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Robust moral realism: an excellent religion

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Abstract According to robust moral realism, there exist objective, non-natural moral facts. Moral facts of this sort do not fit easily into the world as illuminated by natural science. Further, if such facts exist at all, it is hard to see how we could know of their existence by any familiar means. Yet robust realists are not moral skeptics; they believe that we do know (some of) the moral facts. Thus robust moral realism comes with a number of hard-to-defend ontological and epistemological commitments. Recently, Sharon Street has claimed, in light of these commitments, that robust moral realism requires a kind of faith and "has become a strange form of religion." I believe that Street is right. I argue at some length that robust moral realism does require faith, and is a religion. However, I further argue that it is an excellent religion. I argue that it has three principal advantages: it is avoids wishful thinking, is guaranteed not to contradict the results of natural science, and is profoundly simple in its ontological commitments. Further, robust moral realism may be rationally defensible on evidentialist grounds. Consequently, even if the standard arguments for traditional religions are not compelling, there might still be compelling arguments for robust moral realism.

Keywords Ethics · Moral realism · Faith · Atheism · Phenomenal conservatism · Evidentialism

Introduction

Sharon Street, a leading opponent of moral realism, claims that moral realism requires an "article of faith" and thus "has become a strange form of religion—a religion stripped clean of everything except the bare conviction that there are independent nor-

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mative truths that one is capable of recognizing."[1] She doesn't develop this particular objection to realism at any length, but her brief remark resonates. Indeed, the idea that there is something spookily faith-like or religious about moral realism's core commitments seems implicit in some of the better-known anti-realist arguments, such as Mackie's argument from queerness.[2]

I am a moral realist—specifically, I am what David Enoch calls a *robust* realist, i.e., a non-naturalist moral realist—but I believe that there is truth in Street's claims. I don't think that *all* versions of moral realism are forms of religion.[3] For example, I don't think that any of the various strands of naturalist realism are religions of any sort. But I think that robust moral realism, in particular, requires a leap of faith and is, in a very important sense, a kind of religion. And I think that we who accept robust realism should embrace (rather than resist or reluctantly concede) the religious element in our view.

Most of my allies will not agree with me. Robust realists are mostly non-religious—even anti-religious. According to a widespread view, moral philosophy has entered a post-religious era in which, finally free of the superstitions of our forebears, we can begin to make real progress on moral questions. A widely cited quotation from Parfit captures the mood:

> Belief in God, or in many gods, prevented the free development of moral reasoning. Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-Religious Ethics is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will all reach agreement. Since we cannot know how Ethics will develop, it is not irrational to have high hopes.[4]

Parfit himself accepts a version of robust realism; therefore, he would resist Street's (and my) view of robust realism as a religious doctrine. But he and Street appear to agree on at least one thing: *If* robust realism requires religious faith, then it should be rejected. Against that view, I'll argue that robust realism is attractive *even though* it requires religious faith.

I don't think that robust realism requires religious faith *of the traditional sort*. I share Parfit's dim view of traditional religions such as Christianity. But we can deliberately design new religions—just as we can deliberately design new scientific theories, art forms, political institutions, languages, etc. Therefore, as J. L. Schellenberg has persua-

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[1] Street (unpublished manuscript, pp. 22–23).

[2] Mackie (1977, p. 37), says that moral properties are "of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe." It is unclear, to many of us, precisely how Mackie supposes these properties to be *strange*; but one possibility is that he regards them as fundamentally different from the sorts of properties that are familiar in a modern scientific worldview, as opposed to a prescientific *religious* worldview. (Mackie does not indicate whether he thinks these properties would seem particularly strange to a medieval Scholastic theologian, for instance; but one suspects not.)

[3] Annette Baier argues (unsuccessfully, in my view) that morality, science, and knowledge acquisition, in the absence of faith in God, all require "faith in the human community and its evolving procedures" (1980, p. 133). I'll be arguing for a far more specific faith requirement.

[4] Parfit (1986, p. 454).

sively argued,[5] even if the religions of our ancestors are all wrong, it's still conceivable that we might invent a defensible religion. I believe that robust realists have (without knowing it) done just that.

I'll proceed as follows. In "Robust realism defined," I'll define robust realism. In "Faith as unscientific belief," I'll present my view of faith, and will explain why it implies that robust realism requires faith. In "A brief defense of ESEF" I'll defend my view of faith. In "Robust realism as a religion," I'll argue that robust realism has some of the telltale features of a religion. In "Advantages of robust realism as a religion," I'll describe some of the features of robust realism as a religion. In "Epistemic justification and robust realism," I'll discuss the question of robust realism's epistemic justification.

