

Morality, Power, and the Problem of a Self-Sufficient God

A structured synthesis of the argument as developed.

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Thesis. Human moral and religious authority remains historically entangled with power and has never been authenticated in a way that distinguishes revelation from human assertion; therefore obedience cannot be justified by claiming divine warrant alone.

This is the complete, formal statement of the argument. A condensed, general-audience version of the same case is available as a separate article, "Who Told You That Was God?"

Roadmap. The case runs in two independent movements that converge, and the reader should know in advance where its weight falls. The first movement (Sections 1–6) is metaphysical: it presses whether a self-sufficient, omniscient God could have any coherent, non-self-referential reason to create a world and command its creatures. These sections rest on contestable intuitions and are offered as motivation, not as the load-bearing case — a determined classical theist has sophisticated replies to each, and several are flagged as open. The second movement (Sections 7–10) is historical and behavioral: it shows that the observed conduct of moral-religious systems — how they bind and mobilize groups and serve as the contested lever of power — is fully explained without appeal to a divine author. Sections 11–14 then clear the metaethical ground — the burden of proof, moral variation, and "evil" as a moving designation. The conclusion's real weight rests on the final move (Sections 15–19, with Section 20 restating the resulting position), and it is a *pair* of moves taken together. First, no claimed revelation has ever been *authenticated* in a way that separates genuine disclosure from human assertion — so none can rightfully command obedience on its own authority. Second, since authentication fails, the diagnostic question that replaces obedience becomes *cui bono* — who benefits if the claim is believed? The contribution this paper makes, if it makes one, lives in that pairing: authentication-then-*cui bono* as a two-step examination of any claimed moral authority, religious or otherwise. A reader pressed for time can begin at Section 7 and lose little of the core case.

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1. The Originating Question: Omniscience, Oneness, and the Three Endpoints

The inquiry begins not with doctrine but with a question, posed in the form it was first asked. Imagine being touched on the head and, in that instant, receiving the knowledge of everything — the beginning and the end, all that has been and will be, every fact and every perspective, with no question left to ask. That is the being religion describes when it calls God the omniscient creator of all. The question that follows is genuine, not rhetorical: how would *that* being interact with one individual human life — watch over a person, give them a moral code, intervene in their circumstances, and ask to be worshipped?

The difficulty arises from the thought experiment itself. To possess all knowledge at once is not merely to *have* more information than a human does; it is to contain every fact and vantage point with nothing left outside. On this intuition the one who knows everything does not merely *know* the whole — it *is* the whole, the *oneness* premise recognizable from monist and nondualist traditions: Advaita Vedanta's Atman-Brahman identity, Spinoza's single substance, the unitive experience reported by mystics across cultures. The move from omniscience to identity is contestable and should be flagged as such rather than asserted; the argument that follows does not depend on resolving it. Once that premise is in view, the question sharpens. A God who is *one with everything* — no outside, no boundary, nothing it is not — is precisely the being for which "watches over me," "gives me structure," "intercedes," and "asks for my worship" become hard to state coherently. Each needs two parties — one who watches and one watched, one who commands and one who obeys — a *separation* the oneness premise appears to erase. So the question is prior to whether such a God is good or believable: *is there room for the separate, personal, interceding relationship religion describes at all?* It is left open here; the sections that follow test it without presuming the answer.

Classical theism keeps God and creation apart with a single move: they differ not in *substance* but in *manner of existing*. God's being is underived and necessary; the world's is derived and contingent — sustained moment to moment, ceasing if the sustaining were withdrawn. The monist replies that this is a distinction without a difference: a world made of nothing but God's continuous sustaining act looks indistinguishable from God-in-expression. Whether the necessary/contingent distinction bears the weight is itself contestable.

This yields three coherent endpoints. *Classical theism*: genuinely separate, because creation is contingent and God necessary. *Pantheism*: not separate at all — God *is* the undifferentiated totality. *Panentheism*: the world is *in* God but God exceeds it — partial separation. The honest state of play is that the separating move is contestable rather than settled, and oneness is the default into which the picture collapses if classical theism's distinction will not hold.

