if there are good persons—and moral evil only if there are evil ones. The obvious problem then is that the

traits which, according to neo-Platonism, make a person morally good—like love, compassion or kindness—are plainly natural properties. Their instantiation does require the existence of any supernatural being. Craig appears to concede that, even in the absence of God, someone might behave in accordance with the moral standards reflected in scripture and exemplify the Christian virtues. Yet he insists that, unless God exists, such a person could not truly count as morally good. No matter how loving, compassionate, or just someone is, she would lack moral worth should God not exist.

It has been rightly observed that this claim is hardly plausible (see [Morrison 2012](#), p. 22). The only rationale in its favour that we could gather from the writings of the neo-Platonists is the analogy with the standard metre. If metric length predicates are defined by reference to it, they become ill-defined if the standard metre ceases to exist. Length relations among other objects will of course be unaffected, but there will no longer be a well-defined distinction between objects that are and those that are not one metre long. Neo-Platonists appear to assume that, on their proposed conception of moral value, the distinction between good and evil persons would equally be ill-defined if God did not exist. So, just as no object counts as one metre long if the standard metre ceases to exist, no person counts as good if God does not exist.

We shall now argue that the analogy fails. The neo-Platonist notion of moral value *is* well-defined even if God does not exist. To see why, it will be helpful to distinguish two roles that an object may play in the definition of a term. If an object is referred to in the definiens (or defining applicability condition), we shall call it a *defining sample* for the term. Advocates of the neo-Platonist conception of value often ascribe this status to the standard metre. By awarding it the role of the metric length unit, the committee responsible determined that an object counts as one metre long if, and only if, it is as long as the standard metre. By being chosen as the metric length unit, the standard metre thus became the defining sample of ‘one metre long’ and other metric length predicates.

An object may also motivate the definition of a term without being referred to in the definiens. A *novel*, for instance, is defined—roughly—as a long fictional prose narrative that explores characters and events with psychological and social realism. This definition was inspired by early prose narratives like *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, and the definiens is chosen to ensure that the definiendum applies to these paradigmatic cases. However, the definiens does not refer to these works themselves; it invokes only general features observed in them.

It is not uncommon for definitions to be inspired by examples. We encounter objects or phenomena that possess certain general features worth talking about and introduce a term to capture these features. Thus, Mars, Venus, Saturn, and Jupiter inspired the definition of ‘planet’, just as certain aspects of ancient Greek society inspired the definition of the term ‘democracy’. Defining samples are rarer. The Mohs scale, for example, is defined by reference to specific materials, such as diamond and apatite; similarly, acids were once defined by their reaction with litmus paper. Crucially for our purposes, the contributions of definition-inspiring examples and defining samples differ in important ways.

A defining sample, like the standard metre, is not replaceable by a description. The use of metric length predicates cannot be determined by reference to an imagined rod. Should the standard metre cease to exist, it would have to be replaced by a different object, and the definitions of the metric length predicates would have to be revised accordingly.

By contrast, a definition-inspiring example is always replaceable by a suitable description, since the definiens features, not the inspiring examples itself, but only certain properties ascribed to them. As a result, the term defined remains well-defined even if the inspiring example does not in fact exist. Consider the term ‘griffin’. Inspired by ancient depictions of eagle-lion hybrids, a griffin is defined as a creature with the body of a lion

and the head and wings of an eagle. Even though no griffin has ever existed, the term remains well-defined because the definiens does not refer to any real-world creature. For the same reason, a term remains well-defined even when the actual objects that inspired its definition cease to exist. This point can be illustrated with the help of the term ‘phonograph’. Inspired by Thomas Edison’s invention, a phonograph was defined as device that plays back recorded sound from a rotating disc. Since the definiens does not refer to Edison’s specific prototype, the continued existence of the latter is not required for the term to remain well-defined.

