

The Explanatory Challenge: Moral Realism Is No Better Than Theism

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Abstract: Many of the arguments for and against robust moral realism parallel arguments for and against theism. In this article, I consider one of the shared challenges: the explanatory challenge. The article begins with a presentation of Harman's formulation of the explanatory challenge as applied to moral realism and theism. I then examine two responses offered by robust moral realists to the explanatory challenge, one by Russ Shafer-Landau and another by David Enoch. Shafer-Landau argues that the moral realist can plausibly respond to the challenge in a way unavailable to theists. I argue that Shafer-Landau's response is implausible as it stands and that once revised, it will apply to theism just as well. I then argue that Enoch's response, to the extent that it is plausible, can be used to defend theism as well.

1. Introduction

According to robust moral realism, there are irreducible, mind-independent moral facts. According to classical theism, there is an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent being who created the world and is responsible for all that happens within it. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to these two views simply as *moral realism* and *theism*, even though the same terms usually refer to broader classes of views. Taken at face value, moral realism and theism have distinct and logically independent contents.¹ Nevertheless, the possibility remains that indirect logical connections between moral realism and theism exist. In particular, there is an interesting similarity between some of the prominent arguments for and against the two views.² In this article, I will focus on one such argument, the explanatory argument. I will argue that responses that have been developed by moral realists, to the extent that they are plausible, could also serve as responses on behalf of theists. This in itself is a modest conclusion. However, it is worth noting that my claim can serve as a building block for a much broader claim. The similarity of argument in the moral and religious domains gives rise to the possibility that moral realism and theism have a similar epistemic status. They either rise together as rational views or fall together as irrational. This more provocative claim is not one that I will substantiate here. Nevertheless, I mention this possibility because I believe that it is genuine and that the argument of this article is interesting partially because this possibility lurks in the background.

My argument proceeds as follows: In Section 2, I present the explanatory challenges to moral realism and to theism. Section 3 examines Russ Shafer-

Landau's response to the explanatory challenge and his proposed disanalogy between moral realism and theism. Section 4 argues that theists can mimic Shafer-Landau's defense of moral realism. Section 5 examines David Enoch's response to the explanatory challenge and argues that it can be mimicked by theists as well.

2. The Explanatory Argument

The explanatory argument addresses an important feature that moral realism and theism share. It can be helpful to think of it as a way of formulating an objection based on the non-empirical nature of both moral realism and theism without falling into the pitfalls of a simple-minded empiricism.

Among metaethicists, the explanatory argument has attracted special attention since its presentation in the 1970s by Gilbert Harman (1977: 3–10). Harman's challenge runs as follows: We begin with observations. By observation, Harman means, 'an immediate judgment made in response to the situation' (p. 6).³ Examples of observations are seeing a vapor trail in a cloud chamber, or seeing that young hoodlums pouring gasoline on a cat and igniting it are doing something wrong. According to Harman, a litmus test for figuring out whether we should believe that something exists is whether it is required to explain any of our observations.⁴ By 'explaining our observations', Harman means explaining 'your thinking that thought' (p. 8), i.e., why it is that we had the particular observation that we did. Part of our best explanation for why we observe a vapor trail in a cloud chamber includes the existence of protons. Therefore, we should believe that protons exist. On the other hand, the wrongness of burning a cat is not required to explain our observation that the hoodlums are doing something wrong. Non-normative facts about what the hoodlums are doing together with facts about our psychological makeup can well explain why we think that they are doing something wrong. Nor are there any other observations for which moral facts are required to explain. The fact that moral facts do not appear in scientific explanations is evidence for this claim. Therefore, we should not believe that there are moral facts. The problem arises not only because moral facts are (taken by many to be) non-causal. Mathematical facts are also (considered by many to be) non-causal. Yet mathematical facts do play an explanatory role in ordinary scientific explanations and thereby escape Harman's charge. Moral facts, however, play no such explanatory role, and we have no reason to believe that they ever will. Therefore, we should believe that protons and numbers exist, but we should not believe that moral facts do. So Harman argues. Harman's argument seems, at least to me, to have a great deal of initial appeal.

Theism faces a similar challenge.⁵ Arguably, God does not play a role in our best explanations of any observations. Again, evidence for this claim is the fact that God does not appear in ordinary scientific explanations. Nor does it seem likely that God will play such a role as science progresses. Therefore, we should not believe that God exists.

These, in sum, are the explanatory challenges to moral realism and theism, respectively. Both rest on two premises: a general epistemic principle and a premise regarding the particular case at hand. The arguments can be summarized as follows:

<i>Explanatory Challenge to Theism</i>	<i>Explanatory Challenge to Moral Realism</i>
(1T) <i>Explanatory Requirement</i> : We are justified in believing that something exists only if it is part of the best explanation of some observation.	(1M) <i>Explanatory Requirement</i> : We are justified in believing that something exists only if it is part of the best explanation of some observation.
(2T) <i>Explanatory Idleness (Theism)</i> : God is not part of the best explanation of any observation.	(2M) <i>Explanatory Idleness (Morality)</i> : Moral facts are not part of the best explanation of any observation.
(3T) <i>Conclusion (Theism)</i> : We lack justification to believe that God exists.	(3M) <i>Conclusion (Morality)</i> : We lack justification to believe that moral facts exist.

The conclusions of these arguments are weaker than the claim that God does not exist or that moral facts do not exist. The conclusion is an epistemic conclusion, about what we should believe to exist, rather than directly about what exists. Nevertheless, the arguments are fatal enough as challenges to the views at hand. If we have no justification to believe a given position, that seems like a bad feature of that position.⁶

Do the premises of the argument imply that we never were justified to begin with? Jack Woods (2016) has recently argued that a more plausible interpretation of the argument is that prior to having gained knowledge about what might explain our observations, we have default justification to believe that our observations are due to the relevant facts, for instance, that we have moral observations because there are moral facts. However, once science has progressed and we can see how our moral observations are explained without appealing to moral facts, this default justification is undermined and the burden falls on the side of moral realism to provide a proper justification for believing that there are moral facts.