Here is the sharpest turn: the God whose features prompted the question — who *watches over us, gives a moral code, intercedes, and asks for worship* — fits *none* of the three comfortably. **Pantheism** cannot host a commanding God at all; if God is the undivided whole, there is no

separate self to command. **Panentheism** fails the other way; a God of whom one is a genuine part stands too *intimately* to take the shape of a lawgiver at arm's length. And **classical theism** — the one picture granting the separateness commanding needs — is exactly where the creation problem developed below does its work: a being that lacks nothing has no need to *demand* worship or stake outcomes on obedience.

So the watching, interceding, worship-requiring God is squeezed from both sides. The pictures that permit oneness or intimacy dissolve the *separateness* commanding needs; the picture that permits separateness dissolves the *need* commanding implies. That God requires both — enough distance to issue orders to an other, and enough want to care whether they are obeyed — and no single coherent metaphysics supplies both together. Two caveats keep this a strong tension rather than a finished proof: the classical-theism half leans on the contested premise that *commanding implies want*, taken up directly in Sections 2-4; and even if classical theism's separation holds, the *control* objection — that a being sustained moment to moment by God is so nearly determined that the unease about a God "managing" one's life survives even the most cleanly distinct picture — does not actually need the oneness premise to be true.

The squeeze is not only philosophical; the foundational text records it from the inside, oscillating between the two Gods the argument says cannot be one. For the vast one, scripture supplies the attributes directly: "Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite" (Psalm 147:5); "Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done" (Isaiah 46:10). For the near one, the same canon shows God testing, learning, and changing. The voice that stops Abraham's knife says "now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son" (Genesis 22:12) — *now*, as though a moment earlier it did not, which is the only reading on which the test was worth running, and which sits directly against "his understanding is infinite." Before the flood, "it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart" (Genesis 6:6), while Malachi has the same God declare "I am the LORD, I change not" (Malachi 3:6) and Numbers insists God is "not a man ... that he should repent" (Numbers 23:19). These are not scribal slips awaiting harmonization. The text swings between registers because the religious life needs both beings — one vast enough to be worth obeying, one near enough to issue anything — and no single coherent being supplies both. The tradition's standard harmonization, accommodation, is taken up at the close of Section 5. (Scripture is quoted throughout from the Authorized Version.)

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2. Cognition, Creation, and the Problem of Divine Motivation

A further approach starts from the nature of thought. Consciousness, reasoning, and belief are effortful and fallible: we work toward truth, hold beliefs that can be wrong, solve what we do not already understand. A genuinely complete being would not reason step-by-step or *solve* anything — it would simply know, at once and entire; the structure of human cognition signals finitude. But the fact is interpretation-relative. The *apophatic* tradition (Pseudo-Dionysius, Maimonides) reads effortful cognition as the mark of a creature that is not self-sufficient; the

imago Dei tradition reads the same faculties as participation in the divine. This is offered as motivation, not proof — but it opens the question it motivates: if God is complete — lacking nothing — then God has no need to create. Any motive for creation seems to import a lack: loneliness, a desire for company, a wish to be worshipped, simple amusement. A God who *needed* to create a world, or to be worshipped by it, would be diminished by the need.

The classical reply does not dispute that God lacks nothing; it disputes that creation requires a lack. This is the Neoplatonic doctrine that goodness is self-diffusive — later formulated in Latin as *bonum diffusivum sui* by Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas: the sun shines not because it needs to but because shining is what fullness does. Creation is overflow, not need. Aquinas adds that God creates to communicate goodness and gains nothing by it; worship, likewise, is *for the worshipper*, orienting a finite mind toward the good.

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3. Why "Communicating Goodness" Does Not Escape the Problem

The reply relocates the problem rather than dissolving it. To "communicate goodness" still requires a recipient — and manufacturing the recipient *so that* the communication can occur is the suspect move. Even if God gains nothing, the act remains oriented around God's own goodness and its expression: self-referential in *form* regardless of whether it is self-serving in *payoff*.

