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Mediated Morality as a Middle Position in Understanding the Relation between God and Morality

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Abstract: How should we understand the relation between God and morality? This article aims to address this question by constructing a theistic metaethical theory informed by postphenomenological mediation theory. According to postphenomenological mediation theory, properties and values are not independent entities but are instead mutually constituted through the relationships that they participate in. By emphasizing relationships and understanding goodness as harmony, the theory allows God and creation to jointly constitute goodness. This alternative theory is compared to the metaethical theories proposed by Robert M. Adams and Mark C. Murphy, which represent the two primary strands of theistic metaethics: theological voluntarism and natural law theory, respectively. The alternative theory exhibits certain advantages and resolves some of the issues found in Adams' and Murphy's theories.

Keywords: theistic metaethics; divine command theory; moral concurrentism; mediated morality; mediation; harmony



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1. Introduction

According to philosopher Mark Murphy, Divine Command Theory (DCT) and natural law theory (NLT) are the predominant approaches for understanding the relationship between God and morality (Murphy 2011, pp. 69, 100). DCT and NLT are broad categories encompassing various scholars, but they share common features. DCT can be traced back to medieval voluntarism, which posited that nothing could be inherently good but only called good based on its relationship to the divine will since God is omnipotent and free (Murphy 2011, p. 100).

DCT aligns well with a Christian worldview, as it explains our experience of moral imperatives or demands (implying a demanding subject) and aligns with the historical understanding of ethical normativity within Christianity. However, a key weakness of this theory is that ethical norms may appear arbitrary since God could have deemed theft as good and care as evil. If one argues that God would not consider theft as good because God is good, this assumes the goodness of God according to a standard independent of God's will. If God's goodness is presupposed, an explanation is still needed for why God's goodness is considered good.

On the other hand, natural law thinking does not necessarily require God, although it need not exclude God either. NLT is closely related to Aristotelian virtue ethics and posits that the good is derived from the nature of the creature itself. If God is included in a natural law approach, the connection between God and morality is typically thinner than other theistic alternatives. Thus, natural law thinking addresses the problem of supervenience, which questions how the moral character of an action can depend on factors beyond its physical conditions. From a theistic perspective, however, NLT is less appealing than DCT since it does not place God at the center of goodness and introduces a definition of goodness that restricts God's freedom and omnipotence by being independent of God.

DCT and NLT can be seen as approaching the Eutyphro dilemma from opposite sides. DCT states that the good is good because God wills it, while NLT asserts that God wills what is good because it is good. The former approach renders goodness arbitrary, while the latter approach disconnects God from goodness. Both Robert Adams and Mark Murphy attempt to provide God with a constitutive role in our understanding of goodness while avoiding the problems associated with extreme positions.¹

According to Adams, moral obligations originate from God's commands, while goodness itself is derived from God's excellence. This framework places God at the center of determining what is right and wrong, as God freely issues commands while avoiding arbitrariness by virtue of God necessarily being the Platonic concept of the good. Although Adams' theory offers certain advantages, it faces challenges in justifying that commands are necessary for all moral obligations, establishing that goodness consists in resembling God's excellence, and has been criticized for making the world morally inconsequential.

Murphy's theory attempts to reconcile Natural Law Theory (NLT) and Divine Command Theory (DCT) through a concurrentist approach (presented in detail in Section 3.1). Building upon Adams' value theory, Murphy integrates it into a NLT framework, where both God and the world share equal responsibility in explaining moral laws. Murphy's theory introduces novel perspectives that warrant consideration. However, it remains unclear how moral necessitation arises and what this necessitation entails within this framework.

The latter part of this paper aims to develop an alternative understanding of morality that maintains God's central metaethical position while addressing the shortcomings of Adams' and Murphy's theories. Our alternative theory draws insights from postphenomenological mediation theory and synthesizes a Platonic/Aristotelian conception of goodness, proposing that goodness should be understood as harmony. By incorporating mediation theory and emphasizing harmony, this alternative theory accommodates the significance of both God and creation in explaining morality, thus mitigating some of the key concerns raised in Adams' theory. Simultaneously, moral necessitation is understood in terms of its contribution to harmony and turned into a normal instance of logical necessity, addressing the challenges encountered in Murphy's theory regarding necessity.

The concept of God being presupposed in this article is not one of divine simplicity, where God is an immutable timeless being; instead, we find it more coherent to think of God as being in time. Since a discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, it is merely stated here to clarify the presuppositions of the article.

In the subsequent sections, we will first present Adams' theory and examine some objections (Section 2). Then, we will explore Murphy's theory and identify its weaknesses (Section 3). Finally, we will introduce our alternative theory and explicate how it resolves the issues raised in Adams' and Murphy's theories (Section 4), followed by a concluding section (Section 5).

2. Robert Adams' Social Divine Command Theory

Robert Adams' theistic metaethical theory consists of two components: a value theory concerning axiological value (presented in Section 2.1) and a social obligation theory concerning deontological value (presented in Section 2.2). Adams' theory can be described as "restricted theological voluntarism" since the will of God is the source of some, but not all, normative statuses (Murphy 2012, p. 682). The following exposition of Adams' theory is adapted from his book *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Adams 1999).

2.1. Adams' Value Theory

Adams' value theory is a Platonic conception of goodness that seeks to encompass various forms of goodness within a unified concept. According to Adams, moral goodness, aesthetic goodness, and all other types of goodness fall under the broader category of "excellence". Being morally or aesthetically good consists in "participating in" or resembling the Platonic concept of the good or the excellent (Adams 1999, pp. 13–14). In Adams'

theory, excellence is understood as God's excellence. Consequently, being good consists of resembling God, who is the standard for goodness.

Adams' assertion that God is the standard of excellence stems from his understanding of the divine nature, which is derived from a modified Anselmian conception of God. Following Anselm, Adams argues that God exists because of a "metaethical conviction that there must be a standard of all goodness that actually is unsurpassably good" (Adams 1999, pp. 43–44). According to Adams, the existence of God as an actual being is necessary for the standard of goodness to be unsurpassably good, as the standard is greater if it surpasses mere existence in the realm of ideas. Excellence is not an external standard that God adheres to; rather, it is an inherent standard intrinsic to the divine nature itself. Hence, being morally or aesthetically good consists of resembling divine nature.

