religions

MDPI

Article

The Moral Hope Argument

Eric Reitan

Department of Philosophy, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA; eric.reitan@okstate.edu

Abstract

This essay develops a distinct moral argument for the reasonableness of believing in God (conceived as a perfectly good creator) inspired by the pragmatic argument for "the religious hypothesis" advanced by William James in "The Will to Believe." It also contextualizes the argument relative to familiar moral arguments, notably those of C.S. Lewis and Kant. Briefly, the argument developed here holds that when facing more than one coherent picture of reality, each of which could be true based on the arguments and evidence but only one of which fulfills the hope that in a fundamental way reality is on the side of moral goodness (what I call "the ethico-religious hope"), a reasonable person could opt to believe in the hope's fulfillment and live accordingly. Following James' approach, however, this argument does not imply that others who do not adopt such a picture are necessarily irrational or less rational.

Keywords: moral arguments for God; moral hope; William James; Kant; C. S. Lewis

check for updates

Academic Editor: David Basinger

Received: 13 July 2025
Revised: 7 August 2025
Accepted: 13 August 2025
Published: 16 August 2025

Citation: Reitan, Eric. 2025. The Moral Hope Argument. *Religions* 16: 1060. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16081060

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

In this essay, I develop a distinct moral argument for the reasonableness of believing in God (conceived as a perfectly good creator). The argument I develop draws inspiration from the pragmatic argument for "the religious hypothesis" advanced by William James (1956). It also functions as an implicit through-line for my book-length case for the reasonableness of theistic belief, *Is God a Delusion? A Reply to Religion's Cultured Despisers* (Reitan 2009). My purpose here is to make that argument explicit. Since it appeals to moral hope, let us call it the Moral Hope Argument.

Put roughly, the argument holds that when facing more than one coherent picture of reality, each of which could be true based on the evidence and arguments, but only one of which fulfills the hope that in a fundamental way reality is on the side of moral goodness (what I call "the ethico-religious hope"), a reasonable person could opt to believe in the hope's fulfillment and live accordingly—even if not all reasonable persons are rationally required to make the same choice. But since believing in the fulfillment of the ethico-religious hope is tantamount to adopting a broadly theistic picture of reality, it is reasonable to be broadly theistic.

The modest aim here is to present this argument so as to set the stage for critical discussion, not to rigorously defend it. Before presenting it, however, it will help to situate it relative to more familiar moral arguments. This calls for a broader look at such arguments.

2. Moral Arguments for God

To start, let me characterize "moral arguments for God" in broad terms. The first point to make is that moral arguments for God can be classified in terms of a distinction that applies to theistic arguments more broadly: they can be *epistemic*, offering reasons to think

theism true, or *pragmatic*, offering reasons in support of performing the act of believing in God. With respect to the latter, we can distinguish further between *strong* pragmatic arguments, which argue that in some sense we ought to perform the act of believing in God, and *weak* pragmatic arguments, which argue that believing in God is legitimate or permissible. Cosmological arguments of the sort advanced by Aquinas (1947, pt. I, q. 2, art. 3), Leibniz (1965, pp. 153–55), and Clarke (1998, pp. 8–18), are examples of what I mean by epistemic arguments. Pascal's Wager (Pascal 1941) offers an example of a strong pragmatic argument, while James' case for the religious hypothesis (James 1956), to the extent it can be taken to extend to belief in God, would be a weak pragmatic argument. Insofar as the Moral Hope Argument presented here is inspired by James, it fits best into this last category.

But what makes an argument for God—epistemic or pragmatic—a *moral* argument? Let me propose the following broad definition: a moral argument for God is any argument for believing in God that has at least one central premise that makes an assertion about morality—let us call this the "moral premise." Roughly, a premise is *central* if a summary of the argument will focus attention on it. Characterizing the moral premise as "an assertion about morality" is admittedly broad, but this is inescapable given the arguments conventionally classed as moral—as should become clear in the overviews of paradigmatic moral arguments in the next section.

Given such a broad definition, there could in principle be a wide variety of moral arguments. But historically two species have predominated, what I will call Moral Grounding Arguments and Moral Defect Arguments. I turn now to a review of these kinds of arguments, with a focus on a paradigm of each.

3. Moral Grounding Arguments and Moral Defect Arguments

Moral Grounding Arguments hold that we have reason to take morality to be objective, in the sense that moral assertions about right and wrong, good and evil, are true or false based on a standard independent of the subjective beliefs, preferences, desires, judgments, choices, etc., of any human beings or communities—meaning that individuals and whole societies can be mistaken about what is moral. Usually, Moral Grounding Arguments affirm not only such moral objectivism but moral realism. John Hare characterizes moral realism as the view that affirms "the reality of value properties such as moral goodness, a reality which is in some sense independent of our attempts at evaluation" (Hare 2001, p. 1).[1] Moral Grounding Arguments, after affirming the truth of moral objectivism or moral realism, then argue that the best or only way to ground the relevant meta-ethical view involves presuming theism. But this means that the evidence for the truth of the meta-ethical view is also evidence for the truth of theism.

Moral Defect Arguments also generally take morality to be objective, but they do not suppose we can make no sense of objective moral truth without God, nor even that a theistic context is the best way to make sense of it. Instead, they point to a purported tension between what morality calls for and certain facts about the human condition, and then argue that the best or only way to resolve this tension—to repair this defect—involves presuming theism. This fact is then taken to give us pragmatic reason to make that presumption.

To understand each species better, let me sketch out a representative of each. The aim here is not to comprehensively capture each species nor to rigorously develop each representative, but to provide enough substance to better situate the Moral Hope Argument.

