

God and Moral Law

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1.

The problem that I want to talk about today is that of the relationship between God and moral law. I am not going to begin with an account of what I mean by ‘God’ or ‘moral law’; though I will make explicit some of that understanding in the development of the argument, and I would be happy to be challenged to be more explicit still during the discussion. But I think that we share enough of an understanding of God and moral law in order to get our treatment of the problem up and running.

There are many theoretical problems about the relationship between God and morality. Some of these problems center on the relationship between belief in God and our commitment to acting well, morally speaking, and with respect to these we can ask a variety of questions, some of them more on the empirical side of things, some more on the conceptual side. On the empirical side, we could, given some plausible operational definition of “believes in God,” try to uncover evidence that such belief makes a difference — for better or for worse — with respect to some sphere of conduct.¹ On the more conceptual side, we could ask whether there are features of what we might call ‘fully moral motivation’ that cannot be realized, or cannot be made intelligible, without the agent’s believing in God, or a God of a specific sort.² So this set of questions is

¹ For a discussion of the evidence that theistic belief and practice correlates positively with some sorts of admirable behavior and negatively with other sorts of admirable behavior, see Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God?* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 29-52.

² See, for example, Peter Geach, “The Moral Law and the Law of God,” in *God and the Soul* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), where Geach argues for the unintelligibility of commitment to moral absolutes without belief in divine providence; or see Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, 1996), V 122-134, on the postulate of practical reason that there is a God to make intelligible (stable) commitment to morality in the face of the demands of happiness. For further discussion of Kant’s view, see John Hare, “Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism,” in *God and the Ethics of Belief*, ed. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 202–218.

concerned with the role of religious belief in supporting or undercutting good moral agency.

Another set of problems concern the epistemology of morality. The epistemology of morality deals with how we can come to know what is morally right and wrong. Again, there are several possibilities. We might ask whether having some access to properly religious sources — Scripture, perhaps, or inspired tradition — is indispensable to having moral knowledge, or moral knowledge of the most complete or valuable sort. This is, again, to ask about how religious belief makes a difference. But one could pose questions about God and moral epistemology that have nothing to do with distinctively religious sources of evidence. One might note that it seems mighty peculiar that we are able to grasp the moral properties of actions, and might wonder whether the best explanation for our having these capacities is a theistic story — one that appeals to our having been designed a certain way, so that in the environments standard for human beings they will come to grasp at least basic moral truths in at least a basic way.³

I hope that I did not make these inquiries sound too exciting because that's the last you'll hear of them from me. I bring them up only to distinguish these questions about moral belief and moral motivation from a more fundamental question. Taking for granted the truth of theism, how are we best to explain the very holding of these moral norms — and, in particular, what role does God play in that explanation?

2.

How even to approach the question? Here is one road, the road more traveled. We might begin by examining the characteristics of moral laws and to ask whether there is good reason to think that the best explanation of there being things that have those characteristics is that facts about God account for them. So one might say (I am not endorsing these arguments) moral laws are authoritative norms; authoritative norms

³ See Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 356-366.

express someone's point of view;⁴ but the only being whose point of view is plausibly expressed by a moral law is God's. Or: moral laws are fundamentally concerned with the well-being of people;⁵ given the various sorts of value in the world, the best way to explain why moral law is all about well-being is by its originating from a being who has an abiding love for all people; and the best candidate for that role is God. You see the strategy: it is inference to the best explanation. You have something that needs explaining — what philosophers call the *explanandum* — and you are looking for an explainer for it — what philosophers call the *explanans*. If the explanandum is moral law's having certain features, the hypothesis is that the best explanans for that explanandum is God's being a certain way, or doing a certain thing.

There is much of value to traveling this road. For one thing, the issues themselves are fascinating, and want resolution. For another, any such arguments are useful not just in moral philosophy but in apologetics — for when we note that a certain explanation is superior to others for a given phenomenon, that can count as evidence in favor of the explanans. So traveling this road may allow us to accumulate further reason to believe that there is such a being as God.

