

Moral Objectivism and a Punishing God

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Abstract: Throughout recorded history, people have made claims concerning a connection between religion and morality. God has been depicted as a divine guarantor of right and wrong, rendering morality universal and absolute, and belief in God has been correlated with both prosocial behavior and moral conviction. But just how does belief in God relate to folk moral views? In this paper, we discuss original research which suggests a tight connection between belief in moral objectivism and belief in God, but the picture we offer is distinctive in two respects. First, folk moral objectivism seems correlated with one particular conception of God--namely, God as a divine punisher. Second, our results suggest both that a belief in moral objectivism shapes how theists conceive of God, while also suggesting some feedback between how a subset of theists conceive of God and how they think of the nature of morality.

Keywords: folk morality, conceptions of God, religion and morality, metaethics, moral psychology

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Nabum 1:2-3 “The Lord is a jealous God, filled with vengeance and wrath...The Lord is slow to get angry, but his power is great, and he never lets the guilty go unpunished.”

Exodus 34:6-7 “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin.”

Introduction

Since ancient times, great minds have drawn a connection between morality and the divine. For example, in the *Laws* (4th century BCE), In classical Greece, Plato (ca. 4th century BCE) writes that “the fear of such vengeance, exacted by the gods, should hold a man in check” (Saunders, 1531) and that “no one who believes in gods as the law directs ever voluntarily commits an unholy act or lets any lawless word pass his lips” (Ibid, 1542). Around the same time, the Mohists (ca. 5th-4th century BCE) in pre-dynastic China were making similar claims, arguing that “if the ability of ghosts and spirits to reward the worthy and punish the wicked could be firmly established as fact throughout the empire and among the common people, it would surely bring order to the state and great benefit to the people” (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2005, p. 104).

This connection is also drawn in modern times. In a famous passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Dostoevsky’s character Ivan Fyodorovich opines that:

...if there is and has been any love on earth up to now, it has come not from natural law but solely from people’s belief in their own immortality... [and] were mankind’s beliefs in its own mortality to be destroyed, not only love but also any living power to continue the life of the world would at once dry up in it... [and] the moral law of nature ought to change immediately into the exact opposite of the former religious law, and that egoism, even to the point of evildoing, should not only be permitted to man but should be acknowledged as the necessary, the most reasonable, and all but the noblest result of his situation. (Dostoyevsky, 69)

All of these thinkers suggest that religious belief is conducive to--perhaps even necessary for--moral or prosocial behavior. Call this the punishing God explanation of moral behavior. Some have claimed that beliefs in punishing gods were key factors in the scaling up human cooperation beyond the clan level to cities and states (Norenzayan 2013, Norenzayan et al 2015). Recent psychological research agrees that there is such a connection (see Norenzayan and Shariff, 2008, for a review).

The previous quotations characterize individuals as modifying their behavior primarily out of fear of divine sanction or supernatural punishment. But the connection between morality and religious belief could also be drawn at a higher level of analysis. Some have maintained, for example, that God not only punishes people for disobeying his commands but also that God instantiates, realizes, or constructs objective morality *ex nihilo*.¹ On this view, in the absence of God, morality itself (conceived of in absolute, law-like terms) could not exist, while belief in God entails belief in objective morality. Some have gone so far as to maintain that belief in God is inseparable from belief in moral objectivism.

Within the philosophical tradition, Hobbes is one who gives voice to such a position. In *Leviathan* (1991), Hobbes writes that:

These dictates of Reason, men used to call by the name of Lawes, but improperly: for they are but Conclusions or Theoremes concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves; whereas *Law, properly is the word of him, that by right hath command over others*. But yet if we consider the same Theoremes, as *delivered in the word of God, that by right commandeth all things; then are they properly called Lawes* (111, emphasis added).

Nietzsche offers an account that is different in many ways but shares the same general conclusion. Like Hobbes, Nietzsche affirms a strong connection between belief in God and belief in objective morality. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he speculates that slaves in the ancient world yearned for revenge against their masters, yet were impotent to act. The resulting frustration generated a compensatory belief that a noble God exists, is able to detect the objective evil in their masters, and would subsequently punish them (even when the slaves cannot). The desire for revenge thus generates belief in God, belief in supernatural punishment, and belief in the existence of objective moral properties (e.g. Sinhababu 2013).

In this paper we set out to investigate the connection between morality and religious belief at this higher level of analysis--to wit, the connection between belief in God and belief in moral objectivism.

Contemporary Philosophical Metaethics

That ordinary folk believe in the existence of objective morality is an article of faith in philosophy (e.g. Blackburn 1998; Brink 1989; Joyce 2006; Shafer-Landau 2003; Smith 1994). Some recent research supports this notion (e.g. Goodwin & Darley 2008, though see Sarkissian et al 2010, Sarkissian forthcoming).

¹ The writers below all refer to the Abrahamic God.

While multiple explanations could be offered for folk objectivism, it seems, *prima facie*, that morality grounded in a theistic conceptual framework could explain folk objectivism. When philosophers in the Anglo-American world make claims about what ‘ordinary folk’ believe about morality, they are primarily referring to individuals who in fact affirm belief in a monotheistic God (e.g. Hackett et al, 2012). And a monotheistic God’s commandments are typically thought to apply to everyone absolutely, regardless of their contingent beliefs or desires. So, it might seem only natural for someone who believed in God to believe that some moral dictates stem from Divine Command, are objectively true, and apply to all people. (Notice that, unlike the punishing God explanation of moral behavior, this view does not emphasize divine punishment. What is essential to this theistic explanation for folk objectivism is simply God’s dominion.)

We set out to test the underlying assumption of this theistic explanation for folk objectivism by asking whether belief in a monotheistic God leads to a greater acceptance of metaethical objectivism. As we discuss in the next section, some initial empirical research suggests that this is the case. However, subsequent work paints a more complicated picture. On the basis of this research, we argue for a refinement of the previous view. We argue that it is not belief in God that correlates with moral objectivism, but rather belief in a *punishing* God—as opposed to a *loving* God.

Previous Research

The basic theistic explanation suggests that belief in a monotheistic God fosters objectivism about morality. Goodwin and Darley (2008) support this idea, reporting that how people *ground* or *justify* their moral beliefs can predict whether they are objectivists about morality. In the first phase of one of their experiments, Goodwin and Darley had participants assess their level of agreement with a series of moral statements (e.g., ‘Robbing a bank in order to pay for an expensive holiday is a morally bad action’). Then, taking “one of the hallmarks of ethical objectivism to be... that, in cases of genuine moral disagreement...at least one of the parties must be mistaken” (1344), Goodwin and Darley told participants in a second phase of the study that another participant had disagreed with them, and asked them what to make of this disagreement. For example, if a participant had previously strongly agreed with the statement that ‘Robbing a bank in order to pay for an expensive holiday is morally bad,’ they were told that another experimental participant had strongly disagreed with this statement, and asked to choose one of the following options:

- The other person is surely mistaken;
- It is possible that neither you nor the other person is mistaken;
- It could be that you are mistaken, and the other person is correct;
- Other.

In a final phase of the study, participants were asked to mark any and all of the following that served as grounds for their moral beliefs:

- They are ordained by a supreme being;
- Every good person on earth, regardless of culture, holds these beliefs;
- A society could not survive without its citizens holding these beliefs;

- Their truth is self-evident.