Psychological narcissism — a hunger for admiration — arguably misfires when applied to a being that gains nothing. But the *structural* version of the charge does not depend on any gain: the act is self-referential in its very form, because communication needs a recipient, and creating the recipient to enable the communication is precisely what is in question.

A natural objection makes the point sharper. Art, love, and teaching are also self-referential — the artist's vision is expressed, the lover's regard is given, the teacher's understanding is conveyed — and we do not call those defective. The difference is in the *recipient*. The artist paints for an audience that already exists; the lover regards a beloved who already exists; the teacher instructs a student who already exists. Self-expression is offered to a pre-existing other whose independent existence makes the expression genuinely *outward*. Creation is structurally distinct: the recipient does not exist independently; it is brought into being for the purpose of receiving the expression. *That* is the configuration the charge identifies — not self-expression as such, but self-expression to a recipient one has created in order to express to. The artist who carves a wooden figure and then directs their regard at it is not regarding an *other*; the configuration the argument presses is the one where the maker and the recipient-maker are the same agent and the recipient exists only by that agent's act.

The strongest contemporary classical reply comes from Brian Davies (*The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 2006), who draws on the doctrine of God as *actus purus* — pure act with no

unrealized potential — to argue that the creative act is not undertaken *to bring something about* because nothing in God's being stands to be brought about. It is the simple self-identical act of being which God is, directed outward in pure gratuity. Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness* (2010) takes a different Thomist route: where Davies argues that God is not a moral agent and the problem of evil is a non-starter, Stump offers a narrative theodicy built on second-person biblical accounts, arguing that Aquinas would accept the problem and answer it through the lived texture of suffering rather than through metaphysical immunity — a route addressed to suffering, not to the motivation for creation, and so one that leaves the present charge untouched. Davies's reply is taken seriously but not granted, for two reasons. First, *actus purus* leans on the apophatic move that creaturely grammar fails to apply to God — but if "self-referential" fails for that reason, then "loving" and "gracious" fail equally, and the position pays in vocabulary what it gains in defense. Second, *actus purus* answers the *deficit* form of the charge while leaving the structural form intact in a different guise: even an act with no internal end still has an *outward direction* toward the made recipient, and creating the recipient so as to have that direction is precisely the move under examination.

The conclusion at this stage is recognizable in philosophy of religion: a self-sufficient being has no non-self-referential reason to create, so the existence of a world is itself evidence *against* a classically perfect God — or evidence that whatever made the world is not the lacking-nothing being of classical theism.

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4. Why "It Is For Our Good" Fails Under Omniscience

A standard reply appears to neutralize the whole problem. Asked why a self-sufficient God would give law and command, the defender does not deny that God needs nothing; instead the reply *redirects* the need — God gives the law not because *God* requires it but because *the creature* does, as a parent sets a bedtime for the child's good, not the parent's. This does not refute the objection so much as *relocate* it.

The premise that breaks the relocation is the one the defender cannot give up: divine omniscience. The argument does not claim foreknowledge *causes* the outcome — knowing the result of a recorded game does not determine the players' choices. The difficulty is not causation but *purpose* — whether, given that the ending is already known, the guidance can be *for* anything still open. A human parent guides a child precisely because the parent does *not* know how the child will turn out; that openness is what makes the guidance *for* the child. A God who already knows who is saved and who is lost knows exactly who the child will become before issuing a single instruction. The guidance alters nothing God did not already see as fixed.

This empties the "for the creature's good" defense of content. The defense survives only if the direction-giving is *doing something* — opening a future, making a difference to an outcome not yet settled. Omniscience closes that door: if every outcome is already known and (since God

created all) already set by the creator, the direction-giving is not guidance toward an open good but *narration of a script the author already wrote*.

A deeper objection precedes Molinism and must be taken first, because it does not concern foreknowledge at all but the meaning of one word: *for*. The emptying just performed assumes that "for the creature's good" is *instrumental* — guidance as a means toward an outcome not yet settled. But a defender may read *for* differently, as *constitutive*. If flourishing simply *is* living in right orientation to the good, then the command is not a lever for producing an uncertain future but a part of the very content of the good life; an author's foreknowing how a thing ends no more drains its value than a composer's knowing the final bar drains the symphony of its beauty.