Adams argues that most individuals are relatively competent users of the term "goodness", although their understanding of the term is approximate and may not encompass its true metaphysical nature (Adams 1999, p. 16). He maintains that the semantic meaning of goodness is distinct from its genuine metaphysical nature. Adams illustrates the separation of metaphysical and semantic meanings by examining the concept of water. Water, in its nature, is H₂O, such that being water is necessarily identical to being H₂O. However, the metaphysical fact that water is necessarily H₂O cannot be discovered through semantic analysis of the term "water". Metaphysical descriptions of the nature of objects, whether pertaining to water or goodness, cannot be discovered through reductive semantical analysis of linguistic terms; rather, they require direct involvement with the objects themselves (Adams 1999, p. 15).

Adams employs the Greek noun "eros", one of the Greek words for love, to describe how we recognize the good. According to Adams, we recognize and apprehend the good or excellent through eros because goodness is an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic property. Something being excellent does not imply that it is useful or practically good; instead, it signifies that it possesses inherent excellence and is worthy of admiration in and of itself (Adams 1999, p. 19). Adams posits that we possess a rudimentary understanding of the nature of excellence, enabling us to recognize and appreciate intrinsic excellence. Excellence is, therefore, not a term we have to be introduced to as if it were totally unknown (Adams 1999, p. 24). Adams characterizes our recognition and admiration of excellence as denoting a direction, with excellence being the distinctive property found in that direction (Adams 1999, p. 22). While we cannot know what that property really is, Adams argues that God, as an ideally knowledgeable judge, can know that the excellence of God's own nature is said property and that goodness consists of resembling God's excellent nature.

According to Adams, the resemblance to God's excellence is a matter of possessing specific properties that resemble God (Adams 1999, p. 29). However, this does not imply that an excellent chef is excellent solely because they resemble God's cooking, as if God Himself were a cook. Adams rejects such a notion, asserting that resemblance does not merely entail both God and humans sharing the property φ . Rather, when A resembles B with respect to A's φ -ing, it implies that A's φ -ing resembles some aspect of B (Adams 1999, p. 30). A chef's masterful preparation of a meal (A's φ -ing) does not resemble God because of the chef's cutting or frying techniques, but rather because the preparation of the meal reflects God's creativity. Resembling God's properties cannot be reduced to a simple sharing of specific properties either. If excellence is godlikeness and God is omnipotent, one might conclude that Hitler and Stalin were excellent because they resembled God's immense power. However, according to Adams, the context and significance of the property in question, whether it is power or beauty, also plays a role in determining whether something resembles God. Resemblance as excellence is not solely contingent on sharing a single property; rather, it involves holistic resemblance, where the property in question resembles God only by entering into the appropriate context (Adams 1999, p. 33).

While one might envision that moral badness entails resembling some metaphysical opposite of the good, Adams rejects the existence of a symmetric evil counterpart to God in addition to understanding moral badness solely as a privation of goodness. Instead, he

argues that moral badness involves being against or opposing good (Adams 1999, p. 104). Adams does not deny that the privation of goodness is morally bad; however, he rejects the notion that all moral badness should be understood purely in terms of the privation of goodness. Now, let us examine Adams' understanding of moral obligation.

2.2. Adams' Social Theory of Moral Obligation

Adams' Divine Command Theory (DCT) is built upon his value theory, which assigns priority to the good as the good is theoretically prior to the right and "provides the proper framework for thinking about the right" (Adams 1999, p. 231). In his theory, Adams distinguishes moral obligations from morally good actions, which enables his theory to address Euthyphro's dilemma. By having the will of God explain moral obligation, and deontological value, but not moral goodness, or axiological value, Adams tempers the second horn of Euthyphro's dilemma, often accompanied by the arbitrariness objection. While morally obligatory actions may possess a degree of arbitrariness to maintain God's divine freedom, moral goodness, grounded in God's divine nature, cannot be arbitrary. According to Adams, since God's commands are morally good, the moral goodness of God's commands remains non-arbitrary, even if the existence of some divine command is contingent (Adams 1999, p. 231).

Adams employs what he labels a "social requirement theory" to explicate moral obligation. Deontological statuses, i.e., being morally required to perform or refrain from performing specific acts, are inherently social in nature due to their association with concepts such as guilt, sanctions, and forgiveness. Adams argues that guilt is not merely an emotional state but an "objective moral condition which may be rightly recognized by others" and is characterized by alienation and harm (Adams 1999, p. 239). Guilt creates a sense of alienation from the social context, which can only be rectified within that particular social framework. The social nature of moral obligations also explains why we have reasons for acting in accordance with these obligations. If obligations stem from social relationships, valuing such relationships becomes a reason in itself to abide by these obligations. Acting in accordance with moral obligations originating from a specific relationship can thusly be seen as an expression of one's appreciation for that particular relationship (Adams 1999, p. 242).

There exists both moral and non-moral obligations. Adams identifies four criteria that distinguish moral obligations from non-moral ones:

1. Moral obligations arise solely within good and valuable relationships.
2. Moral obligations depend on the personal characteristics of the party who makes the demands—we have a better reason for complying with the demands of the just and knowledgeable than someone lacking these qualities.
3. The content of the obligation, meaning the prescribed or prohibited actions, the consequences imposed for non-compliance, and the impact of these actions on the relationship in which the obligation originates, must be intrinsically morally good. The fairness of the demand holds particular significance.
4. Moral obligations must be actively demanded rather than hypothetically proposed by someone. While hypothetical demands may provide reasons for individuals to act in certain ways to preserve a relationship, actual demands yield stronger reasons for compliance (Adams 1999, pp. 244–45).

Given that obligations arise within human social relationships, meeting the requirements concerning the goodness of the relationship and the demand-making party seems implausible since humans are fallible and often make immoral demands. To address this challenge, Adams contends that moral obligations arise not in any social relationship but in the relationship between humans and God, which can sufficiently fulfill these criteria. Adams' DCT can, therefore, be described as an ideal theistic version of Adams' "social requirement theory" (Adams 1999, p. 250).

