

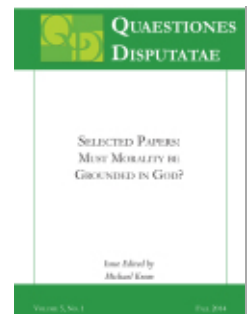


PROJECT MUSE®

Suárez's “Best Argument” and the Dependence of Morality on God

Mark C. Murphy

Quaestiones Disputatae, Volume 5, Number 1, Fall 2014, pp. 30-42 (Article)



Published by The Catholic University of America Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/578486>

Suárez's "Best Argument" and the Dependence of Morality on God

Mark C. Murphy

I want to begin by expressing misgivings about a standard way of making out a claim for the dependence of morality on God, misgivings that I do not have about a somewhat less standard way of arguing for this dependence. I will then consider a guiding maxim for how to proceed along this less standard way, a maxim that I draw from Suárez's account of the relationship between divine activity and the activity of secondary causes. I then sketch one way of conceiving the dependence of morality on God that fits well with this Suarezian maxim.

I. Against God-of-the-normative gaps and against the autonomy of ethics

Here is what seems to me to be the standard way of approaching the question 'Is morality grounded in God?' It is to treat morality as a phenomenon in need of explanation, and then to ask whether God or facts about God count as the best available explanation of that phenomenon. To deliver a positive answer, one needs to show that secular or naturalist or non-religious moral theory must fail to capture adequately some feature of morality, and so one must say that morality is thereby dependent on God.

One must, then, begin with a certain conception of morality. One might say that, perhaps, morality consists of the set of norms of action applying to all human (or all rational) creatures, which norms express some impartial point of view and with which all human (or all rational) creatures have strong, perhaps even decisive, reasons to comply. In carrying out this standard way of answering the 'does morality depend on God?' question, one would focus on one or another of the particular features attributed to morality and ask whether those features require some sort of theistic explanation. So one would then proceed to ask further questions of the following sort: "Can we make sense of norms that are not *someone's* norms—and if they have to be someone's norms, could they be anyone's but God's?"; "Given that moral norms would have to be universally applicable, could they exist unless laid down on everyone by God?"; "As points of view require subjects

who have those points of view, is there any candidate subject to occupy the impartial point of view other than God?”; “Can we make sense of the way that the moral provides decisive reasons for action, decisive even in the face of other, conflicting considerations, unless we have God’s ordering of things that makes it possible?”; and so forth.

Here is an example of this sort of strategy, not chosen randomly.¹ John Rist has argued that for something to be genuinely morally obligating it must be capable of entering into motivation in a particular way—for justice, say, to be binding upon us, it must be the case that “we are invariably capable at least of wanting to be just.”² Morality considered in this way, he argues, is more adequately accounted for by a religious conception of ethics, one that appeals not only to non-natural features, like Plato’s Forms, but to supernatural, personal agency. My point here is not to evaluate this particular argument, but just to indicate that it is an instance of the sort of argument for the dependence of morality on God that I have in mind.

It is of course obviously the case that any account that one gives of how morality depends on God must tell a theistic story that fits the facts about morality on the ground. So I of course agree that to give an account of how morality depends on God one’s account must indicate how facts about morality are explained by theistic facts. But I nevertheless want to try to distance myself from this standard way of providing an account of the dependence of morality on God. So let me register some misgivings about the standard way that I have described, and then try to sketch an alternative.

Here are my misgivings. The standard way of arguing for the dependence of morality on God—looking for particular features of the phenomenon of morality that need a theistic explanation in order to be adequately accounted for—looks too much to me like disreputable God-of-the-gaps theorizing. Within the natural order we might have a variety of questions about how to explain some phenomenon, and at any given time our explanations of those phenomena may fail to be complete. Lacking a natural explanation of a seemingly natural phenomenon, theists might well be tempted to appeal directly to supernatural explanation in order to provide the requisite account. But we have general grounds to be suspicious of such maneuvers. One ground for suspicion is specifically theistic: one may think that it denigrates the created order to think of it as lacking unity and integrity, requiring stopgap completion by special divine action. Another is that such explana-

¹ Professor Rist was one of the other keynote speakers at the conference at which this paper was presented. It is a good general maxim in philosophy that, if you must criticize someone, and a candidate for that role is in the room with you, make it that person.

