Moral objectivism and a punishing God

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**A B S T R A C T**

Many moral philosophers have assumed that ordinary folk embrace moral objectivism. But, if so, why do folk embrace objectivism? One possibility is the pervasive connection between religion and morality in ordinary life. Some theorists contend that God is viewed as a divine guarantor of right and wrong, rendering morality universal and absolute. But is belief in God per se sufficient for moral objectivism? In this paper, we present original research exploring the connections between metaethics and particular conceptions of God among religious participants. Study 1 shows that, when controlling for religiosity, age, and belief in God's loving characteristics, it is belief in God's punishing characteristics (specifically, the existence of Hell) that uniquely predicts rejection of moral relativism. Study 2 shows that followers of Abrahamic faiths are more likely to endorse moral objectivism when thinking of the Divine, regardless of loving or punishing characteristics. And Study 3 shows that priming for moral objectivism makes theists more likely to endorse God's punishing characteristics. A general picture is suggested by these data. For Abrahamic theists, God's particular characteristics are not germane to the question of whether his moral commandments are real and objective. And while theists strongly endorse God's loving characteristics, focusing on the objective nature of morality can highlight God's punishing nature, reminding theists that objective morality requires a divine guarantor of justice to enforce it.

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objective morality. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he speculates that slaves in the ancient world yearned for revenge against their masters, yet were powerless to act. Their frustration generated a compensatory belief that a noble God exists, is able to detect the objective evil in their masters, and will therefore punish them (even when the slaves themselves could not). The desire for revenge, then, generates not only belief in God, but also belief in supernatural punishment as well as the existence of objective moral facts (e.g., Simhabu, 2007). Freud, too, maintained that people create a supernatural “supreme court of justice” to ensure that “all good is rewarded and all evil punished” (Gay, 1995, p. 696).

In this paper we set out to investigate the connection between morality and religious belief at this higher level of analysis—to wit, the connection between belief in God and belief in moral objectivism. Many contemporary philosophers maintain that ordinary folk are objectivists about morality (e.g., Blackburn, 1998; Brink, 1989; Joyce, 2006; Shafer-Landau, 2003; Smith, 1994; see Sarkissian, 2016 for a review), and some research suggests they might be correct (Beebe, Qiaoan, Wysocki, & Endara, 2015; Beebe & Sackris, 2016; Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Heiphetz & Young, 2016; though see Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe, 2011 for evidence that folk might tacitly embrace relativism).

While multiple explanations could be offered for this, it seems, prima facie, that morality grounded in a theistic conceptual framework could help explain why ordinary folk embrace objectivism; after all, when the philosophers mentioned above make claims about “ordinary folk,” they are primarily referring to individuals who believe in a monotheistic God (Hackett, Grim, Stonowski, Skirbekk, & Potančoková, 2012), whose commandments apply absolutely and to everyone, regardless of their contingent beliefs or desires (Piazza & Landy, 2013). So, it might seem only natural for someone who believed in God to believe that some moral dictates stem from Divine Command, are objectively true, and only natural for someone who believed in God, but also belief in supernatural punishment as well as the existence of objective moral facts (e.g., Simhabu, 2007). Freud, too, maintained that people create a supernatural “supreme court of justice” to ensure that “all good is rewarded and all evil punished” (Gay, 1995, p. 696).

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Others have investigated this theistic explanation for folk objectivism. Goodwin and Darley (2008) support such an explanation, reporting that how people ground or justify their moral beliefs can predict whether they are objectivists about morality. In one of their experiments, they assessed participants’ commitments to moral objectivism by presenting them with a number of cases of moral disagreement, and asking whether they thought it was possible for both sides to be correct. Later, they asked participants how they grounded their moral beliefs by having them select from several metaethical justifications, including a divine command justification. This was followed by another question: “According to you, is it possible for there to be right and wrong acts, without the existence of God?” They found that participants who grounded their moral beliefs in divine command (“they are ordained by a supreme being”) were more objective than those who did not. What’s more, if participants answered the last question by claiming that there could be no right or wrong without God (or even if they were unsure), they were more objectivist still. However, these results failed to replicate in some further research (e.g., Wright, Grandjean, & McWhite, 2013).