Robust realism defined

Robust realism, as I want to understand it, is the conjunction of three views: non-naturalism, objectivism, and moral optimism. I'll discuss each of these views in turn.

Non-naturalism is the view that moral facts are irreducibly normative: any given moral fact is distinct from (i.e., not identical with) any given non-normative fact. Natural facts are a species of non-normative fact; therefore, non-naturalism entails that moral facts are not natural facts (which is why it makes sense to call the view "non-naturalism").

For my purpose here, natural facts and phenomena just are the facts and phenomena that are properly subject to scientific investigation: natural facts just are scientific (physical, chemical, psychological…) facts.[6] I'll assume that any fact that plays a contributory role in the best explanation of a natural fact is a fact that is properly subject to scientific investigation, and is therefore a natural fact.[7] Given this assumption, it follows immediately that non-naturalists have to accept a handicap:

> The non-naturalist's handicap: Moral facts do not play a contributory role in the best explanation of any natural facts.

The non-naturalist's handicap imposes a limitation on the best response to various "why" questions. For example: Why do we believe that torturing an innocent child is morally wrong? Well, our belief on this matter is a psychological phenomenon and therefore one that is properly subject to scientific investigation. Therefore, according to the non-naturalist's handicap, our beliefs about torture cannot be explained by any moral facts. We cannot (correctly) say: I believe that torturing an innocent child is

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[5] Schellenberg suggests that we develop a new, skeptical kind of religion—one that is appropriate for the level of scientific and philosophical knowledge that we now possess. So, he is engaged in an activity that we might call *religious engineering* (borrowing a term from Frank Herbert's 1965 novel, *Dune*). See his (2013) for an overview of his project.

[6] Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 59), Enoch (2011, p. 103), and Parfit (2013, p. 109) understand the natural in a similar fashion.

[7] The core idea behind this assumption is that (ideal) science is maximally open: it embraces *absolutely anything* that substantially contributes to best explanations of natural phenomena. This means that even God's existence, for example, would be a scientific (hence natural) fact, *if* God's existence played the right kind of explanatory role.

morally wrong because torturing an innocent child *really is* wrong. (This assumes "because" is used in its explanatory sense, rather than its justificatory sense).

I call this claim a "handicap" because it constrains non-naturalists in various significant ways, as we'll see below. Some non-naturalists are hesitant to fully accept their handicap, although they typically at least accept that there is some substantial *reason for doubt* that moral facts are explanatory of natural facts.[8] This hesitancy is understandable; the non-naturalist's handicap can be *very* inconvenient. Nevertheless, the handicap is unavoidable, given the plausible assumptions I have introduced above. Indeed, given those assumptions, non-naturalism as defined above is actually *equivalent* to the non-naturalist's handicap. I believe that non-naturalists ought to embrace their limitations in this regard, once and for all, and look for a way to struggle forward.

Let's now turn to the second plank of robust realism: objectivism. This is the view that moral facts are invariant with respect to moral attitudes: a change in moral attitudes, ceteris paribus, cannot result in a change in moral facts. I'll assume that there are at least two sorts of moral attitudes: moral beliefs, and moral seemings.[9] According to objectivism, if it is wrong to torture an innocent child (for example), then that act would remain wrong (ceteris paribus) even if the act *seemed* to be right, and even if we *believed* that it is right. It is not necessary to discuss objectivism in depth here, as it will not play a major role in my argument below. But it bears mentioning that objectivism comes with a handicap similar to the non-naturalist's handicap: Given objectivism, moral facts do not play a contributory role in the best explanation of any moral facts.

Note that non-naturalism and objectivism, as I have defined them, are ontologically neutral, i.e., they are silent about whether moral facts actually exist. Non-naturalism and objectivism are merely claims about what moral facts would be like if there were any such facts. (Or, perhaps more accurately, they are claims about what moral facts *wouldn't* be like if there were such facts. In particular, non-naturalism and objectivism are claims about the explanatory roles that moral facts *wouldn't* play, even if they existed).

Moral optimism, the third and final plank of robust realism, is the view that our deepest[10] moral beliefs are true, at least for the most part. This view, unlike non-naturalism and objectivism, is *not* silent about whether moral facts exist: moral optimism entails moral non-nihilism.[11]

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8   David Enoch, for example, wiggles on this point: he says he is both "neutral" and "pessimistic" on the question of the explanatory utility of moral facts (2011, p. 53).

9   Here and throughout this paper, I'll assume Michael Huemer's account of seemings. Huemer refuses, I think rightly, to analyze "seems" (2013, pp. 328–9). Seemings are non-doxastic content-bearing experiences of the sort that we typically have in mind when we say, "It seems to me that…" Beyond that rough and imprecise characterization, the best way to give an idea of seemings in general, and moral seemings in particular, is simply to cite illustrative cases. It seems to me, e.g., that torturing an innocent child is morally wrong.