The claim that God is not required to explain any observations is controversial. Teleological and cosmological arguments for the existence of God are premised on the idea that God is required to explain the existence of the world or its teleological nature. To the extent that those arguments are successful, theism would have an advantage over moral realism. The success of these arguments is doubtful for reasons elaborated by others.⁷ Whether or not those arguments succeed, in this article I will focus primarily on the question of whether there are any considerations in favor of moral realism that do not favor theism, rather than vice versa. I do so at least partly because often moral realism is thought to stand on firmer grounds than theism. It will therefore be interesting to show ways in which the contrary is the case. Therefore, in this article I will set aside the question of whether theism can respond to the

explanatory challenge in a way that moral realism cannot via some cosmological or teleological argument, and merely consider whether moral realism is better placed than theism with regard to this argument. I will argue that the answer is *no*.

How can moral realists respond to the explanatory argument? Because the type of moral realism we are discussing in this paper is specifically robust moral realism, the prospects of rejecting explanatory idleness seem especially dim. Aside from the abovementioned fact that scientists seem to do well in explaining our observations, including moral observations, without appealing to moral facts, there are additional reasons to believe that moral facts will never be required to explain any observations. There are familiar reasons to believe (and this usually is part of the robust realist package of beliefs) that morality is *sui generis* in a strict sense. That is, that *oughts* cannot be deduced from pure *ises* (Hume's thesis), and moral properties are irreducible to non-moral properties (Moore's thesis). This makes it even more difficult to imagine how moral facts could possibly explain anything non-moral.⁸ There are respectable philosophers that deny this,⁹ but I cannot explore all possibilities in a single article. I will therefore set the possibility of moral explanations, i.e., explanations that include references to moral facts, aside.

To my mind, the most appealing responses on behalf of moral realists rely on objecting to the explanatory requirement. Some authors, in fact, have flatly rejected Harman's epistemic principle. One such is Justin Clarke-Doane (2015). Clarke-Doane begins by reminding us that Harman's explanatory requirement is the guiding principle of a type of empiricism developed by W.V.O. Quine. He then claims that an argument premised on Quinean empiricism 'would have no traction with... "non-naturalist" moral realists—who... of course, reject Quinean empiricism' (p. 84). Admittedly, for those who do not find the explanatory requirement at all appealing, the explanatory argument loses its force. However, other authors, some of whom are themselves robust moral realists, do find Harman's principle, or at least something like it, initially attractive. The question I am interested in in this article is whether, assuming you do find Harman's principle initially attractive, you have reason to believe that moral realism fares better than theism. I will therefore focus on robust moral realists that do find the explanatory requirement initially attractive and suggest that it be restricted rather than fully rejected.

In the sections that follow, I will present two ways in which moral realists have suggested that the explanatory requirement should be weakened. I will argue that the first strategy, suggested by Shafer-Landau, does imply that moral realism has an advantage over theism, but his weakened principle is implausible as it stands. Furthermore, once Shafer-Landau's explanatory principle is revised to overcome this implausibility, moral realism loses its advantage over theism. Regarding the second strategy, suggested by Enoch, I have no qualms as to its plausibility. However, I will argue that Enoch's weakening of the explanatory principle disarms the argument against theism just as well as it does the argument against moral realism.

3. Shafer-Landau's Revision of the Explanatory Requirement

Shafer-Landau argues that the explanatory requirement must be restricted to causal entities. Three considerations can be deduced from Shafer-Landau in favor of this restriction: First, it does not make sense to require that all of our beliefs pass an explanatory test. Were we to impose such a global explanatory requirement, then not only moral realism would fail the test, but so would any belief in any kind of normative fact. This consequence, to his mind, is untenable. He notes that the explanatory requirement itself is an epistemic norm, so it is therefore self-undermining.¹⁰ Second, totally abandoning the explanatory requirement would likewise lead to unreasonable results. The explanatory requirement captures an epistemic principle that helps us rule out particular beliefs, such as beliefs in the existence of UFOs or snake gods.¹¹ We need a principle that tells us that if we have not observed such beings and if all observed phenomena can be better explained without assuming the existence of such beings, then belief in their existence is unjustified. Third, according to Shafer-Landau, it makes sense to restrict an explanatory requirement to facts that are supposed to be causally explanatory—to things that, if they exist, have causal powers. Shafer-Landau therefore concludes that we should distinguish between causal and non-causal beings. An explanatory requirement should apply only to causal beings, such as gods and UFOs, and not to non-causal beings, such as normative facts.¹² The explanatory requirement should therefore be revised as follows:

Explanatory Requirement*:	We are justified in believing that a <i>causal</i> object or property exists only if it is part of the best explanation of some observation.
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Now it is easy to see why the argument constructed with explanatory requirement* threatens theistic realism but not moral realism. Shafer-Landau's disanalogy between moral realism and theism is based on the following contrast:

The job description of normative facts does not include the possession of explanatory power ... By contrast, the job description of God does include explanatory power ... God must, at the least, get the universe going, and will further, to all but deists, intervene in our affairs at least occasionally. (Shafer-Landau 2007: 323)

God, as traditionally understood, is essentially a causal being. If God exists, then at the very least God created the world and is standardly believed by theists to continually cause events within it. Moral facts, on the other hand, do not cause anything. Indeed they are explanatorily idle. However, that is not a problem because non-causal facts need not be explanatory. This move is not available to theists, because God is causal and therefore we should only believe that God exists if God is observed or required to explain observations.¹³

Thus argues Shafer-Landau. Here is why I think he is wrong. Recall that Shafer-Landau has argued that normative facts, including moral facts, are exempt from the explanatory requirement. If beliefs in their existence are not justified by being required in explanations of observations, then we must ask: How are such beliefs justified? Moral realists following Shafer-Landau's reasoning must assume that there is at least one belief-forming method in addition to inference to the best explanation (IBE) of observations that can justify at least some beliefs, namely, those regarding normative facts. What other methods could there be? Shafer-Landau addresses this question in his postscript, which I'll discuss shortly. For now, it suffices that we see that moral realists going Shafer-Landau's route must assume that our ontological beliefs, i.e., beliefs regarding which things exist, can be justified even if they are not supported by IBE of observations.

