

Moral and Theological Realism: The Explanatory Argument

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There are striking parallels, largely unexplored in the literature, between skeptical arguments against theism and against moral realism. After sketching four arguments meant to do this double duty, I restrict my attention to an explanatory argument that claims that we have most reason to deny the existence of moral facts (and so, by extrapolation, theistic ones), because such putative facts have no causal-explanatory power. I reject the proposed parity, and offer reasons to think that the potential vulnerabilities of moral realism on this front are quite different from those of the theist.

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I am very interested in the possible connections between theism and moral realism. Not because I am a theist, but because I am not.

As I will understand the view here, moral realism stands for the idea that there are some moral claims that are true in a certain way. Their truth does not depend on the attitudes that anyone takes towards their content. Nor are they true, when they are, because of being endorsed, implied or entailed by norms that are constructed from our evaluative attitudes.

Theological realism, as I will understand the term here, is simply theism: the view that God exists. The God I will be talking about is the traditional God of Western monotheism: an omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect agent.

Among philosophers, it is a common thought that moral and theological realism can easily be prised apart. Most analytical philosophers these days are

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agnostics or atheists, and so reject theism. But even those who are unkindly disposed towards moral realism do not think that its vulnerability lies in a commitment to theism.

The story among non-philosophers is quite different. In that arena, it's a common thought that the status of morality and religion are very closely connected. On a popular view, morality can be objective only if God exists. That's a central reason why atheism is taken, by so many, to be such a threat to morality.

We are all familiar with the standard lines of popular thought that seek to tie the fate of moral and theological realism very closely together. I'll take the liberty of placing some fancy philosophical terms in the mouths of the men on the Clapham omnibus, so as to more precisely capture popular thinking in this area. In short order, the most influential of these arguments are the following:

1. If morality is objective, then it cannot be the result of human creation.
2. If morality cannot be the result of human creation, then it must be authored by God.
3. Therefore if morality is objective, then it must be authored by God.
1. Genuine moral requirements entail categorical reasons of obedience.
2. Categorical reasons are possible only if underwritten by God.
3. Therefore genuine moral requirements presuppose God's existence.
1. Genuine moral requirements must exert a reliable motivational influence on those who are bound by them.
2. Moral requirements can exert such an influence only if they are backed by divine sanction.
3. Therefore genuine moral requirements must be backed by divine sanctions.
4. Therefore genuine moral requirements exist only if God exists.

Each of these arguments contains at least one premise that expresses a philosophical claim accepted by most philosophers today. Still, I think that each argument is unsound. And so do most other philosophers.

Given that, it may seem that there's little here worth discussing. The received view nowadays is that the fate of moral realism is not tied to that of theological realism, and so we can entirely leave aside matters in the philosophy of religion when doing metaethics. I am not so sure.

That's not because I am worried that objective morality may after all require God's existence. Rather, I am concerned about the pressure that arguments for religious skepticism place on arguments favoring moral realism. For the considerations in favor of such skepticism also seem to cast strong doubt on the merits of moral realism.

There are three—really, four—arguments in this connection that seem especially worrisome. I have space here to discuss only the last of these, but I

want to sketch them each so as to give a fair impression of the scope of the relevant concerns.

The first argument is a form of genealogical critique. It does not seek to vindicate atheism, or moral nihilism, but rather to show that any positive theistic or moral belief is epistemically unjustified. On such a view the origins of our beliefs in a given area are directly relevant to their epistemic merits. Most people hold the religious or moral beliefs they do because of the way that they have been raised, or because of the company they now keep. But there is no reason to suppose that such influences track whatever truth there might be in these domains, especially since such influences have led people to contradictory beliefs. If there are moral or religious facts, then given how our beliefs in these areas have arisen, it would be sheer luck were they to land on the truth.¹ But such luck vitiates the epistemic credentials of the associated beliefs. Thus even if there is a God, and even if there is a set of strongly objective moral truths, our beliefs about them are epistemically unjustified.

The second argument is one from disagreement. The argument—really, a pair of arguments—begins with the observation that the breadth and depth of moral and religious disagreement is far greater than that found within the natural and mathematical sciences. The first version of this argument seeks to draw an ontological point from this observation. On this line, the best explanation of such disagreement is that there is no objective reality awaiting our discovery.² Theists and moralists disagree so often and so intently because they are projecting their conflicting commitments or sentiments on a world that contains no god, and no moral facts. The alternative account—that half of those involved in such disagreements have faulty belief-forming mechanisms which stand in the way of their appreciating reality—is both less parsimonious, and requires the presentation of a defensible religious and moral epistemology, neither of which, it is claimed, is forthcoming.

The second version of the argument from disagreement is more modest, and claims that even if there is a god, or objective moral facts, the widespread disagreement on moral and religious matters undermines any justification we might have for our moral and religious beliefs.

The last of the arguments says that we have most reason to deny God's existence, because God is explanatorily superfluous. God must go the way of the ether, and the Aztec divinities. We haven't any need of these things to explain our encounters with the world. Ditto for God—all that he was once invoked to explain can nowadays be more simply accounted for by reference

1. The argument in the moral domain has been pressed in especially forceful ways by both Sharon Street and Richard Joyce. See Street, 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value', *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006), pp. 109-66, and Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Boston: MIT, 2006), ch. 6.

