

Folk Moral Objectivism and Belief in God

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Studies on ordinary people's moral judgments reveal that many people adhere to objective morality and believe in objective moral values. This evidence that ordinary people adhere to moral absolutism is enriched by studies that hone in on the relationship between religion and folk moral objectivity, linking belief in God with moral objectivism. Existing research on folk moral objectivism in theists provokes the question of whether belief in the existence of God causes belief in the existence of objective moral values. An even more provocative question is whether belief in the existence of God *because* of belief in the existence of objective moral values is warranted. In this essay I will explore the existing research on religion and folk moral objectivism and consider Robert Adams' divine command theory and Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology to argue that adhering to moral objectivism can provide grounds for the theist's belief in the existence of God.

Experimental moral philosophy has recently focused on evidence and justification for moral objectivism or subjectivism in ordinary people. While research initially supported the claim that most folk ascribe to moral objectivism, this has recently been disputed and research shows that people can be objectivist or subjectivist for different reasons and under different circumstances (Pözlner & Wright, 2019, p. 4). Therefore, a more productive focus for research on folk morality is to prod at the different motivations, contexts, and beliefs that might make people view morality as either objective or subjective (Sarkissian, 2016, p. 222). Belief in an all powerful God who designates right from wrong is a big part of moral discourse, this tendency for religion to pop up in discussions about morality has been observed experimentally (Sarkissian, 2016, p. 214). Among the variables that correlate with folk moral objectivity is religious belief (Pözlner & Wright, 2019, p. 4). Because of religion's role in the larger moral discourse, it's

important to explore the motivations and justifications under which theists tend to view morality as objective and how they relate to belief in God.

Goodwin and Darley found that belief in God motivates objectivist moral judgment in theists. These conclusions are derived from the results of the authors' second experiment in their paper on the psychology of meta ethics. 71 participants rated their agreement with 26 statements on a 6 point scale and were asked "according to you there can be a correct answer as to whether this statement is true" (Goodwin & Darley, 2008, p. 1351). Participants who grounded their ethical judgments on the notion of a divine being tended to be more objective than those who didn't (1353). When asked if there could be right and wrong without God, those who answered that there couldn't were the most objective out of all participants (1354).

Elaborating on this initial correlation, Yilmaz and Bahçekapili found that priming people with religious words resulted in more objectivist moral judgments. They also observed less confidence in the existence of God after participants were given a reading about the subjective nature of morality (Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2015). In their first study, the authors found a negative correlation between subjectivism and measures of religious belief (96). 355 participants were given a 10 item relativism questionnaire to measure subjective morality. Then a 5 item intuitive religious belief scale and 10 item intrinsic religiosity scale were administered. Finally participants were asked about their belief in the existence of God (96). Moral subjectivism negatively correlated with all 3 measures of religious belief (intuitive religious belief, intrinsic religiosity, belief in God), pointing to the conclusion that people with strong religious belief also believe that objective moral values exist (96).

In their second study, the authors found that people are more objective and less subjective when primed with religious words. They included 100 undergrads who were given a scrambling

task with 10 groups of 5 words and were asked to remove one word and form a meaningful sentence with the remaining 4 words (a total of 10 sentences) (97). Participants were divided into a divine prime and a neutral prime. For those in the divine prime, 5 of the 10 sentences included 5 divine priming words: spirit, divine, God, sacred, and prophet. The remaining 5 sentences were neutral (97). After the scrambling task participants were asked 6 questions about moral dilemmas, answering 3 questions about the subjective or objective nature of each using a 7 point scale (97). Then, an 8 item meta ethics questionnaire was administered where participants were asked 4 questions about subjectivism and 4 questions about objectivism. Finally, participants were asked a question about their religiosity, “to what extent do you consider yourself a religious person,” which was also measured through a 7 point scale (97). After analyzing the results of the moral dilemma questionnaire, the authors found that divine priming had an effect on objective morality scores. The divine priming group had higher objective morality scores than the neutral priming group. The authors found similar results for the ethics questionnaire, the religious priming group had higher objective morality scores than the neutral priming group (97).

