p. 24). In this chapter, I am proposing a longer walk through the issues than in other chapters in order to get a clearer picture of the terrain and to help to locate areas for more focused philosophical study.

Preliminary Distinctions

Many of us assume there are certain actions that are morally right and morally wrong, good and bad. The terms “morally right” and “morally wrong” apply principally to actions as in Acting with integrity is morally right, and Killing the innocent is wrong, or omissions as in Failing to prevent famine is morally wrong. The terms “good” and “bad” can be used in assessing actions, but they can also be used more extensively. “Good” and “Evil” can describe states of affairs in which there may or may not be moral or immoral action. The state of affairs The death of thousands may be deemed bad and The happiness of thousands may be deemed good even if neither involves any moral action or omission. The first state of affairs may be bad and the second good regardless of whether either is the result of moral or immoral action (e.g., they are brought about by volcanic eruptions, droughts, tidal waves). So, the state of affairs There being a beautiful island may be deemed good but not morally right, as islands cannot be morally right or wrong. John Doe acts justly, on the other hand, may refer both to a good state of affairs and to a morally right action.

Following current practice, the terms “ethical” and “moral” will be treated synonymously. (In the past, the English term “moral” would be used to refer to assessing the rightness or wrongness of action whereas “ethical” would be used when matters of character are highlighted, e.g. integrity, courage and cowardice.) “Value theory” names the general area in which one reflects on ethics along with other values and disvalues such as beauty and ugliness, knowledge and ignorance.

The view that there is no such thing as moral rightness and wrongness, or good and evil, is called nihilism (from the Latin nihil meaning “nothing”). Nihilists may grant that it makes sense within a given society to utilize the categories “good” and “bad” in relation to various conventions. They may acknowledge prevailing social laws and think it prudent to conform to them, but nihilists do not think that there is a fact of the matter as to whether some action is truly right or wrong. Following the laws and conventions of one society rather than another is neither morally right nor wrong.

A moral skeptic does not affirm or deny objective moral codes and values, but

withholds judgment about their status. A moral skeptic is like the agnostic who neither affirms nor denies theism.

Ethical relativists maintain that there are moral rights and wrongs but that these are relative to different conditions. This thesis is close to nihilism, but distinguishable from it insofar as relativists think there are facts that do count as establishing moral rightness and wrongness. An individual relativist claims that judgments of moral rightness and wrongness are relative to the individual making the judgment. On one version of this view, individual relativism, for me to claim “X is wrong” means the same thing as “I disapprove of X.” A cultural relativist claims that the legitimacy of moral judgments is relative to cultures. According to this view, to claim that “Y is wrong” means the same thing as “Y is disapproved of by or in some culture.”

In contrast with nihilism and relativism there are different forms of moral realism according to which there are bona fide moral facts. Moral realists hold that certain acts are truly wrong (such as torturing the innocent) and truly right (such as acting courageously to protect the innocent) regardless of social conventions, or individual approval or disapproval. Moral realism is sometimes referred to as moral or ethical objectivism. I am using the term “moral realism” very broadly to encompass any view that upholds objective moral values.

One may be a stringent moral realist and claim that there are moral rules and principles of an absolute, universal kind that do not admit of variation in application. On this view there may be rules such as lying is always wrong, theft is always bad and so on, that hold in all contexts. More qualified forms of moral realism may claim that there are some bedrock absolutes (for example: murder, rape, torture are absolute wrongs and always prohibited) but that certain contexts can permit actions that are otherwise wrong. Thus, someone may claim that lying is wrong but only prima facie (literally “at first glance”). That is, the fact that some action is a lie counts as a reason not to do that act and yet, all things considered, it may be morally required for a person to lie if it is reasonable to believe that doing so will prevent catastrophic harm. Consider the following thought experiment. You live during a fierce persecution of innocent people whom you protect, hiding them from their brutal pursuers. You are asked by a belligerent army officer whether you are indeed harboring such people. A moral realist may deem you morally required to lie, deliberately deceiving the pursuer, even though, if conditions were otherwise, lying would be wrong. Such a qualified position might well be called contextual moral realism. What marks a moral realist (whether a contextualist or a more stringent realist) is that she does not think that the bare approval of a human being
or a culture automatically makes something right or good for that person or culture. While moral realism allows that an individual could, in principle, approve of actions that are wrong, and so could whole cultures, relativism does not. For the relativist who claims that what a culture approves is what defines moral rightness in that setting, it cannot be the case that what a culture approves of is not morally right.

One reason for adopting moral realism is based on an appeal to common experience and judgments. This may amount to appealing to what philosophers variously call intuition, reason, insight, common sense, or experience. To this end, some philosophers advance moral realism simply by describing cases that they hope will bring to light the plausibility of moral realism. Consider, for example, this description of atrocities from Dostoevski’s novel The Brothers Karamazov:

They burn villages, murder, outrage women and children, they nail their prisoners by the ears to the fences, leave them to till morning, and in the morning they hang them all—all sorts of things you can’t imagine. People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that’s a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that’s all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it. These Turks took a pleasure in torturing children too; cutting the unborn child from the mother’s womb, and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mother’s eyes. Doing it before the mother’s eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They’ve planned a diversion; they pet the baby, laugh to make it laugh. They succeed, the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby’s face. The baby laughs with glee, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and he pulls the trigger in the baby’s face and blows out its brains. Artistic, wasn’t it? (Dostoevsky, trans. 1950, p. 283)

Moral realism is served insofar as one feels (or senses or judges or intuits or simply reasonably believes) that such action must be objectively wrong. Nihilists are committed to holding that nothing objectively evil takes place in the events described by Dostoevsky. Relativists can condemn such atrocities from the standpoint of individual victims (a victim’s crying out “that is wrong” would mean he or she does not approve of it), or cultures (the action took place in a culture that did not approve of it). But, from the standpoint of the person inflicting the suffering, the behavior may be permissible.

There are, as will be noted later, many forms of moral realism. But first let us consider some of the reasons behind the rejection of moral realism. Moral realism is not the most popular of philosophical positions. William Lycan writes: “Moral facts are right up there... in the ranks of items uncordially despised by most contemporary philosophers” (Lycan 1988, p. 198). It is not obvious that most contemporary philosophers reject the category of objective moral facts, but certainly many do and it is important to consider some of the reasons why this is so before we consider competing accounts of values in religious contexts.

Reasons For and Against Moral Realism

What follows are four arguments commonly employed against recognizing objective values. Replies to each will then be considered.

(A) Perhaps the most common complaint against moral realism is the charge that if it were true there would be less diversity of moral practices and beliefs. There is widespread variation of moral codes both between societies and within most societies. Therefore moral realism is false (Benedict 1934; Mackie 1977).

(B) Following from the first objection is the charge that moral realism is not borne out by any evident, stable moral methodology. Granted, if only for the sake of argument, that there are objective values, how can we discover what these are? If there is a stable method for identifying moral facts, then they can have a rightful place in our deliberations and practical affairs. But if we have no reliable way to determine what they are, they seem to be useless. Moral facts can do no work in our deliberations. We are better off ignoring claims to objectivity and simply regarding moral disagreements as the reflection of different individual or cultural preferences. For arguments against moral realism on the grounds that it lacks a proper methodology, see Mackie (1977) and Harman (1977).