2. See J.L. Mackie's so-called argument from relativity for a now-classic statement of this worry, in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), pp. 38-40.

to other, wholly natural phenomena. Belief in God is therefore epistemically unjustified; further, belief that God does not exist is highly justified.

The parallel with moral facts, realistically construed, is straightforward. Moral facts are unable to explain our observations of the way the world works; an action's being morally required, or there being a moral reason opposing some policy, does not explain why anything occurs as it does. Moral facts are certainly unable to explain the goings-on of the inanimate world. And even where they have most promise to explain the animate world—namely, in revealing why people do what they do—we can more parsimoniously account for such goings-on by citing non-moral facts about human psychology. Since moral facts are explanatorily superfluous, therefore, we have most reason to believe that they do not exist.

Let's begin with a more careful presentation of this last argument, which will be the focus of the ensuing discussion. It is a variation on a familiar argument, owing to Gilbert Harman,³ that the explanatory dispensability of moral facts entitles us to deny their existence.

Here is an initial go:

Something exists only if it is required in the best explanation of what we believe,
do or observe.

Neither religious nor moral facts are thus required.

Therefore there are no religious or moral facts.

We needn't consider the second premise just yet, for the argument is unsound even if it is true. The first premise is false. The world's contents are not limited by what manages to satisfy our explanatory needs. What serves such needs is a function of our interests and our ignorance. But the true contents of our world are not fixed by such factors. Much of what exists in the universe fails to figure in our best explanations, either because we are ignorant of it, or ignorant of or uninterested in the explananda that it would account for.

It is better, then, to conceive of the argument as having an epistemological, rather than an ontological, point. Thus conceived, it would go something like this:

1. We have reason to believe that something exists only if it is required in the best explanation of the events that we undertake or experience.
2. Neither religious nor moral facts are thus required.
3. Therefore we lack reason to believe that there are such facts.

This argument, if sound, would suffice to warrant a form of Pyrrhonian skepticism about moral and religious facts. Such skepticism claims that our

3. See his *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 3-10, and his 'Moral Explanation and Natural Facts—Can Moral Claims be Tested against Moral Reality?', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, suppl. 24 (1985).

religious and moral beliefs lack justification, and that agents are unjustified in holding such beliefs. But many critics seek to vindicate a stronger conclusion, namely, that we not only lack justification for such beliefs, but possess justification for thinking them false. Call this stronger view *Academic skepticism*.

Academic skepticism entails the Pyrrhonian variety, but not vice versa. One may lack justification for a belief without also having justification for thinking it false. I am not justified in believing that it will rain in Montevideo on 3 June 2020. But neither am I justified in thinking that it won't.

To vindicate the stronger, Academic form of skepticism about religious and moral beliefs, we would need a different argument from the one we've just seen. Perhaps something like this:

4. If anything that x is invoked to explain can be better explained without positing x 's existence, then we have reason to deny x 's existence.
5. Anything that divine or moral facts are invoked to explain can be better explained without positing their existence.
6. Therefore we have reason to deny the existence of divine and moral facts.

This argument, even if sound, is not yet enough to vindicate Academic skepticism about moral and religious facts. Look at its conclusion. It says only that there is reason to deny the existence of such facts. It doesn't say that such a reason is indefeasible, or even the best available reason.

To get Academic skepticism, we need both of the arguments just considered. We can combine them to get the strong form of skepticism about religious beliefs that is so widespread in today's philosophical community, and the strong form of moral skepticism that is less pervasive, but no less threatening for that. The argument would take this form:

7. If there is no reason to believe p , and some reason to deny p , then there is most reason to deny p .
8. There is no reason to believe in moral or divine facts, and some reason to deny their existence.
9. Therefore there is most reason to deny the existence of divine and moral facts.

I hope it is clear by implication that the reasons throughout are epistemic reasons, and not other types, such as prudential ones. If it isn't, let me make it explicit now.

My strategy here will be to present what I consider to be the best replies on behalf of the moral realist, and then see whether these replies allow the theist to resist this extended chain of reasoning. Call that chain, from (1) to (9), *the Explanatory Argument*.

I'll spare you a detailed examination of each premise, and instead sort all moral realist responses into two large groups: that of the naturalist, and that

of the nonnaturalist. Naturalists have a ready reply to these arguments. They will accept the explanatory requirements asserted in premises (1) and (4), but claim that moral facts can meet them. By the naturalist's lights, moral facts are ordinary, run-of-the-mill, natural facts, i.e., empirically discernible facts. Such facts—as, for instance, that a great deal of pleasure is generated by an action—may indeed play an explanatory role in accounting for our beliefs and experiences. So, on the naturalist line, premises (2) and (5) would be false. That would explain why we can resist these skeptical arguments.