According to Adams, humans' relationship with God provides reasons for following God's commands. If the goodness of moral obligations relies on the quality of the relation-

ship, the moral character of the demand-maker, and the moral content of the demands, Adams' Platonic conception of God as the standard of excellence adequately meets these requirements. By situating moral obligations within humans' relationship with God, Adams provides an explanation for the objectivity of moral obligations, the possibility of being forgiven in case of non-compliance, and the means by which individuals become aware of the content of divine commands, all by appealing to God (Adams 1999, pp. 256–58).

Central to Adams' conceptualization of moral obligations is the claim that God actually communicates God's commands. According to Adams, God's commands have three identifying aspects. Firstly, God's commands rely on the creation of a sign that communicates or reveals the content of the command to humans (Adams 1999, p. 265). This sign can take the form of supernatural acts of divine communication, revelations through human conscience, or other communicating mediators. Secondly, the created sign must convey the intended message, as God cannot communicate something unintended. Finally, the sign must be comprehensible to the intended audience. When issuing a command, God must consider the linguistic context and the interpretive capacity of the intended audience. Although the command does not necessarily have to be understood by everyone, it must be potentially understandable (Adams 1999, p. 269).

2.3. Problems for Adams' Social DCT

Adams' metaethical theory, recognized as one of the most robust defenses of DCT in contemporary scholarship, has also faced significant objections from philosophers. In this subsection, we will briefly outline some of these objections, which will receive more attention when we present our alternative theory in Section 4.

One objection pertains to Adams' understanding of goodness as the resemblance of God's excellence. If being good entails resembling all aspects of God's excellence, including attributes like omnipotence and independence, it follows that humans should strive to resemble not only God's benevolence but also God's independence. However, the notion of humans resembling God's omnipotence or independence as a form of goodness raises difficulties. In theological literature resembling God's omnipotence or independence might even be labeled as idolatrous and be considered morally wrong (Jakobsen 2020, pp. 186–87).

Another issue with Adams' DCT lies in the complete independence of right and wrong from what we could label the world, meaning the feelings, motives and actions of creatures in addition to the material outcome of those actions. According to Adams' theory, the wrongness or rightness of actions is exclusively determined by God's commands. Consequently, the wrongness of an action, like the murder of an innocent child, is not dependent upon any aspect of the action itself, such as the pain experienced, the moral horror associated with the act, or any other aspect that has to do with the act of killing a child. Instead, it is solely based on God's decision that the action is wrong (Murphy 2011, p. 118).

A third objection centers on Adams' assertion that divine commands are necessary for moral obligations. If divine commands are indeed necessary for moral obligations, it would imply that God has issued a command on every right or wrong issue. There is, however, a plethora of ethical issues heavily debated in the field of Christian ethics, like euthanasia, in which it does not seem like God has issued a specific command on the matter (Jakobsen 2020, p. 203). If divine commands are necessary for moral obligation, and God has not issued a command concerning euthanasia, then euthanasia is neither morally right nor wrong, merely permissible. Another challenge arises from Adams' claim that divine commands must be understandable to their intended audience. If divine commands are necessary for moral obligations, and these commands must be comprehensible to qualify as morally obligatory, individuals who cannot grasp the content or authority of divine commands, such as atheists or psychopaths, would not have moral obligations (Morrison 2009; Wielenberg 2018).

3. Mark Murphy's Moral Concurrentism

3.1. Introduction to Murphy's Moral Concurrentism

Mark Murphy's concurrentist theory of moral law is an attempt to bridge the two major theistic metaethical traditions: natural law theory (NLT) and theological voluntarism (which includes Divine Command Theory). In his book *God & Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality*, Murphy presents his theory labeled moral concurrentism, inspired by the theory of natural concurrentism, a theory regarding God's relationship to natural laws. Murphy rejects the two major traditions of theistic metaethics because they fail to satisfy what he calls explanans and explanandum-centered criteria for theistic metaethics.

Murphy's moral theory presupposes the existence of God. If God, a perfect being, exists, then God relates to the created world in a very specific way due to God's necessary properties as a perfect being. According to Murphy, God's sovereignty, which follows from God's perfection, necessitates God's involvement in the explanation of everything that is explanation-eligible (Murphy 2011, p. 10). If God does not enter into the explanations of all phenomena, then God is not sovereign over those phenomena, which is to deny God's perfection. Hence, a theistic explanation of morality must meet certain requirements regarding God's role in the explanation, which Murphy calls explanans-centered criteria (Murphy 2011, p. 1). Among these criteria is the demand for God's immediate involvement in the explanation. God cannot simply be a background cause or enter into explanations in a mediated manner but must be directly responsible in some way for every explanation (Murphy 2011, p. 5). However, Murphy asserts that God does not have to be the sole participant in the explanation such that God is both the immediate and complete explanation—only divine immediacy is required to satisfy explanans-centered criteria (Murphy 2011, p. 64).

Murphy contends that a theistic explanation of morality should satisfy both explanans-centered and explanandum-centered criteria. Explanandum-centered criteria focus on providing a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon in question. For example, if one asks why the sky is blue, an explanandum-centered explanation would attempt to obtain a clear and thorough understanding of the sky, light, and color perception and then identify the best explanation for the specific qualities of the phenomenon (Murphy 2011, p. 1). Murphy finds that neither NLT nor theological voluntarism can fulfill both sets of criteria.

Murphy finds NLT to be unsatisfactory at meeting explanandum-centered criteria. NLT, an Aristotelian metaethical theory, posits the existence of various goods determined by their contribution to the perfection of specific creaturely natures. While God can play a role in NLT by being the original cause of natures or being closely linked to specific goods, NLT fails to satisfy the demand for theistic immediacy in explaining why goods are good. (Murphy 2011, pp. 70–72, 76). The main issue for Murphy is that God does not play an immediate role in explaining why the goods are good (Murphy 2011, p. 83). Since God has to immediately explain everything that is explanation-eligible, NLT cannot satisfy explanans-centered criteria in Murphy's terms. On the other hand, Murphy finds theological voluntarism implausible based on explanandum-centered grounds. Theological voluntarism posits that the wrongness of certain acts is immediately and completely explained by God's will. In this view, the wrongness of an act has nothing to do with the actual act itself, as there is no inherent connection between the act and its immorality. According to theological voluntarism, the wrongness of killing innocent children, therefore, has nothing to do with the actual killing of innocent children (Murphy 2011, p. 119).