(C) An argument against moral realism has been advanced by J. L. Mackie that he calls, “The Argument from Queerness.” “Queerness” is the term Mackie employs in his case for “the metaphysical peculiarity of the supposed objective values” (Mackie 1977, p. 49). From Mackie’s point of view, empirical propositions about the world and our feelings and judgments can be accommodated in a reasonable theory about nature. Objective values, on the other hand, are comparatively peculiar objects. Moral facts cannot be seen or weighed or felt. Moreover, when a person judges an action to be morally
required she appears to be committed to believing she has a reason to do the act. Judgments about colors, shapes, and so on do not have a parallel structure. According to Mackie, theories explaining objective moral facts as basic features of the world leave one with more mystery than concluding that they are merely reflections of our subjective projections.

(D) The belief in moral facts, objective rights and wrongs, has had a horrifying role in colonialism and other oppressive practices. Many of the world’s atrocities have been justified on the basis of their serving what is believed to be a great, objective good. Along these lines one may take note of the title of one of Bertrand Russell’s essays: “The Harm that Good Men Do,” or Karl Popper’s chronicle of the harms done in the name of utopian ideals: The Open Society and its Enemies.

Consider a series of replies on behalf of moral realism.

REPLY TO (A): Two replies are often marshaled in response to the objection from moral diversity.

(i) The first is to acknowledge that there are indeed widespread differences between societies and within societies in terms of moral belief and practice, but to argue that such differences have no bearing on the status of objective moral facts and values. This strategy is akin to that used by the logician Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) in his reply to an objection against an objective account of logical relations. He considered the possibility of there being cultures in which people embraced what are, for us, absurdities like “1 + 1 = 3.” Should discovering such cultures weaken our commitment to an objective account of mathematical and logical relations? His conclusion was that unless these foreign symbols are different from ours (for example, their “1” means “1.5” in our system, while “3” stays the same as “3” for us) such cultural beliefs are simply mistaken. Just as Frege contended that the abandonment of an objective account of logical and mathematical relations lands us in absurdity, it may be argued that the abandonment of an objective account of values lands us in moral absurdity. According to some moral realists, moral experience can itself deliver assurance that, for example, torture, rape, and so on, are morally wrong. Anyone who fails to see that torture is evil is morally blind (see Elizabeth Anscombe and Dietrich von Hildebrand).

(ii) Another reply to argument (A) is more elaborate. One can question the thesis that there is indeed widespread diversity of moral codes across cultures. Some moral realists contend that there is more consensus and considerably fewer differences than appear at first. It is argued that while an initial review of the anthropological and sociological data may lead one to believe there are radically different views of morality across cultures, these differences should not obscure the massive amount of agreement between societies and cultures. Peter Singer, a leading contemporary ethicist, summarizes his overall assessment of the spectrum of moral practices as follows:

For ethics is not a meaningless series of different things to different people in different times and places. Rather, against a background of historically and culturally diverse approaches to the question of how we ought to live, the degree of convergence is striking. Human nature has its constants and there are only a limited number of ways in which human beings can live together and flourish; indeed... some of the features common to the nature of human beings in different societies are common to the nature of any long-lived, intelligent social mammals, and are reflected in our behavior as they are reflected in that of other primates. Hence what is recognized as a virtue in one society or religious tradition is very likely to be recognized as a virtue in the others; certainly, the set of virtues praised in one major tradition never make up a substantial part of the set of virtues of another major tradition. (Exceptions tend to be short-lived, societies in the process of decay or self-destruction.) Moreover within each tradition, the same oscillating currents can be observed: there are periods in which the emphasis is on the performance of conventional duties, obligations or roles; then a great reformer will appear, urging that we have become so far steeped in obedience to the rules, so conventional in our ways of thinking and acting, that we have forgotten the higher goods by which the moral conventions themselves must be justified. Thus Buddha stressed egolessness rather than observance of the Hindu rituals of his day, as Mozes argued that we should observe universal love, not the particular duties specified by Confucianism, and as Jesus taught that love of God and neighbour was more important than following the letter of the prevailing Jewish moral law. (Singer [ed.] 1991, pp. 553, 544)

Moral realists such as Ralph Linton have argued in substantial detail for the common moral bond between cultures concerning many ethical precepts (see Linton 1954, especially pp. 145–68). If Singer, Linton, and others are correct, then the objection from diversity does not succeed.

This highlighting of the uniformity of ethical principles may be reinforced by noting the ways in which moral disagreements arise. Many moral disagreements seem to rest on differences about nonmoral matters, namely one’s grasp of what may be called the nonmoral facts, one’s abilities to effectively be apprised of the points of views of others, and one’s ability to be impartial. I briefly note the importance of each and how variation of abilities in each area can shape one’s moral reasoning. This material will be used later in theistic treatment of a God’s eye view of moral disagreements.
Nonmoral facts. Consider some of the ways in which moral disagreements stem from empirical disagreements. A disagreement about whether a war is justified may rest upon different judgments about who started it. A disagreement over the permissibility of nuclear power may rest upon divergent assessments of the probability of highly destructive radiation. A disagreement over the ethics of famine relief may rest upon competing assessments of whether such relief will be successful in overturning famine in the long run. All these areas of moral divergence rest upon matters that one may call "nonmoral facts" in the sense that they can be described without any explicit use of moral terminology. Thus, one can describe different famine relief policies without using terms like "right," "wrong," "evil," "good," "cruel," and the like. It is often on the basis of one's view of what I am referring to as "nonmoral facts" that a view of the moral facts is derived.

Affective appraisal. Moral disagreements may stem not just from divergent assessments of nonmoral facts, but from different assessments of the relevant feelings involved. Two parties may know the same facts about, say, famine relief (they know the numbers involved, the likely survival rate if certain relief projects are funded, and so on), but have radically divergent views of the affective repercussions of either giving or withholding such relief. This condition of affective appraisal might well be seen as simply one more nonmoral fact of the matter, but I distinguish it to highlight the role of feelings in moral reflection. The base for our moral judgments is often not just clinical, abstract beliefs about various states of affairs, but borne out in an understanding of how things feel to those involved. Different levels of experience and exposure to such feelings can fuel different moral judgments. A disagreement about the ethics of famine relief may not stem from disagreement about some of the statistical facts of the case (both parties know that 20,000 die per day from famine-related causes), but from the fact that one person has not affectively grasped what it is like to be a victim of famine while the other has.

Impartiality. Some moral disagreements seem to arise from the failure of competing parties to achieve impartiality. Impartiality is often seen as an essential condition of moral reasoning (see, for example, Immanuel Kant and Stephen Darwell). It is frequently professed but less frequently practiced. The widespread appeal across cultures of the Golden Rule of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is evidence of the widely recognized thesis that moral reasoning needs to stand the test of hypothetical role reversal of some kind, a putting yourself in the other person's shoes, so to speak. (It is called "Golden" because of its presumed worth and is often found alongside the so-called "Silver Rule" of "Do not do unto others as you would prefer that they do not do unto you.")

If divergences with respect to the above three areas are taken seriously, then much of what counts as moral disagreement may be seen to rest on the failure to agree on these other matters. It may be that parties can agree on the ethical principles that are binding while disagreeing on how they are to be applied. For example, people could agree that one ought not to kill innocent persons, while disagreeing about the nonmoral fact of whether the human fetus is a person, or diverging in the ability affectively and impartially to grasp the points of view of involved parties.

Reply to (B): True, there is not a universally agreed list of sufficient conditions for moral reasoning. But the observations made in reply to Objection (A) about the importance of knowing the nonmoral facts, being apprised of the points of view of involved parties, and impartiality, do name what many believe to be essential conditions in moral reflection, even if other factors should be included as well. Thus, it would be paradoxical, if not incoherent, to claim that proper moral reasoning on some topic, X, involves relying on faulty data about the nonmoral facts, a faulty sense of the ways the different parties are affected by X, and only involving the immediate desires of what the so-called moral reasoner wants (Singer 1972). This may not be sufficient for an account of what constitutes moral reasoning, but it is at least a start.