Thus if moral naturalism is true, then moral realists will have a satisfactory reply to the Explanatory Argument. Since the reply relies on invoking moral naturalism in defense of moral realism, a parallel route is unavailable to the theist. For that parallel route would be to enlist theological naturalism in defense of theological realism, and that—ongoing, Western conceptions of God—just doesn't make sense. Theological naturalism would seek to vindicate the explanatory necessity of divine facts by revealing them to be a species of natural facts. But that simply runs counter to the essence of the monotheistic tradition, which depicts God and his attributes as supernatural.

Theists might nevertheless accept the explanatory requirements of (1) and (4), and target the negative claims of (2) and (5). Theists cannot implement this strategy by invoking naturalism. If theists accept the explanatory requirements, they will have to show that natural explanations are incomplete, and that they require supplementation from the supernatural for their success. I think that most of our naturalistic explanations are in fact incomplete. But that gives no reason to suppose that they require such supplementation to adequately round them out. Making such a case is a very tall order.

In any event, I am no moral naturalist, and so even if what I've just argued is on the mark, the prospects for parity between my sort of moral realism and theological realism seems much more likely. The success of the naturalist reply is predicated on accepting the explanatory requirements advanced in premises (1) and (4). I am unsure of whether moral facts can pass such tests. If the relevant explananda include such things as being a virtuous person, or being non-institutionally deserving of praise or blame, then moral facts can surely pass the tests. But as I understand their use, these tests are meant to determine, *from neutral starting points*, the contents of our ontology. If we just assume the existence of moral explananda, then it will come as no surprise that moral facts are required to best explain them. But this surely is a victory too easily gained. If explanatory tests are to be useful in determining whether classes of entities or facts exist, then it seems that we cannot assume the existence of that class in applying the tests.

To reinforce these points, consider the relevant parallel with theism. Suppose that the theist claimed that God was necessary to best explain various religious facts—that the world is imbued with immaterial souls that are innately directed to divine purposes, that there is a heaven and a hell, that the Christian scriptures are inerrant. If we start with the assumption that there are such facts, it will be unsurprising to find divine explanations needed to

account for them. But those who base their religious doubts at least partly on a version of the Explanatory Argument would be right to claim that such an assumption begs the question.

Things are just the same when it comes to moral matters. A concession that Harman made in framing his discussion—that even if there are moral facts, they are explanatorily superfluous—crucially undermines his case. Once we grant the existence of moral facts, we can always ask how they are to be explained, and given the existence of an is-ought gap of some kind, it won't come as a surprise to find other moral facts needed to do the relevant explaining.

So suppose we begin our inquiry without the assumption that there are moral facts. Can we show that they are needed to explain what we believe or experience? Some have thought so. We might think, for instance, that the fact that two and two are four best explains why we believe that they are, and that things are no different when it comes to very widely endorsed, practically unshakeable moral beliefs, of the sort, say, that condemn genocide and slavery. On this line, those who are appropriately sensitive to mathematical or moral reality can explain the event of their believing, as well as the content of their beliefs, by citing the mathematical or moral facts that have caused these doxastic events and contents.

This may be true. But to show it so, we would have to show that alternative explanations are not as good. And the problem, at least in the moral case, is that there are quite plausible alternative explanations (those offered by error theorists and expressivists), ones that do not invoke a moral reality that agents can accurately appreciate. Why require moral truths to best explain our moral views, if we can cite the social, parental and psychological factors that appear to so heavily influence their content? This is the essence of Harman's challenge. There may be a good answer to it. After all, we do need to go beyond such factors to best explain why physicists hold the physical views they do, biologists the evolutionary views they do, etc. But it seems that we are licensed to move beyond purely genetic accounts of doxastic practices in the natural sciences because the phenomena under study possess recognized causal powers. We cannot assume that moral facts enjoy the same status without begging the question in this context.

So at this juncture we are not in a position to vindicate the causal efficacy of moral facts by claiming that they play an ineliminable role in our holding the moral beliefs we do. We can successfully defend such an argument only by revealing the flaws in anti-realist accounts. I don't think that there is any short way to do this.

Consider, then, a different line of argument, meant to demonstrate the causal efficacy of moral facts, that in its essentials can be run in a way that is compatible with either moral naturalism or nonnaturalism. The basic idea is this.⁴ Many nonmoral facts are counterfactually dependent on moral facts. If

4. See David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge

certain moral facts had not obtained, other nonmoral facts would not have obtained. This dependence may, with qualifications, suffice to establish genuine causal power. Since moral facts can often pass such a test, moral facts may possess genuine causal power.

As all proponents of this strategy have acknowledged, counter-factual dependence has its limitations as a sufficient condition of causal efficacy. Relata with common causes, and instances of backtracking, pass the test but rarely reveal genuine causal relations. Exceptions can also arise when the test is used as a necessary condition for causal power. It fails, for instance, in cases of preemption and overdetermination. But barring aberrant cases, a counterfactual test—had X not occurred, Y would not have occurred as it did—is a reliable measure of something's causal (and hence explanatory) power. Let's proceed on this assumption and see where it gets us.

Suppose that we invoke a moral fact to explain a nonmoral fact. The employee pension fund is now drained; what accounts for this? It can be perfectly natural to cite the venality, greed and moral corruption of the corporate executives who perpetrated the fraud. And we might say that we should respect the appearances, until we have good reason to doubt them.