With both NLT and theological voluntarism unable to satisfy both explanandum and explanans-centered criteria, Murphy attempts to carve out a middle position of sorts. Central to Murphy's theory is his understanding of moral law, which he develops with help from the philosophical debate on the nature of natural laws. Murphy defends a universals-account of natural laws along the line of Armstrong, Dretske and Tooley, and develops a parallel universals-account of moral laws (Murphy 2011, p. 30). According to the universals account of natural laws, the requirement-relationship found in natural laws arises from the physical properties themselves, rather than an external law. Natural

law consists of some natural property, F, selecting and physically necessitating property G (Murphy 2011, p. 30).

The selecting property, F, possesses a degree of control over the selected property, G, thereby explaining the physical necessitation. Similarly, the universals account of moral laws asserts that universals themselves morally necessitate other universals. For instance, the property being the killing of children morally necessitates refraining from it. According to Murphy, the morally necessary is not *sui generis*, but rather a species of the practically necessary. Instead of viewing the necessitation relationship as causal, Murphy suggests understanding F's selection of property G as a rational relationship (Murphy 2011, p. 38).

According to Murphy, moral laws serve to explain the existence of moral facts. Moral facts are obtaining states of affairs where party A is morally required to ϕ (Murphy 2011, p. 46). Moral facts must have an explanation, if not we risk the moral necessity of refraining from killing innocent children being happenstance. Even when we attempt to explain one moral fact with reference to another moral fact, we implicitly presuppose the existence of a moral law that explains the moral fact (Murphy 2011, p. 51). This is because it is morally necessary to do what is necessary for a morally necessary action to be completed. But if moral facts are explained only by other moral facts, I would be morally required to do all of the things I am required to do (sweat and perspire, for example) in order to complete a morally required action (Murphy 2011, p. 55). Consequently, if one were morally required to sweat in order to save a drowning child, then one would exhibit moral shortcomings if one did not sweat, which is absurd. In order to avoid this absurdity, Murphy proposes that moral facts are explained by moral laws, which do not entail that it is morally necessary that one do what is necessary for the completion of the morally necessary, since the law itself, rather than another moral fact, is the grounding principle (Murphy 2011, p. 56).

Drawing on the universals account of natural laws, Murphy constructs his moral theory by analogy to theistic explanations of natural laws. In theistic explanations of natural laws, Murphy identifies two major traditions: mere conservationism and occasionalism. Conservationism is the view that God engages in the world only in a limited way. Conservationism affirms two theses. Firstly, God is responsible for the creation and sustaining of all substances and their causal power (God sustaining the substances prohibits conservationism from essentially being a form of deism). Secondly, God is not immediately involved in the transactions between these created substances (Murphy 2011, pp. 134–35). A conservationist explanation of why fire burns cotton, for instance, would attribute it to the existence and properties of cotton and oxygen, with cotton's intrinsic properties causing it to burn at a specific temperature. In contrast, occasionalism asserts that God is entirely and immediately responsible for every natural process, including those seemingly occurring solely between created substances. Natural properties have no real effect on natural processes according to occasionalism, and only serve as the occasion for God's action, as every natural process is an act of God.

Although nature appears to exhibit regularity, this is simply because God desires a certain degree of predictability (Murphy 2011, p. 137). An occasionalist explanation of why fire burns cotton would state that, while it externally looks like oxygen and cotton have certain properties that make cotton burn, in reality, these are simply the occasion for God making the oxygen and cotton react in a way to create fire (Murphy 2011, p. 138). Occasionalism can easily explain supernatural events, because God can simply refuse to act in the way He usually does, thus preventing the men in the furnace from being burned (Daniel 3) (Murphy 2011, p. 141).

Mere conservationism and occasionalism are *mutatis mutandis* NLT and theological voluntarism according to Murphy (Murphy 2011, pp. 139–40). Conservationism and occasionalism share the same strengths and weaknesses as their respective metaethical counterparts. Mere conservationism, akin to NLT, is able to satisfy explanandum-centered criteria, but cannot satisfy explanans-centered criteria. Occasionalism and theological voluntarism are the opposite. In an attempt to find some sort of middle ground between the two dominating theories regarding moral laws, Murphy turns to a theory that exists

between conservationism and occasionalism, natural concurrentism, and develops a moral concurrentism in parallel.

Natural concurrentism posits that both God and the creaturely natures are responsible for natural processes, claiming that God is the immediate but incomplete explanation for natural processes. A concurrentist understanding of natural laws claims that both God and the physical properties of the object in question immediately necessitate the natural process. God contributes with power in a general sense, while the properties of the physical objects determine the specific effects of that power (Murphy 2011, pp. 143–45). We can illustrate this with how an electrical appliance, be it a toaster or a TV, works. These appliances require electrical power to function, but the manner in which that power is utilized depends on the specific physical construction of the toaster or television. Natural laws function similarly under the framework of natural concurrentism. If one were to give a concurrentist explanation of how fire burns cotton, one would claim that God contributes generally with power so that something happens, while the physical properties of oxygen and cotton and heat are responsible for the fact that cotton burns, instead of imploding or turning blue. According to a concurrentist view, it is meaningless to separate God and the properties' actions or question whether it truly is God or the cotton that explains why cotton burns; the answer can only be both (Murphy 2011, p. 145). However, since God is free, God can choose to not contribute with divine power, thereby explaining the existence of supernatural events. If God does not contribute with power, then cotton fails to burn (Murphy 2011, p. 147). Building upon the framework of natural concurrentism, Murphy develops moral concurrentism as a theistic explanation of moral laws.