This does not escape the problem; it chooses which horn of it to be impaled on. Take the constitutive reading and the command is no longer doing anything to the creature — it is the expression, through a creature, of a good God already possesses in full. But that is precisely the move Section 3 dismantled. A self-sufficient being expressing its own goodness through a recipient manufactured so the expressing can occur is self-referential *in form* whatever its payoff. So the two readings fail in tandem — read *for* instrumentally and omniscience empties it; read *for* constitutively and structural self-reference claims it. One objection remains and is the fair one: why privilege the creator's standpoint at all? The reply is that the question this section asks is not whether the good is real *for the creature* but what *reason the creator has* for commanding — and reasons for action belong to the agent who acts. An agent's reason cannot be supplied by an outcome the agent's doing makes no difference to.

A sophisticated defender has one further move, and it must be met rather than ignored. Molinism — the doctrine of *middle knowledge* — holds that God knows not only all necessary truths and all actual facts but also every *counterfactual of freedom*: what each free creature *would* freely choose in any possible circumstance. On this view the law is not idle; the guidance is part of the very circumstance God foreknows. Remove the law and the counterfactual changes and a different outcome follows. Foreknowledge and meaningful guidance therefore appear to coexist.

But Molinism does not restore the one thing the "for the creature's good" defense requires: an *open* future. Grant the Molinist everything. What follows is that God surveyed the entire set of feasible worlds, each with every outcome already specified, and *selected* this one — including, with total foreknowledge, exactly who would be saved and who lost. The guidance is no longer idle *within* the world; but the whole world, guidance and all, was chosen as a finished object by an author who read every line before deciding to actualize it. The openness has not returned; it has only moved back one step, from "God authors each outcome" to "God selects, from all complete scripts, the one whose outcomes these are." (Molinism has its own internal strains, chiefly the grounding objection — what makes the counterfactuals of freedom true, prior to God's decree — but the reply above need not press them: it grants Molinism intact and still finds the future closed from the creator's side.)

The decisive point survives even this reply, and its strength is that it runs entirely on the defender's own premise. The "commanding implies need" assumption is contestable, and the defender disputes it. But omniscience is not optional equipment for a classically perfect God; it cannot be denied without surrendering the perfection the position exists to protect. Foreknowledge of all outcomes removes the only non-self-referential purpose guidance could have had, and the one reading of "for" that survives foreknowledge survives only by collapsing back into the creation problem.

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5. The Punitive Structure and Its Textual Reality

The problem sharpens against the actual content of Judeo-Christian teaching, built on a covenant of reward and punishment: God creates humanity, destroys it for disobedience, sends his son to die for human sin, and commands love on pain of eternal punishment. The conditional — "love me or be punished forever" — is incoherent on its face, since coerced love is not love. And an omniscient being who already knows who will comply gains nothing from the test.

Defenders respond on two fronts. On *demand*ed love, they argue the command is not a demand for God's emotional supply but a description of the only orientation that makes a creature whole. On *punishment*, the tradition splits: some read hell as freely chosen separation; annihilationists deny eternal conscious torment; universalists deny anyone is finally lost. But the point retains its force against even the gentlest readings, because all of them must still explain why a complete being established a *staked* arrangement at all. The soft interpretations relocate the problem from cruelty to pointlessness; they do not erase it. The sharpest form is the one that does not depend on hell: *why a test at all, for a being with nothing to learn and nothing to gain?*

A third defense covers both fronts at once and must be met on its own terms: *accommodation* — the doctrine, running from the rabbinic maxim that the Torah speaks in the language of men through Maimonides to Calvin, that God does not literally grieve, learn, or rage, but speaks in terms a finite mind can hold, as an adult crouches to a child's eye level. The defense is taken seriously because it genuinely explains the *register* of the text — the fatherly voice, the anger, the pacing of a conversation. What it does not explain is the *content*. Stooping accounts for why a message is simple; it does not account for why the simple message specifies which portion of the harvest belongs to the priest, who may marry whom, and what is owed at the temple. Eternity can hold that detail; it cannot sign it. A rule about priestly income, examined from the receiving end, is indistinguishable from a priest with a pen. And the defense should be caught borrowing the picture it needs: the adult crouching to the child is the parental image whose guidance function Section 4 shows omniscience emptying. Accommodation does not lift the doctrine off the fork; it sets it down on the near God — the one built to human dimensions.