But there is another road, the road somewhat less traveled. Let me offer an analogy. Suppose that you leave a bowl of water in a locked room for a week. When you return, the bowl looks undisturbed, but now has no water in it. We expect that there is an explanation for this change. One set of considerations to which we will appeal in deciding on the proper explanation arises from the facts to be explained: we can ask, abstractly, what possible causes there might be that would be sufficient to do the job, to transform the bowl from filled to empty. We might think that, abstractly considered, given the position of the bowl, it is equally likely that the water simply evaporated and that the water was drunk by some animal. If our explanation here is simply explanandum-driven, assessed in terms of the sufficiency for explaining the phenomenon

⁴ See Joseph Raz, "Authority, Law, and Morality," in *Ethics in the Public Domain* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 194-221, p. 202.

⁵ See, for example, Philippa Foot, "Moral Arguments," *Mind* 67 (1958), pp. 502-513, pp. 510-512; also Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, 1994), p. 40

to be explained, we might be indifferent between the thirsty cat explanation and the evaporation explanation. But when we focus on the fact that *there is a cat still alive in the room*, we will settle on the cat as the explanation for the water's disappearance: for had the cat not drunk the water, there would not still be a living cat in the room; we'd have an ex-cat. Cats are *explainers*: cats' characteristic activities are to explain depletions of oxygen molecules and increases in carbon dioxide molecules, the addition of fur to a sofa-environment, the exchange of relatively pure water in one location with cat piss in another, and so forth. If something is not such as to characteristically explain these things, then it is not a cat. To be more explicit: a being that does not actually do enough such explaining, even if it was once a cat, will cease to be cat — it will become a dead cat. But what we have here in this locked room is a *live* cat; and since live cats *have to* explain the exchange of relatively pure water in one location with cat piss in another, we know what the best explanation for the emptying of the bowl is: the cat drank it. The fixing on this explanation is *explanans*-driven: there is a feature of the situation that *must explain*, and so we incorporate it into our explanation.

The feline explanation of the water's disappearance may fail to be superior to the evaporation explanation on explanandum-driven grounds alone; its superiority is clear only once we take both explanandum- and explanans-driven considerations into account. There was something that called for explanation, and both *it evaporated due to the dry, warm, moving air* and *it was drunk by the cat* may be sufficient to explain the change of the bowl from full to empty. But there was a further set of considerations, *explanans*-driven considerations, concerning the nature and continuing existence of the cat, which makes the feline explanation superior. To be a cat is to be a being that explains certain phenomena; and so the continuing existence of a cat can make a cat-involved explanation superior to a non-cat-involved explanation.

My point in moving to a discussion of cats and their tendency to drink-if-existing is to note a road slightly less traveled in thinking through the problem of the relationship between God and moral law. This way of approaching the problem does not begin with certain features of the moral law and asking whether they might be sufficiently accounted

for by nontheistic rather than theistic explanations. It begins, rather, with God. God is like the cat in one way: God is an explainer. But, rather obviously, God is not like the cat. For to be a cat is to be the explainer of a feline-specific range of phenomena, in a feline-specific way; but God is the first cause, the ultimate explainer of what is the case — to be God is to enter into the explanation of *everything* that is explanation-eligible. (As Aquinas puts it, “Anything that exists in any way must necessarily have its origin from God.”⁶)

So my suggestion is that we should think about how to evaluate conceptions of God’s role with respect to the moral law in a way that incorporates this explanans-centered perspective — given the sort of being that God is, what role *must* God have in the explanation of moral law?

3.

My first point was about method; let’s now turn to substance. What views might one take on the relationship between God and moral law, and how do they fare when we try to keep in mind both explanandum- and explanans-centered considerations? Let’s consider two views prominent within theistic thought, *natural law theory* and *theological voluntarism*.

A *natural law theory* is a theory that aims to mark out some courses of action as good in some way and others as bad in some way, some as ultimately worth doing and others as ruled out. But it is not just that a natural law theory aims to be a neat *classifier* of good and bad, right and wrong; it aims to *explain* the goodness and badness of actions, showing why we have adequate reason to perform some actions and why others are simply unreasonable to perform.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, ch. 68.