As explained above, advocates of the neo-Platonist conception of value liken God to the standard metre: just as the standard metre serves as the defining sample of the predicate ‘one metre long’, God is supposed to be the defining sample of the term ‘good’. It would seem more plausible, however, to conceive of God as a definition-inspiring example for the term ‘good’. Neo-Platonists surely do not expect us to actually juxtapose God himself to human beings in order to determine whether the term ‘good’ applies to them. Rather, we are supposed to apply the term by considering how human beings and their actions relate to the scriptural representations of God’s character and deeds. If a coherent moral standard can be derived from these representations, its application would not require God’s existence or, for that matter, the truth of what scripture tells us about Him. As far as the well-definedness of ‘good’ is concerned, what matters is only the coherence—not the truth—of the scriptural accounts used to define the term.

To illustrate this point, consider first the neo-Platonist account of value that emphasizes character traits. According to this account, a good being is one that is loving, compassionate, etc., just like God. However, the phrase ‘just like God’ is not part of the definiens. Rather than specifying an additional requirement for goodness, it simply expresses the claim that God possesses the character traits specified by the definiens. Since the term ‘good’ is defined by reference to those traits rather than to God Himself, it remains well-defined even if God does not exist.

A similar argument applies to the narrative version of the neo-Platonist account, according to which a being is good if it acts as Jesus is described as acting in certain biblical passages. Here too the reference to Jesus is eliminable, since the defining criterion for being good consists in acting as would someone who performs the deeds described in scripture. As long as these actions form a coherent pattern of behaviour, the term ‘good’ remains well-defined. Its application does not depend on the truth of the biblical passages, and it remains the same whether or not God exists. So, no matter whether we opt for this narrative notion of goodness or the one defined in terms of character traits, the application of ‘good’ depends, not on God’s existence, but only what is assumed to be true of Him.

At this point, a neo-Platonist might raise the following objection. The reference to God in the definiens may be redundant *if* the definiens already specifies the relevant character traits or deeds. However, one could define ‘good’ solely by reference to God without specifying any of His properties—by simply stating that a being is good if it is similar in character to God. This would turn God into a defining sample of ‘good’. If further information about God’s character is needed, one could then defer to scripture.

The problem with this objection is that the definition is not complete until God’s character is specified. Consider the following analogy. Suppose it were proposed that we define a bachelor, not as an unmarried man, but as someone who is similar in marital status and gender to Dorian Gray. And if one requests further information about Dorian Gray’s gender and marital status, one is directed to the novel, which tells us that Dorian Gray is an unmarried man. In this case it is clear, we would think that the proposal is not itself a definition, but rather an instruction for constructing a definition. Rather than being given the definiens, we are asked to construct it ourselves by including the gender and marital

status that the novel ascribes to Dorian Gray. The result will be the standard definition of a bachelor which does not include a reference to Dorian Gray or any other object. Similarly, the term ‘good’ is not defined by saying that it applies to all and only those being who similar in character to God unless descriptions of His character or deeds are added. And, once they are added, reference to God becomes redundant.

We may therefore conclude that the neo-Platonist conception of moral value fails to render the existence of moral goodness dependent on the existence of God. Claims to the contrary are likely stem from the mistaken assumption that someone can only be similar in character to God if God exists. As previously explained, what is required for the applicability of moral predicates is the coherence of the scriptural portrayal of God’s character, not its truth.

Of course, the neo-Platonist could attempt to revise the account in order to secure the desired dependency. Instead of defining a good person as one who is similar in character to the loving and compassionate God described in scripture, they could propose the following definition: a being X qualifies as a good person if and only if (i) X is similar in character to the God depicted in the Bible, and (ii) this God actually exists. On this revised account, the term ‘good person’ would remain well-defined even if God did not exist, but it would apply to no one—not even the most loving, compassionate, and just individuals.

However, the introduction of the second requirement lacks any independent justification and could be rejected on purely formal grounds, as it is neither a condition on X, nor one the fulfilment of which X can be expected to bring about. In what follows, we shall set aside the modified definition. In any case, it likely fails to reflect the neo-Platonists’ actual intention. Though they might abandon scripture as a moral standard if they ceased to believe in its truth, this would not entail that they adopt the revised definition. Rather, it would show that their commitment to the original account is conditional on their theistic beliefs.

