God And The Moral Order: Replies To Objections

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Peter Byrne has offered three important objections to the main argument in my “God and the Moral Order.” In this essay I provide brief replies. The central claims of “God and the Moral Order” may be boiled down to: the Reasons Thesis (“The strongest reasons always favor doing what is morally required”) and the Conditional Thesis (“If there is no God and no life after death, then the Reasons Thesis is false”). Byrne’s objections are: (1) Non-theists can readily accept the Conditional Thesis because the cases used to support it are rare and rather extreme. (2) The cases used to support the Conditional Thesis in fact fail. (3) My argument falsely presupposes that agents can weigh prudential and moral reasons from some neutral standpoint.

The case of Ms. Poore is used to support the Conditional Thesis. Ms. Poore faces a choice between stealing a large sum of money and living in unceasing poverty. It is built into the case that stealing will not greatly harm the victim (who is well off) and that Ms. Poore has excellent reasons to suppose she won’t get caught.

Objection 1: Non-theists can readily accept the Conditional Thesis because the cases used to support it are rare and rather extreme. They are cases in which the agent is (a) unlikely to be caught and (b) does relatively little harm. Such exceptions to the Reasons Thesis would not undermine morality.

First, I agree that the non-theist has the resources to argue that, in most cases, the strongest reasons favor doing one’s duty. But, second, if it should turn out that a significant range of moral duties are not backed by the strongest reasons, I don’t think that’s something to take lightly. If Ms. Poore has overriding reason to steal, then many people arguably do at some point in their lives; roughly speaking, they do if they are poor, they can steal from someone who won’t be greatly harmed thereby, and they probably won’t get caught. More generally, the question is raised whether
one has overriding reason to do some wrong act if one has much to gain, one probably won’t get caught, and the resulting harm is not great. Surely that’s something to be concerned about. One needn’t claim that “the sky will fall in” in order to offer a significant moral argument for theism. Third, if some moral duties are backed by the strongest reasons and some are not, it seems to me that the situation inevitably invites a revision of morality, with those acts not backed by the strongest reasons apt to be reclassified as not morally required. This again seems to me not something a morally serious person should take lightly. Nor can it be taken lightly by those non-theists (many of them philosophers) who claim that their metaphysical position supports morality as well as theism does.

Objection 2: The cases used to support the Conditional Thesis in fact fail. For example, if Ms. Poore steals, she is acting in a morally permissible manner, even though she violates a customary moral rule. Her case is similar to cases used in studies of moral development, e.g., Mr. X needs medicines to save a gravely ill dependent, has no money to buy the medicines, and so can obtain them only by stealing from a local pharmacy.

First, I agree that there are exceptions to “Stealing is wrong.” My argument is not meant to depend on moral rigorism, which I regard as untenable. But second, I tried to describe the Ms. Poore case so that she had strong reasons to steal but not a sufficient moral justification. Of course, as with any detailed moral case, there is apt to be some disagreement about the impact of adding or deleting certain factors. One way to handle this complication is to make a distinction between the basic outlines of the case and various ways it might be elaborated. The basic outlines are as follows: Ms. Poore faces a choice between a life of unceasing poverty and stealing a large sum of money. The level of poverty is highly restrictive but not extreme, e.g., she is not starving or homeless. In all likelihood, she can steal the money without getting caught. Stealing the money will not result in great harm, e.g., it will not reduce the victim to poverty.

Given these basic outlines, does Ms. Poore have overriding reason to steal assuming that there is no God and no life after death? I am inclined to think so. For those not so inclined, the case may be elaborated in various ways. (A) Build into the case that the stolen money will open up educational opportunities for Ms. Poore and hence allow her to move from very uninteresting employment to very interesting employment. One’s quality of life is greatly affected by the level of interest one has in one’s work. So, this addition is highly significant. It does not make stealing morally permissible, but, in my view, it plausibly gives Ms. Poore overriding reason to steal—if there is no God and no life after death. (B) If one is not convinced that elaboration (A) gives Ms. Poore enough reason to steal, build into the case additional problems Ms. Poore faces, all of which can be solved if she steals the money, e.g., outstanding debts, substandard housing, inadequate heat in the winter, lack of funds for vacations or amusements, non-painful dental problems, and/or a medical condition that is not extremely serious, such as persisting but non-intense back pains. Now, it seems to me that none of these factors (and not even all of them taken together) makes stealing morally permissible, but they do give Ms. Poore additional reasons to steal, in my view, overriding reason to steal assuming that there is no God and no life after death.
For the sake of clarity, let me add that certain ways of elaborating the case would make stealing morally permissible. For example, we could build it into the case that Ms. Poore has children with severely debilitating diseases that will go untreated unless she steals the money. This way of elaborating the case is of course not useful for advancing my argument—except insofar as it helps to clarify the type of case that does advance it. Many traditional ethicists would allow for exceptions to “Don’t steal” in these rather extreme cases, but not in the less extreme cases my argument depends on.