The explanatory task can be usefully divided into two stages. In one stage of explanation, that which is most proximate to the particular facts about rightness and wrongness of conduct to be explained, the natural law theorist argues from truths about what things are good for persons and truths about how it is appropriate to respond to such goods to conclusions about how it is, or can be, right to act. On Aquinas's view, for example, it is true by nature, and it can be easily known, that things like life, procreation, knowledge, society, and reasonableness in conduct are good for human beings, and worthy of pursuit.⁷ So there is always some sense to acting for the sake of staying alive, or having / rearing children, or getting along with others, or finding out about the world, or making good choices. But even actions that make sense in some way can be wrong to perform. The problem with lying is not that it does not make sense — we all know that there is a point to telling the lies we tell, and often this point is the realization of a genuine human good — but that the pursuit of the good is inordinate. On the natural law view, there are some ways of pursuing the good that are flawed; and to be a wrong action is just to be an action that is flawed in this way. A right action, by contrast, is just one that is in no way flawed.⁸

What is apparent from this sketch is that in the immediate explanation of the wrongness of certain sorts of action, it is the goods for persons that call the shots. The wrongness of an act results from a human action's being an inappropriate response to the goods on which that act bears; those goods make it the case that one must, or must not, respond to them in particular ways.⁹

I said that there are two stages in a natural law explanation of moral norms. The natural law view begins with an account of how goods and the features of human action together fix the moral status of types of actions. But we can also raise questions about why the goods that play this fixing role are goods. A standard answer — some commentators have ascribed it to Aquinas himself, with no small justification — is straightforwardly

⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae 94, 2; 94, 3.

⁸*Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, 18, 1.

⁹For one recent endorsement of Aquinas's account of the goodness of action, see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 72-77.

Aristotelian: that each being's good is fixed by the kind of thing that it is. To be human is to be such that certain things are goods for him or her.¹⁰ These are, to put it plainly, natural facts. A comparison: that certain states of affairs' obtaining (all the parts are in place, and are able to function properly, and so forth) make a duck nondefective and that certain states of affairs' obtaining (swimming in clean ponds, hunting for fish where there is plenty to eat, making new ducks, and so forth) make for a nondefective duck life are matters of natural fact, and what is good for a duck is the maintenance of duckself in good duckly integrity and the performance of the activities, and the participation in the events, of good duckly life. On this standard Aristotelian view there is, and I am not exaggerating, no interesting structural difference between the basic story about the good for ducks and that of the good for humans, however great the substantive differences between goods for ducks and the goods for humans may be.¹¹ That the obtaining of certain states of affairs (all its parts are in place, and are able to function properly, and so forth) make for a nondefective human and that certain states of affairs (eating enough of the right things to stay healthy, having relationships with other humans, getting to know about the world and about how to move around in it, and so forth) make for nondefective human life are matters of natural fact. What is good for a human is the maintaining of itself in good condition as a human and of carrying out the activities and participating in the events of good human life.

The natural law theorist thus explains the moral law and its features ultimately by appealing to facts about human nature and its defective and nondefective realization. Here, though, is the rub. At no point in my account of the natural law view on moral

¹⁰On Aquinas's view, an agent's happiness is that agent's perfection, where for a thing to be perfected is for its substance or its life (its existence and activity) to be perfected (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 37, [2] and *Summa Theologiae* Ia 48, 5); and the specific character of a thing's perfection is fixed by its form (*Summa Theologiae* Ia 5,5). One might object immediately that this account of the nature of well-being is irritatingly disjunctive — to be an aspect of a thing's well-being is to be something that *either* makes that thing good *or* something that makes that thing's existence/activity good. But this appearance of irritating disjunction can be dispelled. The idea is that the animal's good condition is the completion or fulfillment of the animal's nature, and the animal's good existence is the completion or fulfillment of the animal's good condition. This is what Aquinas refers to as the levels of actuality of a thing — the thing's being actual, or activated; the thing's form is for the sake of its good condition, and its good condition is for the sake of its good existence. So what unifies the nature of well-being is that of completion, or perfection, of a thing's nature.

¹¹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Open Court, 1999), pp.

norms did I mention God. The explanation of moral norms proceeds from the nature of the good and the features of human action to the intrinsic validity of certain moral norms. And what we should be asking, I think, is whether this is an acceptable result. Our explanans-centered considerations dictate that God enter into the explanation of moral law at some point. Yet the natural law view seems to suppose that moral norms can be satisfactorily explained in an entirely godless way.