Unsurprisingly, there is a reason to doubt the appearances here, and to deny that the citation of moral facts in everyday causal talk reveals anything about the real contents and structure of the world. The reason is that moral facts, by all accounts, supervene on causally efficacious nonmoral ones, and since we should be loath to countenance widespread causal overdetermination, it is (say the critics) really the subvening nonmoral facts that are doing the causing, rather than the moral facts that supervene on them.

That might be so. But there is reason to resist the criticism just described. We are assuming that in standard cases, X causes Y if and only if Y would have been different had X been different.⁵ Not only do moral facts often pass

University Press, 1989), pp. 192-96; Nicholas Sturgeon, 'Moral Explanations', in D. Copp and D. Zimmerman, *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), and Sturgeon, 'Contents and Causes: A Reply to Blackburn', *Philosophical Studies* 61 (1991), pp. 19-37; Brad Majors, 'Moral Explanation', *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006), pp. 9-10; Graham Oddie, *Value, Reality and Desire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2005), pp. 198-203.

5. It is important to note that almost every standard case is one that involves supervenient phenomena; the only ones that don't are cases of causation at the fundamental physical level (assuming there is such a thing). All of the facts we inquire about—unless we are physicists—are supervenient facts. So we shouldn't seek to discount the applicability of the counterfactual test in the moral case just because moral facts are supervenient ones; motivational, intentional, social, economic, biological, historical, political (etc., etc.) facts are all supervenient, too. It might, of course, be that *all* moral cases are non-standard, but it is hard to see how to defend such a claim in a non-ad hoc way. Or it might be that no supervenient phenomena really exist—that independent causal power is a prerequisite for ontological credibility, that supervenient phenomena lack such power, and that they therefore ought to be expunged from the ontology. But if that were so, then the absence of moral facts would be no surprise, given the absence of any people, actions, intentions or motives—all supervenient phenomena themselves.

this test, but, importantly, the nonmoral facts on which they supervene often fail it. If we kept everything else fixed, but assumed that the executives were not greedy, venal and corrupt, then the outcome would have been quite different—the pension fund would presently be well-endowed. So these moral failings *do* seem to be causally relevant. But the pension fund would remain depleted in the nearest natural possible world, one in which the specific natural facts that constituted the corruption were changed only very slightly. This argues for the greater causal-explanatory power of moral facts over certain nonmoral ones.

Since moral properties are multiply realizable, there is a good deal of variation in the make-up of the natural facts that can instantiate a given moral property. This variability is what explains why citation of exclusively natural features often fails to satisfy a counter-factual test of causal efficacy—a small change to the subvening facts, one that brings us to the closest natural possible world, would *not* alter the relevant outcomes in any way. So if we have to choose between these options in fixing causal power, then whenever (keeping all else the same) alteration of moral facts would, and change of subvening natural facts would not, yield a different outcome, we should be willing to credit the moral facts with enough causal power to allow them to retain a place in our ontology. After all, we extend the same courtesy to many other types of supervenient facts, on precisely the same grounds.

There is a worry, of course. It was expressed a good while back, by David Zimmerman,⁶ and his critique remains, I think, the best expression of doubt about this sort of strategy. His criticism is that the greater generality achievable by adverting to supervening facts in causal-explanatory contexts is a double-edged sword. Rather than explain (say) Hitler's deeds by reference to his depravity or evil nature, we might more informatively account for his actions by citing the specific nonmoral intentions and motives that prompted them. There are many ways of being evil and depraved, some of which Hitler did not exemplify, and so some of which are irrelevant to accounting for his actions. We therefore gain greater understanding of his behavior if we cite the more specific nonmoral facts that realized the evil and depravity at particular times and places. In this way we can always replace a moral explanation with a nonmoral one in order to gain greater understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Suppose that we must concede Zimmerman's claim that nonmoral facts do more in the service of perspicuous explanation than moral facts can do. Still, we might then claim that causal power is enough to secure a place in the ontology, even if what is causally efficacious is not maximally explanatorily efficacious. Zimmerman could be right that mention of finer-grained nonmoral facts will always be more illuminating than reference to coarser-grained

6. David Zimmerman, 'Moral Realism and Explanatory Necessity', in D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1985), pp. 79-103, at p. 87.

moral facts. But even if he is, that does not undermine the (sometime) greater ability of moral facts to pass a counter-factual test of causal relevance. And passage of such a test is what really counts, for causal power is thought by all parties to this debate to signify real ontological credibility, whereas explanatory illumination is always relative to our interests and ignorance. For this reason, if causal and explanatory power come apart, there does seem to be a good basis for sticking with causal power as a means of discerning the proper contents of our ontology.

Yet there remains a serious problem for the moral realist, and the problem is simply put: passing the causal test is insufficient for establishing realistic status. Legal facts, for instance, can pass the test: had traveling at a certain speed not been against the law, the police officer wouldn't have pulled the driver over; had the conduct not been criminal, the defendant wouldn't now be behind bars; had the contract not been validly drawn, specific performance would not now be required. The appeal to legal categories can do genuine explanatory work, and often because legal facts causally account for why things happen in our world. But legal facts are conventional,⁷ and aren't apt for a realistic construal.