If correct, our argument not only shows that the neo-Platonist conception of moral value fails to render the existence of moral goodness dependent on the existence of God. It also provides a further important clarification of this conception. What the neo-Platonists propose is to conceptualize the ethics of the Bible as an ideal-agent theory. On the account proposed a being is good if it acts as the ideal agent would, where the ideal agent is characterized by descriptions extracted from scripture’s depictions of God and Jesus. Trusting in the truth of scripture, neo-Platonists believe that God—and therefore the ideal agent—actually exists. However, as far as the well-definedness of ‘good’ is concerned, the neo-Platonist account does not depend on God’s existence. According to the definition proposed, the term ‘good’ applies in exactly the same way, whether or not God exists.

On this construal, the neo-Platonist account of moral obligations as arising from God’s commands can be seen to be underpinned by the same ideal-agent theory. If God is defined partially as being morally perfect, and if moral perfection is partially defined by the endorsement of certain moral values and duties, then God must indeed endorse those values and duties. This, to be sure, is not an issue of divine sovereignty but of logical/conceptual coherence: God must issue the right commands—not because some higher authority constrains Him, but because a being does not count as God if it issues the wrong commands. So, there undeniably is a moral standard to which a being must conform to qualify as God, namely the standard that the neo-Platonist derive from scripture.

5. The Objectivity of Morality

Perhaps the neo-Platonists’ concern is not so much with the existence of morality as with its *objectivity*. Craig has repeatedly insisted that only God can render morality objective. If God exists, he claims, then ‘we have a sound basis for *objective moral values*’ (Craig and Kurtz 2009, p. 30), a basis that makes morality independent of human opinion.

Conversely, if God does not exist, moral judgments reduce to mere expressions of subjective human preferences (Craig 1997; Craig and Kurtz 2009, pp. 30–33). In what follows, we shall focus solely on the claim that God’s existence renders morality objective.

Empirical claims provide paradigmatic examples of objectivity. These claims express opinions about how things are. Yet their truth or falsity is objective because they can agree or disagree not only among themselves but also with reality. Moral claims can also stand in agreement or disagreement with one another. However, theists regularly argue that naturalism precludes the possibility of agreement or disagreement with reality, since a naturalist universe includes only facts, not values. On this view, moral realism presupposes theism, because only God can supply an objective foundation for morality. Neo-Platonists like Craig and Copan accept this line of reasoning (see Craig 1997, p. 9, 2010, p. 169; Craig and Kurtz 2009, pp. 30–33; Copan 2013, pp. 86–89), though they rarely explain how, exactly, God renders morality objective (see Morriston 2012, p. 16; Sinnott-Armstrong 2009, pp. 103–11).

One idea is that God Himself provides the reality that renders morality objective, since moral claims are supposed to be true if and only if they are consistent with God’s moral nature. However, if God’s moral nature is ascertained from scripture, as we have assumed, then a moral claim counts as true insofar as it aligns with the values or duties articulated in the Bible. On this view, moral truth consists in agreement not with an independently existing aspect of reality, but with a particular set of moral claims derived from scripture. Although such agreement may be an objective matter, God’s actual existence becomes irrelevant to the truth or falsity of moral judgments thus understood. Moreover, the same form of objectivity can be achieved by grounding moral truth in alternative normative systems, such as utilitarianism or the harm principle defended by Sinnott-Armstrong (Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2004, p. 34). In each case, the truth or falsehood of moral claims is objectively determined by a fixed standard, whether scriptural or secular.

Another classical idea, prominent in Craig’s writings, is that the objectivity of morality requires a divine legislator (Craig 2010). While it may be an objective matter whether a given moral claim aligns with a secular moral standard—such as the principle of utilitarianism—it might still be argued that any morality founded in this way remains ultimately subjective, since the choice of standard itself admits no further moral justification. In this sense, it is arbitrary and merely reflects subjective human preferences. On this view, morality can be truly independent of human opinion only if its fundamental principles are not human conventions, but rather eternal laws legislated by a divine authority.

Critics have rightly pointed out that divine legislation does not render morality objective in the sense intended. Even if moral laws are issued by God, morality still depends on the preferences or judgments of a particular agent—namely, God—and thus remains subjective in a broader sense. Furthermore, the fundamental moral principles under this account still lack independent moral justification.