The objections will come immediately. One might say that my failure to mention God in the argument shows only that I have not adequately captured the standard natural law explanation of moral norms. After all, it is called a ‘natural law’ theory, not a ‘natural norm’ theory. Aquinas thought that the truths of morality that necessarily follow upon truths about our human kind are themselves satisfying of the criteria for being genuine law, and can satisfy those criteria only because they are ultimately authored by God, who has care of the entire universe.¹² But, while true, this does not show that there has been any mistake in my account of the standard natural law explanation of moral norms. It would show that there is a mistake in my account only if the fundamental explanation of the binding power of moral norms appealed to their being laid down as law by God. But this is not Aquinas’s account. On Aquinas’s account, the binding power of moral norms — their obligatoriness — is to be understood in reference not to divine commands but by reference to the human good promotion, protection, and respect for which is dictated by those norms.¹³ Its status *as law* requires us to appeal to God, but its status as *binding precepts* requires, on Aquinas’s view, no such appeal. Or, at least, we have not seen any reason why it should.

Another way to answer the question ‘Where is God in the natural law view?’ is to say that my account of the natural law explanation is correct, but that I have given only natural law theory’s *proximate* account of the moral law. I have not, one might object,

¹²*Summa Theologiae* IaIIae 91, 1-2.

¹³Obligation is, for Aquinas, a kind of necessity (ST IaIIae 44, 1, obj. 2, not denied). He identifies two kinds of necessity to consider in regard to human actions: one that results from coercion, which is contrary to the will; and another that results “from the necessity of an end, namely, when one cannot reach the end of virtue without doing a certain thing” (ST IaIIae 58, 3, ad 2). Aquinas identifies obligation with the necessity of the latter kind: that one is obligated to adhere to a certain precept means that the following of that precept is required for one to attain the good of the agent, “the end of virtue.”

given the *complete* account. On the complete account, God must be mentioned, for God is ‘one step removed.’ For example: John Finnis would allow that the natural law account offered thus far is fundamentally correct, but we need to take a step back to see that there is a *further* explanation available for the normative order. Finnis writes that we should appeal to God as part of the explanation of moral law in a number of ways: God is

(i) that which explains the existence of the questioning subject [that is, one who raises questions of normative import]; (ii) that which explains the existing of good states of affairs, and the opportunity of making them exist; (iii) that which explains our ability to recognize goods, to grasp values, and their equivalent practical principles; and (iv) that which explains our ability to respond to the attractiveness of those goods, to the rational appeal of the principles.¹⁴

Further explanation can be offered for the existence of the natural law on the basis of God’s creative causality being responsible for there being agents with the capacity to know the good, be moved by it, and pursue it effectively.

But the theistic explanation for the natural law that Finnis offers does not explain the natural law as such, but rather why human beings are capable of acting on it. It does not explain why (e.g.) knowledge is good for us, and necessitates our acting in certain ways in light of it, so much as to explain what makes our grasp of this goodness, and our pursuit of it, possible. Finnis might balk here, noting that on his view the existence of beings that can be bound by the natural law is entirely contingent on God’s creative activity: what more could one want? But to explain the existence of beings to whom the natural law applies is not to explain the natural law. An analogy: suppose that, while I am childless, wrongheadedly benevolent lawmakers pass a law that hold that any children of Mark Murphy will, upon the age of majority, receive full financial support for the rest

¹⁴John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 404. I have omitted the first item from this list (which does not appeal specifically to God’s capacity to explain states of affairs concerned more immediately with the natural law), and renumbered. Finnis’s view has undergone some development since *Natural Law and Natural Rights*; for an account, see Mark C. Murphy, “Finnis on Nature, Reason, God,” *Legal Theory* 13 (2007), pp. 187–209.

of their days. I do not explain the existence of this law, not one little bit, by becoming the parent of children to whom this law applies. Without their existence, the law would be just as valid; it would simply not be what one might call ‘operative’ — it is not having any normative effect on legal actors. Similarly, to make God’s role in natural law simply that of bringing into existence beings to whom that law applies would not do anything, not one little bit, toward giving God a role in explaining the validity of the moral law that binds us; it would explain only why the moral law is operative, having normative effects on moral agents.

Finnis’s theistic explanation of moral norms is no explanation at all. We have seen no reason to suppose that there is a natural law account of morality that makes God central to the explanation. Perhaps we have a third option, suggested by the failure of the second: simply to deny that an account of moral norms that does not appeal to God is thereby deficient or defective from a theistic standpoint. Perhaps, one might say, these moral norms are just necessary truths, and necessary truths, being the sorts of things that could not be otherwise, do not need any explanation, theistic or not.