This was followed by another question: “According to you, is it possible for there to be right and wrong acts, without the existence of God?”, with ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘not sure’ as answer choices.

Goodwin and Darley ranked participants as more or less objectivist according to their responses to the first two phases of the experiment. They then looked at the relationship between levels of objectivism and the self-reported groundings from the third phase. They found that the more groundings participants selected, the more likely they were to be moral objectivists, and vice-versa. More importantly to the present discussion, subjects who grounded their moral beliefs in divine command (“they are ordained by a supreme being”) were also more objective than those who did not. And if subjects answered the last question by claiming that there could be no right or wrong without God (or even if they were unsure), they were more objectivist still.²

More recently, Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015) conducted a series of experiments aimed at exploring the relationship between religious belief and moral objectivism in a more systematic way. In one of their priming studies, participants were given ten groups of five words. They were asked to drop one of the five words and make meaningful sentences with the remaining four. For participants in a religious prime condition, half of these five-word groups contained religious concept words such as *spirit*, *divine*, and *God*. Other sentences in the religious prime condition (and all sentences in the neutral prime condition) were neutral in the sense that they lacked religious concepts. After the unscrambling task, Yilmaz and Bahçekapili measured participants’ moral objectivism and moral relativism in two ways: Participants indicated agreement with statements about moral dilemmas and they completed an eight-item meta-ethics questionnaire.³ Yilmaz and Bahçekapili found that, across both measures, participants in the religious prime condition endorsed moral objectivism and rejected moral relativism to a greater extent than did participants in the neutral prime condition.⁴ Yet they also found evidence for a causal connection running the other way. In a subsequent study, when participants were primed to think of morality in subjective terms (by reading a text that contrasted a moral claim with a highly objective scientific claim), they evinced lower levels of confidence in the belief in God.

The studies by Goodwin and Darley suggest a *correlation* between belief in God and an objectivist conception of morality. Yilmaz and Bahçekapili’s work suggests a *causal connection*; when people think of religious concepts, they are subsequently more likely to endorse moral objectivism,

² However, these results showing a correlation between religious grounding of morality and moral objectivism failed to replicate in some further research (e.g. Wright et al. 2013).

³ For the moral dilemmas, participants rated degree of agreement with a series of three statements: “Person 1 is right,” “Person 2 is right,” “One cannot say Person 1 or Person 2 is right because there are no absolute rights or wrongs in these matters.” Mean agreement with the third statement across dilemmas was used as a relative morality score for the moral dilemmas measure; the mean difference of their responses regarding the first and second statement was used as an objective morality score. The meta-ethics questionnaire was divided into two 4-item subscales measuring moral objectivism and moral relativism respectively. Mean responses to the two subscales were used as objectivism and relativism scores.

⁴ Effects for relativism were smaller than those for objectivism on both measures. The effect for relativism on the disagreement scenarios just missed the conventional threshold of significance $p = 0.059$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.037$.

and vice-versa. Both of these studies provide support for the theistic explanation of folk objectivism.

However, a more nuanced possibility is suggested when you consider these findings in light of other research. This research suggests that belief in God may not, in and of itself, tell us much of value when it comes to individual morality. Rather, belief in God might only have a stable relationship with morality if one thinks of God in a particular light, namely, as a punishing being. For example, Shariff and Norenzayan (2011) found that participants tend to think of God in one of two ways: either in positive / loving terms, or in negative / punishing terms. How participants characterized God also predicted their moral behavior. When given a chance to cheat in an experimental setting, participants who believed in a punishing God were far less likely to do so when compared to those who believed in a loving and merciful God. While noting the limitations of inferring causal links from correlational studies, Shariff and Norenzayan argue that “it is the punishing aspects of gods and the threat of divine punishment, rather than any loving or compassionate traits, which are responsible for keeping adherents from crossing ethical boundaries in anonymous situations where they would otherwise be tempted” (86), and that “successfully enforcing honesty may not depend on the belief in just any supernatural agent but may require deities who are able to elicit credible fears of punishment. In other words, how much you believe in God matters less than what kind of God you believe in” (92). In related research, Shariff and Rhemtulla (2012) found that, across 67 countries, belief in Hell was negatively correlated with overall crime rates, whereas belief in Heaven was positively correlated with higher crime rates—even when controlling for GDP, income inequality, and other predictors of crime.

We hypothesized that there is a parallel connection between one’s conception of God and one’s metaethical orientation. Specifically, we hypothesized that belief in moral objectivism will be correlated with conceiving of God as ‘punishing’ or ‘vengeful’ as opposed to ‘loving’ or ‘forgiving’.⁵ To investigate this idea, we conducted four studies, which we describe below.

STUDY 1

Participants

80 participants (42 female) were recruited through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk service. Ages ranged from 18-67 (mean age of 33.5, mode of 30). They were given \$0.75 for their participation at the end of the study.

Methods

In order to probe the relationship between participants’ metaethical beliefs and their conceptions of God, we devised a two part study. In the first part, we had participants respond to a case of moral disagreement originally developed in Sarkissian et al (2012). Participants were asked to imagine an

⁵ We also hypothesized that, among those who have a punishing conception of God, those with an active, personal, theistic conception of God would be even more objectivist than those who have a passive, impersonal, deistic conception. However, we found no evidence for this, and we did not pursue this hypothesis after the first study reported below.

isolated tribe of people called the Mamilons, who live in the Amazon rainforests and have preserved a traditional warrior culture with values different than those of the more technologically advanced civilizations around them. They were then asked to consider a Mamilon's opinions about two moral transgressions. The first read as follows:

Horace finds his youngest child extremely unattractive and therefore kills him.

Participants were then told to imagine that whereas one of their friends thinks (unsurprisingly) that Horace's act is morally wrong, the Mamilon thinks it morally permissible. They were then instructed as follows:

Given that these individuals have different judgments about this case, we would like to know whether you think at least one of them must be wrong, or whether you think both of them could actually be correct. In other words, to what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statement concerning such a case

Since your friend and the Mamilon have different judgments about this case, at least one of them must be wrong.

Responses to this question were recorded on a scale from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree). We also included a second transgression to test the generality of the effect.

Dylan buys an expensive new knife and tests its sharpness by randomly stabbing a passerby on the street.

Instructions for this second transgression were exactly the same as for the first. In either of these cases, if subjects agreed that at least one of the disagreeing individuals must be wrong, this would reflect a tendency toward moral objectivism. (We did not predict any difference between how participants would respond to these cases.)

In the second part of the study, subjects were provided with a 14-item conceptions of God scale (Shariff & Norenzayan 2011), presented in randomized order. The items can be found in Figure 1, divided into Loving items on the one hand, and Punishing items on the other. They were asked to answer, on a 7-point agreement scale, the extent to which these items represented their own conceptions of God. Non-believers and atheists were told to answer according to their culture's conception of God.