There isn't anything special about the legal case. We could make the same point about other kinds of conventional facts. Had the joke not been funny, the audience wouldn't have laughed. Had the dress not been unfashionable, its owner wouldn't have been ridiculed. Had the speaker not been rude, he wouldn't have been jeered at. Being humorous, fashionable or rude are all conventional matters, depending essentially on our contingent attitudes to features of our world. Sartorial realism is implausible; realism about humor or etiquette no less so. And yet there are facts of these kinds that cause and explain things in our world. Thus reliance on the causal test is insufficient to vindicate a realistic understanding of the facts or entities that pass it.

I don't think that this points to a special problem for the counter-factual test. It, or something very like it, seems essential to our understanding of causal efficacy. And I don't see any natural amendment to the test that would enable us, through its use alone, to discriminate between facts that are best construed realistically, and those that are not. That is because many conventional facts seem, in the examples above, and in so many others, to be causally relevant to outcomes in our world.⁸

7. For those natural lawyers out there, we can restrict the discussion to legal facts (such as those that enact a speed limit) that everyone acknowledges to be conventional, and leave aside the controversial matter of whether moral constraints (realistically construed) play an ineliminable role in fixing the identity conditions of either a legal system or specific legal standards.

8. One could deny that conventional facts are causally efficacious, and so claim that we have good reason to regard only *nonconventional* facts that pass the causal test as best construed realistically. Since moral facts are nonconventional, and pass the causal test, we therefore have good reason to think that moral realism is true. The problem with this is that we can't simply assume that moral facts are nonconventional. Passage of the causal test was

Where does this leave us? We reached this point by casting doubt on the tenability of the strategy that had us first assuming the existence of moral facts, and then asking after their explanatory efficacy. Such a strategy, endorsed by Harman, makes it far too easy to vindicate the explanatory necessity of moral facts, as becomes clear when we consider the analogous case that might be made for theistic facts. Once we grant the existence of the disputed class of entities or facts (theistic, moral, etc.), and make them the relevant explananda, it won't be difficult to establish the need to invoke other facts of the same kind in accounting for them.

So perhaps we can, without assuming the existence of the disputed class, defend its existence by means of a counterfactual test of causal efficacy. Yet as we have seen, though we may be able to do this for moral facts, that does not suffice to vindicate their realistic status. Those moral realists who rely on the test to underwrite their position thus need to look elsewhere.

This isn't to say that the counterfactual test, or a near-cousin, is irrelevant in these debates. It might be, for instance, that counterfactual dependence ordinarily supplies a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for something's earning its way into the ontology. If that were so, then passage of the test would be insufficient to vindicate moral realism, but failure would suffice to refute it.

If we insist on causal relevance as a necessary condition of ontological credibility, then a good deal more must be done to more precisely fix the content of a causal test, and to show that moral facts are (un)able to pass it. Those who enjoy strenuous exercise are encouraged to take this path. But I think there is good reason to sidestep it.

If we proceed on a neutral basis, and assume neither that moral facts exist, nor that they don't, then it is as yet unclear whether they are explanatorily indispensable. If they are, then moral realism is so far in the clear. But I want to proceed here on the assumption that we can do all of the relevant explaining without invoking moral facts. My goal is to show that even on this worst case scenario, the moral realist has a defense against the Explanatory Argument that is largely successful. This defense, I think, is unavailable to the theist. And so the parity that is asserted at the heart of the Explanatory Argument can be resisted.

If we grant, for purposes of argument, that moral facts will fail the explanatory tests, then nonnaturalists are faced with a real worry. For there's no doubt that we have used these explanatory tests to very good effect in accounting for why we're no longer warranted (if ever we were) in believing in ghosts, UFOs, or snake gods. I think, in fact, that the explanatory tests are excellent devices for assessing the epistemic merits of our ontological commitments in a very broad, but not unlimited, way. Specifically, their

supposed to show that they are. But it can't do that, as the examples from the law and etiquette have shown.

good work is limited to the natural realm, the one whose contents are (at least in principle) empirically discernible.

How convenient for me! But there is a case to be made for such a limitation. For the explanatory requirements, if strong enough to eliminate moral facts, will almost certainly eliminate all normative facts. If we assume that moral facts lack explanatory power, there is every reason to make a similar assumption regarding all normative facts. That I *ought* to believe that São Paulo is in Brazil would not explain why I do. Testimony, and my past acquaintance with maps of South America, would explain my belief. That I would be *irrational* for failing to dress warmly in the snowy season would not explain why I have done so. Rather, my wanting to stay warm, and knowing how to do it, could do the needed explaining. That I am *morally required* to support my children would not explain why I do. That I believe that I am thus required, in addition to the fact of my direct love for my children, and my ability to support them, would together explain my support. As a general matter, it's quite implausible to suppose that normative facts are going to directly account for non-human events. But even when it comes to human agency, there are explanations in terms of our psychological profiles and opportunities for action that might be capable of doing all the needed explaining.

Normative properties are individuated by the standards they set, the reasons they represent. Predictive or causal-explanatory failure is no strike against the credibility of a normative standard—that people don't adhere to it is not, by itself, good evidence that its content is mistaken.