Moral concurrentism claims that moral laws are explained both by the intrinsic properties of actions and natures themselves and God's goodness (Murphy 2011, p. 148). Murphy adopts a modified Aristotelian version of Adams' value theory, which posits that goodness is God's excellence, and that goodness for creatures consists of resembling God's excellence in accordance with its creaturely nature (Murphy 2011, p. 154). Murphy denies that goodness can be understood as entirely transcendental with the following example. If creaturely excellence always imitates God's excellence, then the culinary excellence of chicken fried steak is an imitation of God's excellence. However, if a human were to possess the same properties that make chicken fried steak excellent, such as crispy skin and juicy seasoned meat, we would not deem that human excellent, despite sharing all the properties that make chicken fried steak excellent (Murphy 2011, p. 155). While God is "simply good", the goodness of everything else is creaturely good, given concurrently by the goodness of God and the specific nature of the creature (Murphy 2011, p. 159).

A concurrentist explaining of moral laws would claim that God's goodness and the properties of actions and natures jointly morally necessitate a specific action. It is meaningless to ask whether God or the properties of actions and natures are truly responsible for the moral law's normative status, as the moral necessitation is cooperation. However, just as God can withhold God's power, preventing cotton from burning, Murphy argues that God, in exceptional cases, can prohibit moral necessitation and create "moral miracles," bypassing general moral rules and allowing for moral exceptions at God's discretion (Murphy 2011, p. 177). This could explain how God could have commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Murphy 2011, pp. 173–74).

3.2. Problems with Murphy's Moral Concurrentism

Murphy's moral concurrentism theory initially appears more favorable compared to other theistic alternatives, as it effectively addresses many of the traditional objections to natural law theory and theological voluntarism. However, Murphy's theory is not without its own set of challenges. This subsection will succinctly outline some criticisms of Murphy's theory.

According to Murphy both natural laws and moral laws should be understood according to a universals account, where properties or universals select other properties with necessity. Nevertheless, the mechanism underlying this selection process, particularly

with respect to moral laws, remains unclear. The existence of universals itself is a topic of philosophical controversy, and it is difficult to conceive how these universals possess the rational power to morally select appropriate actions. Even if one were to accept that universals possess this rational power, it would still be challenging to argue that universals are responsible for issuing moral judgments upon themselves. In many cases, something might be wrong, not because of the action itself, but because of how the action enters into a larger causal network. There might not be anything inherently wrong with eating peanuts, but it could still be morally wrong if anyone close by could have a severe or fatal allergic reaction to airborne trace amounts. If there is nothing inherently wrong with eating peanuts, it's hard to see how the act of eating peanuts could morally select prohibition, as Murphy claims. How we can establish the existence of moral universals, as well as their selection of appropriate responses, remains ambiguous within Murphy's theory.

Another concern for Murphy's theory stems from his understanding that the morally necessary is a species of the practically necessary. While one can easily grasp how natural laws prescribe necessary action, moral laws are not self-evidently necessary. Natural laws, such as the laws of gravity, cannot be broken under regular conditions simply because the physical processes they describe cannot be circumvented. When a person jumps, the laws of gravity force him or her to land again, unless the person is in space or some other place where gravity is lessened. It is easy to comprehend how the laws of nature necessitate compliance and what breaking or circumventing these laws would look like. Moral laws cannot force compliance in a similar manner, however. Breaking moral laws could refer to cases where one does something that would be deemed morally wrong under normal circumstances, but which nevertheless does not result in moral blame. The concept of moral blame or culpability does, however, not figure clearly in Murphy's theory of moral laws, making the result of breaking moral laws unclear. Consequently, the nature of moral necessity remains unclear in Murphy's theory.

4. An Alternative Theory: Mediated Morality

In this section, we present an alternative to the metaethical theories proposed by Adams and Murphy. Our theory aims to achieve the same objectives as their theories while addressing the challenges they encounter. First, we introduce a specific type of mediation theory, derived from the work of postphenomenological philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek (Section 4.1). Next, we present our metaethical theory itself (Section 4.2). Finally (Section 4.3), we demonstrate how our theory accomplishes the goals of Adams' and Murphy's metaethical theories while avoiding their weaknesses.

4.1. Mediation Theory

In this subsection, we present a particular mediation theory based on the ideas of Peter-Paul Verbeek, who belongs to the postphenomenological tradition influenced by Husserl and Heidegger. Postphenomenology rejects what has been labeled as the subject/object dichotomy, which claims that one can divide the world into pure subjects and objects while acknowledging the coexistence of subjectivity and objectivity in specific situations and relationships. While traditional phenomenology also criticizes the subject/object-dichotomy, postphenomenology argues that phenomenology fails to comprehend the deeply intertwined nature of the subject-object relationship. Instead, this relationship should be understood as one of mutual constitution (Verbeek 2005, pp. 108–13).

Verbeek adopts a specific interpretation of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory to explain the intertwined relationship between humans and the world. According to this view, every member of the network is constituted by other members within the network. Subject and object mutually constitute each other in networks, meaning that the relationship between the subject and the world is always mediated (Verbeek 2005, p. 168). As these relationships could have been different, the properties and identities of the entities involved in the network could have also been different, as they are constituted through their relationships with others in the network (Verbeek 2011, p. 15). Mediation, in this

context, refers to the specific way in which the relationship between actors (including various entities) is mediated, which could have been different, and this mediation defines the identity of the parties involved in the relationship (Verbeek 2005, p. 119).

Verbeek provides several examples to illustrate the mediation process. For instance, an author writing a text using a pen or a computer would experience a distinct writing process based on their choice of writing tool. Changing the tool during the writing process would alter the nature of being an author, the act of writing, and the resulting text. This example clearly demonstrates how the pen or computer functions as a mediator, mediating the relationship between the author and the text (Verbeek 2005, p. 115). However, mediation can also occur in situations without an obvious mediator between the subject and the object. For example, when choosing between a regular chair and a rocking chair, the chosen chair would mediate different relationships and sitting situations. Mediation occurs through how the chair, or any other object, suggests certain actions by making certain actions easy or difficult, expected or unexpected, possible or impossible (Verbeek 2005, p. 192).