As noted above, the fact that there are many moral disagreements within societies and across societies need not be seen as a sign of deep discord on all moral matters, including moral methodology. In fact, one test of the degree of moral accord between cultures and between groups within cultures is the extent to which moral arguments are even possible. An argument between parties requires some agreement. If one's beliefs and values differ entirely from another party, there can be little hope of a common language in which to carry out debate. So while apparent disagreement across cultures on moral matters is a significant obstacle to the claim that all reasonable people know what is right and wrong, disagreement itself and the ability of competing parties to argue with one another can be evidence of a deep, common accord (Rachels 1986).

Reply to (C): Moral rightness and wrongness may be no more strange or "queer" than other items that make up plausible accounts of the world. Compare moral realism with a standard account of evidence on the theory of
knowledge. It may be argued that ethics is no more strange or queer than standard accounts of the justification of our beliefs. Many philosophers recognize that some beliefs are better justified or more evident than others, and that such justification amounts to a normative constraint on one’s beliefs. Thus, if you have sufficient justification (evidence) for some position, you ought to believe it. On this view, one may be held accountable (blameworthy or praiseworthy), depending upon how one weighs evidence. If one acknowledges that there are objective, normative constraints about what ought and ought not to be believed, why think these are any less odd than thinking there are objective, normative constraints about what one ought and ought not to do? (Brink 1984) For further reflection on the nature of justification and evidence, see chapter 8.)

Reply to (D): Undoubtedly, great harms have been done in the name of what is believed to be the morally right thing to do. But if there are no objective moral facts or principles, then it is difficult to condemn these harmful acts as immoral or to blame societies for unfairly imposing their standards on others. One can condemn imperialism and international belligerence on the basis of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), but unless the Declaration is believed to reflect what is objectively right and valuable about human life, such condemnation has little worth except as an expression of power and threat of punishment. From a relativist position, it is unclear why the Declaration should have any moral significance for a culture that fails to see the Declaration as binding. For the relativist and nihilist there can be no condemnation of what is believed to be, objectively, morally wrong practices, such as female circumcision in Africa, or the old practice in Japan of nukigiri (“crossroads cut”) in which a Samurai tests his new sword by cutting a person in two (Midgley 1981). Those who reject objective values might find such practices repellent, and appeal to our felt dispositions or instincts to reject them. So, for example, Bertrand Russell signals his own preference for Buddhist ethics as opposed to what he sees as a cruel view of life advanced by Nietzsche:

For my part, I agree with Buddha as I have imagined him. But I do not know how to prove that he is right by any arguments such as can be used in a mathematical or a scientific question. I dislike Nietzsche because he likes the contemplation of pain, because he erects conceit into duty, because the men whom he most admires are conquerors, whose glory is cleverness in causing men to die. But I think the ultimate argument against his philosophy, as against any unpleasant but internally self-consistent ethic, lies not in an appeal to facts, but in an appeal to the emotions. Nietzsche despises universal love; I feel it the motive power to all that I desire as regards the world. His followers have had their innings, but we may hope that it is coming rapidly to an end. (Russell 1957, p. 800)

Moral realists may also appeal to emotions as well (love of persons, affective sympathetic identification with the oppressed) but they would see these as responding to objective values (it is a fact that persons ought to be loved) rather than mere expressions of emotion. But to relativists who do not share Russell’s emotions or Buddhist compassion, there may be no ideological barriers to very cruel practices. Note the way in which the Italian fascist Mussolini used relativism:

In Germany relativism is an exceedingly daring and subversive theoretical construction (perhaps Germany’s philosophical revenge) which may herald the military revenge. In Italy, relativism is simply a fact . . . Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism by intuition . . . If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective and immortal truth . . . then there is nothing more relativistic than Fascist attitudes and activity . . . From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable. (Written in 1921, cited by Veach 1962, pp. 32–46)

Mussolini’s relativism is, of course, radically dissimilar to the “live and let live” attitude that is popularly associated with relativism. I cite him only to note how versions of relativism can be used for (what appears to be) profoundly intolerable ends. Some of the ways in which objectivists seek to secure principles of tolerance are explored in a final section of this chapter.

The debate over moral realism is far from resolved and there are certainly responses to the above arguments and counterpoints. My aim is simply to represent some of the major pro and contra arguments (see Singer [ed.] 1991, for a review of further arguments). The defense of moral realism above does not involve any explicit appeal to God or God’s will. If we do invoke God, God’s will or a God’s eye point of view, does the case for moral realism improve? Alternatively, is theism required to secure moral realism? If there are no objective moral values, what authority does God’s will have?
Divine Command Theories

Consider first the significance of God’s will if nihilism is true. In such a world, God’s commands might give rise to prudential values but these would not count as objective moral facts. Thus, if God commanded that everyone do X and God threatened to punish those who did not, everyone would have some reason to do X. The kind of obligation that this theistic picture generates would be thoroughly pragmatic. Consider the role of the term “ought” in these two instances: “You ought to avoid harming others” where this is meant to be a straightforward moral claim, and “You ought to give me your money” as uttered by a thief with a gun pointed at you. The second incident is practical – provided you do not wish to be harmed, you should give the thief what he wants – but it fails to be ethical. Similarly, it would be intelligent or wise to obey a nihilist God, but this fails short of claiming that it would be ethically required:

Peter Geach is by no means a nihilist, but his conception of God’s power would fit into this schema in which God’s authority is grounded in power. Geach believes that the power of God is a key feature in God’s moral authority. It makes no practical sense to defy an all-powerful God. In reply to the question “Why should I obey God’s Law?” Geach writes:

This is really an insane question. For Prometheus to defy Zeus made sense because Zeus had not made Prometheus and had only limited power over him. A defiance of an Almighty God is insane: it is like trying to cheat a man to whom your whole business is mortgaged and who you know is well aware of your attempts to cheat him, or again, as the prophet said, it is as if a stick tried to beat, or an axe to cut, the very hand that was wielding it. (Geach, in Helm [ed.] 1981, p. 172)

In response to the accusation that his analysis of God and goodness comes down to mere power worship, he writes:

I shall be told by [some] philosophers that since I am saying not: It is your supreme moral duty to obey God, but simply: It is insane to set about defying an Almighty God, my attitude is plain power worship. But since this is worship of the Supreme Power, it is as such wholly different from, and does not carry with it, a cringing attitude towards earthly powers. An earthly potentate does not compete with God, even unsuccessfully: he may threaten all manner of afflictions, but only from God’s hands can any affliction actually come upon us. (Geach, in Helm [ed.] 1981, pp. 172–3)

This position is very much like Thomas Hobbes’ (1588–1679), who used a high view of God’s power and sovereignty to establish some basic duties. In Hobbes’ view, “God is King, though the nations be angry . . . Whether men will or no they must be subject always to the divine power” (Hobbes, cited by Geach, p. 172).

The difficulty with this approach, however, is that it seems to fly in the face of what many take to be essential features of moral life. Geach’s terminology suggests ethics is like a business arrangement (cheating on someone who owns your mortgage). It is widely believed that moral relations are very different from mercantile, bargaining arrangements. On this view, sometimes one’s ethical duty is not in one’s best interest. There is also the problem (which he recognizes and seeks to address) that Geach’s picture of divine authority appears to saddle one with a dangerous preoccupation with power. Recall the various analyses of “omnipotence” in chapter 3 and the danger of interpreting God’s “power” in a value-free context. There would not be anything objectively wrong or bad if God were to act inconsistently, break promises, torture the innocent, and so on. After all, if God commanded murder and rape, would those acts then become right? Arguably not. So, an important reason why many theists resist the Hobbesian move today is that they wish to secure nonarbitrary standards of value.