² John Rist, “Morality and Religion: Some Questions about First Principles,” *Philosophical Investigations* 34 (2011): 214–38, esp. 222.

tions often understate the standards that a supernatural explanation would have to meet in order to count as superior to rival natural explanations on offer. A third is that such supernatural explanations tend to be supplanted by natural explanations, leading to the embarrassing spectacle of theists in seeming retreat in the face of advances in scientific understanding.

It seems to me that often this standard way of appealing to God in providing an account of the features of morality is subject to just this sort of worry. Let me give one example of uneven comparison and one of the comic appearance of ongoing retreat.

Here is the example of uneven comparison. In a debate with secular humanist Paul Kurtz, William Lane Craig claims that only a morality grounded in God can be metaphysically satisfactory. There are a number of particular features on which he focuses, but let's take his consideration of the objectivity of morality.

If theism is true, we have a sound basis for *objective moral values*. To say there are *objective* moral values is to say that something is good or evil independently of whether anyone believes it to be so. It is to say, for example, that the Holocaust was morally evil even though the Nazis who carried out thought that it was good.

On the theistic view, objective moral values are rooted in God. He is the locus and source of moral value. God's own holy and loving nature supplies the absolute standard against which all things are measured. He is by nature, loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth. Thus if God exists, objective moral values exist.³

We are offered no account here of exactly how God's nature provides the relevant standard, a fact which is treated as an important consideration against nontheistic accounts of the nature of moral value. In reply to Craig, a number of writers suggested that a standard nontheistic account treats moral value as grounded in prudential value—what is good for persons—but as valued from an impartial perspective, one that takes into account all of the persons who can be made well or badly off.⁴ Craig rejects this view, claiming that it is not straightforwardly entailed by the existence of prudential value and the capacity of humans to take this impartial point of view that there

³ William Lane Craig, opening statement to "The Kurtz/Craig Debate: Is Goodness without God Good Enough?," in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?*, ed. Robert Garcia and Nathan King (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 25–48, esp. 30.

⁴ See Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality," in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?*, 101–116, and Mark C. Murphy, "Theism, Atheism, and the Explanation of Moral Value," in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?*, 117–31.

is anything like moral value.⁵ But of course neither is it straightforwardly entailed by the proposition that God exists that there is anything like moral value. What we have here is a classic instance of uneven standards being applied to the debate at hand, treating an appeal to God as able to fill an explanatory gap when it is far from clear that this appeal succeeds any further than a nontheistic account does.

Here is the example of comic retreat. One way of trying to give an account of various normative notions is theological voluntarism—the appeal to God’s willing something in some way to provide the truthmaker for the fact that it is valuable in some way. The recent history of theological voluntarism is instructive. One finds in the mid-twentieth-century appeals to theological voluntarism as a way to account for value generally in the face of criticism of naturalist and noncognitivist accounts of value. God’s will has to be brought in where the natural fails. But the recent history of theological voluntarism is a retreat from this thoroughgoing view. In the face of relentless and devastating criticism of the notion that the divine will is the immediate and complete explanation of value generally, theological voluntarists retreated to the view that even if there is a nonvoluntarist account of the good, nevertheless we have to appeal to God’s will to explain rightness—why particular responses to the good, say, are appropriate and others are not. In the face of relentless and devastating criticism of the notion that rightness is immediately and completely explained by the divine will, theological voluntarists have retreated to the view that even if there is a nonvoluntarist account of goodness and rightness, nevertheless there is a specific kind of rightness—obligatoriness—that requires a voluntarist account. And even theological voluntarism of that very narrow sort has been placed under severe pressure.⁶ One is tempted to think that this sort of appeal to the divine will was a mistake from the start—that the features of natural morality that the voluntarists wanted to explain should be given a natural explanation, and if God is going to be brought into the explanation, it is *not* going to be in the way that the theological voluntarists have brought it in, as a device to fill some explanatory gap.

One might think that the problem here is the expectation that any explanation of the normative, theistic or not, is forthcoming. But in rejecting the God-of-the-normative-gaps as an account of the dependence of morality on God, I am not rejecting the possibility of theistic explanation of morality. Some theistic moral philosophers have accepted a thesis that we

⁵ Craig, “The Most Gruesome of Guests,” *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?*, 170.