While many have developed Moral Grounding Arguments, C. S. Lewis (1980, pp. 3–32) offers a nice representative in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis begins his argument with an introspective study of human moral experience from which he draws a meta-ethical conclusion. Our moral

experience presents us with the sense that there is "a real law which we did not invent and which we know we ought to obey" (Lewis 1980, p. 21), even though, in contrast to descriptive physical laws, we are free to disobey. We treat this Moral Law as objective in that we think people can be wrong about it, and we take it to have an authority over us that does not depend on our personal inclinations. Finally, this Moral Law appears to transcend socially or culturally established rules. When we compare moral ideas between cultures and see one as better than another, we are "measuring them both by a standard" and, in fact, "comparing them both with some Real Morality, admitting that there is such a thing as a real Right, independent of what people think, and that some people's ideas get nearer to that real Right than others" (Lewis 1980, p. 13). Although not invoking technical terms, Lewis' language clearly gestures towards moral realism. But the most crucial point for Lewis is to affirm morality's objectivity.

Let us call this the first part of Lewis's moral argument. The second part aims to show two things. First, nothing we encounter in our experience of the natural world can be the truth-maker for such objectivelybinding prescriptive truths. As Lewis puts it, "you can hardly imagine a bit of matter giving instructions" (Lewis 1980, p. 25). Second, a being who stands outside the natural world as its creator, a being who is "more like a mind than it is like anything else we know" (Lewis 1980, p. 25), *can* serve as such a truth-maker if it lays down laws for its creation and binds them to our hearts. Our inner moral experience is exactly what we would expect if the latter were true rather than the former. Thus, to make sense of our moral experience, we should posit the existence of a supernatural creator who establishes prescriptive laws for how to live and imprints them on our consciousness. Our moral experience thus serves as evidence for the truth of theism, since it testifies to a view about morality's nature best accounted for by theism.[2]

Even without further fleshing-out, we can discern multiple ways a critic could challenge this argument. Notably, there will be as many critics of it as there are critics of moral realism. But the argument gets its force from the many agnostics and athiests who are drawn to some version of moral realism (and who may even be inclined to invoke, in support of moral realism, many of the same observations about human moral experience that Lewis highlights in the first part of his argument). For such agnostics and atheists, the most powerful way to challenge Lewis's argument would be to focus on its second part, primarily by making the case that some version of moral realism can be grounded without invoking God.[3]

But for the sake of this overview, perhaps the most interesting concern with Lewis's argument is the way Kantians and neo-Kantians could challenge it by invoking the promise of the Kantian approach to understanding the nature of morality, an understanding that makes morality objective even if it is not "real." Although Kant was a theist, he locates the origins of an objectively binding moral law in the demands of practical reason (Kant 1964). For those in this tradition, the aspects of our moral experience that Lewis highlights can be traced back to the fact that we are rational beings and that reason, applied in the domain of action, lays down universal imperatives that apply to us even when they clash with our inclinations.[4] While Kant's theory is often contrasted with moral realism—Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 39) classes it as an objectivist species of constructivism—it renders morality every bit as objective as does moral realism, insofar as Kant takes practical reason's demands to be the same for all persons and binding regardless of contrary beliefs or inclinations.

At the risk of overgeneralizing from a particular paradigm, the above discussion speaks to a general concern about Moral Grounding Arguments: the strength of the case they offer for God will be a function not only of the merits of meta-ethical alternatives to moral realism but, more tellingly, of the capacity of non-theistic moral theories to make sense of the seemingly objective character and authority of morality—whether that is achieved through some naturalist version of moral realism or through a Kantian or neo-

Kantian objectivism. This means, among other things, that advocates of Moral Grounding Arguments must show that the Kantian project of grounding objective morality in practical reason—a project that has attracted some of the greatest ethical minds—is doomed, and then do the same for any potentially viable naturalistic approach to grounding moral realism. Until that is done, Moral Grounding Arguments remain inconclusive.

Moral Defect Arguments sidestep these difficulties. To see why, let us consider what is not just a paradigmatic example of a Moral Defect Argument but a seminal one: Kant's moral argument for God laid out in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant 1997). Although Kant develops his moral argument for God in relation to his moral theory, the theory itself is one atheists and agnostics can and have embraced. What is required for that theory's defensibility is not God's existence but that there be such a thing as practical reason and that such reason generate behavioral imperatives that apply universally, regardless of the varied stances individuals and communities have.

Nevertheless, Kant claims it is "morally necessary to assume the existence of God" (Kant 1997, p. 105). This is so for Kant even though he thinks we can ground objective moral demands in practical reason alone. Instead of making the case that God's existence is necessary for objective moral truths, Kant argues that absent God's existence there would be, in my terms, an inescapable *defect* in the relationship between what the moral law demands and key facts about the human condition. Kant explicates this defect in terms of a divide between the choice pattern that is naturally conducive to human happiness, namely one that subordinates the demands of morality to the satisfaction of human inclinations, and the choice pattern that renders us worthy of happiness, namely one that subordinates the satisfaction of inclinations to morality's demands. This divide can only be closed, Kant thinks, by a being who exists beyond the empirical world and who has the power and will to bestow happiness on those worthy of it. But for Kant, the possession of happiness by those who are moral, and hence worthy of it, is the highest good.[5] Hence, the highest good is only attainable on the postulate that there is a being as described.