According to Verbeek, mediation holds ethical significance since it can create new possibilities or impose ethical restrictions. Morality should not be reduced to intentional agents and their actions but encompasses anything involved in the mediation process in situations where moral or immoral actions occur (Verbeek 2011, p. 36). Mediators actively shape agents' moral decision-making by opening or closing certain possibilities, implicitly recommending or expecting specific actions, and therefore, function as moral agents themselves. Verbeek provides an illustrative scenario wherein a weaker individual seeks revenge against a stronger individual. If the weaker person is provided with a gun, the presence of the gun mediates a new situation that alters the identities and relationships between the two parties. The weaker person becomes a potential killer, the stronger person becomes a potential victim of gun violence, and vengeance can take the form of an act of shooting (Verbeek 2005, pp. 155–56).

The manner in which a situation is mediated can modify the range of concrete actions available and their moral evaluations within a specific context. Verbeek employs the example of an ultrasound test, wherein a new test has been developed to detect a particular disease in embryos. Suddenly, the ultrasound test assumes a different nature, offering a new alternative for decision-making: whether to be informed about a potential disease in the embryo. Not acting may be understood as irresponsible, and failing to prevent the birth of a child with a disease may incur blame (Verbeek 2011, pp. 23–27, 38). This moral significance of mediation is the central insight derived from postphenomenological mediation theory, upon which our metaethical theory is based.²

4.2. *An Alternative Theory of God and Morality: Mediated Morality*

When discussing why goodness is good, it is important to distinguish between intensional and extensional definitions. An intensional definition provides a general description of the meaning of a term, while an extensional definition lists specific instances that fall under that definition. For example, an intensional definition of “furniture” could be “large movable objects found in many houses to make them livable”, while an extensional definition could be “items like tables, chairs, sofas, etc.” Similarly, an intensional definition of “goodness” could be “actions that bring the most happiness to the most people”, while an extensional definition could be “actions like love, honesty, and others”.

Making this distinction is useful because the question “why is the good good?” can be interpreted in different ways. If we understand the good extensionally, it is like asking “why is love, honesty, etc. good?” and one can answer by saying that they fall under the general description of goodness—for instance, love and honesty are actions that bring happiness to most people. If we understand the good intensionally, it is like asking “why are actions that bring the most happiness to most people good?” In this case, one can respond that it is simply a matter of definition. However, the definition should be justified by demonstrating its coherence and ability to explain why things commonly regarded as good fall under that definition.

In the following discussion, we adopt an intensional understanding of goodness as harmony. Harmony is the opposite of chaos and can be expressed through symmetry, order, wholeness, unity, balance, proportionality, etc. The concept is inspired by the works of Plato and Aristotle and the role they play in harmony in their understanding of both beauty and goodness. Philosopher Alan White has a theory of beauty based on the work of Francis Kovach, where something is beautiful to the degree that it is an integral unity of proportionate constituents (White 2014, p. 123). This is a good definition of harmony in terms of the aspects of unity, integration, and proportionality, but in order to expand this harmony-theory of beauty into a harmony-theory of goodness, we would like to add the aspect of well-functioning interaction. Hartmut Rosa has conducted much work on the concept of resonance (Rosa 2019). Resonance is a vague term in the work of Rosa, but we interpret it as describing well-functioning interactions, and thus it can be understood as a form of harmony. There is no room in this article to discuss different understandings of goodness. Instead, our purpose here is to presuppose this understanding of goodness as harmony and demonstrate how it can address the challenges faced by the theories proposed by Adams and Murphy.³

Based on our understanding of goodness as harmony, we aim to establish a relationship between God and the good that makes God central to explaining why the good is good, both intensionally and extensionally. We want to avoid making goodness external to God or beyond God's control. Simultaneously, we acknowledge the necessary character of the good and that it requires an interaction between God and the world.

Intensionally, we propose that goodness should be understood as harmonious order. Prior to the creation of the world, when only God existed, the goodness present in the world was the harmonious order within God. Drawing upon postphenomenological mediation theory, it follows that God and goodness mutually constitute each other. In this context, the good is constituted in its relationship to God as the harmonious order existing within God, while God is constituted by the relationship to the good through the internal unity of God's properties. Thus, goodness is not external to God but rather an expression of God's harmonious unity.

We conceive of God, before creation, as a simple harmonious unity of God's properties. However, harmony can be increased by incorporating diversity within unity. The more parts integrated into harmony, the greater the overall harmony. When God creates creatures capable of being integrated into a harmonious unity, there is more truth, beauty, and goodness in the world.

God is the sole, sufficient cause of the total being of what is created, but God creates over time. Creation grows in internal complexity, and goodness is to be understood in harmony, which can grow in internal complexity over time. Given our understanding of goodness and how God creates in time, goodness can increase over time even if God is the sole cause of creation. We do not think of God as a timeless, immutable, transcendent being, but instead of God as being itself unfolding itself through ever greater internal complexification over time.

Since God created the world and everything within it, God has a relationship with all that exists. Consequently, God's relationship with specific goods and actions is constitutive of their nature as good. Extensionally, goodness consists of a list of specific goods, and the goodness of these goods is partly constituted by their relationship to God. Each specific good thing and action is constituted as part of God's creation and as realizers of the kingdom of God or God's will. In other words, the identities of specific goods and actions are partially constituted by their relationship to God.

How does God explain why specific items belong to the list of specific goods? The items on the list fall under the intensional understanding of the good, which means that they are good because they contribute to increased harmony. As harmony can manifest in different ways, specific components of a system may relate to one another in diverse ways to create a harmonious whole. Thus, when asked why a particular thing or action is good, the answer is partly dependent on the thing or action itself and how it is constituted,

but also partly dependent on the fact that the thing was created by God in a certain way with certain conditions of possibility. If God were to create a universe where only a certain type of Martian existed, the concrete harmonious community in which the Martians would participate would differ from the potential harmonious communities in our world. This difference is partly due to the Martians and their specific properties, and partly due to their relationship with their creator. Consequently, our theory fulfills one of the goals articulated in the debate between Adams and Murphy by positing that the good depends on both God and the created world.