Table 1. 14-item conceptions of God scale

Loving items	Punishing items
Forgiving	Vengeful
Loving	Harsh
Compassionate	Fearsome
Gentle	Angry

Kind	Punishing
Comforting	Jealous
Peaceful	Terrifying

At the end of the study, subjects then answered a number of demographic questions, including the 5-item Duke religiosity scale (DUREL scale, Koenig & Büssing 2010).⁶

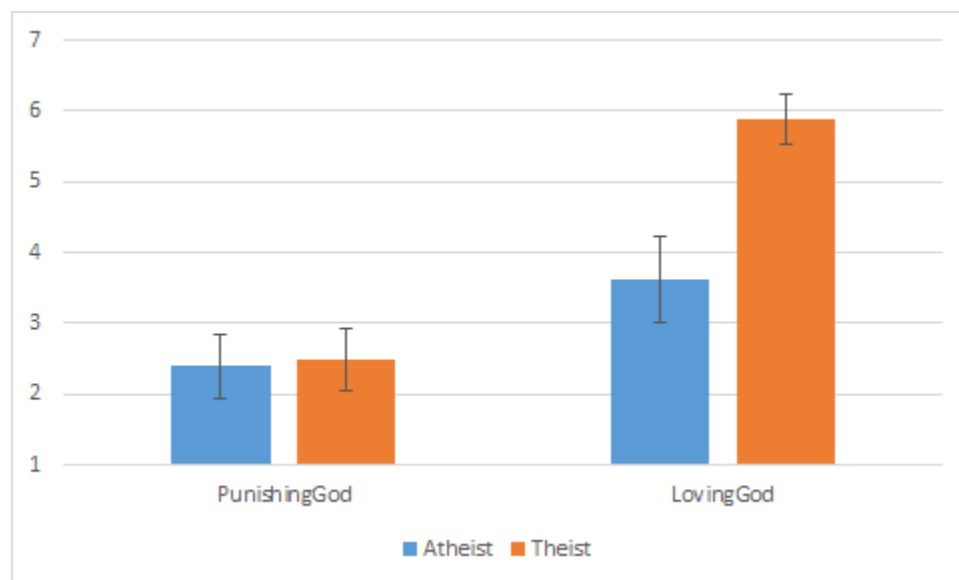
Results

Subjects responses to the moral transgressions were highly correlated ($r = .709$, $p < .001$), and these were averaged to come up with a single objectivism scale.

Conceptions of God

All of the ‘Loving God’ items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha .955$), and these were averaged into a single LovingGod scale. Similarly, all of the ‘Punishing God’ items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha .919$), and these were averaged into a single PunishingGod scale.

Paired sample t-tests revealed significant differences in the extent to which individuals endorsed the Loving God items ($M=4.98$, $SD=1.481$) as compared to Punishing God items ($M=2.46$, $SD=1.40$), $t(79)=-9.5$, $p < .001$. This result held true for both atheists (Loving God $M=3.63$, $SD=1.67$, Punishing God $M=2.40$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(31)=-3.0$, $p=.005$, as well as theists (Loving God $M=5.88$, $SD=1.26$, Punishing God $M=2.50$, $SD=1.50$), $t(47)=-11.6$, $p < .001$. While there were no differences between atheists and theists in their endorsement of God’s punishing characteristics (atheist $M=2.40$, $SD=1.26$, theist $M=2.50$, $SD=1.50$), $t(78)=-.30$, $p=.767$, theists endorsed God’s loving characteristics more than atheists (atheist $M=3.62$, $SD=1.67$, theist $M=5.88$, $SD=1.26$), $t(78)=-6.9$, $p < .001$. See Graph 1.



⁶ In this study, participants also answered a question trying to get at whether they held an active, theistic conception or a passive, deistic conception of God. See footnote 2 for further discussion.

Graph 1. Means for PunishingGod and LovingGod for Atheists and Theists.
Errors bars show the 95% confidence interval.

Religiosity

The DUREL scale consists of 3 subscales. The first measures church attendance (“How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?”), the second measures frequency of private forms of worship (“How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation or Bible study?”), and the final item measures intrinsic religiosity, which assess the degree to which a person has religious commitment and motivation--the extent to which they see religion as an ultimate end in itself or a ‘master motive’ for their lives. (Compare this to extrinsic religiosity, such as church attendance, which may be driven by other motivations such as social reward, peer pressure, or acceptance). Since we are interested in a connection between how people conceive of God and their beliefs concerning the status of morality, we used this subscale in all analyses. The intrinsic religiosity subscale comprises three questions:

1. In my life, I experience the presence of the Divine (i.e., God)
2. My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life
3. I try hard to carry my religion over into all other dealings in life

Participants are asked to assess the extent to which these statements are true of them on a 5 point scale, as follows: 1 - Definitely not true; 2 - Tends not to be true; 3 - Unsure; 4 - Tends to be true; 5 - Definitely true of me. Of the three subscales, These items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach’s α .919), and were averaged to a single intrinsic religiosity scale.

Levels of objectivism (as measured through the disagreement task) were correlated with both PunishingGod ($r = .274$, $p=.014$) and LovingGod, ($r = .224$, $p=.046$). LovingGod was also highly correlated with religiosity ($r = .677$, $p<.001$).

To further test the significance of these predictors, we performed a multiple regression analysis using LovingGod, PunishingGod, intrinsic religiosity, and age (which has been shown to predict objectivism in previous research, e.g. Beebe & Sackris 2010) as predictor variables, and objectivism as the outcome variable. In this complete model, both LovingGod and PunishingGod emerged as significant predictors. See Table 2.

Table 2. Study 1: Multiple linear regression predicting objectivism for all participants

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
PunishingGod	.461	.151	.333	3.051	.003
LovingGod	.391	.160	.365	2.449	.017
Religiosity	-.274	.198	-.204	-1.388	.169
Age	.011	.018	.066	.599	.551

Atheists vs Theists

The initial prediction was confirmed. Endorsement of God’s punishing characteristics was predictive

of metaethical objectivism in the disagreement task. Yet belief in God's loving characteristics was also predictive. This result was not part of our original hypothesis set.

In order to further explore the relationship between these variables, we divided the participant pool into self-reported atheists (32) from self-reported theists (40), and performed a multiple regression on each group. See Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Study 1: Multiple linear regression predicting objectivism for ATHEISTS

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
PunishingGod	.383	.255	.256	1.505	.144
LovingGod	.564	.201	.501	2.814	.009
Religiosity	-.499	.616	-.141	-.810	.425
Age	.009	.029	.054	.322	.750

Table 4. Study 1: Multiple linear regression predicting objectivism for THEISTS

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
PunishingGod	.492	.193	.375	2.551	.014
LovingGod	.048	.279	.031	.173	.863
Religiosity	-.183	.297	-.107	-.618	.540
Age	.019	.024	.124	.808	.424

Analyzing each group separately, we found that for atheists an endorsement of God's loving attributes is the sole predictor of objectivism, whereas for theists an endorsement of God's punishing attributes is the sole predictor of objectivism.

Discussion

Our main prediction was confirmed in this study. The only variable predicting objectivism for theists across the items tested was belief in a Punishing God.

What about the result for the atheists? One possibility is that atheists endorsement of the various descriptors concerning God was influenced by the demands of the task. Atheists were instructed to describe God according to how they believe their culture sees God. It could be that atheists have no stable conception of God, and when prompted to report their culture's dominant conception revert to prevailing positive stereotypes. This would explain why atheists would endorse God's loving characteristics significantly more than his punishing characteristics. Yet this would not explain why, for atheists, Loving God characteristics would be correlated with objectivism. For the time being we will treat this as a spurious result, returning to it in our general discussion.