Objection 3: Your moral argument assumes that agents can weigh prudential and moral reasons from a neutral standpoint. But there is no such neutral standpoint. Moreover, morality demands our allegiance. If Ms. Poore views her situation from the moral standpoint, she will see that she “can only avoid poverty by becoming a thief—a status which she can never lose.” She will also see that “she could not expect other human beings, judging impartially and rationally, to endorse” her theft. And “these points suggest a deeper necessity than mere analyticity to the claim that morality is overriding.”

First, the objection certainly does not show that the Reasons Thesis is a necessary truth. Just consider the following: There is no obvious logical impossibility in supposing that there is a malevolent Deity who eternally damns the virtuous and who sends the wicked to eternal paradise. In such a literally demoralizing situation, surely the strongest reasons would not favor doing one’s duty. Objection 3 in no way eliminates this apparent possibility.

Second, we can hardly claim to approach any important philosophical question in an unbiased way, so if “neutral” means “unbiased,” there is no neutral standpoint for discussing “Why should I be moral?” Nevertheless, the question is one we can intelligibly discuss, it seems to me. We can see that different kinds of reasons support human action—e.g., moral reasons, prudential reasons, reasons having to do with etiquette. When these reasons back conflicting actions (e.g., “steal and refrain from stealing”), we can ask which reasons are stronger, weightier, or overriding. In that sense, it seems to me, there is a standpoint of rationality from which we can compare the strengths of moral and prudential reasons.

Philosophy often involves comparing “apples and oranges,” i.e., things that cannot be measured or evaluated via any formula. It doesn’t follow that comparison and evaluation are impossible, only that they will inevitably be intuitive and imprecise. W. D. Ross’s scheme of prima facie duties provides a helpful illustration. Suppose I’ve promised to meet a friend for lunch, but on the way I come across a seriously injured person who needs my help, and I can help only by failing to meet my friend for lunch. In such a case, the prima facie duty of fidelity (the duty to keep promises and agreements) conflicts with the prima facie duty of beneficence (the duty to help others). Ross provided no procedure for determining which prima facie duty is overriding and indeed he claimed that no such procedure is available. One can agree with Ross about this and yet sensibly claim that beneficence clearly outweighs or overrides fidelity in this particular case. We can see that beneficence is overriding in this case even though we lack a formula, scale, or procedure for making the determination.
In closing, I would like to make an observation about theistic arguments in general and the moral argument in particular. Most philosophers, theists included, agree that simple versions of the theistic arguments are open to devastating objections. The more interesting and defensible theistic arguments are also more complicated. But of course the complications provide further possible avenues for criticism. During the past 50 years, many subtle and complicated versions of ontological, cosmological, and design arguments have been developed, but moral arguments have received much less attention. (Compare the readings on moral arguments in widely used anthologies in the philosophy of religion with the readings on the ontological, cosmological, and design arguments.) I think that "God and the Moral Order" provides a relatively complicated and subtle moral argument for theism. The complications admittedly provide various possible avenues of criticism—a fact borne out by the objections discussed above. But as with other theistic arguments, the complications also give the argument important strengths.  

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NOTES

2. Ibid., 3–6.
3. Ibid., 6–9.
4. Ibid., 11–13.
5. Compare: "Some philosophers have claimed that the word 'ought' has at least two different senses—a moral sense, and a prudential . . . sense. Even if this claim is true, it seems that there must be a further sense of 'ought' that is neither narrowly moral nor narrowly prudential. Consider a case where you know that you are morally required to do X and prudentially required to do Y, but it is impossible to do both. In this case, it seems quite intelligible for you to ask yourself, 'Ought I to do what I am morally required to do, X? Or ought I to do what I am prudentially required to do, Y? Neither of these questions seems equivalent to the trivial question, 'Ought I to do what I ought to do?' But if that is true, then the term 'ought' cannot occur here in a narrowly moral sense, or a narrowly prudential sense. It must occur in a general normative sense." Ralph Wedgwood, "The Metaethicists' Mistake" forthcoming, Philosophical Perspectives 18 (2004). Available at: http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mert1230/papers.htm, 2–3.
6. I wish to thank Terence Cuneo and Phillip Goggans for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.