In their third study, the authors manipulated the meta ethical beliefs of participants by giving them a text meant to prime them towards subjectivity or objectivity or neutral and then asking them to rate to what extent they agree with the argument. Then, all participants were asked about whether they believe in God’s existence (98). The authors found that people exhibited less confidence about the existence of God after reading about the subjective nature of moral truths. One conclusion to draw is that religious priming triggers the belief that objective morality is mandated by God (99).

Sarkissian and Felan studied which conceptions of God motivate theists rejection of relativism, finding that belief in a punishing God motivates objectivism. More importantly they

found that for Abrahamic theists, being primed to think of the divine makes them more likely to endorse objectivism (Sarkissian & Felan, 2019). Over three studies, the authors tested the relation between conceptions of a punishing God and moral objectivism. Study 1 tested for correlation between belief in hell and rejection of moral relativism. Participants filled out a relativism scale and answered demographic questions including a religiosity scale. Additionally, the authors tested for conception of a punishing God by asking participants about their belief in hell (8). The authors found that relativism negatively correlated with intrinsic religiosity, belief in hell, and belief in heaven (10). Their next step was to try to assess whether a divine conception of God drives moral objectivism or whether moral objectivism drives a divine conception of God (11). Study 2 predicted that priming participants with the concept of a punishing God would increase objectivism. Participants were distributed into 6 conditions: divine loving, divine punishing, divine neutral, neutral loving, neutral punishing, and neutral neutral (13). Then a sentence unscramble task was administered where participants were given 5 words and were asked to discard one word and create a meaningful 4 word sentence with the remaining words. Participants in each group unscrambled sentences related to the condition they were placed in (13). After this task participants took an objectivism questionnaire where they were asked to affirm or reject the following 3 statements: there is a single moral code applicable to everyone, only 1 person can be right in a disagreement about morality, and cultures can be compared by a single moral code (14). Sarkissian and Felan found that the impact on the study was mainly observed in Abrahamic theists, who, when primed with divinity concepts (of either a loving or punishing God), portrayed higher levels of agreement with objectivist statements than the neutral group (16). In study 3, Sarkissian and Felan primed theists with objectivism, believing that it would increase endorsement of a punishing God (17). Participants were randomly assigned to

prompts about objectivism or relativism which were graded on a 7 point scale (18). Following this a 14 item conception of God scale was administered asking participants to what extent they endorsed a loving versus punishing God. Finally, a religiosity scale test was administered (19). The authors found a significant effect in the moral objectivism group's conceptions of a punishing God. Participants who ascribed to Abrahamic religions had a more pronounced effect. In conclusion, being primed to think of objective morality makes people think of God as more punishing (20).

From the research we learn that for theists, conception of a divine being who's commands designate right from wrong motivates objective moral judgments. This makes sense since Abrahamic religions adhere to an objective view of morality. This idea of divine command says that morality is defined as obedience to God's commands. It forms the concept of theological voluntarism, which can shed light into how theists justify a morality commanded by God.

Let's consider divine command theory, which says that morality can be understood in terms of God's commands; God's divine nature designates what is moral. The philosopher Robert Adams developed one interpretation of divine command morality that defined it as a conception of wrongness to be that which is contrary to God's commands (Adams, 1979). In "Divine Command Meta-ethics Modified Again," Adams claims that the property he ascribes to wrongness (that which is contrary to God's commands), is a metaphysically necessary truth, drawing on Kripke and Putnam to argue that there are necessary truths that aren't analytic or a priori and that the nature of ethical wrongness is one of these truths (Adams, 1979, p. 71). Adams grounds his argument in an example from Putnam's "Meaning and Reference," where Putnam lays out how one might come to use and signify a concept without understanding its