⁶For an account of theological voluntarism as a degenerating research program, see my “Restricted Theological Voluntarism,” *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012): 679–90.

might call the thesis of the 'autonomy of ethics,' which would indeed in my view rule out theistic explanation of morality of the sort I want to endorse. On this autonomy-of-ethics view, the idea is that some central value ideas and value properties are irreducible, basic, and so any informative explanation of basic normative states of affairs is ruled out. We might give explanations of how we can bring about conditions in which value is realized, and we might give explanations of how we come to know what value propositions are true, and we might give explanations of how we are able to be motivated by truths about value. But the normative truths themselves are fundamental and inexplicable.

For most of *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, John Finnis emphasizes the basic and irreducible character of the basic goods. Is there, then, any informative account we can give of what it is to be good? No, that is just what its irreducibility consists in. Is there any informative account we can give of why the items that Finnis calls 'basic goods' or 'basic values'—life, knowledge, friendship, etc.—are good? No. How could there be, on this view? Explanation, as I am thinking about it here, appeals to what is more metaphysically basic in showing why what is so is so. Yet there appear to be no resources for explanation, in that sense, of the basic norms of practical reasonableness.

Now, one might retort that, whatever the appearances, this cannot be right as a reading of Finnis, for the final chapter of *Natural Law and Natural Rights* does appeal to God as part of the ultimate explanation of the natural law. But this is not so. Here is what Finnis takes the appeal to God to explain:

By... 'God' is... meant (i) that which explains the existence of the questioning subject; (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.⁷

Regardless of what Finnis thinks he is doing here, he is not providing an account of the holding of normative states of affairs but rather what enables us to respond to them effectively by aiming and bringing about instances of them. And that, I think, is the most that one could hope for if one commits oneself to such an autonomy-of-ethics thesis.

For the moment I just register that I do not share these scruples. I think that the possibility of informative explanations of the moral is live. The

⁷ John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1980),

existence of interesting theistic accounts (e.g., that offered by Robert Adams⁸) and non-theistic accounts (e.g., those offered by Peter Railton⁹ or Mark Schroeder¹⁰ and in a very different way Philippa Foot¹¹) is evidence for this. There are far too many worthwhile and non-debunking explanatory projects in ethics that are non-theistic to think that a *theistic* explanatory project can be shrugged off as contrary to ethics' autonomy. The best way to prove such a possibility is to provide an actuality, so at the end of this paper I shall sketch a sort of explanation against which I think that none of the worries that the new natural lawyers might raise have much force.

So far I have expressed misgivings about relying upon a God-of-the-normative-gaps account in order to provide an argument for the dependence of morality on God, though I have expressed no misgivings about the prospect of such an explanatory project. If there is going to be a way to carry out this explanatory project, it will have to be in other way than in this God-of-the-normative-gaps way.

II. An alternate way of approaching the dependence of morality on God

Here is an alternative.¹² While the standard way of proceeding asks what role God must have *vis-à-vis* morality for morality to be what it is, an alternative way of proceeding asks what role God must have *vis-à-vis* morality for *God* to be who *God* is.

The idea is to assume God's existence, and then to ask: Given what God is, what sort of dependence of morality on God should we expect? A comparison, to which we will revert multiple times: If we are thinking of the *natural* world of existing things, we would expect to find that, given God's existence, that natural world is somehow dependent on God for its existence and character, for the nature of God as sovereign entails that there must be some dependence relationship between God and all else that exists. Similarly, we might think this of the normative order. We might well think that because

⁸ Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 163–207; and Peter Railton, "Naturalism and Prescriptivity," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 7 (1989): 151–74.

¹⁰ Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹² The following is, roughly, the methodology of my *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

God must be sovereign—the ultimate source, the ultimate explainer, of all else—we must take the normative order to be dependent on God as well.

One might balk at this comparison between the natural and the normative orders. The natural order, some say, is thoroughly contingent, while the normative order holds as a matter of necessity. As what is contingent requires explanation and what is necessary does not, there is reason to think that God is the ultimate explanation of the natural world though not the ultimate explanation of the normative world. There is more than one way to respond here. But the response I would focus on is the rejection of the idea that the necessary does not require explanation. Some necessities are necessary through themselves, and some are necessary through others. What is necessary through something else has an explanation, that is, that something else. (Suppose the Islamic necessitarians were right that God necessarily created. If so, *there being something other than God* would be necessary. But it would obviously have an explanation!) So the fact that the normative order is fundamentally necessary does not stand in the way of its having an explanation, and in particular a theistic explanation.