More recently, Yilmaz and Bahçekapılı (2015) explored the relationship between religious belief and moral objectivism in a more systematic way. In one of their priming studies, participants primed with divinity concepts in a scrambled sentence task (such as *spirit, divine,* and *God*) endorsed moral objectivism and rejected moral relativism to a greater extent than did participants in a neutral prime condition. Yet they also found evidence for a causal connection running the other way; in a subsequent study, when participants were primed to think of morality in subjective terms (by reading a text that contrasted a moral claim with a highly objective scientific claim), they evinced lower levels of confidence in their belief in God.

The studies by Goodwin and Darley suggest a correlation between belief in God and an objectivist conception of morality. Yilmaz and Bahçekapılı suggest causal connections; when people think of religious concepts, they are more likely to endorse moral objectivism; conversely, when they are primed with moral subjectivism, they show lower levels of religiosity. Both of these studies provide support for the theistic explanation of folk objectivism.

However, a more nuanced possibility is suggested when considering these findings in light of other research suggesting that what matters for individual morality is not belief, per se, but how one thinks of God. For example, Shariff and Norenzayan (2011) found that how participants characterized God predicted their moral behavior. When given a chance to cheat in an experimental setting, participants who emphasized punishing aspects of God were less likely to do so compared to those who emphasized loving and merciful aspects of God. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2013) found that belief in a punishing God correlated with more aggressive (and less forgiving) responses to imagined social transgressions, while Yilmaz and Bahçekapılı (2015) found that priming participants with punishment, whether religious or secular, led to increased prosocial intentions. In other research, Shariff and Rhemtulla (2012) found that, across 67 countries, belief in Hell was negatively correlated with overall crime rates, whereas belief in Heaven was positively correlated with higher crime rates—even when controlling for GDP, income inequality, and other predictors of crime. Other findings support the diverging impact of endorsing God’s loving as opposed to punishing aspects (e.g., Harrell, 2012; Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007).

How do we make sense of these results? One approach would emphasize relationships between conceptualizations of God and views about morality. If belief in moral objectivism is correlated with conceiving of God as ‘punishing’ or ‘vengeful’ as opposed to ‘loving’ or ‘forgiving’, the previous pattern of results begins to make sense. Those who believe in a punishing God may be less likely to cheat and also less likely to forgive because they consider moral transgressions as objectively wrong.

To investigate this idea, we conducted three studies. The first shows a correlation between believing in a punishing God and rejecting moral relativism. The second and third explore the causal connections between these two variables. This investigation is of interest in at least two ways. First, it is of theoretical interest because it constitutes a novel investigation into the causal relationship between particular beliefs about God and moral objectivism. Second, it is of practical interest because, as noted, the connection between objectivist morality and belief in a punishing God could have implications for religious conflict, outgroup religious prosociality, and the prospects of tolerance and cosmopolitanism.

A Note about Agnostics and Atheists: In the following studies we investigate a potential relationship between belief in moral objectivism and conceptions of God. However, agnostics and atheists do not believe in God, and therefore cannot be predicted to conceive of God as having loving or punishing characteristics. Thus, we eliminated any participants who selected “Atheist/Agnostic/None” in response to the question, “What is your religion?” presented in the demographics phase of the studies below. However, for interest and transparency, we conducted analyses for atheists and report the single marginally significant result (for Study 3) in the Supplementary Materials (SM), along with a post-hoc interpretation of this finding.

We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions in the studies below.

1. Study 1

In this initial study, we tested for a correlation between belief in Hell (taken as a proxy for belief in a punishing God) and rejection of relativism about morality.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

Sample size was determined before any data analysis, using G*Power 3.1. We took a medium sized effect (0.30) as our threshold of
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