Of course, even if this conclusion is true, an atheist might bite the bullet and concede that the highest good is unattainable: we live in a world where those who are happy often are not morally good (and may even attain happiness by neglecting or violating moral duties), and those who are morally good routinely pay a price for their moral choices in the form of unhappiness. But according to Kant, practical reason demands that we *presume* the highest good is attainable absent compelling grounds for thinking otherwise. And since he does not believe we can have compelling grounds for thinking otherwise (for reasons I will not explore here), he concludes that practical reason demands that we postulate God's existence (Kant 1997, pp. 104–5).[6] This is not to say there is evidence for the truth of theism. Rather, Kant thinks practical reason demands that we perform the act of believing it. Thus, invoking our earlier distinction, Kant's argument is pragmatic rather than epistemic.[7]

While there are many potential objections to Kant's argument, let me focus on one. Instrumental to Kant's case for the necessity of postulating God's existence is the purported incompatibility, absent divine intervention, of the conditions for human happiness and the conditions for being moral. But this, of course, is an assumption denied by Aristotle and the tradition of virtue ethics that follows Aristotle's lead. According to Aristotle, the possession of virtue, both intellectual and moral, is not only necessary for happiness but its most essential element (Aristotle 1941, 1098a).

Let us call this the Eudamonistic Hypothesis. This hypothesis generates difficulties for Kant's argument. As we saw, that argument rests on the idea that what is required for human happiness is to pursue inclinations, subordinating the demands of the moral law whenever they conflict—while what is required to be moral and hence worthy of happiness is to subordinate inclinations to morality's demands. But if the Eudaimonistic Hypothesis

is correct, subordinating inclinations to morality's demands is not merely required to have moral worth but also required for happiness itself.

Some attenuated variant of Kant's argument could survive the Eudaimonistic Hypothesis, at least if we accept the view that virtue, while essential for happiness, is not sufficient for it—meaning that some of those who have what is most essential for happiness, and thereby are worthy of happiness, may lack additional things that are also required. And so, the alignment between happiness and worthiness to be happy—and thereby the realization of Kant's highest good—will be less than perfect absent some guarantor of happiness for the worthy.

But much of the force of Kant's argument rests on the tension between the conditions for happiness and those for worthiness to be happy. If the Eudaimonistic Hypothesis is true, then instead of such a tension we have this: all who are happy are worthy of it, and some of those who are worthy of it, while possessing the most important thing they need for it, lack certain additional goods and so will fall short of happiness.

Put simply, for Kant the attainment of the highest good requires a *miracle*. But if we grant the Eudaimonistic Hypothesis, it is at least arguable that the highest good could be attained through the right application of human efforts. The humanist's faith in social progress, rather than the theist's faith in divine intervention, might be enough: the demands of practical reason might be satisfied by a Star Trek-level belief in humanity's capacity for social and technological improvement, as opposed to requiring belief in God.

None of this shows that no compelling Moral Defect Argument can be constructed.[8] But taken together with the concerns expressed about Moral Grounding Arguments, I think it shows there is value in exploring moral arguments that fall outside these two dominant species.

Beyond this, there is a different reason for exploring alternative moral arguments. Moral Grounding Arguments and Moral Defect Arguments typically aim to show that reason demands, or at least favors, belief in God. But there is something more modest to be had: an argument aimed at showing that reason *permits* belief in God, even if non-theistic worldviews might also be reasonable. In the taxonomy introduced earlier, what is largely missing from discussions of moral arguments for God's existence is any clear example of a weak pragmatic moral argument. And such weak pragmatic arguments can be attractive to those who, like myself, are inclined to think that reasonable people may reasonably differ when it comes to theistic belief.

4. James and "The Will to Believe"

Perhaps the most famous exemplar of a weak pragmatic argument for religious belief is William James's argument in "The Will to Believe." In that essay, James offers a case for the rational permissibility of believing in what he calls the "religious hypothesis," an hypothesis he defines in terms of two affirmations: first, that "the best things are the more eternal things," and second, that "we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true" (James 1956, pp. 25–26).

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* James argues that mystical states—for him among the most fascinating religious experiences—point us towards "hypotheses" about a "more enveloping point of view" beyond the familiar facts of this life that adds new meaning to those facts, testifying to "the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest" (James 1902, p. 419). Something along these lines appears to be implicit in James' account of the religious hypothesis as discussed in "The Will to Believe." As such, the religious hypothesis might best be captured by the following three-pronged claim: first, there is more to reality than meets the empirical eye, some more encompassing reality of which the world of ordinary experience is a part; second, this something-more is ultimately more fundamental, eternal, and valuable than the world of ordinary experience;

third, relationship with this something-more is a potential source of powerful positive experiences and a sense of meaning, such that we benefit now if we connect with and live in tune with it.

Understood in this way, James' religious hypothesis is broader than theism, although theism clearly falls under its umbrella. His argument in "The Will to Believe" aims to defend the permissibility of embracing the religious hypothesis against the charge of irrationality and irresponsibility leveled by William Kingdon Clifford (2020). But his goal is not to show that belief in this hypothesis is the only rational or the most rational course. More modestly, he thinks pragmatic rationality *permits* belief in the religious hypothesis because our "passional nature not only lawfully may, but must decide an option between propositions" whenever we confront "a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds" (James 1956, p. 11), a set of conditions he thinks obtains with respect to the religious hypothesis.

By a "genuine option," James means one that is living, forced, and momentous. By "living," he mean that the alternatives—affirmation and rejection of the hypothesis—each seem as if they might be true, a subjective criterion that could be met by some individuals but not others. An option is "forced" when refusing to decide amounts, for practical purposes, to deciding in favor of one alternative. And it is "momentous" when the decision has great significance for one's life (James 1956, pp. 3–4). In such cases, believing a hypothesis absent sufficient "intellectual grounds" for belief, based on the hope that it is true, is permissible.