This second problem cannot be resolved by claiming that, since God created us, He therefore has the moral authority to impose whatever laws He sees fit. If God’s moral authority is itself part of what His legislation establishes, then the appeal becomes circular: God’s moral right to legislate is justified by the very laws He legislates. If, on the other hand, His authority is grounded in something outside His own will—such as an independent moral standard—then morality is not based solely on divine legislation. Appealing to God’s moral nature does not resolve the problem, as the same objections apply. If God Himself legislates the rule that a being with His moral nature possesses moral authority, then the rule cannot serve to justify His authority—it merely asserts it. On the other hand, if the rule is not legislated by God but is nonetheless taken to be morally valid, then it

stands as a moral principle independent of divine legislation, thereby undermining the claim that morality needs such a kind of grounding.

Adams (1973, 1979) and Zagzebski (2004, 2016) proposed solutions of the Euthyphro problem also fail to render morality objective in the relevant sense. Both seem to assume that the arbitrariness problem concerns primarily God's commands. Adams argues that it is impossible for God to command cruelty for its own sake because He is loving (Adams 1973, pp. 320–24; 1979, p. 67). While this answer might explain why God cannot issue such a command, it does not directly provide a reason against it. And, as Zagzebski (2016, p. 110) correctly observes, divine commands would be merely arbitrary if they were not based on reasons. She argues, however, that divine commands are, in fact, based on reasons—namely God's motives. Love and compassion, for instance, are motives for action and can thus serve as reasons for divine commands. Of course, this solution presupposes that love and compassion are morally correct motives. However, according to Zagzebski, the arbitrariness problem does not resurface on the level of motives, because, unlike a command,

A divine motive does not need to be based on some other reason. A divine motive provides not only the impetus for an act, but is the justification of the act. So if God acts from a motive of love, there is no need to look for some further reason for the act. (Zagzebski 2016, p. 110, 2004, p. 261).

It is unclear how this proposal solves the arbitrariness problem. The issue is not whether God's motives are themselves based on further reasons, but whether they are morally admirable or worthy of being regarded as virtues in the first place. If there are no reasons to count love and compassion as morally good, their inclusion among the virtues of a morally good being is arbitrary and not a matter of objective fact. It would clearly beg the question to insist at this point that love and compassions must be good because they are the motives of God, the objective moral standard. For the question at issue is precisely what objective reason there are for treating a being with such motives as the moral standard.

Some neo-Platonists bite the bullet and concede that no ultimate justification of morality is possible. They offer two reasons why this is less problematic than it might initially appear. First, they argue that atheists face the same predicament (Alston 2002, p. 293; Copan 2013, pp. 93–94). Second, they claim that God represents a 'natural stopping point' (Craig 2010, p. 180) for moral justification.⁴ Neither reason is particularly convincing. The problem with the first is that the promise of an objective foundation was initially presented as the key advantage of the neo-Platonist account over secular morality. To fall back on shared limitations is to abandon that advantage.

The second claim involves a confusion. A stopping point in a chain of justification must be a claim, not an object. Invoking God *as such* makes no sense in justificatory terms. In practice, the neo-Platonists do not actually stop with God as an object, but rather with moral principles—such as 'It is morally good to be loving, compassionate, and kind'—which they derive from scripture. A stopping point of this kind is just as available to an atheist as to a theist. Indeed, an atheist could equally affirm that love, compassion, and kindness are intrinsically good, without needing to attribute these values to a divine source.⁵

Humanists who endorse secular morality are often accused of 'playing God' (Law 2011, pp. 86–87). The charge is that they impose their own parochial moral standards on others without possessing any legitimate moral authority to do so. Divine legislation, by contrast, is supposed to help us transcend our subjective preferences—even if it renders morality ultimately dependent on God's preferences.

But this idea rests on a further confusion. It is true that a theist does not merely express her own preferences when she describes God's nature or reports His commands. However, since an 'is' does not imply an 'ought', no moral judgment can be inferred from such descriptive claims alone. The moral claim 'Stealing is wrong' does not follow from the

factual claim ‘God commands us not to steal’. It would follow only from a conjunction such as: God commands us not to steal, and I agree with that command. But in that case, the second conjunct simply reveals that the speaker’s attitudes coincide with those attributed to God.