This creates a problem for Shafer-Landau. If there is at least one other way in which ontological beliefs can be justified, what principled reason could we have for excluding the possibility that beliefs in causal entities can also be justified in ways other than IBE of observations? Why should we accept explanatory requirement* that says that causal entities are different in that there is only one way to justify beliefs in their existence. Just as IBE of observations can be used to justify beliefs in the existence of non-causal entities such as mathematical facts (Harman, 1977: 9–10), why should this other legitimate belief-forming method, which moral realists must be committed to, not have the power to justify beliefs in causal entities? Shafer-Landau's claim that an explanatory requirement applies to causal facts but not to non-causal facts cannot remain unexplained or ungrounded.

You may think that it makes sense to expect that regarding causal entities, they will be required to explain some observation, and therefore it makes sense to believe that they exist only if they do appear in a best causal explanation of some observation.¹⁴ However, I do not see why this should be the case. It seems extremely probable that many causal entities exist despite playing no explanatory role in any of our observations. Think of all the causal entities that might exist in distant galaxies and therefore will in no way figure in any of our observations. Therefore, we definitely should not rule out the possibility that there are causal entities that are not required to explain any of our observations. What other reason could there be to rule out in advance some other reason we might have to believe that some causal entity exists?

The following seems like an extremely plausible principle: If a particular belief-forming method is a good one, then, at least *prima facie*, it should be considered a good belief-forming method whenever it applies. For instance, if perception is a good belief-forming method, then perceptions of chairs justify beliefs in the existence of chairs, perceptions of tables justify beliefs in the existence of tables, and even perceptions of ghosts, were we to have such perceptions, would justify beliefs in the existence of ghosts. Similarly, if there is some method that confers justification upon moral realism, i.e., the belief that moral facts exist, then, *prima facie*, we should believe that the same method can justify beliefs in causal entities as well, if it applies to them.

To accommodate this principle, the explanatory requirement must be revised once more. I suggest the following:

Explanatory Requirement**:	We are justified in believing that objects or properties exist only if they appear in the best explanation of an observation, or are justified by any other good belief-forming method and there are no defeaters.
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The considerations that Shafer-Landau used to motivate explanatory requirement* support explanatory requirement** just as well. First, explanatory requirement** allows there to be other belief-forming methods that justify beliefs in normative facts, even if such facts do not appear in the best explanation of any of our observations. So it does not exclude the possibility of justified beliefs in the existence of some normative facts. Second, so long as we have no reason to believe that any good belief-forming method justifies beliefs in UFOs or snake gods, explanatory requirement** will exclude such beliefs just as well as explanatory requirement*. The only consideration that remains in favor of Shafer-Landau's version, as far as I can tell, is the idea that it makes sense to restrict an explanatory requirement to entities that are causally explanatory. The problem is that, upon scrutiny, it is not at all clear why this idea should be accepted. That is, as argued above, it is not clear why we should accept the view that IBE of observations is the only way to justify beliefs in the existence of causal entities.

Once we reject the original explanatory requirement and replace it with explanatory requirement**, the explanatory argument against theism loses its validity. In order for it to become a valid argument, an additional premise must be added, namely, that there is no alternative method of confirmation that justifies belief in theism. This has not been established by Shafer-Landau. Nor do I see how it can be established without meticulously examining the various ways in which theists actually justify their beliefs. I cannot fully pursue this task here. However, in the next section, I will argue that at least one alternative method, a method that Shafer-Landau himself uses to justify his belief in moral realism, can justify belief in theism as well.

4. Alternative Ways of Justifying Beliefs

Once we are open to the possibility of alternative ways of justifying beliefs, the big question is whether there are such ways that are both plausible and can justify beliefs in moral facts or God. In particular, the question relevant to this article is whether the ways in which moral realists justify their belief in the existence of moral facts can also justify some people's belief in the existence of God. There are potentially many detailed accounts moral realists might give to explain why they are justified in believing that there are moral facts. Due to the limited scope of this article, I will focus on one such account that appears in the postscript of

Shafer-Landau's article. Interestingly, he outlines a positive case for moral realism, but does not examine whether it can be applied to theism as well. In this section, I will argue that a parallel case can be made for theism.

Shafer-Landau's justification of moral realism begins with an analogy to realism about the existence of the natural world:

We believe that there is an external world, a world of natural facts, because such a belief *unifies* a great deal of our particular experiences and beliefs, and *presents itself* as so plainly true as to be, for all practical purposes, irresistible. (Shafer-Landau 2007: 327)¹⁵

In response to the adamant skeptic, Shafer-Landau has nothing to say but the following:

True, there are skeptics about the external world, and some of them are brilliant and capable of avoiding any logical traps we set. There is nothing we can do but beg a fundamental question against such people.