To say on the contrary that reason requires us to withhold belief in such cases, in order to avoid the risk of error, strikes James as artificially requiring that the decision-making procedure suited to scientific hypotheses be imposed in all areas of life, including the religious domain. And James sees no grounds for thinking that being rational in a broad pragmatic sense demands any such thing. As James puts it,

> To preach skepticism to us as a duty until "sufficient evidence" for religion be found, is tantamount to telling us, when in the presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law.. . . Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery though hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof; and I simply refuse obedience to the scientist's command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. (James 1956, pp. 26–27)

In sum, James thinks those who embrace the "religious hypothesis" out of hope of securing the goods found through connection with a deeper reality, when "intellectual grounds" for settling the question of that reality's existence are inconclusive, are no less rational than those who withhold belief out of fear of error. The difference between them lies not in their intellects but their differing passions in a case where our passions *must* decide.

5. Towards a Jamesian Moral Argument for God

James's argument here is not an argument for belief in God, but for the less precise religious hypothesis—and we cannot simply assume that his conclusion extends to a theistic species of that hypothesis. His pragmatic case depends on the inconclusiveness of "intellectual grounds" for deciding an option, and the more precise the hypothesis, the more likely it is that there will be evidence against it and hence intellectual grounds for rejecting it. Furthermore, James' argument does not have a clear moral premise. What is crucial for James is that the choice between accepting or rejecting the religious hypothesis amounts to a genuine option that cannot be settled on intellectual grounds—and that when this is

so, our passional nature not only may but must decide which option to embrace. There is nothing in the notion of a genuine option that invokes or presupposes moral values, nor is there anything explicitly ethical or moral about following our passional nature. In fact, critics might worry that James's argument legitimizes belief based on morally pernicious passions. Insofar as James does not investigate the morality of acting on one passion rather than another, it can hardly be said that his case for the pragmatic permissibility of believing based on passion is a moral one.

Still, an argument in the vicinity of James's argument could qualify as a moral case for belief in God. By focusing on the ethico-religious hope and its fulfillment, the Moral Hope Argument is just such an argument. Stated simply, the argument is this: The hypothesis that the ethico-religious hope is fulfilled presents itself as a genuine option for those who find the fulfillment of that hope to be a live hypothesis, and the question cannot be settled on intellectual grounds. Given that our passional nature must settle such an option, and given that the ethico-religious hope is a morally benign (even praiseworthy) passion, the choice to live as if this hope is fulfilled—believing it in a pragmatic sense—is a reasonable and morally benign choice. But to live as if this hope is fulfilled is to adopt theism in a broad sense.

6. The Ethico-Religious Hope

One thing to notice about the moral arguments we have looked at is that, in each case, the argument does not aim to support belief in a being with *all* the properties of the so-called omni-God (a creator who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipresent, and eternal), let alone all the properties of the God of classical theism (who is generally held to possess such additional properties as divine simplicity, impassibility, and necessary existence). Instead, the argument invokes a moral premise or premises to support belief in a being who possesses *some* properties widely attribute to (and only to) God—what we might call "broadly God-like properties." *Which* broadly God-like properties a moral argument points us towards is a function of the argument's moral premise(s).

Take Lewis's Moral Grounding Argument. It makes a case for the existence of a supernatural being who, by virtue of being the world's creator, has the authority to make laws for us to live by and the power to implant the felt authoritativeness of those laws into our hearts. Clearly, such a being would be powerful, have great knowledge, and presumably be "good" in at least the formal sense of having a will in harmony with the moral order that the being has established. While the omni-God would presumably fit this description, it is far from obvious than a being possessed of the properties specified by Lewis's argument would also possess the properties of the omni-God (let alone those typically attributed to God in classical theism).

Kant's Moral Defect Argument, in contrast, supports belief in a transcendent being with the power and will to achieve the highest good by conferring happiness on those who deserve it. While the omni-God would likely possess these properties, it is not clear that a being would have to possess all the properties of the omni-God (let alone the God of classical theism) in order to possess the properties required to achieve the highest good.

In each case, we have an argument for belief in a being with broadly God-like properties, ones specified by the argument's moral premise(s). The Moral Hope Argument I develop here is, similarly, an argument for belief in a being with broadly God-like properties—specifically, the properties needed to fulfill the "ethico-religious hope," that is, the hope that the reality on a fundamental level is on the side of moral goodness.

Let us elaborate on this hope a bit more fully. To be on the side of moral goodness implies agency. It involves, first and foremost, *being* morally good. But it also involves actively valuing moral goodness and reflecting that through, for example, acts that promote

and preserve it—constrained, perhaps, by limits in power and, arguably, by what being morally good demands.[9] Hence, for reality at a fundamental level to be on the side of moral goodness, it seems the most fundamental reality must have the agency to *be* moral and *promote* goodness.

This hope, as conceived here, presupposes that morality is objective: the belief that reality is fundamentally on the side of moral goodness is not just some subjective expression of approbation about the character of fundamental reality but a belief about the conformity of that reality to a standard of moral goodness that is not determined by anyone's subjective beliefs, attitudes, preferences, or choices.

While the notion of "fundamental reality" is difficult to define in general terms, theism offers a paradigm of what it is for something to be the fundamental reality. On theism, God is the creator and sustainer of everything else that exists. As such, if theism is true, everything real other than God depends on God for its existence (and, presumably, for having the nature it has). Notice, also, that God's status as creator and sustainer renders the whole of reality beyond God a product of divine agency—meaning that agency, which as noted above appears to be a prerequisite for the possession of moral properties, lies at the foundation of the world. It is thus coherent to speak of moral goodness existing at this fundamental level.