Many theists today seek to secure moral realism and still ground morality on divine commands. “Divine Command Theory” names any theory which grounds objective values and moral facts on the will or character of God. Could it be that there are objective rights and wrongs, goods and bads, because God made them so? They are not right simply because God is powerful and promises rewards in return for obedience and punishment for disobedience, but because God in some way creates an objective array of duties and rights. According to theism, the laws of nature are explained, ultimately, through the creative power of God. If it is coherent to believe God is the author of the objectively existing laws of nature, why not also the laws of good and evil, right and wrong?

One version of the divine command theory may be formalized as follows. Let “L,” “M,” and “N” stand for actions:

L is morally right because God commands L
M is morally wrong because God prohibits M
N is neither morally right nor morally wrong because God neither commands nor prohibits N.

The "because" in these claims is meant to capture a causal relationship whereby what is asserted is that it is in virtue of God's commands and prohibitions, that there are such objective values. (The theory may be refined to account for the value of states of affairs and not just actions, e.g., Q is a good state of affairs because God approves of it.)

At least four objections face such a divine command theory. In exploring possible replies to each, I suggest ways in which the theory may be modified.

(A) Objection: The first objection is perhaps the most important. Why should God's commanding that an action take place make it right? This is essentially the same worry that hounds the Hobbesian view of divine commands. It might be granted that a divine command theory can provide an account of objective moral laws in the same way that theism can provide an account of objective laws of nature. But just as many philosophers assume that the laws of nature could have been otherwise (in our cosmos the speed of light is a fixed, determinate rate, and yet God could have made it otherwise), it appears that the divine command theory allows that God could have made the moral laws differently. Cruelty is wrong in our world, but could God have made cruelty not just permissible but praiseworthy? Allowing for such a possibility strikes many as dangerous, for it makes objective moral laws subject to arbitrariness and caprice.

Reply to (A): Consider two moves.

(i) The first reply concedes that morality and values in general are arbitrated by God and these could have been otherwise. However, the point is that God did not do otherwise and that objective moral values and rights are as they are because of God's will. If God is viewed as eternally willing all objective values and moral truths then there was no time when God did not will that certain things are good and evil. The fact (if it is one) that God could have done otherwise is therefore of no consequence. This strategy may be satisfactory for some but significant numbers of philosophers deem it unsatisfactory because of the conviction that ethics and objective values simply could not be otherwise (Moore 1996).

(ii) A second reply to (A) introduces a modification on the divine command theory. According to a modified divine command theory, God in some way had to will what God did; God of necessity willed that justice and courage are good, cruelty and malice evil. This is very much like the new Cartesian strategy outlined in chapter 3, according to which the necessary truths of metaphysics and logic are necessary because God willed that they be so and yet God could not have willed otherwise. Arbitrariness in ethics is avoided because of the supposition that God's will is itself necessary.

This view has an important role in the history of theistic accounts of value. God has often been considered essentially good (Augustine, Aquinas, for example), and this has blocked the presumption that God is somehow remote from goodness, as if God needs to check God's behavior over and against some external measure or standard. God's essential goodness has sometimes been described as God being "the good" or "goodness itself" (Dionysius, Augustine, Aquinas, and others). Identifying God as "the good" may seem peculiar from a logical, grammatical point of view. It makes no sense to talk of "the large" or "the small." Things are large or small; there is no "the large." Similarly, things are good; there is no "the good." However, these conceptual snags may be avoidable. The identification of God as "the good" may be interpreted as thinking of God as supremely excellent or good and the source of all created goods. God's being marked out as "the good" may thereby be understood as an affirmation of God's essential goodness and creative power in bringing into existence all other goods. In creating a cosmos, God creates something of value and in God's loving creation and possessing such excellences as knowledge and perfect power, God is the highest good. Thomas Aquinas worked hard to identify God as goodness itself, analyzing this identity in terms of God's preeminent claim to being good and the author of created goods:

This thing is good and that good, but take away this and that, and regard good itself if thou canst; so wilt thou see God, not good by a good that is other than Himself, but he is good of all good. For in all these good things, whether those which I have mentioned, or any else that are to be discerned or thought, we could not say that one was better than another, when we judge truly, unless a conception of the good itself had been impressed upon us, such that according to it we might both approve some things as good, and prefer one good to another. (Aquinas, De Trinitate 8.3)

An appeal to the essential goodness of God is part of a classic response to a dilemma that Plato put forward in his dialogue Euthyphro (at 9e). Plato advances the question: Is something good (or holy) because God approves of it, or does God approve of good things because they are good? To take the first option is to risk arbitrariness while the latter risks seeing God as subservient to something higher or more important than God. Augustine and Aquinas seek to understand God as essentially good and thus not remote from goodness.
in the least, thereby avoiding arbitrariness and the threat of being subject to that which is outside of God.

If one is going to develop a divine command theory of values, this second alternative seems to me the more promising. It may still seem open to criticism on various fronts. Is a will that is necessary still a will? Perhaps not. But here the crucial point for a defender of the theory to note is that the will of God is not some kind of "thing." The Augustine–Aquinas understanding of the goodness of God does not lead one to think of God in terms of sheer will, but in terms of a supremely good nature. Reference to God's will, then, may be interpreted as a reference to the intentionality of a supremely good God. This is at odds with some twentieth-century treatments of "the will," but perhaps no worse for it. I briefly note why this may be so.

Modern Western philosophy includes theories of human nature that put enormous weight on "the will." From the mid-twentieth century on this has been prominent among the existentialists. According to existentialism one's identity is achieved not on the basis of fulfilling one's nature, but in the exercise of a self-determining, self-creating will. This is seen in especially dramatic terms in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), in which human freedom has a profound self-constituting role bordering on the notion of causa sui considered in chapter 3 in the Morris–Menzel project. Emphasis on the will can also be seen in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power and in Arthur Schopenhauer's use of the will in his vast metaphysical scheme of the world. Some theological texts which give center-stage to the power and will of God sometimes refer to God's will in highly reified ways that tax our language and concepts. Consider this statement by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968): "God confronts us with a specific meaning in intention, with a will which has foreseen everything and each thing in particular" (Barth 1948, p. 663).

To think of one's identity as primarily a matter of the will risks not only celebrating some bare notion of power and, thus, being prey to the charge of ethical capriciousness, it also runs into general philosophical trouble. Talk of "the will" makes sense in ordinary contexts, though it may be forcefully argued that its intelligibility rests, in the end, in an overall account of human nature. As John Locke once put it in his discussion of freedom, the proper question is not "whether the will is free" but whether a person is free (Locke 1689, edition 1979, II:21). Does it make sense even to think there could be a will (whether free or determined) without there being a person or some kind of being that is willing? Consider again Barth's claim, cited above. His statement can be given a charitable interpretation according to which Barth is referring to God intending something in light of what God foresees; but, if read literally, in which "the will" itself is said to foresee something, his account seems conceptually absurd. Presumably a will cannot think or feel or sense. The concept of the will is not easy to analyze philosophically, but it may be best viewed in terms of the deliberate intentions of agents. Someone acts with will power or wills such and such when he or she does something with conviction and determination or he or she intentionally does something. Here the reference to "the will" has intelligibility, but taken alone in a conceptual vacuum, so to speak, it does not.