10   A moral belief that P is *deep* for a subject S iff (a) P is believed with very high confidence by S, and (b) P is highly coherent with S's other moral beliefs.

11   I assume that a belief that P is true iff it is in fact the case that P. So, if our deepest moral beliefs are mostly true (as moral optimists say) then moral facts exist (as non-nihilists say).

Objectivism, non-naturalism, and non-nihilism are standard components of robust realism, but moral optimism isn't. However, almost all robust realists (myself included) accept moral optimism; indeed, almost all non-nihilists accept it. Therefore, it does little harm to explicitly include moral optimism as a part of robust realism itself.

The foregoing is a very brief sketch of the main commitments of the view I'm calling "robust moral realism." This will do for our purposes, although of course there's a lot more to say about each of the main components of the view.

Faith as unscientific belief

The English word, "faith," appears to have multiple senses. I cannot argue (and do not believe) that robust realism requires faith in *every* sense of the word.

On some views, faith is a non-doxastic attitude. Some hold that faith is a species of hope; others hold that faith is neither hope nor belief, but something else altogether.[12] These views aren't wrong; "faith" is sometimes used in such ways. But there is at least one sense in which faith is a species of belief.[13] For instance, as is often noted in these discussions, the Nicene Creed contains articles of Catholic *faith* which simultaneously are Catholic *beliefs*.

In this paper, I'm interested in the doxastic senses of "faith"—the senses in which faith is a type of belief. There are at least two particularly interesting doxastic senses. First, there is the sense in which faith is belief that persists despite a lack of evidence sufficient to justify it. Call this *blind faith*. I'll briefly discuss blind faith later ("Epistemic justification and robust realism" section), but I'll mainly focus on another doxastic sense of faith. This is the sense in which faith is understood as equivalent to *unscientific belief*. One often sees this usage, for example, in popular discussions of religion and science. Faith in this sense is not necessarily evidentially unsupported; on the contrary, it is conceptually possible for this type of faith to be supported by rationally decisive evidence. Faith, in the present sense, is a type of belief that persists in the absence of—or even in opposition to—*scientific* evidence.

What does it mean for a belief to be unscientific? A mature science is a network of explanations of natural facts and phenomena. A principal aim of scientific investigation is to expand this network—i.e., to add further and deeper explanations of natural facts and phenomena. If a given hypothesis is able to play a contributory role in that explanatory network, then it gains abductive support; but if a hypothesis turns out to be unable to play such a role—i.e., if the hypothesis lacks explanatory value—then the hypothesis is to be rejected (or at least not endorsed).

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[12] Audi (2011, chap. 3) contains a very useful discussion of the relations between faith, belief, and hope.

[13] Some might object [as Caleb Ontiveros does, in conversation; and as Schellenberg (2005, chaps. 5, 6) argues at length] that faith is voluntary, whereas belief is involuntary, and therefore faith and belief are mutually exclusive. But, for one thing, it's not obvious that all belief is involuntary. There is a deep literature on doxastic voluntarism; see Weatherson (2008) for a limited defense. Secondly, it's not obvious to me that all faith is voluntary. (I suppose that a person who is brought up in an environment steeped in religious faith might well lack voluntary control over her faith, just as a person brought up in a household of geographers might have no voluntary control over her beliefs about the location of Asia.) My guess is that some but not all belief is voluntary, and that some but not all faith is voluntary.

Accordingly, if someone continues to believe that P, even after P as a hypothesis has been shown to be incapable of substantively contributing to acceptable explanations of natural facts of phenomena, then her belief is *unscientific*.

I want to claim that an unscientific belief, of the sort just described, amounts to a leap of faith. Specifically, I make the following claim:

> Explanatory superfluity entails faith (ESEF): If one believes that P, although one accepts that P does not play a contributory role in the best available explanations of any natural facts or phenomena, then one believes that P *on faith*.

ESEF may be controversial, so I will present an argument for it in the next section. But first, I want to explain why ESEF implies that robust realism requires faith. This will be straightforward.

I've mentioned that non-naturalists have a handicap: they have to accept that moral facts do not play a contributory role in the best explanation of any natural facts. If one accepts the non-naturalist's handicap, and one goes on believing that there are moral facts, then according to ESEF, one's endorsement of the existence of moral facts counts as faith. Thus, ESEF at least implies that *non-nihilism* is an article of faith for the robust realist.