If there exists such a creator, and that creator is and cares about what is morally good, then *reality is fundamentally on the side of moral goodness*—as opposed to being what Richard Dawkins takes it to be at the most fundamental level: a thing of "blind physical forces" that "has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference" (Dawkins 1995, p. 133).

It is this version of theism that the Moral Hope Argument aims to defend—one in which God's existence would fulfill the hope, entertained by many theists, that reality is not "pitilessly indifferent" to moral goodness at the most fundamental level but is, instead, on the side of such goodness.

It is worth noting that there are not-uncommon conceptions of the divine that the Moral Hope Argument excludes—conception of God such that, were *that* the fundamental reality, the ethico-religious hope would not be fulfilled. In "On Superstition," Plutarch (1993) nicely captures two opposing conceptions of the divine, paralleling the distinction he draws between superstition and religion, that usefully pick out the conceptions that, respectively, clash with and fulfill the ethico-religious hope. The gods of superstition are, for Plutarch, supernatural powers akin to tyrants, beings we must obey on pain of punishment. The driving motivation for superstition is fear, and its defining activity is appeasement. By contrast, the gods of religion are worthy of our highest trust and love precisely because they are not abusers of their power but embody perfect moral goodness and benevolence.

The conception of God that the Moral Hope Argument favors follows Plutarch in making moral goodness the most essential divine attribute. And for this to be a substantive attribute, the truth-maker for the claim that God is morally good must be something other than conformity to God's arbitrary will. After all, a being whose will and character conform to that being's arbitrary will could be cruel and abusive so long as this conformed with what the being arbitrarily chose to endorse for themselves. The existence of such a being might be a basis for the fear and sycophancy Plutarch ascribes to superstition; it would not be the basis for the trust and devotion of what he calls religion. Hence, the conception of the divine towards which the ethico-religious hope is directed is incompatible with any naïve version of divine command theory that makes moral truth the product of essentially arbitrary divine decree—the kind of divine voluntarism that Leibniz resoundingly condemns on the grounds that it makes God into a capricious tyrant (Leibniz 1973, pp. 49–50). Were such divine voluntarism true, we would arrive at a picture of the divine that provides none of

the comfort, basis for trust, or motive for joyous adoration that Plutarch takes to be the hallmarks of religion as opposed to superstitition. But the ethico-religious hope is precisely the hope that Plutarch is right about the divine—that there is a divine reality that conforms to his religious picture, not the superstitious one.

So, the ethico-religious hope will not be fulfilled if the divine is the perfect embodiment of goodness only in a purely formal, divine voluntarist sense of "goodness." And this fact creates a conflict between the Moral Hope Argument and any Moral Grounding Argument that takes arbitrary divine will to be the basis for moral truth.[10] Put simply, should an advocate of a Moral Grounding Argument succeed in showing that divine voluntarism offers the only possible foundation for objective morality, it would follow that Plutarch's God of Religion—the object of the ethico-religious hope—does not exist.

7. A Reality in Tension with Appearances

The ethico-religious hope can be, at best, a hope—not an object of knowledge or a belief justified by the weight of the evidence. This is because the world we encounter in ordinary lived experience does not provide anything like compelling evidence for the view that reality is fundamentally on the side of moral goodness. Dawkins' depiction of reality as governed by blind physical forces in a manner pitilessly indifferent to goodness is hardly incoherent given our finite experience. And the problem of evil gets its legs from the fact that it is hardly obvious that the world we experience is the product of a morally good creator.

This is why the ethico-religious hope emphasizes what *fundamental* reality is like. Such a specification supposes a distinction between levels of reality. The level we have access to may not be the deepest or most fundamental truth, and that deeper reality may embody moral goodness in a way the level most readily available in experience does not. Such levels are central to James's religious hypothesis, which is not about the world of ordinary experience but about the more "enveloping" reality that gives a new meaning to the world of ordinary experience once we connect with it. In theism, such levels can be understood in terms of the distinction between the creator (most fundamental but less accessible to experience) and the creation (less fundamental but more readily accessible to experience). While the problem of evil rests on the idea that if the former embodies moral goodness, this should be evident in the latter, it is important here to note not only that there are a wide range of attempts to explain why this might not be so, but also that the ethico-religious hope could be fulfilled even if the morally good creator of the world were not the "omni-God."

Zoroastrian theism, for instance, holds that the world is created by a morally good creator, or God, but the power of this God is limited by the existence of an opposing agent of destructive and evil—that is, a Devil. God, while unable to simply thwart this Devil, is infinitely wise whereas the Devil is foolish. God thus has the resourcefulness to *ultimately* prevail. Hence, it is assured that the *final* state of things will perfectly embody moral goodness. Still, creation will fail to consistently reflect moral goodness until the final outcome is achieved.

Should such a theology prove true, the ethico-religious hope would be fulfilled. Likewise, even absent some eternal Devil, one might think God's power is limited with respect to what God can achieve at the first stage of creation even if not with respect to what God can ultimately achieve—meaning God cannot create a world that reflects perfect moral goodness *ex nihilo* but would still fulfill the ethico-religious hope.[11]

So, the truth of a version of theism that fulfills the ethico-religious hope would be possible even if a version of the argument from evil actually established the impossibility of the omni-God. Of course, many theologians challenge the soundness of such "logical arguments from evil" in order to defend the possibility of the omni-God's existence. The point here is that the fulfillment of the ethico-religious hope does not depend on their

success. And this matters for the Moral Hope Argument precisely because its aim, in the spirit of James, is to defending the following: it is *consistent* with reason to opt to believe that the ethico-religious hope is fulfilled—in other words, to opt to see the world as fundamentally on the side of moral goodness—even if such belief goes beyond the available evidence. But opting to believe in this hope's fulfillment would *not* be consistent with reason were its fulfillment clearly logically incompatible with what we know about the world and about moral goodness.[12] But given the broadness of what would satisfy this hope (especially that it could be satisfied by a creator who fell short of possessing all the properties of the omni-God), belief in the hope's fulfillment is not logically incompatible with what we know and so, in James' language, is not a matter that can be decided "on intellectual grounds."