Consider further the prospects of a divine command theory of ethics over and against three objections.

(B) OBJECTION: It is fully intelligible to make moral judgments without having any belief in God. Indeed, there seems to be nothing contradictory about claiming some act is morally wrong and believing there is no God whatsoever.

REPLY TO (B): Let it be granted that it makes perfect sense to make such judgments without invoking God at all, and even while denying God's existence. It does not follow that God is not the cause of objective values and moral laws. By analogy, someone who denies God's existence might consistently and coherently use the laws of nature in explaining natural events but that, alone, does not establish that God did not create the laws of nature and nature itself.

The objection seems to presuppose that the meaning of moral discourse has to be analyzed in terms of God's commands. If a divine command theory that holds "L is morally right" means "God commands L," then it would be committed to holding that it is a contradiction to claim "L is morally right but it is false that God commands L." Analyses of the meaning of synonyms must involve agreement, for if "Grandmother" means "A female whose child has a child," then it is contradictory to claim "There is a Grandmother whose child does not have a child." So, while the second objection may work in terms of arguing that talk of morality and talk of God have different meanings, it does not show that objective values are independent of God's will.

(C) OBJECTION: There are suitable alternative explanations for the existence of objective moral values. These may be biological or social. According to biological accounts, we may be genetically programmed to engage in social activity. Socially, we may be shaped and trained to act in ethical ways. It may also be better to explain ethics in terms of sheer rationality or intuition or claim they exist independently, rather than grounding them in speculative assumptions about God's attitudes (see Moore 1996).
REPLY TO (C): This objection will have to be taken up in chapter 10 when the moral argument for theism is considered along with other arguments for and against the existence of God. For present purposes it should be noted that the existence of other nontheistic explanations of ethics need not displace a role for theism. For example, if one were to account for ethics by appealing to evolutionary biology, it would not follow that theism is not needed to explain the workings of evolutionary biology.

(D) OBJECTION: There are many different conceptions of God and God’s will. There is no clear, objective way of determining the will of God and thus no clear, objective way of determining what is ethical.

REPLY TO (D): Granted that there are different conceptions of God and God’s will, it may be replied that this does nothing to undermine the thesis that the existence of objective values is in virtue of God’s will. The divine command theory of ethics does not rest on the supposition that we possess independent access through revelation of God’s creativity. What is supposed instead is that objective values themselves stem from divine activity. On this scheme, one may hold that the way in which one comes to know God’s will is by coming to know what is objectively valuable. If God is necessarily good and we properly grasp certain essential, objective goods, then, arguably, we have a way of sifting through some of these alternative conceptions of God and rejecting those views in which God approves of what we know to be bad. Imagine justice is necessarily good, and good in virtue of God’s necessarily willing that it be so. Under those conditions, to know justice is good is to know what God wills. The parallel with omniscience may be useful – if you know anything and God is omniscient, you know what God knows.

This fourth objection raises an issue of deep significance and compels us to consider moral methodology at greater length. Here both theists and nontheists may find value in what is commonly called the ideal observer theory of ethics.

The Ideal Observer Theory

While the earlier version of the divine command theory does not analyze the meaning of moral discourse, I think it is promising to claim that moral discourse does in fact imply an appeal to a “God’s eye point of view.” The ideal observer theory presents an account of moral discourse and an outline of moral methodology. I shall first set forth the theory and then draw out its theistic implications.

Versions of the ideal observer theory have been advanced by David Hume, Adam Smith (1723–90), Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), and, more recently, by Roderick Firth, R. M. Hare, and Thomas Carson. I offer a version of the theory that I take to be the strongest (or, if you like, the least implausible). According to the ideal observer theory, the meaning of our moral language can be analyzed in terms of the hypothetical approval and disapproval of an ideal observer.

Let me begin laying out this theory by focusing on three features of what appears to count as ideal observation of values. These three features are developed from the observations cited earlier under the section “Reasons For and Against Objectivism.” If getting nonmoral facts wrong, being unable to apprise affectively the points of view of involved parties and failing to be impartial, can account for inadequate moral reasoning, perhaps an ideal realization of knowing all nonmoral facts, affective appraisal, and impartiality can account for ideal moral reasoning.

Omniscience of nonmoral facts. Our moral judgments typically seem to rest on what we believe to be the facts of the nonmoral case. The reasoning behind our judgments about euthanasia, abortion, nuclear power, economic justice, and so on, seems grounded on beliefs about human desires, origins, physics, history, and so on. Many of these involve facts which may be called “nonmoral facts,” a term introduced earlier, which refers to those facts that can be described without explicitly introducing moral and other value-laden terms. The first thesis about ideal observation then, is that an observer would be ideally situated if she were in command of all the facts of the case so that she could form her approval or disapproval free of ignorance.

The reason for having to specify the ideal observer as knowing all the “nonmoral facts” is to avoid having the theory collapse due to circularity. If one were to identify the ideal observer as simply one who knows the facts, including all the facts about morality, then the theory would be as unilluminating as one that claimed that the ideal mathematical judge knows all the facts of mathematics or the ideal historian knows all history. In ethics it is important to appreciate that many judgments rest on that which can be grasped without any sort of ethical categories; an ideal observer would be one that was supremely situated to know all such facts that undergird and inform ideal moral judgments.

Omniperception. This is Roderick Firth’s term for being affectively appraised of the position and feelings of all involved parties. Arguably, ideal observation
consists not just in knowing the facts but being affectively or emotionally apprised of what is at stake. One can see the appeal to affective appraisal at work in much ethical debate in which various parties are urged to take the role of others seriously. In part, this is why literature has had the moral role it does in ethics and even politics. Rather than just listing morally relevant features of situations, literature enables one to appreciate those features “from the inside” of those involved. By securing this affective dimension separately, the ideal observer theory highlights the vital role of imagination and feeling in ethics. J. C. F. Schiller (1759–1805) exposes the moral problems of failing to use both imagination and affective appreciation. He laments the person who “has a narrow heart, since his imagination, imprisoned within the unvarying confines of his own calling, is incapable of extending itself to appreciate other ways of seeing and knowing (Schiller, trans. 1962, pp. 91–3; see also Janet Soskice’s fine essay “Love and Attention”, in McGhee [ed.] 1992).

Impartiality. As noted earlier, impartiality is a widely recognized feature of moral reasoning. To judge any ethical matter it is essential to achieve a certain measure of impartiality rather than acting simply to advance one’s preferences irrespective of the consequences. “Impartiality” should not be confused with “indifference” or “disinterest” insofar as these suggest an ideal observer is not interested in the outcome of its observations. “Impartiality” is also distinguishable from “neutrality” if the latter suggests that an ideal observer cannot have any judgments at all. A judge can be impartial and yet contend that John Doe did something both morally wrong and illegal. The judge is not, then, “neutral” over John Doe’s behavior, but neither is he or she partial in the sense that she is biased or acting unfairly.

The ideal observer theory draws on each of the conditions just outlined. An ideal observer who would assess morality and immorality, good and evil would be as follows:

An Ideal Observer is omniscient of all the nonmoral facts, omnipresent, and impartial.