In order to avoid this possible confound (i.e. eliciting unstable beliefs about God owing to task demands), in the next study we omitted these instructions and chose a different measure for endorsement of God as either a loving or a punishing being.

STUDY 2

Participants

101 subjects were recruited using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk service (49 female). Ages ranged from 18-71 (mean age of 31.6, mode of 23). They were given \$0.50 for their participation at the end of the study.

Methods

In order to see whether the results from Study 1 generalized, we varied both the objectivism measure as well as the loving vs. punishing God measure. Instead of the moral disagreement task, subjects were presented with a 5-item Moral Relativism scale in randomized order (adapted from Forsyth 1980, and Buchtel, ms), and asked to mark their agreement or disagreement with each on a 7-point scale, as follows.

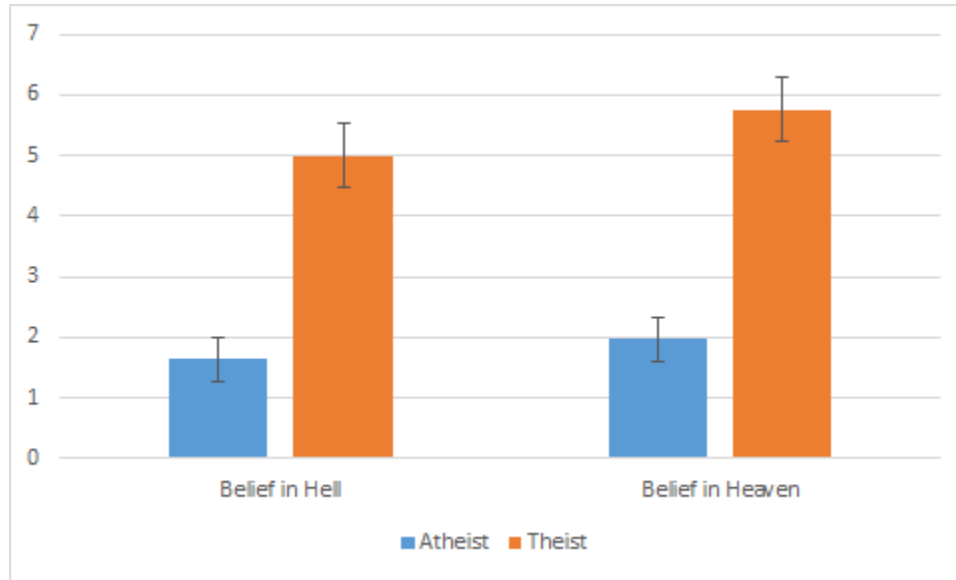
1. Moral standards should be seen as being unique to each culture.
2. Different cultures' moral standards cannot be compared as to "rightness".
3. Questions of what is moral for everyone can never be resolved, since what is moral or immoral is determined by one's culture.
4. There are some moral principles that are so important that they should be a part of every code of ethics in every culture.*
5. There is only one set of correct moral principles, it is universal, and it applies everywhere, to everyone, and under any circumstance.*

(The final two items were reverse-coded.) Then, instead of asking for subjects' conception of God using the 14 item scale, participants answered a number of demographic questions, including the 5-item Duke religiosity scale and two new questions assessing their belief in Heaven and Hell. Belief in Heaven was taken as a proxy for having a Loving conception of God, whereas belief in Hell was taken as a proxy for having a Punishing conception of God (following the logic of Shariff and Rhemtulla, 2012).

Results

All relativism scale items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach's α .754), and were averaged to form a Relativism scale. All of the DUREL intrinsic religiosity items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach's α .925) and were averaged to a single religiosity scale.

Relativism was negatively correlated with both intrinsic religiosity ($r = -.231$, $p < .05$) and belief in Hell ($r = -.246$, $p < .05$), but not with belief in Heaven ($r = -.158$, n.s.). Religiosity was highly correlated with belief in Heaven ($r = .767$, $p < .001$) and belief in Hell ($r = .750$, $p < .001$). As expected, theists believed in both Heaven and Hell to a much greater extent than atheists.



Graph 1. Means for Belief in Hell and Heaven for Atheists and Theists.
Errors bars show the 95% confidence interval.

There was no significant difference between atheists ($n=48$, $M=4.27$, $SD=1.05$) and theists ($n=53$, $M=3.95$, $SD=1.08$) in overall levels of relativism. We then split the participants into high religiosity (>3 in intrinsic religiosity) and low religiosity (≤ 3) groups. Highly religious participants ($n=33$, $M=3.72$, $SD=1.94$) reported significantly lower levels of relativism than those with moderate or low levels of religiosity ($n=68$, $M=4.29$, $SD=1.01$), $t(99)=2.58$, $p=.012$.

We performed a multiple regression analysis on the whole sample using belief in Heaven, belief in Hell, religiosity, and age as predictor variables, and relativism as the outcome variable. None of the predictors were significant. However, we then split the participant group into self-reported atheists ($n=48$) and self-reported theists ($n=53$), and performed multiple regression analyses on both groups. While none of the religious measures were predictive of atheists' relativism, belief in Hell emerged as the sole significant predictor for theists. See Table 5.

Table 5. Study 2: Multiple linear regression on theists, predicting relativism

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Belief in Hell	-.208	.092	-.367	-2.258	.028
Belief in Heaven	-.011	.118	-.016	-.095	.925
Religiosity	-.065	.160	-.070	-.410	.683
Age	-.024	.13	-.270	-1.808	.077

Discussion

When we eliminated all self-reported atheists from the analysis, we found corroboration of the findings from study 1. For theists, belief in Hell was predictive of lower relativism scores, as opposed to belief in Heaven or overall religiosity. Taking belief in Hell as a proxy for belief in a punishing God and relativism as the reverse of objectivism, this study corroborates the main finding

of Study 1. The only variable predicting objectivism for theists across the items tested was belief in a Punishing God.

What about the atheists? In Study 1, we asked non-theists to answer how their culture conceived of God (as opposed to how they themselves conceived of God, regardless of their disbelief). Asking this question immediately after the metaethics probe may have solicited more stereotypically positive (and unstable) ascriptions of God's loving characteristics from objectivist-leaning atheists. In Study 2, we used proxy measures--belief in Heaven and Hell--for all participants. So there was no opportunity to solicit such stereotypically positive God attributions.

Thus far we have found correlational evidence linking a punishing conception of God with moral objectivism for theists. But questions remain as to the direction of causation: does belief in a punishing conception of God drive theists toward a certain metaethical belief--namely, moral objectivism--or is it, instead, that theists' metaethical beliefs shape how they think of God?

We can see this question as at the heart of a very old debate in metaethics, one that harkens back to the Nietzsche discussion of our introduction, and, even earlier, to the Hobbes quote. Hobbes (1991) claims that, "...if we consider...Theoremes, as delivered in the word of God...then they are properly called laws" (111), which implies a causal model that runs from one's conception of God to one's metaethical beliefs. God must exist to speak lawfulness into the moral dictates. And this is the basic idea behind the contemporary theistic explanation for folk moral objectivism: individuals are motivated to think of morality in objective terms and act accordingly because they believe in a supernatural being. Of course, our correlational findings in the previous two studies suggest a slight tweak for this model. Perhaps belief in a supernatural being alone is not sufficient to prompt objectivist thinking, instead individuals may be motivated to think of morality in objective terms when they think of or accept the possibility of punishment by an infallible, omnipotent punisher. Nonetheless, it could be that this modified Hobbesian view correctly captures the causal connection between belief in God and moral objectivism.