Now these considerations, even if correct, do not amount to an argument for jettisoning moral and other normative facts from our ontology. We get that result only if we supplement these considerations with the explanatory requirements in (1) and (4). Since I want to argue for our justified belief in moral facts, I have to show—again, on the assumption that moral facts don't pass the explanatory requirements—that these requirements don't apply to them. I think that there is a direct way to do this:

10. If the explanatory requirements (i.e., premises (1) and (4)) are both correct, and perfectly general in application, then we have most reason to deny the existence of all normative facts.
11. We don't have most reason to deny the existence of all normative facts.
12. Therefore the explanatory requirements are either false, or, if true, are limited in their application.

Let us proceed by assuming the truth of (10), which represents a generalization of the concession I have been making for purposes of argument. Whatever grounds there are for thinking that moral facts are explanatorily dispensable will, so far as I can tell, generalize to all normative facts. If (10) is false, then whatever explains its falsity will also, presumably, justify the explanatory necessity of moral facts. And while (per our earlier discussion) this is not enough to vindicate moral realism, it is enough to insulate moral

facts from the Explanatory Argument. So anti-realists can have no quarrel with the concessive assumption that (10) is true.

In support of (11), consider first some hopefully uncontroversial examples: it is a fact that it is sometimes *appropriate* or *legitimate* or *justified* to pursue one's happiness, a fact that one *ought* to believe in one's own existence, a fact that one often *should* pursue efficient means to one's chosen ends. More importantly, we can show that (11) is plausible by showing how implausible its negation is. The negation of (11)—that we have most reason to deny the existence of all normative facts—is, if true, a normative fact. So, by its own lights, we would have most reason to deny it. If we have most reason to deny the negation of (11), then we have excellent reason to affirm (11).

In other words, the explanatory requirements, and the conclusions they are meant to help establish, are all themselves normative claims. They tell us what we have reason to do or believe. But if we deny the existence of all normative facts, then the conclusions of the skeptical arguments are ones that we have most reason to deny. Since I am assuming that the proponents of those skeptical arguments would find such a view unacceptable, even they should accept the truth of (11).

Here is where we stand. I have tried to vindicate (12), by granting to anti-realists the truth of (10), and then arguing for (11). If I have succeeded, then we either have to say of the explanatory requirements that they are false, or that they do not apply to the normative realm. I prefer to say the latter, just because of the excellent work they have done in justifying the rejection of beliefs in phlogiston, the Greek pantheon, Easter bunnies, etc. In other words, I think we are right to apply the explanatory requirements when seeking to determine the natural contents of our world.

And this provides a basis for drawing a disanalogy between the moral and the divine. The job description of normative facts does not include the possession of explanatory power. They may indeed possess such power, though I am assuming here that they do not. But because their functional role does not require that they explain nonnormative phenomena, but rather that they specify ideals, requirements, or standards that in some way must be met, an explanatory failure does not license their expulsion from the ontology. By contrast, the job description of God does include explanatory power. Indeed, such power is causal-explanatory power, which, moreover, must sometimes be exercised. God must, at the least, get the universe going, and will further, to all but deists, intervene in our affairs at least occasionally in such a way as to vitiate the causal closure of the natural.

Yet it is far from clear that supernatural explanations are superior to natural ones in accounting for the goings-on in our world. Supernatural explanations are certainly less parsimonious than natural ones. When a battle is won, for instance, we can say, if we are so inclined, that God had a hand in the victory, but what we *must* say is that these particular soldiers, acting in these particular ways, in these specific circumstances, carried the day. Perhaps a divine hand was guiding the combat, but there is no need to invoke such an

explanation when the natural one is apparently complete. The lesson is easily generalizable. Since theistic explanations are less parsimonious, if they are to be superior to natural explanations they must be substantially better along some other explanatory dimension. It isn't clear what that dimension would be.

The theist might at this point try adopting a companions-in-guilt strategy, and argue that many kinds of things whose existence we strongly affirm are such that their functional role includes causal efficacy, though they fail to be explanatorily indispensable. Mental states are perhaps the most common example in this regard. There are mental states. They do cause things. And yet they also seem to be replaceable in any explanation they might appear in. We don't really need to cite mental facts—at least in principle—to explain why we do what we do. There is a complete neurophysical story that can do that, and we have warranted confidence that such a story will some day, in all its details, be available to us. Once the neurons do their job, there is nothing left for a belief or a desire to do. So beliefs and desires, and other mental states, are explanatorily superfluous. Therefore, by the lights of the explanatory requirements, we have most reason to deny their existence. Since, I am assuming, this last conclusion is false—we don't have most reason to deny the existence of beliefs and desires—something must be wrong with the explanatory requirements. And so the pressure they put on theism may be resisted.