An ideal observer’s vantage point thereby reflects a dismissal of egotism. The resultant point of view is one that many philosophers have prized and sought. Schiller underscored the desirability of developing a moral sensitivity that is informed by impartiality and an affective appreciation of others:

It would be . . . difficult to determine which does more to impede the practice of brotherly love: the violence of our passions, which disturbs it, or the rigidity of our principles, which chills it – the egotism of our senses or the egotism of our reason. If we are to become compassionate, helpful, effective human beings, feeling and character must unite, even as wide-open senses must combine with wide-open intellect if we are to acquire experience. How can we, however laudable our precepts, be just, kindly and human towards others, if we lack the power of receiving into ourselves, faithfully and truly, natures unlike ours, of feeling our way into the situation of others, of making other people’s feelings our own? (Schiller, trans. 1962, pp. 91–3)

An ideal observer with such powers would be ideal at least in the sense that it would achieve unsurpassable ideals of knowledge, affective appraisal, and impartiality. Presumably none of us are ideal observers. But, according to the theory, what is at work when we make moral judgments or value judgments is that we invoke such an ideal point of view. The thesis is not that in moral judgments we are committed to holding that there actually exists an ideal observer, but that we are committed to holding that if there were an ideal observer, its judgments could be analyzed as follows (let “IO” stand for “ideal observer”):

L is morally right = L would be approved of by an IO
M is morally wrong = M would be disapproved of by an IO
N is neither morally right nor morally wrong = N would be neither approved of nor disapproved of by an IO

Unlike the ideal observer theory, the divine command theory articulated in the previous section did not rest on an analysis of meaning. The divine command theorist can concede that it is not a contradiction to claim “L is morally right and yet it is false that God commands L.” Is it a contradiction to claim “L is morally right and it is not the case that L would be approved of by an IO”? It may not be readily apparent, but there are some reasons for thinking that this would be contradictory or at least reflect an unconventional use of English. If someone claims that an act is indeed good – an act of courage, for example – it would be paradoxical at best to claim that an act of courage is good yet not approved of if one knew all the nonmoral facts of the case, one were affectively apprised of the points of view of all involved, and one were truly impartial. If the ideal observer theory is true then we implicitly allude to an idealized vantage point when we make moral judgments, betting (as it were) that we are holding beliefs that would be vindicated rather than under-
minded if we could see matters more extensively and clearly. We are committed to holding that our views are those that would be matched from an IO point of view.

The IO theory has its critics and some of their objections to the theory are noted among the suggested questions at the end of this chapter. If the theory can be defended, it has some advantages. Though highly abstract, the theory does highlight principles that are commonly at work in everyday moral reasoning. Insofar as empirical study of facts, affective appreciation of others, and impartiality are ideals we seek in practice, the IO theory singles these out as vital conditions in moral reasoning. The IO theory may be of use to theists, as I note below, but one can also be an atheist and embrace the theory and, indeed, one can be a moral skeptic and yet hold the theory. A skeptic could uphold the theory and then argue that because none of us can achieve IO status, we should suspend our own, considerably less ideal judgments. But assuming such skepticism is too severe (we may be uncertain about the moral status of euthanasia, yet surely we know torture is wrong), theists may use whatever gains are made by the IO theory to fill out their conception of God and moral methodology. The IO seems to mirror closely the concept of God as recognized in theistic religious tradition.

Consider how theistic notions of God resemble the IO, and then how religious and ethical discourse may then be seen to accord with one another. As noted in chapter 3, theists contend that God is omniscient and, therefore, that God knows all nonmoral facts. Omnipresence may or may not involve God having to undergo experiences, but a mark of divine omniscience is that God would have such an affective grasp of all creation. God, as envisioned in traditional monotheism, is also believed to be impartial. Judaism and Christianity recognize God as singling out some individuals for special blessings and the like, but all this is understood within a providential care for all. It is customary to understand such special dispensations as leading to the overall good, a good that would be approved of impartially. Of course theists believe God is more than an ideal observer. Perhaps a theistic view of God would more accurately be described as the portrait of what is believed to be an ideal agent. But if God is more than an IO, theists seem committed to holding God is not less.

If this theistic portrait is acceptable, then moral reflection may be read as trying to mirror or achieve a God’s eye point of view. Just as Newton spoke in terms of the scientist’s role of trying to think God’s thoughts, the ethicist may be thought of as trying to identify the approval or disapproval of God, or, putting the point in a more qualified form—trying to identify what would be the approval or disapproval of an IO, if there were one.

For further reflection on whether theism can account for morality see chapter 10. For now, let us consider the repercussions of theism on values in general and then consider theistic reflection on specific moral problems.

Theism and Values

Here are three ways in which theism may serve to intensify or extend one’s commitment to values and to introduce new values as well.

(A) Granting an affective understanding of God called passibilism and a fairly basic moral precept, it may be argued that if God exists then the goods of the cosmos are even more good and the evils of the cosmos even more evil than if God does not exist. This may be termed the “intensity of theism” argument. A first step in the argument is unpacking what is meant by passibilism.

Passibilism is the thesis that God sorrows and feels pain over the world’s ills and takes pleasure in the world’s goods. It is distinguished from impassibilism (from the Latin impassibilis meaning “without passion”), the thesis that God does not suffer or feel pain. Reasons for adopting passibilism include the following: (a) Passion involves change, and if God is changeless, God does not undergo passion. (b) Similarly, it is argued that to suffer requires being in time. God is eternal, hence God does not suffer. (c) It is also argued that suffering is an imperfection. If so, then there is reason to think that a supremely excellent, all-perfect being would not suffer. A passibilist theism has been defended on the grounds that it is more plausible to believe (a*) God does change, and (b*) God is in time (see the exchange in chapter 6). (c*) While some suffering is seen as an imperfection, suffering or feeling sorrow can also stem from a great excellence. It can be argued that loving another person is an excellence and that this involves feeling sorrow over the beloved’s ills, and joys over the beloved’s welfare and flourishing. For these reasons, plus the appeal of some revelation claims (Hebrew and Christian Bibles) and religious experience, a range of theists have adopted a passibilist version of theism, (see Crel 1986 for a defense of impassibilism, and Clark [ed.] 1992 for a defense of passibilism).

The intensity of theism argument may be formulated succinctly. A principal premise in the argument is that there are goods and ills, rights and wrongs, and among these, causing someone sorrow can be both evil and wrong, while causing someone pleasure can be both good and right. I state this in terms of “can be,” rather than “always is,” because of the following important caveat.
There is no need to commit the intensity of theism argument to an exclusively hedonistic view of values, according to which all pleasure is good and all sorrow is evil. One may run the intensity of theism argument and grant that it is not necessarily the case that all pleasures are good, and all pain ipso facto bad. (Anti-hedonistic moral judgments strike many as very forceful in certain cases. Hence, it is plausible to judge that pleasure in wickedness is not at all good, but, rather, that such pleasure is itself supremely wicked. It is part of what makes a person paradigmatically cruel and malicious; to take pleasure in evil is, as Schopenhauer once termed it, a "malignant joy." Still, having acknowledged the difficulties with an unfeathered hedonism, it may plausibly be argued that certain pleasures are in themselves good. Thus, a person's taking pleasure in caring for others, in friendships, and in the beauty of good relationships is itself good. Similarly, sorrow and pain under many conditions can constitute something bad. Thus, if Eric cruelly tortures George, it is reasonable to think that part of what makes this bad, and thus part of what makes such torture torturous, is the fact that he brings about a state of pain and sorrow. There may be many evils other than sorrow and pain, but it may still be argued that there are plausible cases when sorrow and pain are indeed bad states and it is wrong and evil to bring them about.