One might also object that my way of framing the explanatory issue makes the question of the dependence of morality upon God trivial. If the key thesis is not *Morality must depend on God* but *Given God's existence, morality must depend on God*, have I not traded in the discussion of an interesting claim for the discussion of a trivial one? No. There are lots of folks, theists and nontheists alike, who hold what I have labeled above as the 'autonomy-of-ethics thesis,' an entailment of which is that God does not stand in a general explanatory relationship to truths about morality. They would deny that *Given God's existence, morality must depend on God*. The motivations for this view are various: some involve the inability to accept the possibility of explanation of fundamental moral truths, others the strong desire to avoid what they take to be an inevitable outcome of this sort of explanatory account, that is, some sort of raging theological voluntarism. I don't think either of these are good reasons to worry about the fundamental dependence of morality on God. But my main point at the moment is that this thesis is not a trivial one, and so worth discussing.

III. Suárez's "best argument" for concurrentism in the natural order

My view, then, is that the dependence of morality upon God is best explored as an implication of what we might call God's "job description"—that is, what a being must be like to count as God. I have suggested that this depen-

dence of morality on God is a matter of divine sovereignty, and that a fully sovereign God will be sovereign over morality.

But what sort of dependence of morality on God should we, then, affirm? How are truths about morality related to facts about God?

My view here is that the best way to approach this question is to go back to the analogy between God and the natural order. Suppose we think that God is sovereign over the whole created world, and that its existence and character thus depends on God. I take it that we nevertheless will very likely want to affirm the following about the created world: we will want to say that there are a number of *general truths* about the natural world, and that these general truths exhibit some sort of *necessity*; either they are metaphysically necessary truths, or at least they exhibit some sort of lesser modality, like physical necessity. Furthermore, these truths are *knowable* through the ordinary natural processes of coming to understanding about the natural world. And these general truths exhibit an *explanatory order* among them, and this explanatory order is *unified* in some way and is itself *complete* in its own order, so that for every nonmiraculous happening in the natural order the question “why did this happening occur rather than some other?” there is a complete answer in terms of natural features.

This is a pretty strong view of the unity of nature and of our natural capacities to know it. One might think that such a view of the natural order commits one to holding a strongly deistic picture of the dependence of nature on God—God just brings the whole shebang into existence, or at best brings about and conserves in existence the whole creaturely order. But this conception of the natural order as knowable, characterizable in terms of necessary universal truths, and explanatorily unified and complete in its own order was endorsed by theists who held a much more robust account of the dependence relationship between nature and God. These were *concurrentists* about the natural order.¹³ On their view, in every transaction in the natural order—fire burning cotton, water dissolving salt—there is a cooperation between God and creature in bringing about the effect. Every non-miraculous action in the natural order is, on this view, the result of a concurrence between God and creature.

How is this different from the sort of God-of-the-gaps view that I was treating suspiciously above? The idea is not that there are any *natural* gaps; natural explanations are typically sufficient as explanations, and there

¹³ Aquinas affirmed a concurrentist view, as did Molina and Suárez, as did Leibniz. Contemporary discussion of concurrentism is massively indebted to the work of Fred Fredoso; see especially his papers “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation is Not Enough,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 553–85 and “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Pitfalls and Prospects,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1994): 131–56.

is typically no appeal to some specific divine action to explain why this happened rather than that. (The exception would be in the case of miraculous events.) The idea, rather, is that the cooperation is *general*, for the divine contribution does not itself specify a particular natural effect. Nonetheless, this is far from mere deism or conservationism, for although God's contribution is general, it is fully *immediate*. Both the creature and God cooperate in producing each effect in the natural order, though they contribute differently. There is no level of analysis at which something happens in the natural order in which there is no divine involvement.

It is not to my purpose to get into the metaphysics of concurrence. This is hard stuff, and I would just screw it up. Let me fix, though, one model of divine concurrence, a model at least suggested in Aquinas's work and made explicit and precise in Molina's. On this view, the model is that what God contributes is being, while the specific natures of the creatures involved in the transaction determine the particular character of the effect. So Aquinas says that creaturely causes are "like particularizers and determinants of the primary agent's [that is, God's] action,"¹⁴ and Molina writes that

God's general concurrence is channeled by the particular concurrence of the secondary causes in a way not unlike that in which the influence of the sun, which is also universal, is channeled by the action of a human being in order to generate a human being and by the action of a horse in order to produce a horse.¹⁵

Jeffrey McDonough offers a wonderfully mundane analogy: the relationship among electricity, the toaster, and the activity of toasting.¹⁶ While the electricity that powers the toaster explains why something happens when the toaster's mechanism is engaged and the element begins to heat up, it is only because the appliance is a *toaster* that the activity resulting is a heating, a toasting, rather than something else (a vacuuming, a coffeemaking, etc.)