Alternatively, the theist might infer ‘Stealing is wrong’ from the conjunction ‘God commands us not to steal, and He has the authority to issue such commands’. However, to recognize God’s authority is not to describe one of His objective features, but to express an attitude towards him. So, the theist who claims that stealing is wrong imposes a moral standard on others in the same way the humanist does. The only difference is that the theist claims her standard aligns with God’s will—a claim which, by itself, adds no independent normative force.

6. Moral Standards and Definitions of Moral Value

The neo-Platonist account of moral value, according to which the ‘good’ applies to a given being if and only if it is similar in character to God, is often presented as a definition of the term (Craig 2010; Alston 2002, pp. 291–93; Zagzebski 2016, p. 109). While it is common to define descriptive terms by specifying conditions for their application, attempts to define basic moral terms in the same way face well-known difficulties.

One problem is that someone who applies ‘good’ according to a standard different from the one assumed to define the term must either misunderstand ‘good’ or use the word deliberately in a deviant sense. So, if character similarity to God were the term’s defining applicability condition, then utilitarians or Kantians, who intend to use ‘good’ in its normal sense but suggest alternative applicability conditions, thereby fail to understand the term. The disagreement involved would thus be of a purely verbal nature and should be easily resolvable by disambiguation. But neither of these things seem to be the case.

A second problem is that definitions of ‘good’ framed in terms of applicability conditions prevent applications of the term from having any determinate normative force. If ‘good’ were defined as the neo-Platonists suggest, then calling someone ‘good’ is just to assert that the person in question satisfies the relevant condition: character similarity to God. Such an assertion does not, by itself, express any evaluative stance, let alone approval, admiration, or endorsement. It is even compatible with the speaker’s disapproval of the object in question.

It is true that the difficulties mentioned are not particular to the neo-Platonist account. They arise whenever moral standards are construed semantically, as explaining the meaning of moral terms. Still, it is worth pointing out that the neo-Platonists account faces these problems and that they are not sufficiently addressed.

Anticipating the objections just presented, Mawson proposes to qualify the neo-Platonist account of value—and, for that matter, the utilitarian account—as metaethical rather than semantic. However, he neither explains how a metaethical account of goodness differs from, and relates to, a semantic explanation of ‘good’. Nor does he provide any indication as to how the term is to be explained if not by reference to the applicability condition proposed (Mawson 2009, p. 1037).

Zagzebski, who addresses semantic issues most explicitly, likens the neo-Platonist account of moral value to the Kripke/Putnam account of natural kind terms (Zagzebski 2004, pp. 40–50, 2016, p. 113). According to this account, ‘water’ is defined by reference to certain paradigmatic samples. Only later is it found out that these samples have the microstructure H₂O. Competence in the term’s use is possible, however, independently of this discovery, and does not require knowledge of microstructure. Zagzebski suggests that ‘good person’ is not defined in terms of character traits such as love, compassion, and kindness, but is, instead, introduced by reference to certain moral exemplars—God, Jesus,

Socrates, or Confucius—which serve to fix the term’s extension. By carefully observing these reference’s fixing samples, we are then said to discover that love, compassion and kindness belong to the real essence of a good person.

Zagzebski does not make this proposal to address the two problems mentioned above. Yet it is worth pointing out that the proposal resolves neither. Even if the expression ‘good person’ could *only* be defined in the way described—that is, by stipulating that the expression applies to those who are similar in character to a given set of moral exemplars—its extension and meaning would still vary depending on which exemplars are chose. Consider, for example, the set consisting of Malcolm X (in his early years), Frantz Fanon, and Lenin—figures admired by many for their courage, ideological clarity, and willingness to fight for justice, yet who rejected traditional virtues such as humility, compassion, and pacifism. If Zagzebski’s account were correct, then someone who used these figures as moral paradigms would misunderstand the expression ‘good person’, since such a person would apply the term differently from the neo-Platonists and also conceive the essence of a good person differently. Moreover, characterizing a given person as good would no more express any evaluative attitude than characterizing a given liquid as water. In either case, one simply states a similarity between the object given and some paradigm.