Now, as we've seen, moral optimism requires non-nihilism, but is not identical with it. Moral optimism is the hypothesis that our deepest moral beliefs are mostly true; moral non-nihilism is the hypothesis that moral facts exist. But it is hard to see how the former hypothesis could have any explanatory utility if the latter one does not. (That is: If the existence of moral facts does not help to explain any natural facts or phenomena, then it is hard to see how the hypothesis that our moral beliefs match the moral facts could help to explain any natural facts or phenomena.) So, it seems to me, non-naturalism fairly directly supports the view that moral optimism does not play a contributory role in the best explanation of any natural facts. If that's right, then ESEF implies that robust realists' commitment to non-naturalism means that they must take moral optimism on faith.

A brief defense of ESEF

An atheist is lying in bed one night when she hears a voice clearly say, "I am God." Afterward, she considers a pair of explanations for this experience: that the voice really was the voice of God, or that it was just a dream. She comes to accept that the best explanation of her experience—the explanation of her experience that possesses the best mixture of general explanatory virtues—is that it was just a dream. Despite this, she is unwilling or unable to dismiss her experience so lightly. In the end, she gives up her atheism and embraces the belief that God truly spoke to her that night.

In this example, I suggest, the atheist takes a leap of faith into theism. Indeed, I think that this is a *paradigm case* of faith: If anyone has ever made a leap of faith, then the person in the above story does so. And, happily, ESEF supports this verdict: ESEF says that the belief formed in the above case is what I'll call a "faith-belief"—a belief held on faith. This is a count in favor of ESEF.

Consider another example. Geocentrism was appealing, long ago, because it was thought to explain why the objects in the sky—the stars, moon, sun, etc.—appear to rotate around us. At that time, it seems to me, geocentrism was not a leap of faith; instead, it was an explanatorily useful hypothesis of early astronomical science. Later, however, we came to understand that alternative models of the universe better explain the observable natural facts. Once this became widely accepted, *then* any continued endorsement of geocentrism begins to look much more like faith. And this, again, is precisely what ESEF implies. So, in this case as in the previous case, ESEF has intuitively plausible implications.

I could continue, but the point is made: ESEF has plausible implications when applied in a range of different cases. Perhaps this is enough to show that ESEF picks out at least one important sense of "faith". But before continuing I'll discuss some objections.

According to some views, one cannot have faith unless one has a pro-attitude toward the object of one's faith. But ESEF implies that one could have faith that P even if one hopes that P is false.

One way for me to respond to this point is simply to grant it. After all, many of us *do* seem to have a pro-attitude about the truth of robust realism. (I'll return to this point below, in "Advantages of robust realism as a religion" section.) So, even if a pro-attitude is necessary for genuine faith, as the present objection maintains, this might not pose any serious problem for my position; I'd still be able to argue that robust realism ordinarily involves faith.

But I think we can go a step further. I think it is arguable that faith that P can exist in the absence of a pro-attitude about P. Imagine a Christian who says that she acts and believes in accordance with the requirements of her religion, not because she particularly wants to go to Heaven, but because she is afraid of Hell. Suppose this person even says that she would like atheism to be true, because then she would be free of the threat of everlasting torment. In such a case, the Christian does not have a pro-attitude toward her brand of Christianity. (Indeed, she seems to hope that her brand of Christianity is false, or to wish it were false.) But I think it would be quite strange to say that her beliefs about God, Heaven, Hell, and so on, thus cannot amount to faith. If that's right, then we should say that there are at least some forms of faith that do not involve the relevant sorts of pro-attitudes at all. So, regardless of the way that the robust realist feels about the truth of her metaethical views, her endorsement of those views can still count as a leap of faith.

Here is another line of objection against ESEF. Suppose I believe that water is composed of oxygen and calcium. This belief can amount to a leap of faith, according to ESEF—as long as I simultaneously accept that my belief does not play a contributory role in the best explanation of any natural facts or phenomena. An objector might claim that this makes ESEF too broad in its implications.[14] The objector might further argue that when we talk about matters of faith, we are typically talk about a specific set of issues: God, or the meaning of life, or some kind of spiritual, transcendent, transmundane, or ultimate reality, etc. But ESEF does not require that faith be about

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[14] Audi considers the possibility of content restrictions on faith (2011, p. 60) but seems to leave open the question of whether such restrictions might actually exist.

such issues. ESEF is content-neutral; ESEF says that even beliefs about the chemical constituents of water can count as faith–beliefs.

I think it is true that we sometimes use "faith" to refer to just those beliefs that concern spirituality (or transcendence, etc.)—i.e., the sorts of beliefs that are typically the domain of *religious* belief and practice. That is: We sometimes take *faith* to be identical with *religious faith*.[15] But this does not cause a serious problem for my view. After all, morality is normally one of the central concerns of religion; and morality is also the central concern of robust realism. So, even if we say that all faith is religious faith, this might actually *support* my view that faith is required by robust realism.