This familiar line relies for its success on something like what Kim called the 'causal inheritance principle'.⁹ I won't pause here to comment on the merits of the principle, except to say that if it can be vindicated, then the moral realist—whether naturalist or nonnaturalist—is very likely on firm footing as regards the explanatory requirements. But the theist is just as likely not. For the success of this theistic reply depends on the plausibility of the causal inheritance principle, and that principle, if true, is restricted in its application to phenomena that supervene on, or are identical to, naturalistic facts or states. But divine facts are neither. They aren't identical to mundane natural facts. Nor is God nomologically, metaphysically or conceptually constrained by such facts; the divine does not supervene on the natural. Divine explanations *compete* with natural ones. They do so because the divine is neither identical to, nor supervenient upon, the natural world.

This point is crucial in seeing why the moral realist and the theist are not equally vulnerable to the Explanatory Argument. If moral facts are identical to natural ones, then there is no competition between them in accounting for the world's events. If moral facts instead supervene on natural ones, then if there is any competition, it is as benign as the competition between physical facts, and the mental, biological or chemical facts that supervene on them. If

9. Jaegwon Kim, 'Multiple Realization and the Metaphysics of Reduction', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52 (1992), pp. 1-26, at p. 18.

we insist on the multiple realizability of these latter kinds, regard them as real, and have a causal test of ontological credibility, then we will render one of two verdicts. Either (i) there is causal competition between supervening and subvening facts, and the supervening facts sometimes win out (as they do in a straightforward application of the counterfactual test, e.g., in the pension fund case above), or (ii) there is no real competition between such facts, and the genuine causal efficacy of one entails that of the other. So, for instance, one might think that there is no real competition between a causal explanation of a paper cut in half if we cite, on the one hand, the scissors that did the cutting, and on the other, the concatenation of particles that constitute the scissors.

But since divine facts are neither identical to natural ones, nor supervenient upon them, then there is real competition between explanations that invoke only natural facts, and those that invoke God and his powers and attributes. If, to take an earlier example, a battle's outcome can be accounted for just in terms of natural facts about military deployment, then not only is there no need to invoke divine explanation, but the completeness of the natural explanation entails the falsity of the divine one. That's not so in the case of supervenient phenomena; explaining (say) someone's death by citing a terminal disease does not falsify an account that is couched at the molecular level. (For, as a general matter, an explanation given in terms of a supervenient domain does not falsify one given at the subvening level, if the supervening features are realized by the subvening features.)

What this shows is that theists cannot avail themselves of the companions in guilt strategy, and so must, after all, accept the plausibility of the explanatory requirements, and proceed to show, if they can, that divine facts manage to pass them. Whether they can succeed in this task is, of course, too large an issue to be considered here.

As far as I can tell, there is just one way for the theist to resist this line of reasoning, and that is to claim that knowledge of God's existence can be gained in a wholly a priori way. Thus even if our concept of God included the realized ability to causally intervene in our affairs, we would not have to be able to cite evidence of such interventions in order to justify a belief in his existence. So, for instance, if a version of the ontological argument were sound, and we could know this, then that would suffice to justify belief in God's existence, even if we were unable to show that divine intervention was the best explanation of anything that we had experienced.

This strategy bears an obvious resemblance to the sorts of intuitionist epistemological strategies sometimes adopted by moral realists. The crucial difference is that intuitionists are not claiming to gain knowledge of any existential truths in an a priori way. *If* there are any a priori moral propositions, they are restricted to ones that express moral principles (which, as I understand them, are conditionals), rather than moral facts (which, by my lights, are instantiations of moral properties). So, for instance, one might be able to know a priori that killing solely for enjoyment is immoral, though one cannot

know a priori whether any given instance of killing is immoral. And that is because one cannot know a priori whether moral properties have been instantiated. One must know something of the world's contingencies in order to have such knowledge. Thus moral facts are not knowable a priori, even if some moral principles are.

So, although some moral realists are perfectly comfortable invoking the possibility of conceptual truths and a priori knowledge in moral matters, they deny that we can know a priori either (i) that there are moral facts, or (ii) that the specific moral facts are as we take them to be. We must have some experience of the world in order to know that there are moral features in it. We must know, at the very least, that there are beings with intentions and deliberative powers, vulnerable beings who can suffer, etc. There can be no moral facts in the absence of moral agents. And whether there are any moral agents about is not something we can know a priori.

Compare the situation for the theist. It might be a conceptual truth, and hence a priori knowable, that if there is a God, then God possesses more knowledge than human beings do. But the theist needs more than this, of course, since atheists can sign on to such principles. What the theist needs is a justification for believing that God exists, and such a justification must, if I am right, proceed in one of two ways. Either the theist must show, a priori, that God exists, or the theist must show, a posteriori, that God is explanatorily indispensable.

Both such argumentative burdens are different from those inherited by the moral realist. Moral realists cannot show, a priori, that moral facts exist. (Nor do they need to.) Nor does the realist have to show that moral facts are essential in explaining why the nonmoral world is as it is. Thus the argumentative burdens on the moral realist differ very importantly from those of the theological realist.