The first thing to say here is that it is just false that necessity means no explanation is possible or called for. There is an important distinction between things that have their necessity *through themselves* and those that have their necessity *through others*. For example: the Islamic philosopher Avicenna thought, wrongly but plausibly, that God necessarily creates. On this view, *there is a created world* is a necessary truth. But it is obviously an *explainable* truth, indeed, one that calls out for explanation. Avicenna provides the explanation by starting from what has its necessity through itself — that is, God.¹⁵

The second thing to say here is that we should not forget our methodological starting-point, the explanans-centered criteria. God’s status as the first cause, the first explainer, of all that is militates in favor of an intimate role for God in explaining truths of the created world, whether necessary or contingent. The inadequacy of deism as an account

¹⁵Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, first and sixth treatises

of God's relationship to the natural order has as its principled rationale that God's status as first cause is not satisfied by God's performing an act of creation that bears only upon the first temporal slice of the universe — to be first cause, God's sovereignty must be extensive and ongoing. But there is no reason to suppose that the extent of God's explanatory involvement in the moral order is any less, or has any reason to be thought to be more limited, than God's explanatory involvement in the natural order. If there is a God, then God is first cause, source of all that exists distinct from God; God will be, so to speak, that in which we live and move and have our being.¹⁶ But if there is a God, then God is also the first good; nothing is good, so to speak, but God alone.¹⁷

Here is where we may introduce the second view that continues to have some prominence within theistic ethics: theological voluntarism. Theological voluntarists explain moral requirements in terms of God's will, though they disagree among themselves with respect to how to characterize the act of will that is essential to the explaining of the moral requirement. Some appeal to divine intentions, others to desires, others to more generic divine willings; and some take it that what is essential is the willing itself and others some speech-act — say, commanding — with respect to which some acts of will are essential elements. Again, theological voluntarists differ among themselves on the relation between the divine willing and the moral requirement — whether it is constitutive, say, or causal. But what they agree on is that the divine will explains moral requirements in a way that is both *immediate* and *complete*. (As Philip Quinn summarized the view, the explanatory relationship between God's will and moral facts is total, exclusive, active, immediate, and necessary.¹⁸) The relevant act of divine will immediately brings about the moral requirement; it is not that the divine will brings about some third element that in turn explains the requirement's holding. The relevant act of divine will alone brings about the moral requirement: it does not cooperate with anything else in bringing into existence the requirement; there is no third thing that also has an immediate role in its explanation.

¹⁶ Acts 17:28.

¹⁷ Luke 18:19.

¹⁸ Philip Quinn, "Divine Command Theory," in Hugh LaFollette, ed. *Guide to Ethical Theory* (Blackwell, 1999), pp. 54-55.

Now, whatever else we say about theological voluntarism, we should first notice its cardinal virtue from an explanans-centered standpoint. It is *undeniably theocentric*. The story about moral norms must include reference to God. God is not pushed to the side, or given some background role. God is in the *center* of things. And this is where God must be, given God's character as ultimate explainer, and this stands in stark contrast to the position taken by the natural law view.

The central objections to this view are not explanans-centered but explanandum-centered. Here I want to press two concerns.

The first is the normative impotence of natural facts, at least in relation to human agents. (More on this qualification below.) Roughly put, a moral law expresses a relationship of moral necessitation between some set of natural facts and the performance of an action. That this is an action that one promised to perform morally necessitates one's performing that action; or, more colloquially, because one promises to perform, one must perform. But notice that on the theological voluntarist view, these natural facts don't do the necessitating — or, at least, they don't do it in any straightforward way. What does the necessitating is God's will, and God's will alone. This follows from the voluntarists' view that God's will is the immediate and complete active explanation of the action's being required. Perhaps that does not sting when we think about the natural facts involved in promising. But if we turn our attention to, say, a small child, and the good of the child's life, and the way that this being an innocent child's life seems to necessitate my refraining from harming the child, the sting intensifies. The voluntarist view closes off the good of the child's life from being the *wrongmaking* feature of the harming, relegating it simply to the *occasion* of wrongdoing.

The second is a dilemma regarding the necessity or contingency of moral law. A standard criticism of theological voluntarism is that because the moral law issues from God's will, and God's will is free, the moral law must be contingent; but it seems that we do not want to say that the moral law is contingent in that way. That this small child is

innocent necessarily makes it case that I mustn't harm the child. A now standard response to this explanandum-centered challenge to the voluntarist view is that God necessarily fixes the moral law, or at least those aspects of the moral law the necessity of which we are confident of, in the way that God does. But this move enmeshes the voluntarist in paradox. For it looks all the world like these human interests have a normative power with respect to God that they are, on the voluntarist view, not supposed to have with respect to created moral agents. For, on this view, necessarily, the character of the human goods and the perfection of God's agency entails divine action of a certain kind. But, on the voluntarist view, it is not true that (abstracting from divine action), any created good and any perfection of created moral agency entails created moral agents' acting certain ways. The notion that while created nature morally necessitates God's action it does not morally necessitate human action is exceedingly unfitting.