Robust realism as a religion

To this point, I've presented a brief argument for ESEF ("Faith as unscientific belief"), and I've shown that ESEF implies that robust realism requires faith ("A brief defense of ESEF")—specifically, I've shown that (given ESEF) robust realists' commitment to non-naturalism means that they have to have faith in the truth of moral optimism. Thus, I've given a provisional case for the view that robust realism requires faith.

But this doesn't yet establish that robust realism is or can be a religion (since, as I've mentioned, there might be some non-religious forms of faith). I am not sure what a religion is; I do not have a definition. But I know of some of the typical characteristics of religions (beyond the fact that religions typically involve some sort of faith).

First, religions often involve beliefs in the supernatural. Perhaps not *all* religions do: As is often mentioned, atheistic Buddhists do not appear to endorse any supernatural beliefs; also, I think the ancient Greeks might not have held any genuinely supernatural beliefs. (For the Greeks, the gods explained many natural phenomena, and therefore—according to the way in which I have chosen to define "natural" in this paper—the gods were a part of the natural world.) However, supernaturalism does seem *usually* to be involved in religious faith.

As it happens, though, robust realists *do* in fact endorse beliefs in the supernatural. Specifically, they endorse beliefs in non-natural moral facts. When a given fact or phenomenon is said to be *non-natural*, I do not think anything is added when it is also called *supernatural*; as far as I can see, "supernatural" and "non-natural" are synonyms.[16] Of course, the supernatural reality that robust realists posit is quite different from the supernatural reality imagined by, say, Catholicism. The Catholic supernatural reality involves supernatural *agents*—God, angels, etc.—whereas robust realism only

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[15] It bears noting, however, that some philosophers have argued that faith can be non-religious; e.g., see Baier (1980).

[16] Paul Draper (2005) suggests that genuinely supernatural phenomena *must* be causally efficacious. I think this is wrong. Intuitively, God would be no less supernatural if God never engaged in any creative activity and remained causally inactive. More moderately, Stephen Ingram argues (in conversation) that the supernatural *can* be causally efficacious (whereas the non-natural cannot be). If Ingram's more modest suggestion turns out to be correct, it would still be plausible to suppose that the non-natural is a causally and explanatorily inert *subtype* of the supernatural, which is all I need to claim here.

posts the existence of supernatural *moral facts*, which obviously are not agents.[17] But I do not see why this difference, by itself, should be seen as relevant in the present context.

A second important feature of religions is that they typically provide guidance through a set of principles that purport to show us how to live, and serve to direct our attention toward the things in life that are supposed to matter most. Consider the Catholic sacraments, which express the Church's view of the main stages of life. Most religions, I gather, have some doctrinal element that plays a role similar to that of the sacraments.

What about robust realism? Well, robust realism lacks sacraments. But robust realism is, after all, a theory about *morality*—and morality is custom-made to provide us with guidance in making choices. When the Catholic is asked how we ought to live, she ought to say: *Follow the sacraments*. When the robust realist is asked how to live, she ought to say: *Do the morally right thing*. These are two very different pieces of advice, of course, but they are both forms of guidance. (The details of the robust realist's guidance will, of course, depend on which first-order moral views she accepts).

A third important feature of religions is that their members are typically *organized*. In this way, religions are like nations, and unlike theories. To create the needed degree of organization, religions use many different sorts of rituals, hierarchies, meetings and services, holidays, etc. The methods of organization differ from religion to religion, but the need for some form of organization is, I think, universal.

But robust realists *are* organized—through philosophy journals and books, through philosophy departments and universities, through professional organizations like the American Philosophical Association, and so on. Of course, universities, philosophical organizations, and other such institutions do not primarily serve a religious role. Nevertheless, these institutions do provide a way for robust realists to organize and communicate (with one another and with their opponents). Catholics go to church to pray; robust realists go to philosophy conferences to present arguments. These are two very different activities, obviously, but they both serve an organizational function.

In light of the features of religion exhibited by robust realism, I think it is reasonable to view it as a kind of religion—albeit a strange one (as Street says). Those of us who accept robust realism ought to start thinking of our metaethical commitments as religious commitments. (Of course, this doesn't mean that robust realists ought to do all of the sorts of things that members of traditional religions do. It is hard to imagine a robust realist priest, or a robust realist altar, or a robust realist form of worship).

But if robust realism is a religion, as I maintain, is it a *good* religion?