Adams also claims that his account of the semantics of basic moral vocabulary parallels the Kripke/Putnam account of natural kind terms (Adams 1979, pp. 71–73). His proposal is actually more confused than that of Zagzebski. As ‘water’ stands to ‘H₂O’, so, he suggests, ‘good’ stands not to ‘compassionate, etc.’, but to ‘similar in character to God’. He argues that such an account can explain how someone, perhaps a non-believer, can be competent in the use of ‘good’ without having the criterion ‘character similar to God’ in mind. His suggestion makes little sense, however, since, according to the Kripke/Putnam account, what competent speakers need to understand is not the microstructure of water, but simply that ‘water’ refers to the stuff of the same kind as the paradigmatic instances. What we discover empirically is not that water is whatever is similar in kind to the paradigmatic instances, but that the kind instantiated by the paradigmatic instances is that of H₂O.

A further difference with Zagzebski is that Adams seems to be offering an *explication*, in Carnap’s sense of the term (Carnap 1959, pp. 12–18). Like an analytic definition, an explication provides a criterion or condition for the correct application of the *explicandum*. But unlike an analytic definition, it does not aim to capture the actual meaning of the term. Rather, it redefines the explicandum in a way that better serves certain theoretical purposes. Accordingly, a successful explication need not accurately codify current usage; its adequacy depends instead on how well it serves the purposes for which it is introduced.

Adams suggests that competing moral standards should not be viewed as analytic definitions of ‘good person’, but rather as proposals for how best to understand the expression. His claim that identifying moral goodness with Godlikeness best satisfies the relevant adequacy conditions can thus be construed as the view that the neo-Platonist account offers the most successful explication of *good person* (Adams 1979, pp. 74–75, 1999, pp. 14–18).

It is worth noting that Adams’s argument in support of this claim is transparently circular—a point he himself seems to acknowledge. One of his adequacy conditions is that moral terms should be redefined so that they continue to apply to certain paradigmatic cases (Adams 1979, pp. 74–75). He then proposes that Christians will therefore ‘identify wrongness with the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God’ (Adams 1979, p. 76). This proposal is indeed plausible, if we can assume Christian intuitions about what constitutes paradigmatic wrongdoing. However, a utilitarian could, with equal justification, identify wrongness with the failure to maximize overall well-being—since that matches *their* intuitions about their chosen paradigm cases. Since there can be reason-

able disagreement about the adequacy conditions for the explication, there will also be disagreement as to which possible explication is best.

Moreover, the problems associated with defining good person by specifying a criterion of application are not avoided by construing such a specification as an explication rather than an analytic definition. Even if different explications serve their intended theoretical purposes with varying success, speakers who adopt divergent explications would still be engaged in merely verbal disagreement. And in calling someone good on the basis that she satisfies a preferred *explicatum*, the speaker would not be making an evaluative judgment but merely offering a descriptive classification.

7. A Digression

It is fair for Craig to complain that the two difficulties discussed in the previous sections—that of formulating an adequate definition of the term ‘good’, and that of providing a basis for the supposed objectivity of moral judgements—are not unique to the neo-Platonist proposal: secular moral realist positions face the same problems. There is a danger, however, of drawing too much comfort from the fact that some rival theories are in the same boat—especially if there are other accounts that may offer at least a partial solution. In this section will sketch how one account might achieve this, but it should be emphasized that our previous critique of the neo-Platonists does not depend on the success of this account.

The problems of definition and normativity are difficult to resolve and we do not pretend to have a simple solution. However, it strikes us that any satisfactory solution will be along the general lines of prescriptivism. To many this solution is unattractive, because it seems to abandon objectivity. Still, given its virtues, the position might be worth reconsidering, and we suggest that many anti-relativist objections to prescriptivism are weaker than is often taken to be the case.