And any reading that denies real consequences for disobedience is not describing the text. The punitive structure is explicit across both Testaments. In the Hebrew Bible the consequences are

direct and often God-initiated: the Flood, Sodom, the plagues culminating in the death of the firstborn, the conquest narratives. Deuteronomy 28 catalogues blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience; the prophets frame the Babylonian exile as punishment for covenant violation. The New Testament relocates and intensifies rather than softens this. Jesus himself is the source of the most vivid judgment language — outer darkness, the eternal fire of Matthew 25's sheep-and-goats judgment — and Revelation's lake of fire is explicit. The notion that a gentle New Testament God replaced a wrathful Old Testament one does not survive contact with the text. The framework, as written, is built on conditional obedience enforced by consequence. The comfortable middle answer — "it is not really punitive" — is ruled out by scripture itself, leaving only the hard exits of brute free choice or declared mystery.

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6. Against "Built-In Moral Physics": Morality as Natural, Not Cosmic

The last available defense is that the punitive language is anthropomorphic framing of an impersonal reality — that estrangement from the source of life simply is ruin the way stepping off a cliff simply is falling, with the fire and curses as metaphor for built-in consequence. This defense fails, and its failure is instructive.

The cliff analogy backfires: falling off a cliff is not a *moral* event but a natural one; physics does not care. To say estrangement-from-God is ruin "the way stepping off a cliff is falling" concedes that morality reduces to morally-neutral cause-and-effect — and one cannot then smuggle moral weight back into a process just called impersonal. Human behavior, including what we label moral, sits on the same continuum of what evolved organisms do; there is no obvious line where natural behavior stops and cosmic moral law begins. Hundreds of thousands of years of human and pre-human behavior shaped our moral instincts, yet a recent, local religious framework presents itself as the eternal law overriding all of it. And "working together" supplies a sufficient natural account of where moral codes come from — the behaviors that let organisms cooperate and survive in groups, requiring no deity — with the caveat that a sufficient explanation is not a proof.

This closes the dilemma. If the moral order is truly impersonal, it needs no divine author, and the personal, deliberating, punishing God of the text becomes superfluous. If instead the deity authored the moral rules, then the deity has an *interest* in how creatures behave — placing God in some real relation of stake to outcomes. The classical theist denies that caring is needing or valuing is lacking, and the argument does not press the point: the decisive pressure on an authored moral order comes from omniscience (Section 4), not from caring-implies-lack. *Interest* is meant in the thin sense — a stake in how things turn out — not in any thicker sense of desire or deficiency. The tension is not "God wants, therefore God lacks"; it is "a being defined as standing in no relation of stake to anything is here standing in one."

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7. Morality as a Mobilizing Force: Two Cases — the American Civil War and the French Revolution

The sections so far pressed a metaphysical case: that a self-sufficient God has no coherent reason to command. Grant, for the sake of argument, that the classical theist can meet every one of those tensions. A second and wholly independent line remains, and it turns on no metaphysics at all. Whatever a perfect God could or could not coherently do, the *observed behavior* of moral-religious systems across history is fully accounted for by what they do in human affairs, with no divine author required to explain it. That case begins with a single mechanism: mobilization.

One framing matter must be settled first, because the case to follow will trigger a reliable misreading otherwise. Nothing in this section is a claim about the moral status of the events analyzed. Slavery was a moral catastrophe whose victims numbered in the millions and whose injury has not ended; that the structural-and-mobilization reading is offered here is in no way a softening of that fact. The historical question this section asks is *not* whether the moral judgments people made were *correct* but what made the resulting *action* politically possible — what converted moral conviction held by some into collective force capable of altering institutions. Two cases follow because no single case establishes a pattern; the second is offered partly so that a reader who finds the first too close to current politics to engage analytically has another to work with.