Why are specific goods, such as honesty and love, good in the extensional sense? These specific goods are good because they contribute to increased harmony. However, the manner in which specific things and actions contribute to harmony depends on their constitution and the harmony made possible by God through the creation of this particular universe. Therefore, the good is mediated in the specific relationship between humans and God.

Why is the good, understood intensionally as harmony, good? We have established that goodness is defined as harmony, and this definition can be defended by demonstrating how specific goods contribute to harmony. It may appear that God is excluded from this perspective; however, it is crucial to recognize that harmony always assumes a specific form. The constitution of a harmonious relationship is partially determined by entities' relation to God. This applies both when God existed alone in the universe when God and goodness were identical, and after God created entities distinct from God.

Our existence encompasses both harmony and disharmony, suffering, and alienation. Something is considered good if it contributes to increased harmony. As theists, we believe that a final harmony will emerge, encompassing all of creation—an arrangement distinct from the harmony that existed in God before creation. In both cases, before creation and at the time of final harmony, the specific form that harmony takes is shaped by the beings that exist. Therefore, these cases exemplify maximal goodness by being the most harmonious configuration of all that exists.

4.3. Comparison with Adams and Murphy

As demonstrated in the exposition of Adams and Murphy's theories, both scholars strive to grant God a central role in their moral frameworks and in defining why the good itself is good. Simultaneously, they aim to prevent morality from becoming arbitrary but rather want to maintain its necessary character. However, Murphy's theory encounters challenges in explaining moral necessitation, while Adams' theory struggles to justify the proposition that God has issued commands pertaining to all deontological states, that goodness resembles God, and that goodness is entirely independent of the world. In this subsection, we will endeavor to demonstrate how our alternative theory accomplishes the objectives of Adams and Murphy while avoiding the problems they face.

By distinguishing between the intensional and extensional aspects of goodness, our theory gives a precise explanation of the centrality of God. Intensionally, goodness is harmony, which manifests as a harmonious relationship among existing entities. Initially, before God created the world, goodness was the specific harmony intrinsic to God. However, with the creation of new entities by God, a more complex harmony can be realized by integrating these creations into a harmonious web of relationships. The particular configuration of this new harmony depends partly on God's act of creation, which entails that God created the conditions for how everything created could be assembled into a harmonious whole. Simultaneously, the new harmony is dependent on the contributions and properties of the specific creations that actually exist.

Our theory averts the risk of moral arbitrariness by positing that God cannot deem any conceivable thing or action as good. If God were to desire or command something that does not contribute to increased harmony, then, according to our theory, that which God desires or commands would not be good. Hypothetically, as the creator of the universe, God could have been malevolent and caused chaos instead of harmony. We presuppose

the commonly accepted theistic notion of God as good, meaning that God acts to increase harmony, although we do not present a theodicy to account for the existing chaos (for such a theodicy, see [Søvik 2011, 2018](#)). The relational focus of our theory also avoids Murphy's controversial solution to the problem of evil, in which God is "under no obligation to promote creaturely well-being" ([Duncan 2018](#)).⁴

Our theory allows for the influence of God's free will to co-determine what is good. Due to the indeterminism of the universe and the free will of human beings, the universe can evolve and transform in various ways. God's will is an integral component of the harmonious whole in which all existing entities participate, and what God wills is influenced by what happens. What constitutes harmony in a specific context is determined and co-constituted in relation to God's will with which it should be harmonious. Conversely, God's will is co-constituted by the properties, desires, and needs of creation since God desires a harmonious (good) world, and what constitutes harmony at any given time is dependent on the specific beings present during that period. The specific manifestation of harmony is mediated through a mutually constituting relationship between God and creation.

According to our theory, morality possesses a necessary character in the sense that good is inherently good in virtue of contributing to harmony. In certain situations, only one alternative or choice contributes to increased harmony, rendering it the sole action that is morally necessary. However, in other situations, the determination of what is good may be contingent, with multiple equally harmonious paths leading to equally harmonious outcomes. It is a strength of our theory that it accommodates the existence of morally good actions that are not morally necessary, as well as morally neutral choices where both options are equally harmonious.

We understand the morally necessary as specific moral actions that are intrinsically good or evil due to their contribution to increased or decreased harmony, respectively. Necessity, in this context, refers to logical necessity. An action is considered good when it contributes to increased harmony because goodness itself is harmony. Thus, it is logically necessary (denying it would entail a contradiction) that an action promoting increased harmony is good. This understanding of the necessity of morality enables our theory to overcome one of the challenges in Murphy's theory, where the issue of moral necessitation in his concurrentist theory remains unclear (cf. [Section 3.2](#)).

In Adams' metaethical theory, the world itself holds no relevance in determining right and wrong, as goodness derives from resembling God and rightness or wrongness stems from God's commands. Contrary to this, our proposed theory addresses this concern by acknowledging the significance of the world and all its beings in determining what is the most harmonious unity. The well-being of children, for instance, partially determines the harmony of a situation, making them and the existence of all other beings and entities relevant in discerning what is good.

Unlike Adams' theory, which asserts that God must have issued commands encompassing all deontological statuses, our theory contends that something can be morally right without being commanded by God. Right actions, according to our theory, are actions that contribute to harmony. Nevertheless, God's commands can still hold importance within our framework. If God were to issue a command, that command would become a part of the harmonious whole encompassing everything that exists. Hence, abiding by these commands would increase harmony and be morally good.

Adams argues that goodness consists of resembling God, implying that it is good for humans to mirror God's omnipotence or independence. Our theory avoids this problem by emphasizing the necessity for all existing beings to find their proper place within a harmonious whole. If all beings were all-powerful creators of everything except themselves, harmony would be unattainable since it would be logically impossible. However, harmony can be achieved if each being finds its suitable place within a harmonious whole, where God represents the ultimate all-encompassing entity.