My first point in this lecture was a methodological point: in thinking through God's role in the explanation of moral law, we should not fail to keep in mind explanans-centered considerations. My second point is substantive rather than methodological: it seems that, given theism, we have difficulties with both of the theories prominent within theistic thought. This natural law view founders for explanans-centered reasons — God becomes irrelevant to the explanation of moral law. The theological voluntarist view founders for explanandum-centered reasons: it fails to capture properly the features of the moral law we want captured, that concerning its necessity and content, and this due to the fact that it makes the divine explanation *too complete*, crowding out the sorts of natural facts that the natural law view is built around.

4.

I have focused on some bad news: that theists should be dissatisfied with what is on offer for theistic explanations of moral law. Let me now turn to the good news, the third and final point: *that this problem has been thought through before* — or, at least, that a problem so similar to it has been thought through that we can turn to its discussion for guidance. (When I say that it has been thought through, I do not mean that resolution has

been achieved; but we do have a much clearer picture of what the options are, and how they might be developed, than we have here in the case of moral law.)

This similar problem is that of the relationship between God and the *laws of nature* — that is, those laws express regularities and perhaps even governing relationships in the *natural* order. So let me describe a couple of theories of God's relationship to the laws of nature, and let's see if they don't have a familiar ring.

Here is one view on the relationship between God and the holding of the laws of nature, a view that has been called 'mere conservationism.' On the mere conservationist view, God's explaining events in the natural order is (typically¹⁹) neither immediate nor total, for there are natural agents that have their own proper power to bring about effects in the natural order. God's role is that of bringing into and conserving in existence those natural agents; given the kind to which those natural agents belong, it follows that they will bring about certain determinate effects under certain determinate conditions, for it belongs to the kind to exercise a determinate range of causal powers. In this sense God is the first cause of every event in the natural order: God is the mediate cause of every effect. It is this complete dependence on God by creatures for their existence and agency that is supposed to meet the theist's need for an account of God's relationship to nature that preserves God's sovereignty over it.

But it does not sound to me at all like God explains the laws of nature on this view. If God's role with respect to the laws of nature is simply that of bringing into and conserving in existence beings with the relevant natures, then what we have explained is not the laws of nature but why these laws of nature are operative, or effective. And that is a very different explanandum.

¹⁹Except, of course, for miraculous events.

Here is a rival view of God’s relationship to the natural order: *occasionalism*. According to this view, every event in the natural order²⁰ has God as its immediate and total active cause: *immediate*, because there are no natural agents as intermediaries between God’s will and the occurrence of the event; and *total active*, because there are no natural agents that make any active causal contribution to the event’s occurrence. While some entities in the natural order might appear to exercise causal agency (the fire appears to actively cause cotton to burn), this is mere appearance. There is no true causal efficacy in nature; apparent causal efficacy is but ‘occasional’ causation, labelled as such because the presence of such ‘causes’ is merely the *occasion* for God’s actively causing a state of affairs to obtain (the presence of the fire near cotton is an occasion for God’s willing the cotton to burn). Regularities in nature that are commonly attributed to intercreature efficient causation are really nothing but manifestations of God’s “abiding intention to act in certain fixed ways.”²¹

I hope that these views sound familiar. Mere conservationist accounts of God’s relationship to the natural order are, making the relevant substitutions, the standard natural law account of God’s relationship to the moral order. And occasionalist accounts of God’s relationship to the natural order are, making the relevant substitutions, theological voluntarist accounts of God’s relationship to the moral order. Their strengths and weaknesses are, unsurprisingly, similar as well. Mere conservationism shares with natural law theory the strength of according a central explanatory role to creaturely natures and the weakness of shutting God out of any significant role in explaining the laws in which those creatures are implicated. Occasionalism shares with theological

²⁰Except, perhaps, the free actions of rational beings — occasionalists have strong reason to want to exempt rational beings from the occasionalist thesis, for otherwise God is the agent of sinful action — though I confess that I can’t see a principled occasionalist rationale for making this sort of exception. That is different from seeing the principled occasionalist rationale for *wanting* to make this sort of exception.