8. Varieties of Hope

Although it may be tempting to identify the ethico-religious hope's fulfillment with the attainment of Kant's highest good, this is at best one contestable construal of what it means for reality to be fundamentally on the side of moral goodness. John Bishop (1998) offers an alternative construal in "Can There Be Alternative Concepts of God?" Here, Bishop develops a functionalist understanding of God. God, for Bishop, is an object of worship, and worship requires a "uniquely excellently worthy object" (Bishop 1998, p. 176). According to Bishop, God can meet this standard of worth by fulfilling an important function in the "psychological economy" of the theist—namely, the function of providing warrant for the hope that "lives lived lovingly… are not deprived of meaningfulness and point by suffering, finitude, and death," since those who live such lives are living in harmony with reality in a way those who do not live such lives are not (Bishop 1998, p. 183). The payoff of this variant of the ethico-religious hope's fulfillment is not that all those who live moral lives will be guaranteed happiness. Rather, the payoff is that their lives will be invested with great meaning by being deeply in tune with reality.

Perhaps the term "payoff" is misleading here. On Bishop's view, the hope is not for some personal gain or reward for being morally good so much as it is the hope that being good is not some anomalous feature of reality, something of value that appears only fleetingly in the corner of the universe where moral agents exist, to the extent that moral agents exhibit it for the brief moment in cosmic history when such beings exist. It is, instead, a central and enduring feature of reality itself at the deepest level. This valuable thing—moral goodness—is woven into the fabric of reality through and through, even if most moral agents on Earth fall short of exemplifying it.

If we do put the hope in terms of a payoff, that payoff would be relational: if the ethico-religious hope is fulfilled, then those who are morally good reflect in how they live what is true fundamentally about reality. They are thus attuned to fundamental reality in a way they would not otherwise be. Were Dawkins' picture of fundamental reality correct, then a life lived in tune with it would be amoral, a life lived with pitiless indifference to the good. The life, in short, of a sociopath. Living in tune with reality, if reality is utterly indifferent to the good, thus has *negative* value. But if the ethico-religious hope is fulfilled, then not only does a life lived morally have positive value, but so does relational attunement with reality—and these positive goods are mutually reinforcing, each amplifying the value of the other.

In this respect the ethico-religious hope is a hope for something in the vicinity of Kant's highest good: consistently prioritizing morality over inclinations brings additional value beyond the inherent value that attaches to being moral as such, because the very foundation of all existence celebrates such a life, even as that life embodies the deepest truth about reality. Put another way, a moral life has *cosmic significance*.

As noted above, this hope is embraced in the context of a lived experience in which evils, including horrors, occur: people commit atrocities, and natural forces grind on in ways that pay no heed to human welfare or what people deserve. The ethico-religious hope is that these features of our experience give us a radically incomplete picture of reality, in that they fail to represent what is true at the most fundamental level: despite these appearances, moral goodness lies at the foundation of the created order.

This hope would clearly be fulfilled by a God who, despite being constrained against preventing life's evils, were able to redeem them so completely in some post-mortem state that the lives of those who endured them were rendered at least as good as they would have been had the evils never occurred. And it would be fulfilled by a God who, unable to secure such a complete redemption, nevertheless were able to ultimately bring all horror to an end while bestowing happiness on all those who have lived morally good lives.

But even if we imagined a God who could not secure even such a partial redemption, the ethico-religious hope in Bishop's sense could still be fulfilled, since the essence of this hope is that the fundamental reality, or God, embodies moral goodness, not that God is able to secure any given outcome. For Bishop, the hope is that a morally good life has great objective value and cosmic meaning, despite the evils and afflictions of this world, because such a life harmonizes with the deepest truth about reality. And this harmony—what we might call a life attuned to the nature and will of God—is something to be treasured for its own sake.

The ethico-religious hope, in short, is the hope that a moral life produces this treasure of attunement—a hope that could be fulfilled even were God unable to secure Kant's highest good. Of course, we might well hope for more than this. We might hope for a final chapter to the world's story so joyful that one could not hope for better—something like the Christian universalist's hope that in the end, all creatures will be both morally redeemed and perfectly happy. While I think believing in the fulfillment of such a profound hope can be justified by a Jamesian-style argument, given the challenges leveled against both Christian universalism and the omni-God, it would take considerably more space to show the plausibility of this than is afforded here. My aim here, therefore, is to make this Jamesian-style argument with respect to the more modest species of the ethico-religious hope explicated in this section.

9. The Will to Believe in the Fulfillment of the Ethico-Religious Hope

This, then, is the essence of the ethico-religious hope, as I am construing it here: that moral goodness is woven into reality at its most fundamental level, and a morally good life thus brings one into harmony with reality in a way no other life can. It seems clear that the corresponding "ethico-religious hypothesis" could be approached in much the way James approaches his "religious hypothesis." Given that the most straightforward way to envision the fulfillment of the ethico-religious hope is the existence of a creator who embodies moral goodness, the ethico-religious hypothesis is more clearly theistic than James's vaguer religious hypothesis. And given that the substance of the hypothesis is so clearly moral, and what is at issue is whether we can legitimately and reasonably choose to live in the hope that this deeply moral picture of reality is true, what emerges is a variant of James' argument that qualifies as a moral argument for the reasonableness of believing in God.