A further assumption in the argument is that there are straightforward cases when the degree of evil and the gravity of wrongness involved in a state of affairs is directly related to how much sorrow or pain is caused. Why is it that we might assess Eric's deliberately tormenting George to be worse than his deliberately causing George some lesser injury, such as stealing George's ticket to an opera? Many factors might enter our judgment at this stage, but, arguably, we are safe in assuming that when Eric's actions are morally unwarranted, and George is morally innocent in all the relevant respects (he is not a wicked tyrant, a murderer, etc.), then the gravity of the wrong done to him is a dimension of the degree of sorrow caused.

According to theistic passibilism, God's sorrow and pleasure over the world's goods and ills is morally fitting. God's affective responsiveness to the world is neither malicious nor cruel; God takes pleasures in values, not in wickedness. Similarly, God's sorrow does not stem from any wicked designs or aims, as it would if God's sorrow was prompted by the fact that even more evil has not occurred. God's affective responsiveness is also not something epistemically deviant. We might feel sorrow over what we believe to be some cruel act and hardship, and this sorrow actually manifest goodness, and yet there still be something deeply amiss in our sorrow. Imagine that I feel great compassionate sorrow and seek to assist people who, as it turns out, are not at all in any danger, nor afflicted by any ills. Perhaps I am in such poor shape cognitively that I am forever misjudging the plight of others, going about my honest, but inept and undesirable compassion-based projects. As an omniscient being, God would not be subject to such impairments, however benignly motivated.

The intensity of theism argument claims that if God exists, then the wrongs we do cause more sorrow than if God does not exist, and that this sorrow is morally relevant. We could perhaps discount its relevance, if God's sorrow stemmed from ill motives or, if God was not morally innocent in some other respect. But given God's goodness and omniscience, this discounting is not available. God's resultant sorrow may be termed morally unjustified sorrow because, while the sorrow is morally fitting in the sense that it stems from God's goodness, it is unjustified in the sense that it is caused by a morally wrong act and all morally wrong acts are unjustified. The latter, presumably, is part of what it means for an act to be wrong. The intensity argument may be cast in a formal way as follows:

1. Causing unjustified sorrow is wrong.
2. Other things being equal, if two wrong actions, X and Y, are indistinguishable from the moral point of view in all respects except that X causes more unjustified sorrow than Y, then X is more gravely wrong than Y.
3. If God exists, then any wrong act causes God unjustified sorrow.
4. If God does not exist, then no wrong act causes God unjustified sorrow.
5. If God exists, then wrong acts cause more unjustified sorrow than if God does not exist.
6. Therefore, if God exists, then wrong acts are even more gravely wrong than if God does not exist.

This argument may easily be fashioned in terms of evil states of affairs. Premise (2) may be reformulated as follows: Other things being equal, if two evil states of affairs X and Y are indistinguishable from an axiological point of view in all respects except that X causes more unjustified sorrow than Y, then X is more evil than Y. Premises (3)–(6) may then be reformulated to yield the conclusion that if God exists then evil states of affairs are even more evil than if God does not exist.

A complementary argument may be fashioned with respect to right action and good states. If passibilism is correct, then right action and good states of affairs bring about Divine pleasure. It is plausible to believe that pleasure (delight, appreciation, enjoyment) in right action and good states is itself right
and good. In modern philosophy, G. E. Moore, and before him Franz Brentano (1838–1917), have ably identified the high value of pleasure in the good (see Chisholm 1986 for a more recent defense). Consider good acts and states such as acts of courage, compassionate service, just institutions, friendships, the beauty of romantic love. If God exists, then in addition to the evident right action and states of affairs themselves, there is the good of pleasure in these acts and states. Let me underscore here, as I sought to earlier, that this does not assume an unqualified hedonism in that one need not assume that all pleasure is ipso facto good. The pleasure may be thought of as befitting moral innocence and a constituent part of God's love of the world.

If possibilism is accepted, theists may give greater weight to the proximity of the God–cosmos relationship than many philosophers assume. Thus, William Rowe's depiction below may be seen to be an accurate theistic description of God's metaphysical independence of the world, but not an accurate depiction of God's affective, intimate concern with the cosmos:

According to the Judeo-Christian and Islamic conception of God, the world is entirely distinct from God; everything in it could be entirely annihilated without the slightest change in the reality of the divine being. (Rowe 1993, p. 12)

On a possibilist construal of the God–world relation, the annihilation of creation would profoundly affect "the reality of the divine being." To write off such annihilation as not causing the slightest change in the reality of God would be either wrong or misleading.

Possibilists emphasize both the sorrow and pleasure of God. According to possibilism, just as sorrow may be a part of an intimate God–world bond, so may pleasure. A distinction is sometimes made in ordinary English between being pleased at, or feeling pleasure at, such and such took place, and feeling pleasure in something, where the latter marks off a more intimate, engaged feeling. It is one thing for me to be pleased that you achieved some goal and another for me to take pleasure in your achievement. Current word-use may not always carry this subtle difference in meaning, but I note here that on certain possibilist accounts God may be more accurately described as taking pleasure in the goods of the cosmos, and not just pleasure that such goods exist.

(B) Theism has also led to an expanded conception of goods and ills in virtue of the claim that because God created the cosmos and sustains it in existence, God therefore owns the cosmos or, putting it somewhat differently, the cosmos belongs to God. Divine ownership of the cosmos is upheld in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles (1 Chronicles 29:11–18; Psalms 24:1; 50:12; Ezekiel 18:4) and the Qur'an ("To God is the personal ownership [mulk] of the heavens and the earth," from "The Light"). The thesis that the cosmos is owned by or belongs to God is a key claim in medieval philosophical theology and much modern theology. It has led both to an amplified sense of duties (i.e. do X not just because it is good in itself but also because you belong to God and God commands X) but also to new duties such as the duty not to commit suicide (with possible rare exceptions).

Among modern philosophers, probably the most well-known advocate for divine ownership is John Locke who developed his stance in the Second Treatise on Civil Government. Locke held that "we owe our body, soul, and life—whatever we are, whatever we have, and even whatever we can be—to Him [God] and to Him alone.... God has created us out of nothing and, if He pleases, will reduce us again to nothing" (Locke, in Ildziak 1980, p. 182). Locke's position has been defended by Richard Swinburne, Baruch Brody, and others. Swinburne writes:

The other characteristic among those traditionally ascribed to God which makes his commands impose moral obligations which would not otherwise exist is that he is the creator of the rest of the universe other than men; he brought it into existence and keeps it in existence, and so is properly judged its owner. What greater claim could one have to property than having created it ex nihilo, and kept it in being by one's free choice, unsaid? The owner of property has the right to tell those to whom he has loaned it what they are allowed to do with it. Consequently God has a right to lay down how that property, the inanimate world, shall be used and by whom. If God has made the earth, he can say which of his children can use which part. (Swinburne 1977, pp. 206–7)

It is because of this ownership that it would be conceptually impossible for God to steal from creation. None of us have a right to property over against God's rights. Thomas Aquinas held this: "What is taken by God's command, who is the owner of the universe, is not against the owner's will, and this is the essence of theft" (Aquinas, ST, Ia2ae., 94.3). Swinburne draws the following conclusion: "It follows from this that it is logically impossible for God to command a man to steal—for whatever God commands a man to take thereby becomes that man's and so his taking it is not stealing" (Swinburne 1977, p. 207).