²¹Alfred Freddoso, “Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case against Secondary Causation in Nature,” in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 74-118, p. 103. (I am heavily indebted to Freddoso’s work on rival views of God’s activity in nature. I have also benefited very much from the careful dissertation work of Louis Mancha, *Concurrentism: A Philosophical Explanation* (Purdue University, 2003).) As John Foster emphasizes in *The Divine Lawmaker* (Oxford University Press, 2004), it is important that, if God’s causal contribution is to support the view that it is a law that fire burns cotton, it must be that God intends this *as a regularity*: it must not simply be true that, for each instance of cotton’s being placed in fire, God wills that the cotton burn; it must be that God wills that, if the cotton is placed in the fire, then the cotton burns. Otherwise the bearing of the divine willing on the case will not validate the status of *fire burns cotton* as a law of nature as opposed to a mere regularity.

voluntarism the strength of being unquestionably theocentric and the weakness of denying any power, causal or moral, to creaturely natures.

But here is one way in which the discussion of the relationship between God and the laws of nature is much further advanced than the discussion of the relationship between God and the moral law. For we have in the discussion of the relationship between God and the laws of nature a well-worked-out third view that claims to be able to capture the immediate presence of divine action in every causal transaction that occurs in nature but without precluding a genuine, ineliminable role for creaturely natures in those transactions. The occasionalist says that God's role in necessitating events in the natural order is *immediate* and *complete*. The mere conservationist says that God's role is *incomplete* because *mediated*, with the result that the transactions between creatures are entirely between those creatures; what happens between the fire and the cotton is between the fire and cotton, and divine action is not implicated in that transaction. So here are the guiding ideas. First, that the explanans-centered considerations do not require completeness of divine explanation, only immediacy; for God to be involved in *every* causal transaction in the natural order does not require God's being *solely responsible* for every such transaction. And, second, happenings in the natural order can result *immediately* from *both* divine and creaturely contributions. So there is a hope to meet the objection to mere conservationism that it makes God explanatorily superfluous and the objection to occasionalism that it makes creaturely natures explanatorily superfluous.

The view is called *concurrentism*, and it is disputed among concurrentists how, in formulating the position, to best characterize the respective contributions of God and creatures. I don't confess to understanding well the various benefits and burdens of taking on one or another of these formulations. (I am, after all, but a poor moral philosopher, gleaning the remainders from the exalted fields of the metaphysicians.) Put broadly, with regard to each natural effect, God's contribution to the bringing about of that effect is 'general' or 'universal' while the creature's contribution is 'specific' or 'particular.' To each effect (and here I'm taking a stand that would be rejected by some concurrentists) God contributes general, undifferentiated power, while the creaturely

agent contributes the specific way that this power will affect other objects. As Aquinas puts it, creaturely causes are “like particularizers and determinants of the primary agent’s [that is, God’s] action.”²²

Consider the following analogy. Think of an overhead projector, on whose surface is placed a clear plastic sheet on which a variety of colored shapes have been drawn. When the overhead projector is turned on, there will appear on the wall a number of images: a red triangle, a blue square, a green octagon, etc. We might refer to both the overhead and the ink shapes in even the most immediate explanation of the presence of the images on the wall: the overhead projector’s contribution is to produce the light that beamed the images, and the ink shapes determined (along with the nature of the wall) the particular images that would appear on the wall. This case seems to be a close analogy to the concurrentist view of how God and creatures cooperate in causation within the natural order that I have described. Just as the overhead is a generic cause in virtue of its producing an undifferentiated beam of light, God is the general cause of all events in the natural order; and just as the particular ink shapes on the transparency determine the particular effects that would result, the natures of individual creatures determine what particular effects will be produced by them.²³

So how, then, does concurrentism give an account of the laws of nature, and God’s role with respect to them? Well, look: the specific effects that creatures can cause *is* determined by the nature of those creatures. It is just false to say that the creatures make no real difference to the effects that are brought about, just as would be just false to say that the color and shape of the ink figures on the transparency sheet make no real difference to what is projected on the screen. But if we want to say that *fire burns cotton* is a law of nature, we should be careful about we formulate this view, and make some distinctions with respect to it. It is a law of nature in that given God’s ordinary concurrence, God’s ordinary contribution to the natural order, fire burns the cotton. We could call these ‘ordinary worlds’: in ordinary worlds, *being placed in fire and being*

²²Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 66, [6].