James' key premise, of course, is that our passional nature may legitimately decide an option if that option is genuine (living, forced, and momentous) and cannot be settled on intellectual grounds. But for the purposes of the Moral Hope Argument, there is no need to ascribe to the broad view that *any* passional impulse can be legitimately acted upon when confronting a genuine option that cannot be settled on intellectual grounds. As noted above, James's premise might be worrisome if there are morally pernicious passional impulses (such

as vengeful or spiteful ones) that might be invoked to settle such an option. One could imagine, for example, that belief in divine infliction of eternal conscious torment on those who fail to accept Jesus as Lord and savior might be motivated in some cases by the desire not only to be right in religious disputes but to see those who disagree with you suffer for it in horrific ways. Even if this eternal torment hypothesis presented itself as a genuine option that could not be settled on intellectual grounds, there would be reason to worry about a view that legitimizes belief based on such petty and vindictive passional impulses.

But that worry is sidestepped if, instead of relying on a premise that grants carte blanche permission to follow one's passions in the face of such choices, we appeal instead to a more modest premise that grants permission to follow *morally benign hopes* when confronting hypotheses whose truth would fulfill these hopes. Of course, a Jamesian argument modified in this way would require that we add and defend the further premise that the hope in question is morally benign.

There are several reasons to suppose that this further premise would be true with respect to the ethico-religious hope. First, believing that this hope is fulfilled would increase the motivation to be moral—but not in the banal way that desire for a self-serving reward does this. If what motivates me to be moral is the desire for a reward, it is hardly clear that what I really desire is to be moral—in the sense of valuing morality for its own sake and therefore choosing to live a morally good life. But if valuing morality for its own sake and for that reason choosing to live a moral life brings me in tune with fundamental reality in a way nothing else can, thereby investing my life and priorities with a deep meaning it would not otherwise have, the desire for meaning and the desire to be moral for its own sake are mutually reinforcing.

Furthermore, if I live a moral life while believing in the fulfillment of the ethico-religious hope, I will be less likely to wonder whether I am simply being foolish, hoodwinked by cultural conditioning into giving up personal advantages and worldly pleasures so that, in the struggle for survival and prosperity, I am easier to exploit. I am less inclined to see my propensities to care for and empathize with others as mere byproducts of blind evolutionary forces, accidental workings-out of mindless processes. As such, I am less likely to wonder why I should favor a life in which these propensities are nurtured rather than suppressed. In short, I am more likely, if I believe in the fulfillment of the ethico-religious hope, to resist the cynical or nihilistic ideas that lead some to discount the value of, and so be tempted to abandon, a moral life.

Finally, belief that reality fulfills the ethico-religious hope can fuel our optimism—optimism not merely in the self-interested sense of expecting that things will turn out well for ourselves, but the deeper and broader optimism about the ultimate course of things. If reality is fundamentally on the side of moral goodness, then we can trust that moral goodness will not be just a fleeting blip in the history of a universe bookended by a mindless explosion at one end and the heat death of maximum entropy at the other. Even if that is the history of the empirical universe, that history is situated in something more profound which renders that blip a reflection of the most eternal truth about reality itself. What results is a cosmic moral optimism that can strengthen our resolve to pursue good ends in the face of opposition.

In short, being moved by the ethico-religious hope to believe in its fulfillment has every indication of being morally benign, even morally beneficial, in terms of motivating a sincere allegiance to a moral life. And the same reasons to think acting on this hope is morally benign are reasons to think this hope's fulfillment represents a genuine option for anyone who meets the subjective condition of finding that fulfillment to be a live option. The impact that this option has for the perceived meaning and value of a moral life, and for cosmic moral optimism, surely is enough to render it "momentous" in James' sense.

And there is also a clear sense in which the option is forced, insofar as the decision to withhold judgment about whether the universe is on the side of moral goodness amounts, for practical purposes, to living without the perceived meaning, value, and optimism that belief in its fulfillment provides.

So long as we grant the additional premise that nothing we know about the world *precludes* belief in the fulfillment of the ethico-religious hope, James's argument for the reasonableness of believing in the religious hypothesis can thus be adapted into a weak pragmatic moral argument for theistic belief: a basis, not for thinking that belief in God is more rational than the alternatives, but rather for thinking that a fully rational person could, consistent with reason, make the choice to believe in God based on the ethico-religious hope—the morally benign hope that a morally enriching picture of reality is true.

But let me add that, even though this is presented here as a weak pragmatic argument, it nevertheless could in the individual case do more than simply grant permission to believe. The reasons offered above for thinking that the ethico-religious hope is morally benign may imply more than this, at least for some individuals. Living as if the ethico-religious hope is fulfilled might generate in some individuals a sense of purpose, meaning, and worth in their lives that they simply would not have absent that choice—and they might actually be morally better people as a result. If belief in this hope's fulfillment inspires me to be a morally better person than I would otherwise be, that may count as a moral reason why I *ought* to follow the urgings of that hope rather than not—at least given the plausible premise that, all else being equal, if pursuing a course makes me a morally better person than I would otherwise be, I should pursue that course. Thus, for some individuals the Moral Hope Argument may amount to a strong, rather than a weak, pragmatic argument.