This concludes my assessment of the explanatory argument that seeks to establish parity between the vulnerability of moral and theological realism. The take-home message here is that there is an important disanalogy between the cases that can be made against moral facts and theistic ones. The explanatory requirements are best construed as limited in their application to entities whose job description includes having a discernible impact on the natural world. Since moral facts do not, but many divine facts do, have it as part of their job description to causally intervene in that world, moral facts are excluded from the purview of the requirements. Divine facts are not. And therefore divine facts must earn their way into our ontology by passing the explanatory requirements; their failure to do so would (absent a sound a priori argument for God's existence) provide us most reason to deny their existence. Moral facts, by contrast, are immune to the explanatory strictures. They might nevertheless manage to satisfy such demands. But even if they fail such tests, we do not, on that account, have most reason to deny their existence.

Postscript

I haven't yet said anything that would give us reason to think that there are moral facts. Indeed, on the very generous assumption that everything I've argued for thus far is correct, we are left with a very large question: if passing an explanatory requirement is not the appropriate path to normative vindication, then what is? Why are we licensed (if we are) in believing that there are moral facts?

Let's distinguish two questions that might tend to get entangled here. The first is the one just asked: what reason do we have for thinking that there are moral facts? The other, narrower question is: what reason do we have for thinking that the specific moral facts are as we take them to be? The former question is the more fundamental. If we can't supply a positive answer to it, then there's no point in considering the second question.

The answer to the first question is, at a sufficiently general level, the same answer that we return to the question of what licenses belief in the existence of natural facts. We believe that there is an external world, a world of natural facts, because such a belief unifies a great deal of our particular experiences and beliefs, and presents itself as so plainly true as to be, for all practical purposes, irresistible. True, there are skeptics about the external world, and some of them are brilliant and capable of avoiding any logical traps we set. There is nothing we can do but beg a fundamental question against such people, as their position, so far as I can see, need not involve incoherence. We will never convince them, as anything we can adduce on behalf of the external world will presuppose its existence.

Most of us think that this intractable disagreement is compatible with our being justified in believing that there is an external world. We think this because of the aforementioned unification and practical irresistibility of such a belief. I think a perfectly parallel case can be made on behalf of our confidence in the existence of moral facts. The atrocious immorality of certain actions just impresses itself upon us in a way that makes the abandonment of such a conviction completely untenable. Nor can we check our admiration at fidelity under extreme temptation, or suspend our judgment of a person's virtue when she publicly exposes the cruelties of tyrant. There are a great many easy cases in morality, though these rarely get the press devoted to the hard ones. These cases are easy because (at least in part) we arrive at our beliefs about them without deliberative effort, and we attach to such beliefs a near unshakeable conviction in their truth. They are as easy as we think they are only if there are right answers in ethics. This general commitment to moral facts unifies our moral beliefs and experiences in just the way that an underlying commitment to the existence of an external world unifies our empirical beliefs.

That is why we are licensed, if we are, in believing that there are moral facts. But what licenses us in thinking that certain actions are right, and

others wrong, certain motives good, and others bad? Things are less tractable here, and the parallel between moral and empirical beliefs breaks down at this point.

We are searching for a replacement for the explanatory test of justified belief about ontological matters, a test that works so well in the empirical realm. What, precisely, are we testing for? In the natural realm, we are testing to see what sorts of entities exist. In the moral realm, we are not testing to determine the contents of our ontology—at least, once we grant the existence of a class of moral facts. We allow that there are people, actions, intentions, motives, etc. And we allow that there are moral properties. We don't really need to do any further ontological sussing out. We don't need to determine which entities do, and don't exist. What we need, instead, is a way to determine which specific moral claims are true. And what's potentially puzzling about moral claims isn't that some, but not others, entail ontological commitments that might be suspect. Either all moral claims do that, or none. Rather, what's puzzling about moral claims is that we aren't sure how we might vindicate the truth of some, but not others.

And here, I am afraid, there is almost nothing constructive to be said. What we are looking for is something more specific than a general theory of epistemic justification. We might be foundationalists, coherentists, contextualists or reliabilists in science, as in ethics. The explanatory requirement does not serve as a general criterion for positive epistemic status, but rather as a more specific test that can be utilized within the context of these general theories of epistemic justification and warrant—the test, specifically, of what our ontology should include and exclude. The correlative test in the normative realm would not, as I say, focus on determining the contents of our ontology, but rather on what's to count as correct normative standards or particular normative truths. The explanatory test enjoys allegiance from all parties to ontological investigations in the natural realm. There is nothing similar in the normative realm.

What this means is that we have no uncontroversial, neutral starting place from which to begin normative inquiry. We have only the guidance available to us from the edicts set forth by our preferred general epistemology. So the coherentists among us will be counseled to proceed by gaining the needed doxastic alignment. Some foundationalists might hope to vindicate their normative commitments by identifying at least some of them as self-evident. Etc.

This isn't very exciting, but there's nothing, so far as I can tell, to be done that would both make things more exciting, and preserve the truth about normative inquiry. An explanatory test is out of place in the normative realm, and there's nothing suited to serve as its substitute. That we lack a general test for normative commitment is something we simply have to live with. We must muddle on as we can.

Lest this be thought especially damaging to the prospects of veridical moral inquiry, remember that epistemic assessment is also a normative endeavor, as

is inquiry that seeks to determine the proper demands of practical rationality. So long as we think—as all of us do—that we can have good reason to support our beliefs in these other areas, we should, at least provisionally, extend the same courtesy to our moral beliefs.

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