However, on the other side of this metaethical debate, we find Nietzsche, who suggested that disenfranchised people created a punishing God to rectify the moral harms visited on them in this life. Similarly, we find Freud, who claimed that we created our store of religious ideas in order to ensure that:

...the same moral laws which our civilizations have set up govern the whole universe as well, except that they are maintained by a supreme court of justice with incomparably more power and consistency. In the end all good is rewarded and all evil punished, if not actually in this form of life then in the later existences that begin after death. (Gay, p.696)

This second causal model implies an initial commitment to ethical objectivism, which then motivates us to conceptualize God as a punisher. Our moral dictates are independently lawful, so God must exist and have the appropriate nature to enforce them.

Which model explains the correlation for theists between belief in a punishing God and

moral objectivism? Both are live possibilities.⁷ We set out to test them in a series of priming studies. We begin with the model which claims an influence from how one conceives the status of morality to how one conceives of God.

STUDY 3

Participants

369 participants (162 female) completed an online questionnaire. Ages ranged from 19 to 73 (mean of 32.3, mode of 26). The largest reported religious affiliation was agnostic/atheist (45.8%), followed by Protestant Christian (16.7%), Roman Catholic (11.8%), and Other Christian (11%). Evangelical Christian, Spiritual with no affiliation, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim were each selected as religious affiliation by fewer than 4% of participants (in descending order of proportion). All affiliations other than agnostic/atheist were treated as theists for the following analyses. Participants were given monetary compensation for their participation at the end of the study.

Methods

In order to induce participants to think of morality as either absolute on the one hand, or relative on the other, they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (modified from Young & Durwin 2013). Those in the Relativism condition received the following prompt:

Many thoughtful, reflective people maintain that moral rightness and wrongness are relative--that they are determined solely by one's background or cultural upbringing. In other words, there are no universal moral truths.

Do you agree that moral rightness and wrongness are relative, that they are determined by one's background or cultural upbringing?

Those in the Objectivism condition received this prompt:

Many thoughtful, reflective people maintain that moral rightness and wrongness are universal--that they are independent of one's background or cultural upbringing. In other words, there are universal moral truths.

Do you agree that moral rightness and wrongness are universal, that they are independent of one's background or cultural upbringing?

Those in the Control condition received this prompt:

⁷ Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015) did find evidence for a causal connection between belief in God simpliciter and moral objectivism. But we will have more to say about this finding below and, in any case, it doesn't bear on the punishing God hypothesis.

Many people agree that online studies have proven beneficial, as they speed up the process of data collection and allow participants to take part in the studies easily and from a variety of venues.

Do you agree that online studies are beneficial for researchers and participants?

Subjects marked their agreement on a 7-item agreement scale. (Their answers were ignored in the analyses.) Subjects were then given the 14 item Conceptions of God scale from study 1, followed by a series of funnel questions to assess their awareness of the purpose of the metaethics questions. Finally, they provided demographic information.

Results

Of the entire sample, 26 were removed from the analysis for failing a comprehension check, leaving 343 participants overall (149 female) for the analyses below. As a next step, each author independently coded participants' responses to three funnel questions for suspicion, with agreement on 338 of 343 cases (Kappa .438, $p < .001$). After discussion of the cases of disagreement, a total of five participants were eliminated from the analysis for suspecting the purpose of the study, leaving 338 for analysis.

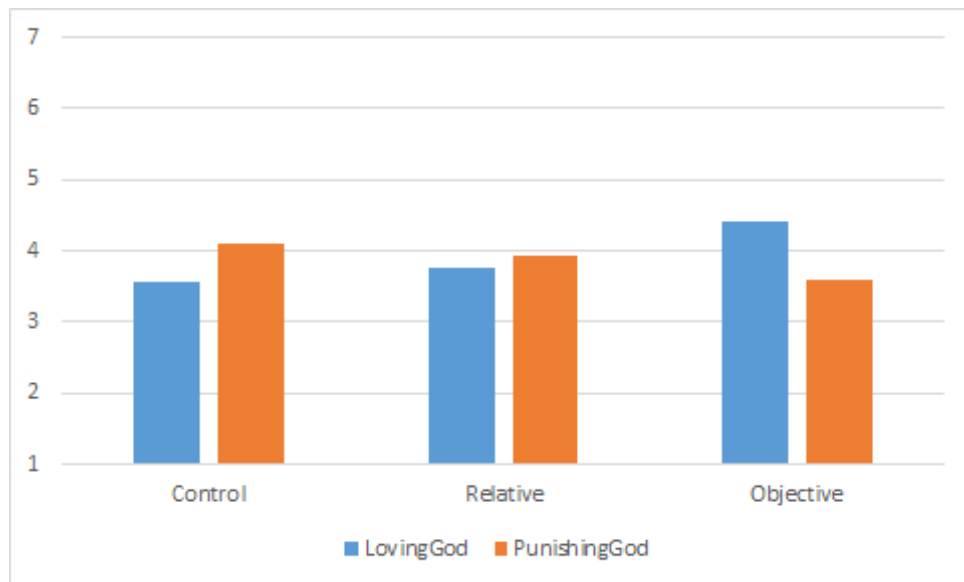
Once again, the Loving God items (Cronbach's α .972) were averaged to a LovingGod scale, and the Punishing God items (Cronbach's α .929) were averaged to a PunishingGod scale. The Intrinsic Religiosity scale (Cronbach's α .945) was averaged to a single Intrinsic Religiosity score.

A one way, multivariate ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the manipulation for ratings of LovingGod and PunishingGod in the objectivist, relativist, and control conditions. For the whole sample, there was no significant effect on either LovingGod, $F(2,335)=1.36$, $p=.258$, or PunishingGod $F(2,335)=.482$, $p=.618$. Given the differences noted previously, we analyzed atheists ($n=156$) and theists ($n=182$) separately, using self-reported religious affiliation for classification.

Atheists

A one way, multivariate ANOVA revealed no significant effect of condition on atheists' conception of god as a punishing being, $F(2,153)=1.13$, $p=.325$. However, there was a significant effect of condition on atheists' conception of god as a loving being $F(2,153)=3.68$, $p=.027$, $\eta_p^2=.046$.