A similar situation holds in his opinion with regard to morality:

I think a perfectly parallel case can be made on behalf of our confidence in the existence of moral facts. The atrocious immorality of certain actions just *impresses itself upon us* in a way that makes the abandonment of such a conviction completely untenable ... This general commitment to moral facts *unifies* our moral beliefs and experiences in just the way that an underlying commitment to the existence of an external world unifies our empirical beliefs.¹⁶

Shafer-Landau's reasoning seems to run as follows. There are some basic beliefs that we cannot bring any conclusive argument to justify. That is, we have no available non-question-begging argument to bring against a hypothetical skeptic. Nevertheless, there is another way that such beliefs can be justified. Shafer-Landau uses our belief in the existence of the external world to motivate something like the following principle:

Shafer-Landau's Epistemic Principle (SLEP):	<i>Ceteris paribus</i> , for any subject S and proposition p, if p (1) <i>impresses itself upon S</i> in a way that makes the abandonment of such a conviction untenable and (2) <i>unifies</i> many of S's beliefs and experiences, then S is justified in believing p. ¹⁷
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The details of this principle must be spelled out in more detail in order for Shafer-Landau's justification of moral realism to be theoretically satisfying. Nevertheless, I believe that, with the help of a few necessary clarifications, we will have enough on the table to argue that at least some theists can provide this same kind of justification for their belief in the existence of God.

Two clarifications of Shafer-Landau's justification are needed here. First, the description of moral realism as 'irresistible' should not be taken literally to mean

that human beings are not psychologically able to resist moral realism. Many outspoken antirealists serve as evidence to the contrary. Insisting that antirealists are in some way insincere or incoherent should be a very last resort. No doubt, that is why Shafer-Landau adds the 'for all practical purposes' qualification. He may mean something closer to 'very hard to resist' or 'psychologically deeply ingrained'. These are claims that many antirealists would accept as well.¹⁸

Second, as explained above, Shafer-Landau concedes the explanatory idleness premise in the explanatory argument. Therefore, when he says that moral realism best unifies our experiences and beliefs, he does not mean that it is part of the best causal explanation of why it is that we have the experiences and beliefs that we do. Rather, he must mean that it helps us create a worldview that coheres well with our experiences and ordinary ways of thinking in some other way. A distinction suggested by Harman himself may be helpful in understanding this point:

You see the children set the cat on fire and immediately think, 'That's wrong'. In one sense, your observation is that what the children are doing is wrong. In another sense, your observation is your thinking that thought... Certain moral principles might help to explain why it was *wrong* of the children to set the cat on fire, but moral principles seem to be of no help in explaining *your thinking* that that is wrong. (Harman 1977: 8)

Harman's argument was premised on the idea that only explanations of the second type, why it is that we think certain actions are wrong, are relevant to establishing whether there are moral facts. Shafer-Landau's view is that sometimes explanations of the contents of our beliefs, such as explaining why certain actions are wrong, can justify ontological commitments. Furthermore, Shafer-Landau believes that we can have such justification, under the conditions specified by SLEP, even if the fact that we have moral beliefs is well explained without referring to moral facts.

Is a parallel justification available for theism? Surprisingly, Shafer-Landau does not discuss this question. It seems that a case can be made for theism on the basis of SLEP. Furthermore, many theists seem to justify their theism in ways that seem to align with the conditions for SLEP. Arguably, the belief in the existence of God unifies a host of experiences and beliefs: religious experiences, experiences of beauty and providence, feelings of gratitude, and a need to pray are all unified by the belief that God exists. It also seems quite common for theists to report that their belief in God feels practically irresistible (i.e., they cannot make sense of a host of aspects of their experience without the belief in God's existence).¹⁹ I see no reason to doubt that theism seems irresistible to many people, any more than I have reason to doubt Shafer-Landau's testimony regarding the irresistibility of moral realism for him. It may be true that there are more people who find belief in moral facts irresistible than there are people who find belief in God irresistible. I do not know.²⁰ Theists tend to believe that even atheists have some sort of covert belief in God, just as moral realists tend to believe that even moral antirealists have a covert belief in moral facts.²¹ In any event, as it stands, numbers play no role in

Shafer-Landau's justification of his belief in moral realism, and I don't see why they should.

In fact, a number of theists justify their theism in ways that resemble Shafer-Landau's justification of moral realism. Although the precise details differ from one theory to another, the idea that belief in theism can be justified on the basis of relevant experiences and ingrained beliefs, even if no non-question-begging argument can be provided, is characteristic of reformed epistemologists such as Alvin Plantinga, William Alston and Nicholas Walterstorff.²² Peter Van Inwagen, in his response to the explanatory challenge to theism, notes the following:

[M]y belief in God ... is not based entirely on – statable reasons or publicly available arguments. In this, my belief in God is like my belief in a material world ... and objective morality. (Van Inwagen 2005: 145)

Our discussion of Shafer-Landau's reasoning, rather than providing grounds for objection to Van Inwagen's analogy between his belief in God and his belief in objective morality, seems to support it.

5. Enoch's Indispensability Argument

David Enoch suggests another response to the explanatory argument (2011: 50–84).²³ Like Shafer-Landau, Enoch suggests an alternative to the explanatory requirement that is supposed to respect the intuitions that motivated the acceptance of the principle to begin with. He argues that the main intuition that motivated the explanatory requirement is the following parsimony principle:

Parsimony: One ought not to multiply ontological commitments to the existence of kinds of entities without sufficient reason.