If perfection is understood as harmony, God can be considered the perfect harmony before creation. After God creates the world, perfection (i.e., maximal harmony) is the state where creation attains the most harmonious relationship with itself and with God. By reinterpreting Adams' conception of God's excellence along this harmony-centered perspective, the issue of humans resembling God's perfect properties might be resolved. In this reinterpretation, the goodness of beings could still involve resembling God's excellent properties, depending on whether and how it would contribute to increased harmony.

One could question whether our theory is sufficiently theistic, or if morality understood as harmony mediated in relationships makes God's metaethical role superfluous. If God only partly constitutes what is harmonious in the same way any other being would constitute the specific shape harmony takes, one could have a theory of morality as mediated harmony even in a godless universe.⁵ We would answer this question by pointing out two things. Firstly, even if God only partly constitutes harmony, God as the creator has a privileged position in doing so. Since what is morally good in a universe where God exists is decided by the harmony within God Godself (which depends on God's nature) and the other beings and relationships that exist (which God creates), God shapes harmony in a fundamental way. Secondly, even if God did not exist (if God does not exist necessarily), and harmony could be constituted by the existing beings in a godless universe, harmony could still be understood in a theistic way. Adams suggests that, if God did not exist in an alternative universe, then something else would be the most excellent being in this universe, but this would not be as excellent as God is (Adams 1999, pp. 46–47). We suggest that harmony could be understood in the same way. If God does not exist in another universe, then the existing beings and relationships in that universe would constitute moral goodness in that universe. The type of harmony that is morally best is, however, the harmony beings could achieve in relationship with God, since the relationship within God, and therefore, God's nature, is perfectly harmonious. This allows our theory to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, God must obviously have a more central role in morality than other beings. On the other hand, we do not want to make goodness so dependent on God that we must conclude that in a possible universe with no God, nothing could be morally good. For it seems obvious to our moral intuition that there could be a possible universe with no God, but with moral goodness. Thus, we argue that our position is a middle position that avoids both problems. God is central to morality, and more so than other beings, but not so much that a universe without God could not contain goodness at all.

In this subsection, we have endeavored to demonstrate how our theory fulfills the objectives of Adams' and Murphy's metaethical theories while overcoming their respective challenges. It may appear that our harmony theory, rather than mediation theory, resolves the issues in their theories. However, we contend that both understanding goodness as harmony and embracing mediation theory are indispensable for addressing the challenges in other metaethical frameworks. This claim stems from the crucial insight of mediation theory, which recognizes the significance of various factors beyond will, motive, intention, pain, and pleasure in shaping and constituting moral goodness and badness—particularly in terms of harmony. The moral value of things and actions should not be reduced solely to their consequences or to motives and rules that determine what is morally good and right. On the contrary, the constitution of things and actions and their participation in well-functioning interactions that create harmony is morally relevant. Mediation theory elucidates why the specific forms of harmony determine the nature of goodness and morality, surpassing other theories' understanding of moral evaluation.

5. Conclusions and Further Research

This paper has aimed to develop a theistic metaethical theory rooted in an understanding of goodness as harmony and influenced by postphenomenological mediation theory. We propose that morality is mediated, implying that goodness is always constituted by the various components of existing relationships. Our concept of mediated morality aligns well with harmony as the intensional definition of goodness, as harmony itself relies on the

constituent parts. As demonstrated in Section 4, this approach offers several advantages over other theistic metaethical theories. By considering morality as mediated, we preserve God's central role in metaethics while also acknowledging the significant contribution of creation. Unlike Adams' Divine Command Theory (DCT), our theory does not require God to issue commands encompassing all deontological statuses, and humans do not necessarily become good by resembling God's perfect properties. Our theory successfully places both God and the world at the core of morality, achieving Murphy's primary objective while avoiding Murphy's ambiguity surrounding moral necessitation.

Although our theory demonstrates explanatory potential, it would benefit from further research. Our current theory does not account for the existence of moral obligations or provide a clear distinction between axiological value (good and bad) and deontological value (right and wrong). Another concern with this alternative understanding of morality pertains to the somewhat vague notion of harmony. If we were to define "harmonize" as the effective collaboration of different components, we would still require a precise understanding of what "effective" means in this context. It is conceivable that harmony itself is a product of and thus reducible to some other ethical principle. However, given that harmony is always constituted by all existing relationships, it would be consistent with the theory if the concept of harmony remains somewhat vague, as it is constantly changing. Additionally, the theory would benefit from addressing the connection between postphenomenological ontology and theism. Postphenomenology rejects absolute claims about the properties of beings, asserting that attributes like freedom are not inherent properties of human beings but rather emerge within specific relationships (Verbeek 2011, p. 59). The postphenomenological rejection of absolute ontological claims may conflict with theological assertions concerning God's perfect properties, human dignity, or similar attributes. Resolving these issues would position this alternative understanding of morality as a contender among other theistic metaethical theories. Therefore, our endeavor to develop an alternative theistic metaethical conception of morality has yielded a promising theory.

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Notes

- ¹ Instead of discussing classical Natural Law Theory like that of Thomas Aquinas, we have chosen to focus on a live discussion between some contemporary scholars, with Mark Murphy representing a sophisticated modified version of Natural Law Theory.
- ² One could see a resemblance between our position and situation ethics since both positions hold that moral conclusions depend on context. However, the explanation for this view is very different in mediation theory and situation ethics. The main point of postphenomenological mediation theory is the mutual constitution between subject and object, which is not a topic in situation ethics. Situation ethics rejects universal conclusions since different contexts have different subjects, reasons, goals, consequences, limitations, etc. Mediation theory may well accept universal conclusions or think that something holds descriptively and normatively across all contexts but will emphasize the mutual constitution that finds a place and is relevant for the assessment.
- ³ It could seem strange to think of harmony as good in a morally relevant sense. But we share the common view in metaethics that normative statements include both norms (statements about actions that are morally good to do) and value judgments (statements about what is good, and this is not restricted to actions). The following statements are morally normative and not merely descriptive: It is good that stars exist; it is good that love exists; it is bad that suffering exists. Value judgments being part of ethics explain how harmony can be understood morally as goodness.

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

⁵ We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this objection to our attention.

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