

Theism Without Objective Ethics

Jacob Williams

Ethics

Dr. Manis

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When people make ethical claims about states and actions, they generally seem to be claiming that there is an objective, categorical, normative fact about the state or action: i.e., that the state of affairs is good or bad, or the action such that it should or should not be performed, and that any people who think otherwise – regardless of their beliefs, feelings, goals, or anything else about them – are simply mistaken. For various reasons, however (I think chiefly because of the mysterious nature of such facts), one might suspect that these facts do not actually exist. This view initially appears to be at odds with theism, for common theistic doctrines make much use of the concepts of good, evil, right, and wrong. I will consider five specific reasons a denial of objective ethics might be thought incompatible with theism, and I hope to show that none of them are decisive.

First, theists usually place great emphasis on adherence to a moral code, and might be concerned that denying the objectivity of ethics would undermine the authority of that code. This concern would be baseless. Theists typically hold that it is in one's own best interests to adhere to the moral code, because God will ensure that adherence is ultimately rewarded. Although it might be metaphysically possible for a person to be indifferent to his or her own welfare, it seems unlikely that any actual human being who accepted the theistic doctrine of eternal life would fail to feel a strong motivation to do those things which would lead to his or her own greatest happiness in that life. Thus, theism provides a motivation for every (well-informed) person to adhere to the moral code, and that motivation does not depend on the existence of objectively true ethical facts.

A second complaint a theist might have is that denying objective ethics makes the character of God contingent. Sometimes theistic philosophers say that God is the “greatest possible being,” that this being exists necessarily, and that this being by definition must be

maximally good and therefore possess those qualities we believe are required by goodness. However, without objective ethics, the phrase “greatest possible being” cannot truthfully refer to anything, since it cannot be objectively true that any being is greater than any other being. There are two ways to reply. One would be to assert that God and his characteristics are necessary for some other reason that is not dependent on objective ethics. I do not know what this would be, though, so I think the better reply is simply to question whether this objection is any reason to reject a theory denying objective ethics. If it means that we are deprived of an explanation of God's existence and his characteristics that we otherwise would have had, then this is certainly an unfortunate consequence for our knowledge of the world, but it is no evidence that the theory is false, and nothing inherent in theism seems to demand that we attribute necessity to God or his traits.

A third, and I think more serious, obstacle that a theist will face in denying objective ethics lies in the belief that God is good. This belief tends to play a central role in theistic faith, and it seems highly unlikely that any theory that demands we deny it could really be considered compatible with theism as we know it. The question, then, is whether it is possible to deny that anything is truly objectively “good” or “bad” without compromising our belief in the goodness of God.

It is important to note that statements describing something as “good” or “evil” often communicate much that would be of interest even if objective ethics were denied: the speaker probably has in mind some properties that a “good” thing would have – in the case of a person, perhaps qualities such as unselfishness or courage – which it can still be objectively true that the thing possesses. (Similarly, statements about “right” and “wrong” can also communicate beliefs beyond just the assertion of an objective moral obligation – the speaker may think an action is

“right” or “wrong” based on its accordance with God's commands or with social customs or based on whether it promotes the general welfare, and by making a moral judgment on the action the speaker is also revealing a belief that the action meets this criteria.) Now, bearing this in mind, suppose an evangelical Christian reassures a friend who has suffered loss by reminding him that God is good. After this, the Christian learns with certainty both that there are no objectively true ethical facts, and that God is loving. Would she be inclined to declare without qualification that her previous assertion of God's goodness was false? I doubt it. She might have to admit that strictly speaking her statement was false, since it asserted the existence of an ethical fact which does not actually exist. But she would probably find this to be insignificant, since her main idea – that God cares about the person – was correct. The point of this example is to illustrate that even if denying objective ethics requires us to deny the literal truth of the statement “God is good,” it does not require us to deny any of the beliefs the statement expresses that we are likely to think truly crucial to theism. I will consider two potential objections to this solution.

One possible concern is that while there is near-universal agreement among theists that God is good, not everyone has the same characteristics in mind when they say this (for instance, some might think that it means he is limitlessly and unconditionally forgiving, while others might think it means he is relentlessly just), and this might raise doubts about our ability to know what God is like. For if we knew that God is objectively good, we could (presumably) proceed by rational argument to determine what traits an objectively good person must exhibit and thus what traits God must exhibit. This should not cause us much worry, though. First, the project of determining by reasoning exactly what qualities and behaviors make a being good has not led to any sort of universal agreement, so it is somewhat questionable just how helpful the bare knowledge that God is objectively good would be in deducing anything else about him. More

importantly, theists generally base their conceptions of God on the teachings of some set of sacred texts, which usually have much more specific and more clearly objective things to say about the character of God than merely that he is “good” (the Bible, for instance, contains direct affirmations of God's love and justice, as well as numerous narratives from which Christians draw implications about the character of God).