A historical case shows how moral and religious framing functions in human affairs. The end of slavery in the United States can be read not primarily as the product of a moral awakening — whatever one concludes about slavery's own moral status — but as the result of that moral energy being *used to mobilize* people toward goals largely structural and material: holding the Union together, suppressing secession, consolidating federal power at the states' expense, and freeing labor for mobile deployment. The context was long in building — secession debated for a decade, a chaotic currency, tariffs a standing sectional grievance, and the Nullification Crisis of 1832–33, in which Andrew Jackson had already threatened force against a state over a federal tariff. (The structural-consolidation reading invoked here is one contested historiographical interpretation among several, and the argument needs only the weaker, widely granted claim that follows: that moral-religious framing was the indispensable mobilizing energy, whatever weight one assigns the structural motives beneath it.)

The precise claim is important, and it is *not* that slavery was a fake issue or a pretext. The secessionists themselves named slavery, explicitly and centrally, as their cause; to call it a pretext is to contradict the people who were seceding. The defensible claim is that slavery functioned as the *catalyst* — the one genuine grievance among several with the power to *mobilize a population*. People do not march and die for tariff schedules or abstractions about federal-state sovereignty; those grievances are real but bloodless. Moral and religious framing — sharpened by decades of evangelical revival — supplies righteous energy, sermons, volunteers, and martyrs. The North obtained both the cause that could move people *and*, as the

war's outcome, the structural consolidation the deeper conflict was about. These were convergent aims, not competing ones.

A second case removes the analysis from American particulars and shows the same machinery running in a different idiom. The French Revolution arose from structural conditions long in formation — a state finance system bankrupted by warfare, peasant grievance over feudal dues, urban hunger from harvest failure, an unworkable estates system, and an aristocracy collecting privilege without bearing tax. None of these grievances by themselves moved populations to storm a prison or kill a king. What moved them was a moral framing — the *rights of man*, popular sovereignty against divine-right monarchy, a clerical hierarchy denounced as parasitic on the people. As with the American case, the moral cause was not a pretext; the philosophes meant what they wrote and the sans-culottes meant what they shouted. But the moral framing was also the activation energy that converted structural grievance into collective force capable of abolishing the monarchy, expropriating the church, and reorganizing the state. The structural transformation and the moral mobilization were not alternatives but partners; the second made the first possible.

This yields a general principle: even when a moral issue is entirely genuine, its primary *social function* is mobilization. Morality is the activation energy that converts diffuse structural interest into collective action. Crucially, this claim is compatible with moral facts being real, which is why it survives where the purely cynical "it was all economics" version fails — exposing self-interested motive does not establish that the moral judgment was false. The lesson is about what morality *does*, not about whether its claims are *true*.

It is worth being precise about which banner gets selected, because the obvious reading — that the mobilizing cause is always *suffering-relief* — obscures the mechanism. The banner that does the work is not suffering-relief specifically but *whatever moves the particular population*. Often that is the promise to *end* suffering, as with abolition. But the lever runs the other way with equal force: the cry can be to *inflict* suffering — on the sacrificial child, the heretic, the scapegoat, the marked outsider — so that the tribe is spared, the harvest secured, the gods appeased. The same machine that mobilizes a nation to relieve suffering mobilizes another to impose it, both wrapped in the language of the good. Suffering, then, is not the principle nor even a consistent banner; it is a *dial*, turned up or down according to what the audience will march for. The one invariant across both directions is *beneficiary*: the redrawing of the moral line, toward mercy or atrocity alike, reliably advantages the believers, the in-group, and above all those holding the lever. The moral story always asserts the cause serves *the good*; the translation worth checking first is that it serves its authors.