Appeals to divine ownership have often been used by theists to undermine what is believed to be excessive individualism and to foster a greater sense of the duty to aid others. Historically, the theistic appeal to give to others in need
has often been preceded by advancing the thesis that all one’s possessions are conferred as a gift by God. This theme of the creation as a gift runs through Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Lenn Goodman singles it out in his summation of Jewish philosophy:

Through all the change of style and structure, and all the seeming change of paradigms, the thematic content [of Jewish philosophy] remains remarkably steady, anchored in tradition and text: God offers love and demands justice and generosity. Life is a gift; truth, a sacred and inescapable responsibility. (Goodman 1995, p. 431)

A divine ownership ethic has its critics. A chief objection is that such an ethic seems to make human beings slaves to God and this offends a mature view of our autonomy and dignity (Young 1977 and Lombardi 1984). One defense of divine ownership maintains that being owned by God is not pernicious. Another defense is to revise the divine ownership ethic so that it is significantly different and amounts to a weaker claim of persons belonging to God.

As for the first defense, it may be argued that God is essentially good and thus not subject to capriciousness and injustice. Any analogy with human enslavement is therefore wide of the mark. Consider the second possibility – In English the term “belonging” can be used both to indicate property but also to make a value judgment. When someone reports that “Jane Doe belongs in this school” or “John Doe belongs in this family” there is a suggestion that there is a fitting propriety to being in certain relationships. It is good or in some way deserved for Jane and John to be in school and in the family. The ownership of God thesis can be modified to make the claim that persons belong to God in the sense (a) that they exist, in part, because God conserves them in being (life is a gift); and (b) a life of fulfillment and welfare is to be found in relationship with God (for further material on divine ownership see Brody 1974 and Avila 1983). This later view of belonging brings us to a third area where theists claim to find new values and goods.

(C) Theism has given rise to alternative pictures of the meaning of life, involving what are believed to be values that stem from a relationship with God. At the most general level, the good of a divine-human relationship is believed to be forged in part by how one thinks God sees oneself. Here the appeal of the ideal observer theory may come into play. I briefly note this general character of what theists believe to mark a relationship with God, and then turn to more specific concerns.

Our self-image is often grounded upon only what we think we are and not what we know we are. Many of our own desires seem predicated on assuming we are right about the details of the world around us. Thus, I might point to what I believe is a glass of water and say: “I want that.” Unknown to me the glass is actually filled with poison. Do I really want that liquid? Upon learning its contents it would make ample sense to claim something like: “I do not really want that, I want a glass of water!” If there is an omniscient observer or God, then (s)he knows us thoroughly. Given an ideal vantage point, one would have a transparent, clear notion of one’s own desires and identity. We are often interested in things which we do not realize are not in our interests. Theistic construals of our self-image in the context of a relationship with God often focus on the importance of honesty and shedding self-deception.

But theists tend to attribute more to God’s role in defining the meaning of life than just this general appeal to an omniscient vantage point. There is also the conviction that God is involved in individual lives. This may involve religious experiences (the topic of chapter 8) in which “a person” feels herself to be conjoined to a greater purpose, the fellowship and friendship with God. Marilyn Adams describes this good in terms of a relationship with God:

For each created person, the primary source of meaning and satisfaction will be found in his/her intimate personal relationship with God. This relationship will also be the context in which a created person can be best convinced of his/her worth, because it is the place where God's love for the individual is most vividly and intimately experienced. Christians naturally see it as to everyone's advantage to enter into this relationship as deeply as one can in this world, as soon as possible. (Adams 1991, p. 291)

Brian Hebblethwaite also notes that theists believe the relationship with God places one in an enlarged context, a shared life:

Forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and justice sound much the same when advanced as ideals of life by theists and non-theists alike. But in fact these qualities and ideals of life turn out rather differently when they are experienced and embraced as effects of gratitude, grace and the divine indwelling. (Hebblethwaite 1988, pp. 15-16)

Traditional theism includes this expanded concept of goodness and relationships.

This theistic picture of the divine-human relationship seems very different
from the way some of its critics portray it. Consider, for example, Kurt Baier’s
description of God’s relationship with creatures:

The Christian world picture . . . sees man as a creature, a divine artifact, some-
thing halfway between a robot (manufactured) and an animal (alive), a
homunculus, or perhaps Frankenstein, made in God’s laboratory, with a purpose-
or task assigned him by his Maker. (Baier, in Hanfling [ed.] 1988, p. 22)

While there certainly have been theists who view the divine–human relation-
ship in something like these terms, this portrait is considerably distant from
that of Adams, Hebblethwaite, and many others who emphasize human
freedom and shared love in religious experience.

In the context of what some theists take to be their relationship with God,
new values can be realized and other values transformed. Thus, there may be
a value of worship that is realized in a theistic world view. One form of
worship may be understood as taking delight in the holy, and privileging this
delight so that other things are enjoyed, in part, because of this overarching
pleasure in God (Smart 1972). The transformation of values would come into
play in the course of religious teaching about forgiveness, mercy, atonement,
and the like.

Theistic Ethics in Practice

If one believes there is an all-good God and believes that God’s commands are
always good and right, then to discover God’s commands will be to discover
what is good, and to discover what is good is to discover what God approves.
In a theistic philosophy, there will be a balance between revelation claims and
independent moral reflection, depending upon theistic convictions about na-
ture, reason, and revelation.

Nature. Some theists believe that nature is fundamentally good. Evil is essen-
tially the twisting of something valuable. Fulfilling the nature of persons,
for example, counts as a basic good. This is not the same as holding that
whatever is, is good. Rather, it is the stance that persons and animals (perhaps
plants too) have natural ends and states, so that it makes sense to talk of their
fulfillment, flourishing or health, and these count as genuine goods. On this
view, discovering the will of God and discovering what fulfills a being’s nature
are commensurate. Stump and Kretzmann depict this position in terms of
what it is natural to desire:

Desirability is an essential aspect of goodness. Now if a thing is desirable as a
thing of a certain kind (and anything at all can be desirable in that way, as a
means, if not as an end), it is desirable to the extent to which it is perfect of that
kind – i.e., a whole, complete specimen, free from relevant defect. But, then, a
thing is perfect of its kind to the extent to which it is fully realized or developed,
to the extent to which the potentialities definitive of its kind – specifying
potentialities – have been actualized. And so, Aquinas says, a thing is perfect
and hence desirable (good of its kind) to the extent to which it is in being.
(Stump and Kretzmann, in Morris [ed.] 1988, p. 283)

This link between goodness and being leads some theists to believe that evil
consists in the destruction of something good – evil is parasitic on the good and
thus properly seen as a privation of being and not some force in its own right:

Evil is always and only a defect in some respect to some extent; evil can have no
essence of its own. Nor can there be a highest evil, an ultimate source of all other
evils, because a summum malum, an evil devoid of all good, would be nothing at
all. A human being is defective, bad, or evil not because of certain positive
attributes but because of privations of various forms of being appropriate to his
or her nature. And, in general, the extent to which a thing is not good of its kind
is the extent to which it has not actualized, or cultivated dispositions for
actualizing, the potentialities associated with its nature. Every form of privation
is covered by that observation – from physical or mental subnormality, through
ineptitude and inattention, to debauchery and depravity. In each case some form
of being theoretically available to the thing because of its nature is lacking.
(Stump and Kretzmann, in Morris [ed.] 1988, p. 288)

Not all theists believe that nature in its present state is fundamentally good,
however. Some believe that there has been a fall in which nature, which was
created as essentially good, has become profoundly marred and broken. For
someone who holds such a position, discovering what fulfills a being’s nature
will not count as heavily for marking off what is good or establish a reliable
guide to what is morally right. On this view, even a person’s nature can be
twisted.

Reason. While considerations of nature may provide one route in construct-
ing an ethic, some theists believe that we have reflective abilities enabling us