To use Shafer-Landau's examples, parsimony is what explains why we should not believe that there are UFOs or snake gods. Parsimony, as formulated here, leaves open the question of what kinds of reasons are sufficient to establish a commitment to the existence of additional kinds of entities. Harman's original explanatory requirement specified two kinds of sufficient reasons: observation and being required to explain observations. Enoch argues that these are only a subset of a more general sort of reason. Why are we justified in believing that entities that appear in our best explanations exist? According to Enoch, we take part in an extremely important project: the project of explaining our observations. Furthermore, according to Enoch, the explanatory project is intrinsically indispensable to us. Next, he claims that if we are to have any hope of succeeding in the explanatory project, then we must believe that the kinds of entities necessary for explaining our observations really exist. According to Enoch, we are justified in believing that entities required in explanations of our observations exist, because these beliefs are instrumentally indispensable to the intrinsically indispensable

explanatory project.²⁴ The general epistemic principle is as follows:

Indispensability: If something is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project, then we are epistemically justified for that very reason in believing that that thing exists. (Enoch 2011: 83)

Instead of Harman's explanatory requirement, we now have a set of epistemic principles: parsimony and indispensability. Parsimony eliminates entities from our justified ontological beliefs, whereas indispensability adds entities. In the final step of Enoch's argument, he argues that the belief in normative facts, like the belief in subatomic particles, also passes the indispensability test. He does so by arguing that another intrinsically indispensable project is the deliberative project—that is, the project of figuring out what makes the most sense for us to do. Just as believing in subatomic particles is instrumentally indispensable to the explanatory project, so too believing in irreducible normative facts is indispensable to the deliberative project. We cannot deliberate which actions would be right or wrong for us to do without assuming that there are right and wrong actions. Once we accept into our ontology any normative facts, parsimony will not tell us to eliminate other facts of the same kind. Therefore, moral facts, which are a kind of normative truth, meet the parsimony requirement.

There is much to question about Enoch's indispensability argument. My discussion here, however, will be limited to the following conditional claim: I argue that if Enoch's reasoning is sound, then theists have a similar move available to them.²⁵

What does it mean for a project to be intrinsically indispensable? As Enoch writes, two readings suggest themselves:

- a Pragmatic indispensability: x is pragmatically indispensable for S iff S *cannot* disengage from x .²⁶
- b Normative indispensability: x is normatively indispensable for S iff S *should* not disengage from x .

In his final version, Enoch claims that the relevant indispensability is normative indispensability, although he suggests that pragmatic indispensability may be relevant as well.²⁷ I will take this claim one step further and argue that *only* normative indispensability is relevant. Consider Sisyphus, who has been cursed by the gods: he is unable to escape from the project of pushing a huge boulder to the top of the mountain, but every time the boulder reaches the top, it topples back down, and poor Sisyphus is compelled to engage in the project again. Assume that Sisyphus believes—and rightly so—that this project is completely valueless. Does he have any reason to try to succeed in it? Intuitively, he has no such reason. It seems clear in general that there is no reason to pursue valueless projects. This intuition holds not only with regard to Sisyphus's actions. Suppose it was necessary for Sisyphus, in order to succeed in his valueless project, to believe in the existence of something or other. For instance, he may have to believe that there

are gods watching over him in order to motivate himself to continue making an effort to succeed. Since he rightly believes his project to be valueless, it seems wrong to think that this in any way justifies his belief.

The Sisyphus example demonstrates the insufficiency of pragmatic indispensability. Is pragmatic indispensability nevertheless a significant contributing factor to the justification of beliefs via indispensability? Suppose neurologists could rewire our brains one day so that we are able to stop seeking explanations or stop deliberating. Would such rewiring change anything in the epistemic status of our beliefs? My intuition is that such rewiring would in no significant way change the epistemic status of our belief in subatomic particles or the credentials of moral realism. It seems, therefore, that the pragmatic indispensability of a project is irrelevant. However, if a project is normatively indispensable (i.e., if it is so important that you ought not to opt out of it), then it makes sense to use whatever means necessary to succeed in it. If ontological commitments are justified by intrinsic indispensability considerations, it must be in virtue of normative indispensability alone.

As for instrumental indispensability, Enoch characterizes it as follows:

Something is instrumentally indispensable for a project, I suggest, just in case it cannot be eliminated without undermining (or at least sufficiently diminishing) whatever reason we had to engage in that project in the first place; without, in other words, thereby defeating whatever reason we had to find that project attractive. (Enoch 2011: 69)

If some means is pragmatically necessary in order to achieve a desirable end, then that surely is one way in which something can be instrumentally indispensable. There is little point in pursuing an end that cannot be achieved. Perhaps there are other ways in which the elimination of something can undermine the point of a project, but that will not affect my argument. We can now reformulate the indispensability principle so that it is clear that intrinsic normative indispensability and pragmatic instrumental indispensability are sufficient conditions for justifying beliefs:

Indispensability*: If *S* cannot succeed in a given project without being committed to the existence of some entity, and the project is one that *S* *should* not opt out of, then that is a reason for *S* to believe that that entity exists.

Is God instrumentally indispensable for any project? Although the instrumental indispensability of God is questionable for some projects, it is undeniable for others. Here are a few projects for which some believe God to be indispensable: Many theists believe that God is instrumentally indispensable for the project of doing what is morally right, because without God's instruction we are hopeless in figuring out what we morally ought to do.²⁸ Others believe that, without God, moral behavior would be under-motivated because only God can make sure that moral desert will be matched with proper reward (Kant, 1788).²⁹ Some believe that

without an eternal God, moral achievements can only be temporary and therefore of little or no worth. Divine command theorists believe that without God's command or will, there cannot be moral obligations (Craig 1997; Evans 2013). Some believe that, in our fallen state, we cannot cleanse ourselves of sin without God's help. Other theists believe that God is instrumentally indispensable for epistemic projects, because without God, we have no guarantee of the reliability of our cognitive faculties (Plantinga 1993: 216–237).

Examining these highly contested views will overcomplicate my discussion. I will therefore focus on theistic projects for which the indispensability of belief in God is undeniable. Many (most?) theists believe that their ultimate goal in life involves a relationship with God, be it one of worship, knowledge, mystical communion, unity or love. Even though there are different versions of the precise ideal relationship with God, I will call the general project of forming a positive relationship with God *the theistic project*. God is instrumentally indispensable for the theistic project, because without God, the whole point of the project is diminished.