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8. Who Operates the Lever: Morality as an Instrument of Power

If morality mobilizes, someone operates the lever — and those best positioned to are disproportionately those with power to keep or wealth to protect. This makes morality,

especially divinely sanctioned morality, a recurring instrument of legitimation. The lineage is deep: Machiavelli treated religion as a founder's most useful instrument (*Discourses on Livy*, I.11–15); Marx called it "the opium of the people" (1844); Gibbon noted religions are held true by the people, false by the philosopher, and useful by the magistrate (*Decline and Fall*, ch. 2); Weber showed divine sanction converts naked power into *authority*, far cheaper to maintain than force. A ruler who governs by God's will needs fewer soldiers.

The historical pattern is dense: the divine right of kings, deified emperors, "Deus vult" and the Crusades, Constantine's battlefield cross, the Inquisition, manifest destiny, the theology that underwrote apartheid. The sharpest element is *control of interpretation*: whoever defines what the sacred demands controls the mobilization switch, which is why clerical classes and state power fuse so reliably. Control of the moral narrative is itself a form of rule, and the motive it serves — *cui bono* — points with great regularity toward the power or enrichment of those who wield it.

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9. The Resistance Tradition, and Why It Strengthens Rather Than Refutes the Thesis

The obvious objection is that morality is also the native language of *revolt*: the Hebrew prophets denounce kings in God's name, abolitionists turned scripture against slaveholders, the civil rights movement ran on the prophetic tradition, and liberation theology aimed the same God at the landowning class. If morality were purely a top-down instrument of elite control, it could not also be the most potent weapon of the powerless.

But the resistance cases do not refute the thesis — they are absorbed by it. The prophet aiming God at the king and the king claiming God's mandate are the *same instrument pointed in opposite directions*. Morality is not specifically a tool of the elite; it is a *lever anyone can seize*, and precisely because it mobilizes, it is perpetually fought over. Two observations show the lever is content-neutral. First, the trajectory of the Church: a movement that began with a figure executed by an empire became, once institutionalized, the throne itself — a papacy dictating punishment for unbelief, projecting force outward through the Crusades and inward through the Inquisition. The same authority that was a *resistance* instrument under Rome became a *domination* instrument in the medieval period; if its moral content were fixed and divine, it could not invert function so cleanly with its operator. The English Reformation supplies an unusually naked instance. When the papacy refused Henry VIII the annulment he wanted, he did not begin with defiance — he argued, for years: scripture set against scripture, university faculties canvassed across Europe, appeal after appeal. When the arguing failed he did not submit to the moral authority — he moved the jurisdiction: Cranmer was raised to Canterbury, the Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533) closed the case's route to Rome, Cranmer pronounced the marriage void, and the following year the Act of Supremacy (1534) named the king supreme head of the church in England (Bernard 2005). Henry had built the court that gave him his

answer. Tellingly, he did not abolish the *form* of sacred authority but reproduced it, installing himself as supreme head of the English church exactly as the Pope was head of the Roman one — the office preserved, only the occupant changed. Consider what that requires one to believe about the law he was under. If it was God's law, changing the court could not change the answer; if changing the court changed the answer, the operative law was whatever the controlling institution declared it to be. A moral-religious authority that can be reconstituted under new management the moment it rules against the powerful is a transferable instrument of power, not a fixed law standing above it.

Second, and more decisively, the behavior of consolidating authoritarian regimes. If religion were merely a *pacifier*, a new regime would preserve and exploit it. Instead, the consolidating revolutionary state's recurring move is to *destroy or capture* independent religious-moral authority — the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks, Maoist China, the Khmer Rouge, Hoxha's officially atheist Albania. The reason is the thesis itself: an independent moral authority is the one thing that can credibly say "the ruler defies a law higher than the ruler" — the seed of every legitimate uprising. A regime that means to be unchallengeable cannot tolerate a moral court it does not control. Cambodia shows the destruction limb at its purest. Buddhism had been woven through Khmer life for centuries; within a few years of the fall of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge had effectively dissolved a monkhood that had numbered in the tens of thousands — monks forced into labor, wats converted to granaries, warehouses, and prisons, the practice of the religion made punishable (Harris 2005; 2013). Nothing about rice production required this. What the sangha held was the only standing claim in the country that some things were wrong regardless of what the leadership decided — precisely the claim a regime that intends to decide everything cannot leave in other hands. This discriminates between two theories that otherwise predict alike: flat "opium of the masses" predicts rulers always *preserve* religion; the "contested lever" model predicts they preserve it when they control it and attack it when they cannot. The record matches the second — which is why neutralizing independent moral authority, by capture or destruction, is step one.