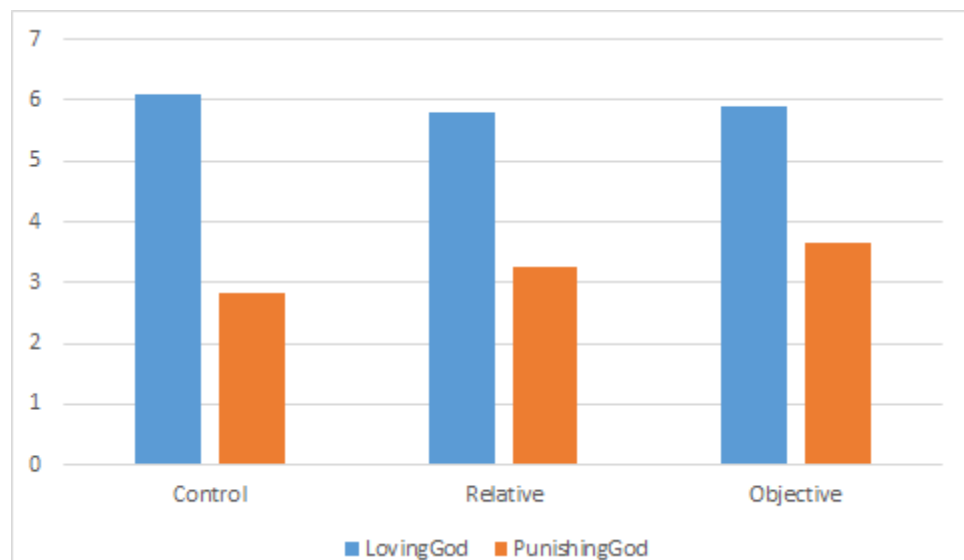
Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for LovingGod in the Objective condition ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.81$) was significantly higher than in the Control condition ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.52$). The Relative condition ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.66$) did not significantly differ from either the Objective or Control conditions.



Graph 2. Means for LovingGod and PunishingGod for **Atheists** by Condition

Theists. A one way, multivariate ANOVA revealed no significant effect of condition on theists' conception of god as a loving being, $F(2,179)=1.51$, $p=.224$. However, there was a significant effect of condition on theists' conception of god as a punishing being $F(2,179)=4.927$, $p=.008$, $\eta_p^2=.052$.

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for PunishingGod in the Objective condition ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.41$) was significantly higher than in the Control condition ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.31$). The Relative condition ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.52$) did not significantly differ from either the Objective or Control Conditions.



Graph 3. Means for LovingGod and PunishingGod for **Theists** by Condition

For reasons that will become clear in the discussion of study 4, below, we also ran the same analyses focusing only on those in the Abrahamic tradition ($n=153$). We discovered the same basic pattern with a slightly larger effect size $F(2,150)=4.97$, $p=.008$, $\eta_p^2=.062$. Finally, we analyzed only those in the Abrahamic tradition with high levels of intrinsic religiosity--namely, only those scoring above midpoint (>3) on Intrinsic Religiosity scale ($n=111$). The basic pattern held, though the effect size increased considerably $F(2,108)=6.646$, $p=.002$, $\eta_p^2=.110$.

Discussion

In this study we investigated the causal connection suggested by the tradition of thought associated with Freud and Nietzsche--namely, that one's views about morality shape one's religious views (and not the other way around). As that view might predict, being primed to think of morality as objective makes theists think of God as more punishing.

However we also found that being primed to think of morality as objective makes atheists think of God as more loving. This result is in line with the result from Study 1, whereby thinking of God as loving was predictive of moral objectivism for atheists. Having uncovered this result for a second time, we will provide some post-hoc explanations in the general discussion, below.

STUDY 4

Participants

538 participants were recruited using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk service. 309 participants were female. Ages ranged from 18-68 (mean age of 33.54, mode of 25). The largest reported religious affiliation was agnostic/atheist (37.5%), followed by Protestant Christian (20.4%), Roman Catholic (10.8%), Spiritual with no affiliation (10%), Other Christian (10.2%), and Evangelical Christian (4.1%). Other, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu were each selected as religious affiliation by fewer than 3% of participants (in descending order of proportion). All affiliations other than agnostic/atheist were treated as theists for the following analyses. Participants were given \$1 for their participation at the end of this study.

Methods

In this study we investigated our modified Hobbesian model, the theistic explanation for moral objectivism. Does thinking of a punishing God causally influence one to adopt more objectivist metaethical beliefs? We approached this question using a sentence scramble prime similar to that used by Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015). Participants were given ten groups of five words, which, after one of the words was discarded, could be rearranged into meaningful sentences. However, whereas Yilmaz and Bahçekapili had only two priming conditions (Religious Prime and Neutral Prime), ours was a 2 (Religious Prime, Neutral Prime) x 3 (Loving Prime, Punishing Prime, Neutral Prime) priming study, yielding six priming conditions: (Religious-Loving, Religious-Punishing, Religious-Neutral, Neutral-Loving, Neutral-Punishing and Control/Neutral-Neutral). We describe these below.

For participants in each of our Religious Prime conditions, four of the sentence scrambles included a word intended to prime religious concepts: *spirit*, *divine*, *God*, and *sacred*. These words needed to be included in the unscrambled, four-word sentence in order for participants to form grammatical sentences (e.g., “The dessert tasted divine”). Participants in each of our Loving Prime conditions were given four sentence scrambles that included a word intended to prime concepts related to forgiveness: *love*, *forgave*, *peacefully*, and *kind*. Whereas participants in our Punishing Prime conditions were given four sentence scrambles that included a word intended to prime concepts related to punishment: *harsh*, *punishing*, *angry*, and *revenge*. Thus, participants in our Religious-Loving and Religious-Punishing conditions unscrambled two neutral sentences and eight sentences containing concepts we wanted to prime, four related to religion, and four related to loving or punishing respectively. Participants in our Neutral-Loving and Neutral-Punishing conditions unscrambled six neutral sentences, and four sentences containing concepts we wanted to prime, related to loving or punishing respectively. Participants in our Religious-Neutral condition unscrambled six neutral sentences, and four sentences containing concepts we wanted to prime, related to religion (this condition corresponded most closely with Yilmaz and Bahçekapili’s Religious Prime). Finally, participants in our Control condition unscrambled only neutral sentences, that contained none of the concepts we wanted to prime.

After the priming task, participants completed a three-item moral objectivism questionnaire. In Study 2, we took relativism as the reverse of objectivism (from a folk psychological perspective) and, on that basis, interpreted our findings as supporting our primary thesis--namely, that belief in a punishing God is correlated with belief in moral objectivism (for theists). Here, we test for objectivism directly with the following new 3-item scale:⁸

- There exists a single moral code that is applicable to everyone, regardless of any individual person’s beliefs or cultural identity.
- If two people really disagree about a particular moral problem then at most one of them can be correct, since moral problems cannot have multiple correct answers.
- It is possible to compare different cultures by a single, universal standard of moral rightness.

Not only did this 3-item scale differ from the measure used in Study 2 by testing objectivism directly, it was also was not based on previous measures of objectivism or relativism. We were concerned that these existing measures--such as the 5-item scale developed by Forsyth (1980) and Buchtel (ms)--did not capture metaethical views in a precise way. Take, for example, the statement “There are some moral principles that are so important they should be a part of every code of ethics in every culture.” This can be interpreted as a normative claim expressing one’s attitude, rather than a principled position about the actual status of morality. Similarly, the statement “Moral standards should be seen as being unique to each culture” can be taken to be a descriptive claim, which is entirely consistent with being an objectivist about morality. In other words, one can think that,

⁸ In a pretest, these statements were given to participants (n=114) in random order. The objectivism scale items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach’s α .846). In a separate study (n=291), answers to the objectivism scale were also found to correlate with answers to the disagreement task used in Study 1 ($r = .560$, $p < .001$).

descriptively, moral standards should be seen to vary and be unique to cultures, while holding that at most one of these moral cultures has a handle on moral truth. So, some may wonder, as we began to wonder, whether the scale used in Study 2 adequately assessed metaethical beliefs.