nature. Putnam describes aliens landing on Earth carrying a clear liquid, XYZ, that looks and tastes like water and does all the things water does, however it is not H₂O. Can we still call this liquid water? Putnam imagines that if the aliens had landed hundreds of years ago, when we didn't yet know that water is H₂O, people might have called it water, even though it's actually XYZ. Putnam reveals that the meaning of concepts and the nature or property of concepts is divergent. We constantly use concepts without understanding their nature. Yet nothing that is not H₂O can be rightly called water, even if it does all the things we understand water to do. Crucially, it is a metaphysically necessary truth that water is H₂O. Adams says that the same is true of wrongness. Regular people can have conceptions of wrongness and act on these conceptions without understanding or even acknowledging the nature of wrongness (74). The only things the "competent user" knows about wrongness is that it is (1) the property of actions and (2) something to be opposed and a reason for being opposed to something (74). This dismisses the common atheist rebuttal that if God is the arbiter of morality, how can people who don't believe in God still act morally?

From here, Adams fleshes out his theory of wrongness. First he outlines certain conditions that any acceptable theory of wrongness must meet. These conditions are that any theory of wrongness would ascribe the property of wrongness to actions objectively, that the property of wrongness should be applicable to most actions that are perceived as wrong and should play a role in causing actions to be wrong, that understanding the nature of wrongness should give us more reason, not less, to oppose wrong actions, and finally, that the best theory about the nature of wrongness should satisfy our intuitions about wrongness as much as possible. Adams acknowledges that theories outside of divine command theory could fulfill these conditions, but he argues that if God exists, then the divine command theory is the best possible

theory of wrongness (74-75, 77). Adams' theory of wrongness is paraphrased as follows: (1) For any action, X, X is ethically wrong if and only if X is contrary to God's commands, (2) That X is wrong expresses opposition and negative attitudes towards X, (3) Because God is loving, God does not and will not command wrong actions for their own sake, (4) Therefore, if X is wrong, X is contrary to the commands of God, (6) if X is ethically permitted then X is permitted by the commands of God, and (7) If there is no loving God then nothing is wrong, obligatory or permitted (67). There's a lot to unpack here and it'd be interesting to study how strongly folk theists affirm each of these premises. This argument is curious because its grounded on the suppositions that God exists, that morality can only be objective, and that God is loving and would not command immoral action, all of which are strongly contested by non-theists.

Adams bases his presumption that morality can only be objective based on our supposed intuitions that morality is objective (which we know is not a universally held belief): "we normally speak of actions being right and wrong as of facts that obtain objectively, independently of whether we think they do...if possible, therefore, the property to be identified with ethical wrongness should be one that actions have or lack objectively" (74). This means that there can be no acceptable relativistic theory of wrongness. Adams argues for the acceptability of his theory because divine command is objective, because it entails most actions that we perceive as wrong, because God has endowed us with the moral faculties to classify actions as wrong, and because we see disobedience to God's commands as a reason to oppose an action (76). This is key: God endows us with our intuitions about moral objectivity and endows us with the moral faculties to recognize wrongness (77). The nature of wrongness *must* be contrary to the commands of a loving God because cruel commands from God would be contrary to our intuition about wrongness, given to us by God. Of course, if God doesn't exist then none of this

has any basis and morality must apparently have another explanation. But if God does exist, then no actions can be morally wrong without a loving God (78). This explanation for the objectivity of moral values calls to mind the axiomatic argument for God's existence, which says that: (1) if God did not exist, objective moral values would not exist (2) objective moral values do exist (3) God exists (Craig & Moreland, 2003, p. 30). In its most simplistic sense, Adams' divine command morality is kind of a reworking of this argument: (1) if God did not exist, objective moral values would not exist (2) a loving God exists (3) objective moral values rooted in our God given moral faculties exist. The validity of this argument can only be appreciated by a theist, although if God does in fact exist, the argument encompasses everyone. Both of these arguments however, portray the interconnectedness of belief in God and moral objectivism. They reveal that our intuitions about morality (that is, if they're objectivist) and our capacity to make moral judgments can be grounds for belief in God. Note that this is not grounds for the existence of God but for belief in the existence of God. However, the atheist might still reply with Plato's famous Euthyphro dilemma: is something good because it is approved by God or is something approved by God because it is good? The Christian response to this is that given the characteristics of God (omniscience), God is axiologically perfect and goodness is in his nature, of above it or beneath it (Craig & Moreland, 2003, p. 537). This popular Christian argument for the existence of God would be interesting to study experimentally. If theistic folk adhere to divine command morality, can they be prompted to conceive of a cruel God, and what kinds of moral judgments would this lead to? We already know that conceptions of a punishing God lead to more objectivist judgments (Sarkissian & Felan, 2019). I think that objectivist theists could be manipulated into showing less confidence in God's existence and in turn, less objectivist morality by being prompted to conceive of a cruel God. For example, the infamous instance in