So far I have suggested that we can look to the dependence of the natural order on God for some guidance in how we are to think of the dependence of the normative order on God. Even if we want to think of the natural order as exhibiting necessities galore and an explanatory unity and

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.66.6 in Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book Three: Providence, Part I*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 218.

¹⁵ Molina, *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione concordia*, part 2, disp. 26, §11, trans. Alfred Freddoso (unpublished translation, last accessed August 18th, 2014), <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddoso/translate/molina26.htm>.

¹⁶ Jeffrey McDonough, "Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence," *Leibniz Review* 17 (2007): 31–60, esp. 43.

completeness, we can nevertheless consistently with such a view ascribe a very intimate role to God in the bringing about of every effect in the natural order—God’s concurrence involves an immediate, though general, causal involvement in the bringing about of every effect, and this necessarily, so that no creature is capable of bringing about any effect in the absence of divine cooperation. What we have not considered is why we ought to affirm this account of the relationship between God and the natural order. If we want an account on which God’s role is immediate, we might be tempted by the occasionalist picture on which God is the immediate and complete cause of every event in the natural order, but I take it that this is ruled out if we think of the laws of nature as exhibiting some sort of necessity and creatures as really making a difference to what happens in the natural order. So views more extreme than concurrentism, such as occasionalism, may be off the table. But what about weaker views, like deism or conservationism? Why go for this very strong view, on which God is immediately involved in every natural effect?

Suárez, a defender of the concurrentist view, considers a variety of reasons for thinking that the action of creatures requires divine cooperation. Some of these arguments hold that it is arbitrary or incoherent to hold that God conserves effects in existence while rejecting that God concurs in the bringing about of those effects. Some make appeals to Scripture, either to direct descriptions of divine cooperation with the action of creatures or to reports that seem best explained on a concurrentist theory of divine action in nature (e.g., the miraculous non-incineration of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, which Suárez interprets to be a case in which God miraculously withheld concurrence from the fire while leaving the fire’s nature intact). But he saves what he calls his ‘best argument’ for last:

This manner of acting [i.e., divine concurrence in the ordinary course of nature] in and with all agents pertains to the breadth of divine power, and on God’s part it presupposes a perfection untainted by imperfection; and even though it does bespeak an imperfection on the part of the creature, ...this imperfection is nonetheless endemic to the very concept of a creature or participated being as such.... For the rest, there is in this way a perfect and essential ordering between the First Cause and the secondary cause, and there is nothing impossible here...therefore, this general influence should not be denied to God.¹⁷

¹⁷ Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 22, §1, 13, in Suárez, *On Creation, Conservation, and Concurrence: Metaphysical Disputations* 20–22, trans. with an introduction by Alfred Freddoso (St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), 22, 1, 13.

I understand Suárez here to be making an argument from the perfection of the divine nature to the concurrentist account of divine action in nature. It befits the perfection of the divine nature to be involved in this intimate way in the bringing about of events in the natural order. While it correspondingly involves some imperfection in creatures—just as creatures must be created and conserved by God, and are not self-existent as God is, they are also unable to act on their own—this is an imperfection that befits the created condition. And as nothing precludes this relationship between God and creature in the bringing about of events in the natural order, then, that relationship ought to be affirmed.

This way of arguing for the thoroughgoing dependence on God of all events in the natural order is a far cry from the God-of-the-gaps style argument. Suárez suggests that the best argument appeals primarily to God's nature—it speaks to the "breadth of divine power" and is possible only for a being whose "perfection is untainted by imperfection." And so we should take God's involvement in nature to be the more extensive concurrentist account rather than the less extensive conservationist or deistic accounts.

IV. Moral concurrentism

So I say that there is an approach to the question of the dependence of morality on God that comes from the God side of things rather than the morality side of things. This sort of approach is suggested by what Suárez calls his 'best argument' for concurrentism about transactions in the natural order. It argues for giving as extensive and immediate a role for divine action in the natural order as is compatible with giving creatures an irreducible, nonsuperfluous role in the goings-on of the natural order. Indeed the concurrentist picture is compatible with the desiderata that I described above, that there are a number of general truths about the natural world, and that these general truths exhibit some sort of necessity. Scientific knowledge of these truths is available through the ordinary natural processes of coming to understanding about the natural world. And these general truths exhibit an explanatory order among them, and this explanatory order is unified in some way and is itself complete in its own order, so that for every nonmiraculous happening in the natural order the question "why did this happening occur rather than some other?" there is a complete answer in terms of natural features.

