

# From “Is” to “Ought” in one easy step

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## 1 Introduction

The grounding of absolute morality requires surmounting some hurdles, including Euthyphro’s dilemma, Hume’s guillotine, and Moore’s naturalistic fallacy. This paper shows how those hurdles don’t prevent moral absolutes in a transcendent idealist setting. (Incomplete draft.)

## 2 Requirements

In order for an account of moral absolutes to succeed, it needs to be immune to a series of attacks that have been mounted against the possibility of any such account, including the following famous ones.

- Plato’s Socrates raised the Euthyphro dilemma, that any grounding of ethics in a god is either arbitrary or not really grounded in that god.
- Hume formulated the Is-Ought problem, that given premises that do not already contain an “ought”, no non-trivial conclusion<sup>2</sup> containing one can be reached.
- Moore (1903) pointed out the naturalistic fallacy, that any description of moral values in terms of non-moral facts still requires an additional argument explaining what makes those values moral.

There are more. Might doesn’t make right, so threat of (divine) punishment constitutes no ground, for instance.

## 3 Assumptions

In this paper we assume *transcendent idealism*<sup>3</sup>, i.e. a transcendence tree with a mind as the root, and we shall ground moral absolutes in that root.

## 4 The nature of morality

There are many candidates for moral entities: some hold them to be values, some to be obligations, and so on. Whatever they are, if they are absolute they are part of the world. They are not just opinions – not even opinions of some supernatural being. Socrates was correct in pointing out the absurdity of that position, and Moore would add that we should still need a reason to hold those opinions for moral.

At the same time, we have seen<sup>4</sup> that to the extent a supreme being can be given a moral status, it must be *good* – a supreme being cannot be bad or evil. That would point to the supreme being itself as the standard of goodness, and would seem to lead us to the first horn of the dilemma: that something is good because the supreme being wants it.

This necessary goodness (or rather non-evilness) also seems to clash with the absolute freedom of the supreme being – we also saw that to the extent it can be classified as free or determined it is free. If being non-evil means one doesn’t do any evil, how can a being that is necessarily non-evil at the same time be necessarily undetermined?

## 5 Omnipotence

Here it becomes important to distinguish the ontic and epistemic levels, and look deeper into the relationship of the supreme being to our world. For ease of reference we’ll assume that our world is directly dreamt by the supreme being, i.e. that there is only one transcendence level above us. This is no loss of generality, as essentially the same arguments, though more complex in their expression, can be formulated in the case of a root that is farther removed us. In the remainder we’ll call this supreme being, directly above our world, **God**.

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2 Trivial conclusions, such as by *or insertion* are of no interest here, as they don’t lead to moral consequences.

3 I define *transcendent idealism* and the notions around it (such as *transcendence tree*) in my [Transcendent Mediocrity is the Neutral Position](#).

4 In my [How to Speak about a Supreme Being](#). There I also define notions such as *prior and posterior properties*.

From our point of view, God as the dreamer of our world is almighty – whatever he dreams, believes, about our world is true by the very fact of his believing it. Such is the nature of dreams. So there is an unquotation rule<sup>5</sup> about God’s beliefs:

1.  $GB('X') \Rightarrow X$

That is, if God believes X, then X is true.

God, in dreaming our world, has decided to dream logical, physical, and mental rules for our world. It is those logical rules that let us conclude that God only has prior properties, and what those are. If he had dreamt different rules, possibly we would (correctly) have concluded him to have only posterior properties. It is also those rules that allow us to derive the above unquotation rule. As an example:

2.  $GB(' \forall a: a \vee \neg a') \Rightarrow \forall a: a \vee \neg a$

God also dreams our world as a *moral* world, that is a world with moral entities. It has freely chosen the nature of this world, so it, and the direction of its “moral arrow”, could have been different. We, living in this world, evaluate morality according to that arrow, and thus find worlds in which that arrow is different immoral. We also evaluate God according to that arrow, so to the extent that his dealing with our world agrees with it, he is moral. As an example:

3.  $GB(' \text{thou shalt not kill}') \Rightarrow \text{thou shalt not kill}$

This is the step from “is” to “ought” that, while impossible from first-order logic, is possible here because God’s beliefs (from our point of view) are of the second order.

Remark that moral commands are not binding because God imposes them on us – they are binding because they follow from the nature of our world, a nature that God has wanted. Therefore, the standard argument against divine command theory doesn’t hold, because imagining God commanding something different in *our* world would indeed merely make God not good<sup>6</sup>.

God also dreams the world such, that the various rules harmonise. So what is good also is what brings the greatest happiness in the end, and what furthers flourishing of conscious beings. From our point of view, God does this *because* he is good, but the whole (logical, etc.) basis from which we decide this is in the end freely dreamt by that same God.

## 6 Grounding morality

Naturalist accounts have a hard time grounding morality, because the only available ground is concreta (space, time, matter, energy). Even grounding logic runs against this problem in strict materialism – so under naturalism it is hard to see what this “moral arrow” would be.

A transcendent idealist account does not have this problem, because abstract values are primitive, and it is concreta that require grounding. We do have an empirical account of the latter, though, since whenever we dream we create an (often material) world, which obviously is grounded in our thoughts.

Epistemically, a vague analogy might be found in the way we perceive the “arrow of time”.

## 7 Evil

This account obviously requires an additional one to explain evil. One option would be the Christian one, that abuse of (good) freedom led to evil, and to God yielding this world in order to allow salvation. Elsewhere<sup>7</sup> I give a more theoretical account, as a proof that evil, suffering, God’s goodness, God’s justice, and a set of other facts can all be true at the same time.

## 8 References

Hume, David (1739). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Book III, Part I, section I.

Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia Ethica*. § 13.

<sup>5</sup> Not unlike the *evaluate* function in some languages such as APL or Scheme.

<sup>6</sup> Whether he could have created a world in which slowly cutting up babies for pleasure is the ultimate good, and where philosophers reject divine command theory by referring with horror to the imagined situation where saving people from starvation would be morally acceptable, merely because God would declare it to be, is an open question, but one of coherence, not of morality. Importing *our* moral intuitions into such a world where they don’t correspond to reality obviously creates friction, but that friction tells us something about our process – the inappropriateness of using those intuitions there –, not about the morality of that world. Their argument against divine command theory would have as much force in that world as our version has in ours.

<sup>7</sup> In my [A Baker’s Dozen Compossibles](#).

Plato. *Euthyphro*.