In terms of this Special Issue's theme, "Is ethics without God possible?", the implication of the argument is this: while ethics may be possible without God, moral beliefs and hopes may still play a role in the pragmatic reasonableness of believing in theism. And in individual cases, allegiance to an ethical life may be more fulfilling and more likely to be pursued in the face of challenges without falling prey to cynicism or despair, if it includes belief in a God who fulfills the ethico-religious hope. In such cases, theism is arguably the morally right choice.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 Similarly, Russ Shafer-Landau defines moral realism as the view that "there is a moral reality that people are trying to represent when they issue judgments about what is right and wrong" (Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 13).

2 Others who have developed such Moral Grounding Arguments include Craig (Craig and Kurtz 2009), Hare (2001), and Burt (1975).

3 This is the approach that, for example, Wielenberg (2005) takes in *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*.

4 Of course, theists could argue that the existence of rationality and rational beings in some way depends on God's existence; but that would not be a moral argument for God.

5 There is some ambiguity with respect to how this highest good is to be conceived. One possibility is that the highest good, for Kant, consists in all persons being moral and enjoying happiness; the other is that the highest good consists in happiness being enjoyed by all persons who are moral. I will not be exploring here which better fits with Kant's intent; but it is clear that Kant thinks even the more modest latter understanding requires God for its attainment.

[6] Others, inspired by Kant, have sought to develop their own versions of what I am calling Moral Defect Arguments, more or less explicitly conceived as interpretations of Kant's work. Notable examples include Green (1988) and Hare (1996).

[7] While it qualifies as pragmatic in my sense—in that it offers reasons for performing the act of believing in God's existence rather than reasons for thinking it true that God exists—Kant appears to think that these reasons for performing this act of believing are *moral* reasons. In this sense, his argument is a moral argument in what is arguably a deeper sense that any Moral Grounding Argument: one should believe because, in a sense, morality demands it.

[8] The Moral Defect Argument developed by Hare (1996) in *The Moral Gap*, while indebted to Kant's broader work, focuses on a different moral defect than the one discussed above: the gap between what morality demands and what humanity is psychologically capable of. Put simply, without God's grace we would simply not be able to live up to morality's demands. The discussion above has little, if any, bearing on the force of this argument.

[9] The idea here is that there may be deontological moral constraints on how one can promote and preserve goodness or prevent evil. For a discussion of how such constraints might limit God's pursuit of good ends, see Reitan (2022).

[10] I am not saying here that Lewis's argument relies on divine voluntarism, nor that Moral Grounding Arguments in general do. In *God's Call*, Hare (2001) invokes divine commands to ground moral realism but aims to avoid the divine voluntarism that earned Leibniz's ire. The broader question of whether one *can* avoid divine voluntarism while giving divine commands a foundational role in grounding objective morality is not one I explore here.

[11] The soul-making theodicy of Hick (2001) posits such a two-stage creation and the impossibility of achieving the second stage directly or ex nihilo, while attempting to preserve divine omnipotence. The point here is that even if such a picture cannot be reconciled with divine omnipotence, this picture of the divine would nevertheless still fulfill the ethico-religious hope.

[12] So-called logical arguments from evil attempt to show that there *is* such a logical incompatibility between the facts of this world and the existence of the omni-God. For a recent, comprehensive development of such an argument, see Sterba (2019).

References

Aquinas, Thomas. 1947. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by the English Dominica Fathers. New York: Benzinger Brothers.

Aristotle. 1941. Nicomachean Ethics. In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Translated by William David Ross. Edited by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House.

Bishop, John. 1998. Can there be alternative concepts of God? *Nous* 32: 174–88. [CrossRef]

Burt, Donald X. 1975. The problem of justifying moral obligation: An aspect of the moral argument for the existence of God. *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 49: 72–81. [CrossRef]

Clarke, Samuel. 1998. *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings*. Edited by Ezio Vailati. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clifford, William Kingdon. 2020. The ethics of belief. In *Arguing About Knowledge*. Edited by Duncan Pritchard and Ram Neta. London: Routledge, pp. 301–05.

Craig, William Lane, and Paul Kurtz. 2009. The Kurtz/Craig debate: Is goodness without God good enough? In *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?* Edited by Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 25–48.

Dawkins, Richard. 1995. *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Green, Ronald M. 1988. *Religion and Moral Reason: A New Method for Comparative Study*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hare, John E. 1996. *The Moral Gap; Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hare, John E. 2001. *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Hick, John. 2001. An Irenaean theodicy. In *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*. Edited by Stephen T. Davis. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

James, William. 1902. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Random House.

James, William. 1956. The will to believe. In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Dover Publications.

Kant, Immanuel. 1964. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Herbert James Paton. New York: Torchbook.

Kant, Immanuel. 1997. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leibniz, Gottfried. 1965. Modadology. In *Modadology and Other Philosophical Essays*. Translated by Paul Schrecker, and Anne Martin Schrecker. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, pp. 148–63.

Leibniz, Gottfried. 1973. Discourse on metaphysics. In *Leibniz: Discourse on Metaphysics/Correspondence with Arnauld/Monadology*. Translated by George R. Montgomery. La Salle: Open Court.

Lewis, C. S. 1980. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins.

Pascal, Blaise. 1941. Of the necessity of the wager. In *Pensées and The Provincial Letters*. Translated by William Finlayson Trotter. New York: Random House.

Plutarch. 1993. Superstition. In *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues*. Edited and Translated by Donald Russell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–12.

Reitan, Eric. 2009. *Is God a Delusion? A Reply to Religion's Cultured Despisers*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Reitan, Eric. 2022. Divine omnipotence, divine sovereignty, and moral constraints on the prevention of evil: A reply to sterba. *Religions* 13: 813. [CrossRef]
Shafer-Landau, Russ. 2003. *Moral Realism: A Defense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sterba, James P. 2019. *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Wielenberg, Erik J. 2005. *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.