God is instrumentally indispensable to the theistic project, but is the theistic project intrinsically indispensable? This is the more difficult and more significant question. How do we determine whether a project is intrinsically indispensable? On what basis should we think, for instance, that the deliberative project is indispensable? Lacking a plausible answer to this question, Enoch's reasoning will overgeneralize. Why, for instance, should we not believe in ghosts because ghosts are instrumentally indispensable to the ghost-busting project?

Enoch does not elaborate much on this question. He first attempts to argue that we have reason to believe that the deliberative project is intrinsically indispensable on the basis of the claim that we, pragmatically speaking, cannot cease to deliberate. I do not know whether this descriptive claim is true. It likely depends on the precise characterization of the deliberative project. However, if I have been successful in convincing the reader that pragmatic indispensability is irrelevant, then I need not engage with this question. Whether we can, in fact, cease to deliberate is of no epistemic consequence. The only other consideration that Enoch offers in favor of the deliberative project being intrinsically indispensable is that opting out of the deliberative project 'does not *seem* to be a rational option for us' (my emphasis) (Enoch 2011: 71). He is assuming that if a project *seems* to be normatively indispensable, then that is a good reason to believe that it is.³⁰

If the only consideration in favor of the normative indispensability of a project is that it *seems* so, then any theist to whom it *seems* as though the theistic project is normatively indispensable is justified in believing that it is. Likewise, anybody to whom it *seems* that the deliberative project is normatively indispensable is justified in believing that it is. Many theists report such seemings, and I see no initial reason to doubt theists' seemings any more or less than those of moral realists. Note that the claim is agent-relative. Whenever epistemic justification supervenes on seemings, a difference in seemings can yield a difference in epistemic justification. My claim is not that all moral realists have reason to believe that the theistic project is intrinsically indispensable, but rather that they should accept that some people have reasons to believe that the theistic project is normatively indispensable that

are similar to the reasons that moral realists have to believe that the deliberative project is indispensable.

Thus far, I have argued that some theists can pursue the same line of reasoning to justify theism in response to the explanatory challenge as Enoch suggests on behalf of moral realism. I have argued that a theist can come to believe that theism is instrumentally indispensable for an intrinsically indispensable project in the same way that a moral realist can come to believe that normative facts are instrumentally indispensable for an intrinsically indispensable project. This claim does not yet get us all the way to parity in epistemic justification. As the indispensability principle is formulated above, epistemic justification depends on actual indispensability, not on perceived or justly believed indispensability. It is logically possible that although theists and moral realists pursue the same reasoning, the theistic project is in fact dispensable whereas the deliberative project is not. Of course, it is also possible that the theistic project is intrinsically indispensable whereas the deliberative project is not. Other than consulting our seemings, we do not yet have any way of arbitrating between these possibilities.

If access internalism is correct, then the indispensability principle should be revised once more, and a stronger conclusion will follow. According to access internalism, epistemic justification is determined only by components accessible to an agent upon reflection. Declan Smithies (2015) defines the view as follows:

Access Internalism: One has justification to believe that *p* iff one has justification to believe on the basis of reflection alone that one has justification to believe that *p*.

I am sympathetic to access internalism, for many of the reasons that Smithies elucidates. It is a controversial view and is not the topic of this article, so I will not repeat arguments for and against it. However, I will point out the consequences of this view for the debate at hand.³¹ As far as reflection alone goes, the theist and the moral realist have equal reasons to believe that their relevant beliefs are indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project. The indispensability principle formulated above suggests that there is a further factor that can determine which of them is epistemically justified, and at least one of the imagined agents, the theist and the atheist, cannot come to justly believe upon reflection alone. The indispensability principle is therefore inconsistent with access internalism. If access internalism is correct, then the indispensability principle should be amended. Here is a natural way to do so:

Internalistic Indispensability: If it seems to *S* that *S* cannot succeed in a given project without being committed to the existence of some entity, and the project is one that it seems to *S* that *S* should not opt out of, and these seemings are undefeated, then that is a reason for *S* to believe that that entity exists.

If internalistic indispensability is correct, then, all other things being equal, a theist to whom it seems that the theistic project is normatively indispensable is epistemically on par with a moral realist to whom it seems that the deliberative project is normatively indispensable. That is, unless there is some defeater in one domain but not the other.

Some people have more externalistic intuitions and may not go this far, and they have their reasons. Imagine that there are people engaged in the project of worshipping the devil. This project seems to these people like one that they should not opt out of. It is somewhat attractive to say that even if it *seems* to them that their satanic project is normatively indispensable, that is not enough. It needs to actually be normatively indispensable for an indispensability principle to apply. Perhaps such a person is not to be blamed for his beliefs, because he believes that he is following the indispensability principle, but epistemic justification is not coextensive with blameworthiness. I think we should say that such a devil worshiper is as justified as moral realists and theists in his beliefs. Others are more open to epistemic justification more heavily depending on inaccessible factors. For them, it may be the case (though we may not know whether or not it is) that moral realism and theism are asymmetrical with regard to considerations of indispensability. Even for atheistic moral realists with such externalistic leanings, the argument of this article may be troubling. I have argued that some theists can internally justify their theism (in light of the explanatory challenge) similarly to the way in which Enoch proposes that a moral realist justify her belief in moral realism. Atheistic moral realists could have hoped for more. They could have hoped to be able to demonstrate to theists that their way of reasoning is more secure than theists'.

Is there any relevant disanalogy? In particular, is there any difference between the deliberative project and the theistic project that can defeat a seeming that the theistic project is normatively indispensable?

Some differences between the deliberative project and the theistic project suggest themselves. One is that the deliberative project may be, practically speaking, much more difficult if not impossible for us to consciously escape. But if I have convinced you that pragmatic indispensability is insignificant in this context, then it is difficult to defend the idea that this pragmatic consideration should be of any consequence.