²³Free agents differ from other natural agents in that their natures do not specify a determinate set of effects.

cotton necessitates being burned. But because God's contribution to this sort of causation is free, God might choose to withhold God's contribution in extraordinary worlds, and in those worlds flame might fail to burn the cotton — much less Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

I have described this debate about God's relationship to the natural order in a way that obviously brings out my attraction to the concurrentist view. Take it for no more than it is worth. My attraction to it is for what the concurrentist view promises — an account of the natural order in which no real transaction is just between creatures, for God is always present and active in each transaction, but yet the creatures are not idle, for they genuinely make a difference to how those transactions go. It is not an attraction to it based on a reliable confidence that the details of how concurrence is to be characterized have been or will be delivered. That debate is still going on.

But of course my primary concern here is not with the natural order but the moral order, and the question there is: can we describe an analog of the concurrentist view for ethics, on which there is neither the distancing of God present in standard natural law theory nor the stripping of creaturely difference-making present in theological voluntarism?

Is there, then, a normative analog to concurrentism? On the concurrentist view, God concurs with creatures with respect to their efficient causality, where God contributes to creaturely causation in a general way and the creature in a specific way. If one were to offer a normative concurrentism, one would not emphasize God as first, and general, *efficient* cause, but rather as first, and general, *final* cause — as the Good, what is ultimately and finally worth pursuing and having. It is not unnatural to think of particular goods as distinct, partial, diverse exemplifications of goodness, different guises under which the good can appear. But if nothing is good but God alone, if God is alone good without qualification, we can see all of the distinct and incommensurable goods that demand a response as participations in the divine goodness; indeed, they demand a response — they morally necessitate our action — just because they are participations in the divine goodness. What makes them distinct is the particular nature of that good. Just

as on concurrentism all natural necessitation is the push of divine power specified by the nature of the creaturely causal agent, on moral concurrentism all moral necessity is the pull of divine goodness specified by the nature of creatures involved. Above we saw that on Aquinas's concurrentism, the natural order involves both God as universal efficient cause and creatures as "particularizers and determinants";²⁴ what necessitates an effect in the natural order is this cooperation between God as general efficient cause and the particularities of the creaturely nature. Aquinas also writes that all creatures have God as their end, but that the manner in which they enjoy that good is diversified by their diverse natures;²⁵ what necessitates action in the moral order is this cooperation between God as general final cause and the particularities of the creaturely nature.

So natural law theory is correct to claim that the goods that fulfill human persons specify the moral requirements that bind us. That your good includes life explains why I must not kill or assault you; that it includes knowledge explains why I must not lie to you; and so forth. But that your good normatively necessitates a certain response from me does not mean that this normative transaction is entirely between us. For your good simply is a participation in the divine goodness, and those particular sorts of participation in the divine goodness that require from me responses of promotion and respect are fixed by the kind of being that you are. And theological voluntarism is correct that no normative necessitation occurs without divine involvement. But that divine involvement need not be an act of divine will, but rather the participation in the divine goodness in which all human goodness consists.

I have played up the analogies between concurrentism as regards the natural order and concurrentism as regards the moral order, but let me close with an important disanalogy, one that I think bolsters the case for moral concurrentism rather than undermines it. Concurrence in the natural order is a matter of the cooperation of the divine will in creaturely efficient causation, and exercises of the divine will are free, and with respect to the natural order, contingent. Thus we have to be very careful in characterizing the laws

²⁴*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 66, [6].

²⁵*Summa Theologiae* IaIIae 1, 8.

of nature, for they express necessitation relationships (fire burns cotton) only given God's concurrence, and God may freely withhold God's concurrence so that the natural effect does not occur. By contrast, moral concurrentism is not about *efficient* causation, but *final* causation. And this is *not* a matter about which God is free: God is Goodness, God has no choice about whether God is the ultimate end of all things. If (e.g.) *being human* morally necessitates respect, then on the moral concurrentist view the goodness of God and the humanity of a substance cooperate in necessitating respect for humans. But the goodness of God is as necessary as can be, and if humanity is a particularization of God's perfectly complete, general goodness, then humanity morally necessitates respect, and it does so necessarily, whether the world is as ordinary or as extraordinary as can be.