But our topic is morality and God. And my point is that there is nothing to stand in the way of our appropriation of Suárez's best argument for concurrentism, and the central concurrentist ideas themselves, to offer a more satisfactory account of the relationship between God and the moral order.

Suppose that we think about morality what we think about the laws of nature. There are a variety of general truths about morality, truths that hold as a matter of necessity. We are capable of knowing these truths through ordinary natural processes, processes that enable us to grasp what goods there are and what sorts of responses by us agents are appropriate or inappropriate with respect to them. These truths have an orderly, systematic character, such that explanations of why this action is morally required rather than that one are, in all but the most exceptional cases, explained by appeal to these naturally known general truths of morality. In short, suppose we think that something like a natural law moral theory is, in outline if not in details, the correct account of what morality is like.

Is there any room for theistic explanation of morality in this picture? It may seem not: it may seem that this systematic, unified, complete set of moral necessities rules out the prospect that there would be any meaningful sense in which God's nature or action explains morality. What seems to be doing all of the work of moral explanation is just the goods that humans are naturally capable of grasping and which morally necessitate our acting in certain ways in response to them. But it would be hasty to conclude that there is no room for theistic explanation. After all, even if the laws of nature exhibit the same sorts of features, the concurrentists described a way for there to be extensive, immediate theistic involvement in everything that happens in the natural order. So perhaps there is something analogous to concurrentism for the normative order, a normative, or moral, concurrentism.

The crucial idea of concurrentism is that there is divine and creaturely cooperation in bringing about effects in the natural order. On the one specification of concurrentism that I sketched, we can think of God as contributing something more general while the creatures contribute the specific sort of transaction that will take place. Suppose, then, that we think of God not in God's role as first efficient cause, but as the first good, as goodness itself, such that all particular creaturely goods are good by participation. We might say, for example, following Robert Adams, that all creaturely goods are goods insofar as they bear a likeness to the divine nature;¹⁸ but diverse creatures have diverse goods insofar as these creatures bear specific natures that make it true that they are supposed to be like God in specific ways.¹⁹ What makes me good and what makes a kudzu vine good are both alike insofar as they are likenesses to God, but what diversifies these goods is that the kudzu vine and I have distinctive natures, in virtue of which I count as a failing to

¹⁸ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 28–38.

¹⁹ This is the theistic account of goodness defended in chapter six of my *God and Moral Law*.

realize my good as a human if I fail to be able to think and choose while the kudzu vine does not fail in realizing its good if it cannot do these things.

A theistic account of the *humanly* good, then, should appeal both to human goods' being ways in which humans are made like to God and its belonging to our kind to be like God in these ways. If this is correct, then we can sketch an account of what it would be for human agency to be good—how certain instances of it can be good or less good, and how indeed certain *kinds* of agency are invariably defective and deficient. Human action is humanly good if and only if it constitutes a nondefective response to the goods and bads that bear on that action; otherwise it is bad. A type of action is wrong if and only if to be an action of that type is to be a bad human action. For an action to be bad is for it in some way to be a flawed response to the good. But if that is the correct explanation of moral norms, then the moral concurrentist claims that morality is immediately explained by both God *and* creaturely natures.

This way of conceiving the explanation of morality is not a God-of-the-normative-gaps style of argument. There is no argument that natural goods leave a gap in the capacity to necessitate that has to be filled by an act of divine will, or anything of that sort. While the unity and completeness of the natural moral order is affirmed, though, it is affirmed in a way that leaves open the possibility of theistic explanation and theistic dependence.

Why should theists, then, accept this, or some similar, sort of theistic explanation of morality? Here I conclude by appealing to Suárez's "best argument." Theism requires us to think of God as highly as possible. Part of thinking of God as highly as possible is to think of God as sovereign over the normative order, so that facts about the normative order depend on, and are controlled by, facts about God. And there is, as Suárez puts it, "nothing impossible here": the normative concurrentist model of morality is coherent. We ought, then, to attribute to God this thoroughgoing role in the explanation of morality; this "general influence should not be denied to God."

—Georgetown University