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[17] Relatedly, J. L. Schellenberg says that the following features are "defining features [of religiosity], if any are": "(1) frequent thoughts of a transmundane reality; (2) an emphasis on a significant good, for oneself and others, that may be realized through a proper relation to this reality; (3) the cultivation of such a relation; and (4) a disposition or tendency, when attending to matters in which they are implicated, to—as I shall put it—*totalize* or *ultimize* in some way the central elements of features (1) to (3)" (2005, p. 12). It seems to me that robust realists satisfy at least the first three conditions. (Moral facts, in the robust realist worldview, are transmundane just because they are non-natural.) Whether or not robust realists satisfy the fourth condition is unclear to me; this depends on what it means to totalize or ultimize something. Schellenberg sometimes sounds as if he thinks that the ultimate, for a given individual, is just whatever that individual considers to be of greatest importance.

Advantages of robust realism as a religion

In evaluating robust realism as a religion, we should be attentive to *at least* two very different perspectives. First, there is the perspective of those who presently subscribe to a traditional religion such as Christianity. Naturally, these people believe that at least one traditional religion has certain important epistemic or practical advantages. They will ask: Does robust realism as a religion have any advantages that make it as attractive as the traditional religions that already exist? Second, there is the perspective of those who reject traditional religions. These people believe that traditional religions have certain important epistemic or practical defects. They will ask: Does robust realism avoid the defects of traditional religions?

Ideally, I would be able to provide a case for robust realism that would fully and decisively answer the concerns of both of these groups. However, unfortunately, that project is well beyond the scope of this paper. So, instead, I'll simply discuss some of the main features of robust realism as I see it, and will argue that these features should make robust realism attractive to *some* members of traditional religions, as well as *some* individuals who presently are not religious at all.

I'll begin by noting a feature that initially looks like a *disadvantage* of robust realism. Robust realism is a cold and uncomforting doctrine—especially in comparison with many traditional religions. There is no salvific element. Moral facts do not care about us, are powerless to help us, and will not ensure that we get what we deserve. If a thoroughgoing naturalist's world seems barren or dim, things do not get much brighter when non-natural moral facts are added to that world. Non-natural moral facts provide a basis for guilt and shame when we do evil, and a basis for praise when we do the right thing—but they do not provide a basis for eternal salvation, or anything remotely like it.

As I've said, robust realism's failure to comfort us looks like a disadvantage. But consider the matter from the perspective of those who presently reject traditional religions. These people might believe that there is a very real sense in which the universe *really is* cold and uncomforting—for example, they might believe that our death results in our permanent annihilation. Well, robust realism, to its credit, does not say otherwise.

We might *wish* that matters were different, but this—opponents of traditional religion can argue—does not give us reason to *believe* that matters are different. Wishful thinking is an intellectual vice, and many of the traditional religions are a product of wishful thinking. By contrast, it would be somewhat odd to wish for the truth of robust realism.[18] Thus, it may be argued, robust realism avoids wishful thinking, and thereby

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[18] Many robust realists—in conversation, if not in print—will say that they defend robust realism because they hope it's true, or wish it were true, or because they can't bear the thought that it is false, etc. But I, for one, don't wish or hope that robust realism is true. When I blow out my birthday candles, I wish for many things; the truth of robust realism is not among them. I endorse robust realism for the reasons I've already given: (a) I think objectivism is a conceptual truth, (b) I think non-naturalism is a sound empirical generalization, and (c) I think moral optimism is true because I believe that moral seemings are trustworthy. It is not unlike the way in which I believe that I am surrounded by tables and chairs. If it turns out that I'm not surrounded by tables and chairs (because, e.g., ontological nihilism is true, or because I'm in a simulation of the sort that Nick Bostrom imagines) then I would certainly be surprised; I might begin to doubt my sanity; even so, I am not emotionally invested in the presence of tables and chairs around me.

avoids what is widely regarded (among opponents of religion) as an important defect of many traditional religions.

Let us now turn to a second feature of robust realism. One widespread critique of traditional religions is that their articles of faith can conflict with, and thereby interfere in the progress of, natural science. This is very unlikely to be true of robust realism, precisely because the sole posit of robust realism is that there exists an empirically superfluous realm of moral facts. It is not a part of the "job description" of moral facts to explain anything in nature.[19] Since robust realism sharply divides moral reality from the natural world, the robust realist's moral philosophy cannot conflict with science.

Thus far, I've mentioned two features of robust realism that I think should be regarded as advantages from the perspective of those who are presently nonreligious. What about those who embrace traditional religions?