Similar concerns can be raised regarding some of the items used by Yilmaz and Bahçekapili. For example, the statement “What is moral varies on the basis of context and society” can again be interpreted as a descriptive claim, and the statement “If morality were to differ from person to person, it would be impossible for people to live together” is a conditional claim that has no straightforward metaethical implication—for example, one natural way to understand this claim is referring to the need for people to share *local* norms only, without any implication for the metaethical status of morality (Yilmaz and Bahçekapili, 2015, Supplementary Materials).

After completing our objectivism measure, each participant answered a series of three funnel questions intended to assess suspicion of the purpose of the study. Finally, participants completed a short demographic survey. After participants completed this final portion of the experiment, the experimenters debriefed the participants.

Results

Of the entire sample, 97 participants failed a comprehension check, and 24 failed to follow the instructions for the paraphrasing task correctly. Finally, each author independently coded participants’ responses to three funnel questions testing participants’ suspicion of the purpose of the study. Criteria were established through discussion of a sub-sample of the cases, and a dichotomous categorization was given to each participant, indicating either obliviousness to or awareness of the purpose of the study. An interrater reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic was performed to determine consistency among raters. The interrater reliability for the raters was substantial, with $Kappa = 0.54$ ($p < .0001$) and agreement on 533 of 538 cases. After resolving disagreements, a total of 5 participants were flagged as suspecting the purpose of the study. After eliminating all of these participants, we analyzed the remaining 423 in what follows.⁹

The three objectivism scales were highly internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha .806$) and were averaged to form an Objectivism scale. All of the DUREL intrinsic religiosity items were highly internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha .943$) and were averaged to a single intrinsic religiosity scale.

A 2 (Divine) x 3 (Attitude) ANOVA was used to compare the influence that priming divinity and dispositional attitude had on endorsement of objectivism. No significant main or interaction effects were found. As in the previous study, we then split the participant group into self-reported atheists ($n=164$) and self-reported theists ($n=259$), and performed the ANOVA on both groups. No significant main or interaction effects were found for atheists or theists. Next, we eliminated theists with low intrinsic religiosity scores from the analysis. No significant main or interaction effects were found for highly religious theists who responded to the objectivism questionnaire ($n=143$).

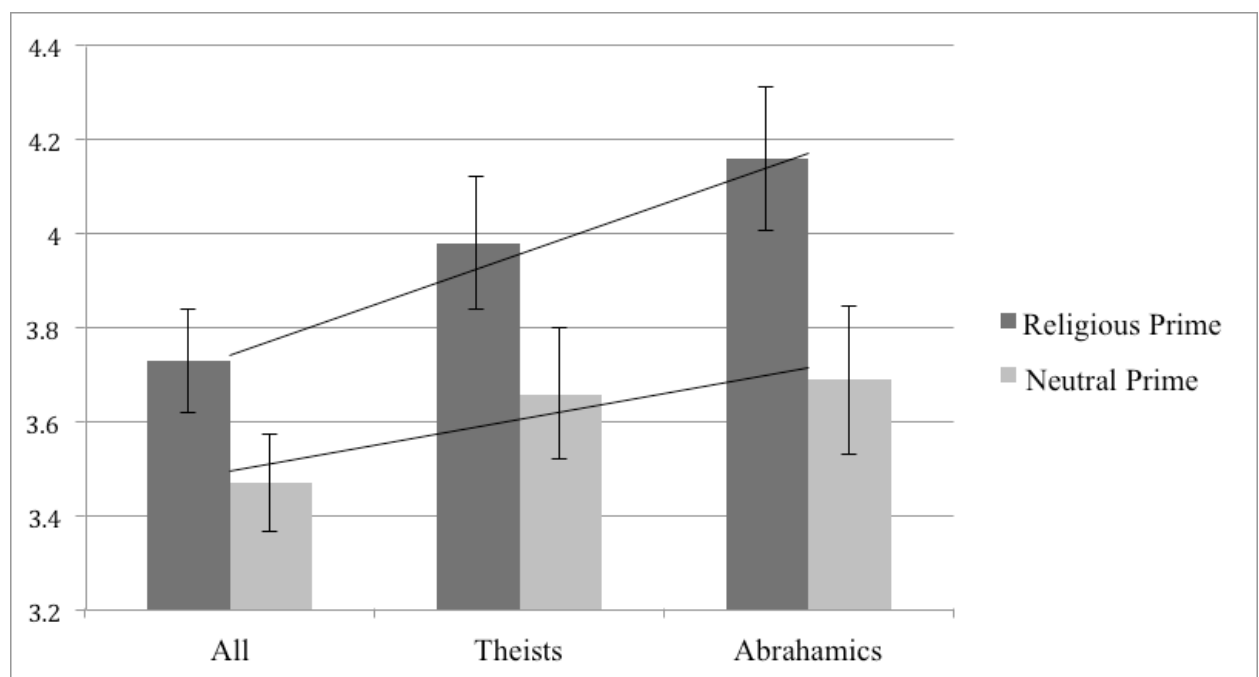
Recall that Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015) found a medium to large main effect with respect to Divinity for their objectivism probe. In our study, we found no main effects, and the marginal main effects we found for Divinity (discussed in footnote 8) were much weaker. What explains this

⁹ Note that some participants were eliminated more than once, hence the remaining total is higher than a simple subtraction from the initial amount would suggest.

disparity? It might be due simply to random differences between our two populations. But a more specific possibility also presents itself. Whereas our participants represented a plurality of religious perspectives, with non-theists comprising the largest single block of participants (38.6%) and no-single theistic tradition comprising more than 19% of the sample, Yilmaz and Bahçekapili's population was much more homogenous, with 81% of participants reporting identification with Islam. Perhaps Muslims or, more generally, followers of Abrahamic religions, are more susceptible to the religious priming effect that Yilmaz and Bahçekapili uncovered.

While our sample comprised only a small number of Muslims, we decided to try and test this hypothesis by focusing on self-reported followers of Abrahamic religions: Protestants, Catholics, Evangelicals, Other Christians, Jews, and Muslims ($n = 203$). Indeed, an ANOVA uncovered a main effect of Divinity on levels of objectivism for this group: $F(1, 203) = 5.21, p = .024, \eta_p^2 = 0.026$.

Abrahamics primed with religious concepts indicated higher levels of agreement ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.58$) with our objectivist statements than those in non-religious, neutral conditions ($M = 3.69, SD = 1.44$). No other significant main or interaction effects were found for Abrahamics, nor were any significant main or interaction effects found for non-Abrahamics.



Graph 4. Mean Objectivist Responses for Religious and Neutral Prime.
Errors bars show Standard Error of the Mean.

Finally, we eliminated participants with low intrinsic religiosity scores from our sample and reran the last analysis, once again separating Abrahamics from non-Abrahamics. For highly-religious Abrahamics ($n = 122$) we found an even stronger effect for religious concept priming: $F(1, 122) = 6.67, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = 0.054$. (Note that we found not even a marginal effect of this kind when we

analyzed our 143 highly religious theists above. Excluding 21 highly religious non-Abrahamics seems to have made all the difference.) Highly-religious Abrahamics primed with religious concepts once again indicated higher levels of agreement ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 1.48$) with our objectivist statements than those in non-religious, neutral conditions ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.45$). There were too few highly-religious non-Abrahamics ($n = 21$) to make meaningful comparisons between conditions.