the Bible when God asks Abraham to kill his son Isaac would remind theists of an occasion when God was arguably cruel. After being primed with this story, would theists be as committed to their belief in a loving God? Would their moral judgments of situations God disapproves but society is indifferent to remain the same? Premarital sex is seen as immoral in Abrahamic religions but has become destigmatized outside of religion, for instance. Undermining confidence in the existence of a loving God would likely lead theists to distance themselves from strictly objectivist morality. It would also be interesting to see how strongly folk theists agree that God exists *because* objective moral values exist. Studying this would provide insights into the persistence of the axiomatic argument as justification for belief in God.

For the theist, belief in objective moral values can provide grounds for belief in the existence of a loving God. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga developed the concept of reformed epistemology to argue that belief in God is properly basic and is a warranted belief for the theist to adhere to (Plantinga, 1981). To understand the basis of Plantinga's argument it might be best to describe an example first. You might have heard the story of 2 traveller's who stumble onto a solitary garden in the middle of a patch of dry land and wonder among themselves if there is a gardener. The travelers don't have any evidence to prove that there is a gardener tending to the garden, but given that they see a garden that is tended to, they have the grounds to claim that there is a gardener who tends to this garden. Plantinga's argument that belief in God is properly basic is closely analogous to this example. For a belief to be basic means that it is a belief that can be accepted without the basis of other propositions. To be properly basic a belief must be basic and also satisfy the condition under which it should be taken as basic (Craig & Moreland, 2003, 101). Plantinga takes a foundationalist approach to reject the notion that belief in God is only justified if one has evidence for it. Plantinga points out that basic beliefs are not groundless

beliefs; there is a ground for ascribing to basic beliefs (Plantinga, 1981, 46). I don't have evidence to prove that there is a table in front of me, but I have the grounds to claim that there is a table in front of me. My belief that there is a table in front of me is a properly basic belief. Like the example of my table, basic beliefs are partially grounded in sense experience. In fact, we commonly accept beliefs that are not self-evident, but this doesn't make us irrational. This reveals a mistake in the claim that we can only believe things we have evidence for, since we can rationally believe many things we don't have evidence for. Similarly, Plantinga argues that theists don't need evidence to believe in God, only the grounds to do so (44). The grounds for believing in God come from the theist's sense of the divine (*sensus divinitatis*), which can be invoked by moral situations (46). There are properly basic experiences that are self-evident to the person experiencing them, these experiences are grounds for belief in God. The sense that "God disapproves of what I've done" or that "God forgives me;" these are properly basic experiences (46). If God exists, he has instilled in us the faculties to produce belief in him. As it pertains to moral questions, our moral faculties invoke our sense of the divine and provide basis for belief in God. Remember, this is not an argument for the existence of God, only an argument for the proper basicity of belief in God.

The concept of divine command morality and the insights of reformed epistemology help contextualize how theistic folk's belief in God is grounded in their intuitions toward objective morality. Adams and Plantinga argue that God has instilled in us the capacity for morality and warranted belief in him through our intuitions about morality. Further research on divine command morality and folk moral objectivism could continue Sarkissian and Felan's work by focusing on the strength of theist's moral objectivism when primed for different conceptions or characteristics of God.

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