As we have seen, attempts to define moral goodness encounter the problem that competent speakers apply ‘good person’ by appeal to different criteria or standards. The expression cannot, therefore, be defined by reference to any particular criterion of application. However, this does not preclude explanation altogether. It only implies that an adequate explanation—one that captures the shared understanding of competent speakers—must avoid specifying, or implying, particular conditions of application. R.M. Hare once cited an explanation from the O.E.D. which appears to satisfy this demand. According to this explanation, ‘good’ is ‘the most general adjective of commendation’, where ‘to commend’ is further glossed as ‘to mention as worthy of acceptance or approval’ (Hare 1972, p. 32). This explanation naturally leads to a non-cognitivist, or expressivist, account of moral value. For reasons of space, this account can only be sketched here, but not properly defended.

To apply the expression ‘good person’ to someone is to commend that person for her character. The favourable evaluation expressed in this way is also manifested in various forms of behaviour—most notably, in treating the person as a moral exemplar. We express approval of someone’s character not only by calling her a good person, but also by seeking to emulate her conduct and by encouraging others to do the same. A speaker understands ‘good person’ if, and only if, her use of the expression coheres with her broader evaluative dispositions. That is, she must consistently show preferential attitudes and behaviour toward those she calls good, as opposed to those she calls bad. The fact that a utilitarian, a Kantian, and a neo-Platonist may apply ‘good person’ according to different theoretical standards does not imply that they mean different things by the term. So long as they display similar patterns of esteem, imitation, and encouragement in relation to those they call good, they share a common understanding of the expression.

General characterizations of what it is to be a good person are likewise expressions of commendation. When neo-Platonists say that it is good to be compassionate, they are commending compassion as a character trait. This commendation partly reveals the standards according to which they apply the expression ‘good person’. However, for the reasons outlined above, such standards do not define that expression. General characterizations of the nature of a good person therefore cannot be treated as definitional truths. Nor can they be regarded as statements of empirical or metaphysical fact. For there is only one sense in which such a commendation can be said to agree or disagree with reality: people are or are not compassionate. But the principle that it is good to be compassionate is neither confirmed by the presence of compassionate people nor refuted by their absence.

Being commendations, judgements about the moral value of certain character traits cannot be objective in the way that descriptive statements are. Arguments to the contrary sometimes appeal to widespread moral agreement. Craig, for instance, defends the objectivity of morality by citing paradigmatic cases of moral evil. Sexual abuse or torture, he claims, are objectively wrong, and ‘[p]eople who fail to see this are just handicapped, the moral equivalent of someone who is physically blind’ (Craig 2010). But this is a non-sequitur. By the same logic, one might argue that judgments of taste must report objective facts—since only a boor, we might say, would dislike Swiss chocolate. The strength or universality of a reaction does not transform an evaluative stance into a factual report.

The comparison with judgements of taste serves to address what is perhaps the principal motive behind the search for objective foundations in morality: the fear of relativism. We naturally wish to go on morally evaluating ourselves and others. But once we consider the possibility that moral judgments are expressions of our values rather than reports of fact, we may begin to question our authority to make them. For if there are no moral facts—only divergent perspectives—how can I reasonably privilege my own outlook over someone else’s?

As explained above, theists cannot sidestep this difficulty. If they do not merely act in accordance with they take to be God’s values but genuinely endorse them, then they too assume the kind of moral authority in question. Moral appraisal always involves taking ownership of one’s values. This responsibility cannot be delegated to any external authority, divine or otherwise.

The question of how I can privilege one moral principle over another admits of different interpretations. If what is being asked is what reasons can be given for such a preference, the answer is: moral ones. As explained above, denying the existence of moral facts to which our moral judgments must conform does not imply that justification is impossible. It implies only that the endpoint of such justifications lies in other moral judgments, not in moral facts. Although others are not compelled to accept the reasons I offer, it is not impossible that they do—and thus come to agree with me. Likewise, I may be moved to accept the moral reasons my interlocutor gives for their preference, or feel compelled to modify my own attitudes for reasons of consistency. Moral debate is therefore in no way futile, even in the absence of moral facts (see Blackburn 2003, pp. 28, 130).

Another possible outcome of moral debate is that the participants agree to disagree. They continue to uphold their competing moral views, each claiming the superiority of their own. At this point, the objectivist may renew their concern: if my view is not true, what entitles me to claim its superiority? But this is now a moral question. And the naïve objectivist may respond that, in the absence of moral truth, no such entitlement exists—that if moral judgments are neither true nor false, then all are equally valid, and no one has the right to impose their view on others.