Discussion

Our primary aim with this study was to test our modified Hobbesian model, the hypothesis that thinking of a punishing God influences one to adopt more objectivist metaethical beliefs. We did not find clear evidence for this hypothesis. However, we did find that priming members of the Abrahamic traditions (Christians, Jews, and Muslims) with religious concepts made them significantly more inclined to endorse metaethical objectivism, with no effect on non-Abrahamic theists or atheists.¹⁰ This bears directly on the findings from Yilmaz and Bahçekapili's (2015) paper, provocatively titled, "Without God Everything is Permitted?" In summarizing their findings, Yilmaz and Bahçekapili write that, "It seems that our participants were more willing to judge actions as right or wrong when religion was salient on their minds...In a sense, then, they do seem to intuitively think that more (but maybe not everything) is permitted without God" (99). Of course, as Yilmaz and Bahçekapili note, their participants were predominantly Muslim. Interpreting their results in light of our findings, then, it may be more appropriate to conclude that *for followers of Abrahamic religions*, without God, everything is permitted. This is consistent with a recent meta-analysis showing no stable effect of religious primes on non-believers (Shariff et al 2016).

As a post hoc analysis of our results, we conducted two One-way ANOVAs for the highly religious Abrahamic group using our objectivism measure: (Secular: Neutral, Loving, Punishing; $n = 64$) & (Religious: Neutral, Loving, Punishing; $n = 58$). The ANOVAs were not significant at the 5% confidence interval. However, (Religious: Neutral, Loving, Punishing) was approaching significance. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for Objectivism in the Religious-Punishing condition ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.58$) was significantly higher at the 10% confidence interval ($p = 0.076$) than in the Control condition ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.11$). No other results were approaching significance.

In this study, we pursued a possibility in line with the tradition of thought associated with Hobbes--namely, that one's views about the attributes of God shape one's metaethical views. If our interpretation of our results are correct, then there is a sense in which the Hobbesian proposal is accurate, but only for a subset of people. Practitioners of Abrahamic religions--particularly highly religious practitioners of those religions--tend to endorse objectivism to a greater extent when they are primed with religious concepts.

General Discussion

Across a number of studies, we found evidence for a connection between conceiving of God as a punishing being and moral objectivism. In Studies 1 and 2, we found that, for theists, belief in moral

¹⁰ Note just how small this effect was on atheists: $F(1, 168) = .214$, $p = .64$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$.

objectivism was correlated with belief in a punishing God. This prompted us to investigate the causal relation between the two. In Study 3, we tested the Nietzschean model, and found that being prompted to think of morality in an objectivist fashion did indeed strengthen theists' conception of God as a divine punisher, but had no effect on their conception of God as a loving being (which remained consistently high throughout the studies). This suggests that although theists may invariably conceive of God as a loving, forgiving, and merciful being, they also recognize that God is punishing and vengeful when prompted to think that there are objectively right and wrong answers to moral questions. God seems to be viewed as the magistrate of the universe, meting out justice according to objectively true criteria. It's as though theists think that if there is an objective morality, there must be a punishing God to enforce it.¹¹

This is in line with other studies suggesting a link between individual's values and ideals on the one hand, and how they conceive of the divine on the other. For example, Ross et al (2012) found that American Christians projected their own moral ideals onto the figure of Jesus; conservatives believed he was a conservative, liberals that he was a liberal. What's more, they took issues important to their own ideological orientations (fellowship and caring for liberals, moral teaching for conservatives) to be central to Christianity. So theists tend to think God (or Jesus) must be like them. However, whereas this previous work reveals that theists tend to think God (or Jesus) must be like them, our findings suggest that how individuals understand the nature of moral truth shapes their conception of the nature of God.

One way to explain this result is to note that moral education and the learning of moral rules, consequences, and punishment occur at an earlier age than one's learning of the various and varied characteristics associated with God. This suggests that how one thinks or conceives of the nature of morality (for example, whether diverging moral rules, judgments, or opinions could be valid) comes first, and this then later renders some characteristics of God more salient than others.

In Study 4, we tested, but found no clear support for, the modified Hobbesian model. Instead, we found that being prompted to think of God alone had a small but significant effect only on Abrahamic individuals' views concerning morality, making them view it in a more objectivist fashion, with highly-religious Abrahamics being especially susceptible to this manipulation. In a sense, this supports the findings of Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2015). But, in another sense, it also restricts their findings, by suggesting that they obtain only for followers of Abrahamic faiths. Future research might target individuals from other religious traditions to further explore this relationship.

Across two of our studies, there was also an unexpected correlation between atheists' endorsement of moral objectivism and the loving aspects of God. In Study 1, atheists' ratings of Loving God were correlated with moral objectivism. And in study 3, priming atheist participants to think of morality in objectivist terms increased their endorsement of God's loving aspects, but not his punishing aspects.

This result was not among those hypothesized, so our discussion here is more speculative.

¹¹ Notice that only one of the Ten Commandments consists in an exhortation to do good ('honor thy father and thy mother'). The rest consists in prohibitions ('thou shalt kill; bear false witness; steal; commit adultery', etc.). Thus, the most salient connection between morality and God lies in not violating certain prohibitions, where such violations carry severe penalties.

One possible explanation for this effect is *fear driven rationalization*. Atheists who think of morality as objective, or who are situationally primed to think in such a way, might endorse God's loving characteristics as a way to ameliorate any discomfort they might feel in denying his existence. (This might also explain the correlational result from Study 1, where participants were asked to adjudicate a case of disagreement *before* completing the 14-item conceptions of God scale. The order of these tasks might have yielded higher endorsement of God's loving characteristics from atheistic participants who took an objectivist stance toward the moral disagreement. In effect, this would be an instance of self-priming.) If God exists and withholding belief in him results in punishment, atheists might be motivated to think that he is, after all, loving and merciful.

Another possibility is that moral objectivism and God's loving characteristics are both expressions of a deeper belief in the goodness of the universe. Uttich and colleagues (2013) have found that belief in moral objectivism correlates with belief in a just world and with belief in moral progress. These characteristics might be related to the loving aspects of God pursued in this study; if there really is right and wrong in the universe in an objective sense, it might be more acceptable to think that if there is a God, that God is kind and benevolent. Other recent research affirms the idea that, at a very basic level, people might endorse the idea that essences are good (Newman and Knobe, ms).

A final possibility is suggested by Norenzayan & Gervais (2013), who note that it might not be justifiable to treat atheists as being of a kind. There are many routes to disbelief. Some atheists, for example, might never have been raised in a religious environment, others may lapse slowly in their beliefs, others might be reasoned out of them, and yet others might abandon them over a particular incident. Given these divergent routes, it is possible that at least some sizable number of atheists--perhaps the majority--are former theists, and might therefore retain latent beliefs about God and about the nature of morality stemming from their theistic background. This possibility aligns, to some extent, with the Nietzschean view, since it suggests that, for lapsed theists, thoughts of moral objectivism trigger latent conceptions of God. In any case, future work may help to tease apart these hypothesis and explain the cause of this surprising effect.

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