A more worrisome potential disanalogy is that many more people opt out of the theistic project than opt out of the deliberative project. One plausible explanation for this difference is that many people lack the seeming that any theistic project is intrinsically indispensable (henceforth referred to as the theistic seeming), whereas the same is not true for the deliberative project. Perhaps this disagreement in seemings undermines the credentials of the theistic seeming. Peer disagreement is another topic into which I do not want to delve too deeply here, but I will offer two responses that are especially relevant in our current context.

First, considerations of indispensability also give us reason, at least sometimes, to form our beliefs on the basis of our own intuitions despite our knowledge of wide-ranging disagreement. This ability is instrumentally indispensable in order

to succeed in the deliberative project. Why? The answer is because you cannot deliberate without having any normative commitments. When it comes to first-order normative beliefs, disagreement is extremely widespread. Therefore, to have any chance at succeeding in the deliberative project, one will have to be justified in forming beliefs despite such disagreement. It is difficult to see how this can be done without grounding one's beliefs in one's own seemings. Therefore, following the indispensability principle, one must be justified in forming beliefs on the basis of one's seemings despite wide-ranging disagreement. Hence, we have an indispensability argument in favor of the conclusion that one can be justified in one's beliefs that are based on one's seemings despite disagreement. I see no reason that this should not apply to normatively indispensable projects as well.

Second, given the characterization of the deliberative project that Enoch needs for his argument to succeed, it does seem that there are rational people who opt out of the project. It is essential to Enoch's argument that deliberation not be understood as arbitrary picking. Rather, 'Deliberation ... is the process of trying to make the decision it makes most sense for one to make' (Enoch 2011: 73). 'Makes most sense', however, is a vague notion. For Enoch's argument to succeed, the characterization of 'making sense' must imply that decisions can be correct or incorrect in the realist's sense. Otherwise, belief in normative, mind-independent facts would not be indispensable for deliberation. Any antirealist about normativity must believe that he or she is opting out of the deliberative project, as Enoch characterizes the project. Sartre (1948) seems to claim that there are no moral facts, but rather we go about our lives choosing. According to John Mackie (1977), ethics is invented rather than discovered. That still leaves room for a kind of deliberation, but not the kind that Enoch needs for his argument. It may be that antirealists do not follow through with their own theories in real life, but the fact that they promote such views does at least offer some reason to believe that some people do opt out of the deliberative project, as Enoch must understand the project.

In a private correspondence, Enoch suggested the following disanalogy between the deliberative project and the theistic project: A life without deliberation would be significantly impoverished, whereas a life without belief in God need not be impoverished. Many people live a very rich and fulfilling life without believing in God, but it is difficult to think of anybody living a rich and fulfilling life without deliberation. The thought is, then, that if a life without a given project would be impoverished, then that is a factor that contributes to its normative indispensability. We therefore have a reason to believe that the theistic project is dispensable, whereas the deliberative project is not.

I have a few things to say in response. First, many theists believe that life without belief in God is significantly impoverished, and many antirealists believe that life without deliberation, in the robust sense of the term that Enoch needs, is not significantly impoverished. At the very least, it means that it would need serious argumentation to establish the disanalogy. Second, even if the contrast is correct, it does not yet directly imply that the theistic project is normatively dispensable. In order for the disanalogy to work, we need a reason to believe that if opting out of a project does not imply an impoverished life, then that is a reason

to believe that that project is normatively dispensable. These are not conclusive reasons to reject the relevance of Enoch's disanalogy. Rather, they are reasons to be initially suspicious and to ask for more details.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that moral realism does not have an advantage over theism with regard to the explanatory challenge. I examined two responses to the challenge on behalf of moral realism. Shafer-Landau argues that the explanatory requirement should be limited to causal entities, and I argued that this restriction is ungrounded. I further argued that Shafer-Landau's justification of moral realism parallels a popular way of justifying theistic commitments. I then examined Enoch's response, according to which Harman's explanatory requirement should be replaced by a more general indispensability principle together with a parsimony principle. I argued that, given the most plausible interpretation of Enoch's indispensability principle, theists can mimic Enoch's argument and justify their theistic commitments.

Some people suspect that there is something religious-like about robust moral realism, even if it does not strictly imply theism or any other paradigmatic religious belief. One way to understand the conclusion of this article is as a partial substantiation of this suspicion. Epistemological commitments required to justify moral realism might imply that theism is justifiable as well.³²

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ENDNOTES

¹ Divine command theorists argue for a metaphysical dependence of moral obligation on the existence of God, but I take it that all reasonable sides to the debate agree that moral realism and atheism are not *logically* inconsistent. Rather, divine command theorists argue that God is required to *explain* moral obligation or other moral properties. For arguments against the view that atheism implies nihilism, see Sinnott-Armstrong (2009) and Wielenberg (2013).

² Here is how this article stands in relation to previous authors that explore these similarities: It started off as a response to Russ Shafer-Landau (2007). Shafer-Landau lists three parallel families of arguments against moral realism and theism: arguments from disagreement, genealogical arguments, and the explanatory challenge. I believe this is a very partial list. For instance, arguments for theism from religious experience are similar to arguments from moral experience for moral realism. Shafer-Landau focuses on the explanatory challenge and suggests a disanalogy. I will argue that Shafer-Landau's suggestion fails. Michael Rea (2006) argues that in order for moral realists to respond to Harman's explanatory challenge, they must accept theism or some similar view. Although the theme is

similar to mine, the details of Rea's argument are different: his main argument is that moral realists must rely on considerations of simplicity and that these in turn imply something like theism. I will make no such claims.

More recently, Crow (2015) explores the relationship between Street's (2006) evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism and Plantinga's (1993: 216–237) evolutionary argument against naturalism and in defense of theism.

³ *Observations* in Harman's sense may be equivalent to what current epistemologists more often call *seemings*. The precise meaning of *seemings* is itself controversial, so I make this claim with some hesitation. See Werner (2014) for discussion of some of the controversy.