To address this question, let's stick with Christianity as our example (but the following should also apply to other traditional religions). To be sure, many Christians look to Christianity for hope of salvation, and many Christians look to Christianity for explanation of observable parts of the natural world (e.g., the observable order of nature). These individuals will see the two features of robust realism discussed above as disadvantages. However, there may be a minority of Christians who find they are uncomfortable with the salvific element of their faith (because they grant that is a form of wishful thinking); likewise, some Christians may be uncomfortable with the empirical implications of their faith. These people may embrace Christianity for further reasons of their own, *despite* Christianity's salvific element, and *despite* its empirical implications. They might therefore see robust realism as a potentially attractive alternative to their current religion.

If someone is drawn to Christianity (or some other traditional religion), but not by its salvific element and not by its empirical implications, then why *would* they be drawn to it? Many—perhaps all—religions aim to provide some sort of basis for morality; indeed, this is often thought to be among the chief advantages of traditional religion. George Mavrodes, for example, says that "[Christianity] gives morality a deeper place in the world than does a [thoroughgoing naturalistic] view and thus permits it to 'make sense'".[20] This opens a third dimension along which to compare robust realism to traditional religion. Both traditional religion and robust realism seek to make sense of morality. Which of them does a better job of this?

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[19] Shafer-Landau (2007, p. 323). Here it is also worth noting that robust realism's lack of empirical implications might be taken as a disadvantage for it—because its lack of empirical implications might be thought to make it unfalsifiable, and the unfalsifiability of a theory might be considered to be a disadvantage of that theory. There are several ways to respond to this concern; here is my favorite one. First, it is not the case that robust realism is unfalsifiable, if that means that no evidence against it is possible. On the contrary, plenty of evidence against robust realism is possible. For example, the phenomenon of moral disagreement might be taken to be an important piece of evidence against moral optimism, which is one of the three components of robust realism. It is true that robust realism lacks empirical predictions, and thus cannot be tested by *empirical* evidence (at least not in the way that scientific theories can be). But I do not see why the mere fact that a theory cannot be tested by *one type of evidence* is a problem for that theory, provided that the theory in question is still susceptible to evidence of *some* sort.

[20] Mavrodes (1986).

Here I wish to concede significant ground to proponents of traditional religion. I think that Christianity and other traditional religions make morality comprehensible in a way that robust realism fails to do.

For one thing, as Mavrodes emphasizes, Christianity yields a clear self-interested reason (in the form of an afterlife reward) to do the right thing, whereas both pure naturalism and robust realism leave open whether morality is in our self-interest. Some people think that this means that pure naturalism and robust realism deprive us of any genuine reason to do the right thing. I think that's mistaken (because I think not all of our reasons are self-interested ones). What is significant, however, is that Christianity can provide an explanation of *where morality comes from*: the Christian can say that the source of morality lies in God's divine will.[21] For many people, this is a quite satisfactory response to the question of morality's origin.

By contrast, when the robust realist is confronted with the question of morality's origin, what is she to say? Erik Wielenberg, in his recent defense of non-theistic robust realism, says that the answer is that moral facts (at least some of them) simply *come from nowhere*, and I think he is right about that.[22] For the robust realist, no one has laid down the moral law for us; our moral obligations appear to us as "laws without a lawgiver," as Anscombe says—"as if the notion 'criminal' were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten."[23] I am prepared to grant that there is a certain absurdity in this. Thus, in my view, Christianity and other traditional religions can make sense of morality, and can do so in a way that pure naturalism and even robust moral realism cannot.

However, in order to make sense of morality, Christianity (and other traditional religions) posits a vast, elaborate, and mysterious supernatural ontology, and seeks to explain our moral requirements in terms of that ontology. By contrast, robust realism posits *only one* kind of mysterious supernatural reality—namely, morality itself. So I grant that morality is, within a robust realist worldview, mysterious in a certain problematic way, but I also maintain that robust realism's mystery is *simpler* than that of traditional religion. And parsimony dictates that we should not (ceteris paribus) dissolve a simpler mystery at the cost of bringing in a more complex one.[24]

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[21] In other words, the Christian can posit the Divine Command Theory. To be sure, many Christians reject the Divine Command Theory. But I am unconvinced by the standard objections, including the Euthyphro objection. I think that the Divine Command Theory, or some variation on it, is plausible—*if* God exists (c.f. Carson (2000, p. 250)).

[22] Wielenberg (2014, p. 38).

[23] Anscombe (1958).

[24] These points do not apply to certain extremely simple forms of religion. For example, imagine a religion that posits a perfectly simple God, and posits that this simple God is responsible for both morality and for the natural world. If this religion posits nothing further—e.g., it does not posit any angels, or Heaven, or Christ, etc.—then I'm prepared to grant that it would be simpler and, arguably, more parsimonious than robust moral realism. Of course, this doesn't rule out the very real possibility that the simple religion on offer would have other problems (e.g., the need to explain how a perfectly simple God could be responsible for a highly complex universe).