A more formidable objection is this: it seems that one of the important ideas we have in mind when thinking of the goodness of God (and that plays a major role in theistic sacred texts) implicitly depends on a notion of objective ethics. This is his justice. Theists usually believe that, as a component of God's goodness, he will reward people for performing right actions and punish them for performing wrong actions. If no actions are objectively right or wrong, though, it might seem that God's giving of good and bad consequences is ultimately arbitrary, and it seems to run counter to our normal beliefs about God to think that he would choose to inflict suffering on a person arbitrarily. In response to this, consider the possibility that God's justice is necessarily connected to other properties that we do not find troublesome at all. One way in which this might be worked out is to suggest that God's justice is required by his love for all people. If God cares about the welfare of all people, it seems reasonable that he would wish to provide some motivation for people not to perform actions which hinder the welfare of others; thus, there must be consequences for selfish and harmful actions. Still, the justice ascribed to God sometimes seems to include an element of retribution for its own sake, not required for any practical purpose (as the extreme example, consider eternal punishment in hell); but the very fact that we are aware of these instances means that they have the potential to function for us as deterrents from certain kinds of behavior, and I do not think we can rule out that they exist solely for that purpose.

A fourth difficulty theists might encounter in denying objective ethics is finding some way to make sense of our moral intuitions. Theists tend to have a strong commitment to the idea that certain actions are right and others are wrong. How can this be reconciled with a denial of anything being objectively right or wrong? If we were to apply the same strategy I used regarding belief in the goodness of God and suggest that beliefs regarding the rightness or wrongness of certain actions have as their main content the affirmation of other types of properties (like the action being selfish or being contrary to God's commands, etc.), certain cases would still be puzzling: for instance, when we say that it is right to obey God, it seems unlikely that the main idea is “obeying God is unselfish” or anything else we might associate with an action being right; the main idea seems to be simply that it is objectively right to obey God. Obviously, that idea cannot be literally correct if objective ethical facts do not exist. To overcome this difficulty, I propose that these moral judgments flow from moral intuitions implanted in us by God (evangelical Christians, at least, should not have much difficulty with this; the notion that God has put a moral code in our hearts is not uncommon), and that the purpose of these intuitions is to motivate us to pursue those behaviors which God wants us to pursue, and avoid those which he wants us to avoid. It should not be surprising that these intuitions provide our minds only with information of the form “you ought not do that” or “that is wrong” even if it would be more technically correct for them to provide us with “doing that would be contrary to the will of God, detrimental to mankind in general, and ultimately detrimental even to yourself”; after all, according to this theory, the purpose of these moral intuitions is not to provide us with metaphysical knowledge, and God is not made a liar if we misinterpret them any more than he is made a liar if someone watching the motion of the sun mistakenly concludes that it revolves around the earth.

As a fifth objection, some theists might think that all of the above discussion is irrelevant because we have in Scripture direct claims regarding the goodness of God, the rightness and wrongness of various actions, and the goodness and wickedness of various people, and these claims require us to accept the objectivity of ethics. Certainly if any of the numerous ethical claims made in the sacred texts of theistic faiths have as their proper interpretation the affirmation of the existence of objective ethical facts, then a denial of objective ethics will be incompatible with any form of that faith which holds to the text's inerrancy. However, I think it is plausible that such interpretations would be incorrect. To begin with, if ethical relativists and noncognitivists are correct that ethical claims are not actually claims about something objective, then there is clearly no problem at all. If they are wrong (as some of my earlier discussion has assumed), it is still possible that the correct interpretation of the relevant passages does not ask us to accept objective ethical facts. If, as I have been suggesting, the strict falsity of propositions about objective ethical facts would not lead us to declare false most of the statements in which we express them, it seems plausible that scriptural texts making ethical statements may have as their proper interpretations not affirmations of simple objective, categorical, normative facts but rather affirmations of the various other properties that the authors had in mind when making the statements. Whether this is the case is mostly a question for theologians (in determining what hermeneutic we should use in interpreting Scripture) and historians (in determining exactly what the author of the text likely meant) and is outside the scope of this paper.

There may be other objections than those I have discussed. Based on the above considerations, though, I do not think that theists' beliefs about the importance of moral practice, the necessity of God's attributes, the goodness of God, the rightness and wrongness of various actions, or (at least *prima facie*) the teachings of Scripture need to prevent them from accepting a

metaethical theory which holds that objective ethical propositions cannot be true.