⁴ Harman's epistemic principle here is closely related to Harman's (1965) view that inference to the best explanation is the basic form of non-deductive inference.

⁵ I submit that I am not aware of an argument against theism that is identical to the formulation here in the precise details. However, there is a family of arguments that seem like attempts to capture a similar idea. Prominent examples are Clifford (1886); Flew (1972); Mackie (1982); Russell (1957); and Scriven (1966: 94–107). Gellman (2008) attributes to Dawkins (2006) a version of this argument and helpfully lists a number of possible responses. Van Inwagen (2005) responds at length to formulations that seem to be the closest to Harman's challenge.

⁶ Van Inwagen (2005) spends much of his article arguing that there is no plausible argument from lack of evidence to disbelief in this context. I disagree, but need not get into this issue here. If the argument is sound and moral realism and theism lack justification, that seems to me enough to worry the proponents of those views.

⁷ For discussion and references, see Mackie (1982); Ratzsch and Koperski (2015); and Reichenbach (2012).

⁸ Shafer-Landau (2007) and Enoch (2011: 53) express and elaborate similar reservations about responding to the explanatory challenge to moral realism by rejecting explanatory idleness.

⁹ One prominent defender of moral explanations is Nicholas Sturgeon (1984, 2006).

¹⁰ Jack Woods (2016) defends a version of Harman's challenge and argues that it does not apply to domains that are needed to spell out the argument, such as epistemic norms and logic, because of this problem of self-effacement. I note that both Shafer-Landau and Woods implicitly assume that we should not be moved by epistemic norms unless we understand them realistically. Some may wish to push back on this assumption.

¹¹ These examples are Shafer-Landau's. Roger White pointed out to me that it is not clear how these examples support the principle because it is not clear why we should have any reason to believe that such entities exist; therefore, it is not clear why we need such a principle to rule them out.

¹² For similar claims, see Dworkin (1996: 120) and Nagel (1986: 144).

¹³ Shafer-Landau makes an implicit assumption here that if something is causal it follows that it must also be explanatory. Some may be inclined to reject this assumption. I do not dwell on this point because I doubt the very idea that the 'job description' of an entity is a significant factor in discerning the epistemic status of the belief that it exists.

¹⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to elaborate here.

¹⁵ My emphases.

¹⁶ My emphases.

¹⁷ My emphases.

¹⁸ John Mackie (1977) and Richard Joyce (2001) are examples of antirealists that believe that our moral discourse is essentially committed to moral realism (and is therefore erroneous).

¹⁹ For instance, see Plantinga (2000, pp. 171–174).

²⁰ Some empirical research actually suggests that we all have a natural tendency to develop religious beliefs (Barrett 2004, 2012). Therefore, it makes sense that, for many people, religious beliefs are no less irresistible than moral beliefs. I thank Brian Besong for this comment.

²¹ Enoch (2014) argues for a conclusion close to this.

²² In fact, moral realists who are inclined to develop a defense of moral realism along the lines of Shafer-Landau's suggestion can benefit by consulting some well-developed accounts of reformed epistemologists, such as Plantinga (1981, 1983, 2000: 167–198), Wolterstorff (2005), and Alston (1991), who argue that one need not have an argument for the existence of God in order to be justified in believing that God exists.

²³ Enoch actually presents the explanatory challenge as a backdrop to his positive indispensability argument for moral realism. In this section, I took the liberty of reorganizing his reasoning to suit the purposes of this article. The contents, I believe, are true to the original.

²⁴ A similar indispensability principle is defended by Wright (2004). Enoch and Schechter (2008) argue that indispensability considerations can vindicate basic belief-forming practices. McPherson & Plunkett (2015) argue that deliberative indispensability has no epistemic significance.

²⁵ Gellman (forthcoming) is a precursor of this argument. At the end of his paper, he outlines an indispensability argument for theism based on Wright's (2004) framework.

²⁶ 'Cannot' need not be interpreted as strict impossibility of any sort. It may be enough that the chances are significantly low.

²⁷ Enoch's views have shifted over the years on this issue. In 'An Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism' (Enoch 2003: 100), he goes for pragmatic indispensability, while in 'An Outline of an Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism' (Enoch, 2007, n. 30), he says he is undecided between the two. In his final version, recognizing that pragmatic indispensability alone is insufficient, he opts for normative indispensability. Nevertheless, he remains undecided as to whether pragmatic indispensability still plays a significant role in addition to normative indispensability. Perhaps, he suggests, pragmatic indispensability combines with something like a 'general principle of rationality according to which we are justified in pursuing projects we cannot disengage from' (Enoch 2011: 62). He again mentions the possibility that pragmatic indispensability plays a role when trying to defend the intrinsic indispensability of the deliberative project: '[D]eliberation too seems a rationally non-optional project for us. Perhaps this is so partly because we are *essentially* deliberative creatures. Perhaps, in other words, we *cannot* avoid asking ourselves what to do, what to believe, how to reason, what to care about' (Enoch 2011: 70).

²⁸ This and the other types of possible dependencies of morality on God are discussed in Sagi and Statman (1995) who also provide many helpful references.

²⁹ Interestingly, Enoch got his original inspiration from Kant (Enoch 2011: 76).

³⁰ A number of epistemologists develop the idea that seemings provide prima facie reasons for belief (Huemer 2007; Pryor 2013). Tucker's (2013) anthology is a helpful resource for learning more about these developments.

³¹ Some people find internalism with regard to rationality to be more convincing than internalism with regard to epistemic justification (Berker 2008). If they are correct, then the conclusion of my argument should be that theism and moral realism are equally rational as far as indispensability considerations go, but they may not be equally justified.

³² Many thanks to Brian Besong, David Enoch, C. Stephen Evans, Yehuda Gellman, Avital Hazony, Yakir Levin, Russ Shafer-Landau, Roger White and several anonymous

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