This line of reasoning exemplifies a version of the naturalistic fallacy. It infers a first-order normative conclusion—namely, that no one is entitled to assert the superiority of one moral view over another—from a premise about the logical or semantic status of moral judgments. But even if moral judgments are, say, commendations or prescriptions and thus not truth-apt, this does not entail that no one is entitled to claim the superiority of one moral judgment over another. What follows, rather, is that such a claim of superiority is itself a commendation or prescription—and, as such, neither true nor false.

To be sure, we do not mean to suggest that all neo-Platonists who insist on the objectivity of moral judgments commit the relativistic fallacy. Nevertheless, Craig, for example, comes perilously close in his repeated assertion that ‘if naturalism is true, [...] it does not matter what values you choose’ (Craig 1997). Many naturalists would contest the assumption that naturalism entails the impossibility of objective moral truth. But the further inference—that in the absence of such truth it does not matter which system of values one adopts—is no less debatable. This leap from metaethical premises to normative indifference certainly appears to be a case of the Is-Ought fallacy.

8. Concluding Remarks

A currently popular neo-Platonist account of moral value defines moral goodness by reference to the moral nature of the ideal agent, God. On this basis, some advocates, most notably Craig, have claimed that objective moral values exist if and only if God exists.

The definition can, and should be, assessed independently from the foundational claim. We argued that the definition becomes circular if God, the ideal agent, is Himself defined in moral terms. Contrary to what some neo-Platonists propose, their definition of moral goodness cannot be combined with the definition of God as a perfect being. To avoid circularity, a non-moral specification of the ideal agent is required. In practice this is given by scripture.

Considered as such, the account of moral value is not without merit. Even if moral exemplars and narratives neither define moral terms nor provide a metaphysical foundation for moral truth, they nonetheless play an important—and often underappreciated—role in moral reasoning and education. Many Christians approach moral questions as the neo-Platonist account suggests: by relating them to biblical narratives and the character of God as portrayed in scripture. Indeed, the evaluative attitudes of those with secular moral outlooks are often shaped in a similar way, through stories of exemplary individuals and their lives.

Our critique of the neo-Platonist approach has focussed mainly on the attempt to use an ideal agent account of moral value to establish the objective truth of scriptural ethics. This attempt, we have argued, is both unsuccessful and misguided. It is unsuccessful because, even if moral goodness were defined in the way neo-Platonists suggest—by reference to the moral character of the God of scripture—its existence would still not depend on the actual existence of God. Moreover, the acceptability of this definition itself presupposes prior acceptance of scriptural moral values. The attempt is misguided, first, because moral goodness cannot adequately be defined by specifying conditions for the application of the expression ‘good person’, and second, because moral judgments are not objective in the sense intended by neo-Platonists.

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Notes

- ¹ Of course, the dilemma Plato presents in the Euthyphro concerns not the theistic God, but the gods; and not what they command, but what they love (Plato 1999, p. 14). The question of explanatory priority can nevertheless be raised for any such equivalence.
- ² We adopt the term ‘neo-Platonism’ from Mawson (2009).
- ³ Note that in the case of God there could be no external fink (in the sense of Martin 1994) to prevent the expression of the disposition, since this would be an impingement on God’s power.
- ⁴ Of course, some philosophers have been inclined to reject the view that justification must rest on an ultimate foundation. On one such account, there may be an unending chain of justifications; on another, justification is a matter of coherence among claims. Neither model, however, salvages the argument under consideration. If the chain of justifications is infinite, then God, or the claim that God exists, cannot serve as a uniquely firm foundation; and a new line of reasoning would be required to support the thesis that adding the proposition that God exists to a set of moral claims yields greater internal coherence than is achievable without this addition.
- ⁵ It is perhaps worth recalling in this connection that the principle that it is morally good to be loving cannot be derived solely from God’s moral nature. If God is defined as a morally perfect being, then the principle is needed to justify the claim that God is loving. If God is defined as being loving, then the principle does not follow. If God is defined as both morally perfect and loving, then the principle is needed to justify the coherence of the definition and hence the possibility of God’s existence.

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