Epistemic justification and robust realism

Thus far, I've considered three features of robust realism: (1) its consistency with a picture of a cold and uncomforting universe; (2) its utter lack of empirical implications; and (3) the simplicity of its account of the nature of morality. I've argued that these features should be regarded as advantages by some nonreligious people, and might also be regarded as advantages by some religious people; but I grant that not everyone will see them as advantages, and that some will see some or all of them as defects.

Another important issue, which I have not yet directly discussed, concerns whether the main tenets of robust realism can be epistemically justified, and whether the prospects for their justification are any better than the prospects for justification of the main tenets of traditional religion. This is obviously a large and complex issue; I will only make a few remarks about it here.

As we've seen ("Robust realism defined" section), robust realism has three main planks. Two of these planks—namely, objectivism and non-naturalism—are ontologically neutral; they are claims about what moral facts would be like if there were any such thing. The best line of argument for (or against) these claims is a matter of some controversy, but in my view these are largely conceptual matters, similar (in principle) to conceptual questions about the nature of God—e.g., the question of whether God's nature is consistent with anger. And of course traditional religions posit answers to these sorts of conceptual questions. But when it comes to these sorts of questions, I don't think that robust realists have any particular advantage (or disadvantage) with respect to traditional religion. Robust realists need to defend objectivism and non-naturalism through careful attention to moral language and thought; Christians (and others) need to defend their claims about the concept of God, etc., through careful attention to religious language and thought. With regard to these sorts of conceptual claims, I think that robust realism and traditional religions are roughly on a par.[25]

But of course, robust realism and traditional religion do not *only* make conceptual claims. Both camps make ontologically loaded claims as well. The ontologically loaded component of robust realism is moral optimism—the claim that moral facts exist and that our moral beliefs largely match those facts. This claim should be considered alongside the ontological claims of traditional religion, e.g., the claim that God exists.

In their efforts to defend moral optimism, robust realists have their hands tied behind their back, because scientific evidence cannot (given non-naturalism) support moral optimism. Thus, in order to defend their position, robust realists will need to produce *non*-scientific evidence.

There are many different ways to attempt such a defense. One promising approach—my favorite—appeals to phenomenal conservatism, according to which seemings confer epistemic justification (i.e., If P seems to S to be true, then this is evidence that P really is true, and S is therefore pro tanto justified in believing that P really is true). Given that most (not all) of our moral beliefs are such that they seem (to us) to be true, phenomenal conservatism provides some initial support for moral optimism. The next

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[25] See the valuable discussion of related issues in Shafer-Landau (2007).

step would be to show that this initial support is not outweighed by evidence of any sort against moral optimism. It is not a foregone conclusion that this can be shown; nor is it clear that phenomenal conservatism is defensible in the first place. These are matters of ongoing debate. I contribute to that debate elsewhere;[26] I certainly cannot settle the issues here. But the availability of the line of argument from phenomenal conservatism shows one of the ways that we might find a rational basis in evidence for the faith of robust realism.

How does this compare with the prospects for justification of the ontological claims of traditional religion? Well, to begin with, if the robust realist can justify her belief in moral facts by pointing to moral seemings, as I've suggested, then perhaps the defenders of traditional religions can justify their claims by pointing to *religious* seemings, e.g., the seeming presence of God. However, this strategy is complicated by the fact that genuine religious seemings are apparently somewhat rare. Many committed Christians are prepared to acknowledge that God, for example, does not *seem* to be present—this is, after all, the source of the problem of divine hiddenness. By contrast, when we see a morally heinous act—e.g., when we see the torture of an innocent child—we are confronted by an overwhelming sense that the act observed is very seriously wrong. Thus, I suggest, our experience of morality is constituted by a class of seemings that are simply far more vivid and immediate than the experience of God (or of angels, or of any of the other constituents of the traditional religious worldview).

For these reasons, I suspect that the argument from phenomenal conservatism in favor of robust moral realism is likely to be far more powerful than a parallel argument from phenomenal conservatism in favor of traditional religion. Of course, members of traditional religions can and do offer *other* arguments for their views—the ontological argument, the argument from design, the argument from scriptural testimony, and so on. I cannot here determine whether those familiar arguments for (and against) traditional religion are successful. However, I hope to have shown that *one* line of argument in particular—namely, the argument from phenomenal conservatism—might provide much stronger support for robust moral realism than for the main components of traditional religions. For this reason, some of those who remain unconvinced by the usual arguments for Christianity (or for other traditional religions) might nevertheless find robust moral realism to be rationally compelling.

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[26]   See my unpublished paper, "Moral Occasionalism."

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