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10. The Third Response: Becoming the God

Capture and destruction are not the only options. The third and most total response is for the ruler to collapse the distance entirely and install himself as the divine source. The deified god-king leaves no higher law to be invoked against him, because he *is* the higher law. This is the oldest pattern — pharaohs as living gods, Roman emperors received into the imperial cult — and the most recent: the North Korean state runs a deliberately engineered cult around the Kim dynasty, the founder enshrined as "eternal" and the apparatus of worship pointed at the ruler. The modern case is the most revealing, since it shows the structure is not an ancient credulity we outgrew but something manufacturable in the twenty-first century and still functional — exactly what one expects if divine authority is a seat power can occupy rather than a truth standing apart from it. Capture, destroy, or become: the three exhaust the ways power handles

a moral authority it cannot leave standing on its own — and that the sacred office can be seized, razed, or personally occupied at all is itself the evidence that it is an instrument of power, not a law above it.

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11. The Theological Payoff: God as Explanatorily Unnecessary

Assembled, the argument runs as follows. A self-sufficient God has no non-self-referential reason to author a conditional, reward-and-punishment moral order. What we observe instead is a moral-religious order whose *function* is the binding and mobilization of human groups and whose *operation* is a perpetual contest for control of that power: its content inverts with its operator, preserved by rulers who command it and abolished by rulers who fear it. Every feature is explained by what it *does* in the struggle for human power, with no remainder requiring a divine author — the God invoked on every side of every throne being the projection the contestants need, Feuerbach's externalized human image operating from above and below at once.

Its scope must be stated precisely. The argument establishes that the divine author is *unnecessary* — that human power-dynamics fully explain the origin, function, and behavior of moral-religious *systems*. It does *not* establish that no moral facts exist, nor that no God exists, nor even that the human moral *capacity* the systems exploit is itself explained away; that a lever works on people at all may presuppose a prior moral sensibility the instrument is parasitic on, and that prior sensibility is a different explanandum, left open here. A defender retains one coherent fallback: a real moral order and a real God might exist, which humans then hijack and weaponize — corruption of a real thing rather than invention of a fake one. That cannot be disproven from outside, since "humans abuse X for power" is compatible with X being real. But the defender has been driven from the strong claim — a perfect God authored this punitive order for good reason — back to a bare possibility: something real might exist beneath the human wreckage. The explanatory need for God has collapsed; the metaphysical possibility has not.

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12. Existence Versus Necessity: The Asymmetry of the Burden

Two clarifications fix the state of play. First, a "moral fact": a claim true *independent of anyone's opinion*, the way "water is H₂O" is true rather than the way "chocolate is delicious" is. To say "slavery is wrong" is a moral fact is to say it would remain wrong even if everyone approved of it. The opposing view, moral anti-realism, holds there are no such facts — moral claims express human attitudes rather than report features of reality.

Second, the burden of proof. Neither side can *prove* its case: one cannot prove from history that no God exists, nor the defender that one does. But the burden is not symmetric. When two explanations both fit the evidence and one requires an extra entity, the account without it is the

rational default — not because it is proven, but because positing an unnecessary cause is a cost (Occam's razor; the burden lies on the claimant). Two cautions keep this honest. The razor adjudicates only between rival explanations of the *same* thing, so it cuts the divine author from the explanation of how moral-religious systems *behave* — not from the separate question of why humans have moral intuitions at all, which this argument does not claim to have closed. And "fully explain" means *of that explanandum*: the behavior of the systems, not every adjacent fact. With that scope fixed, the point holds: if human power-dynamics fully explain the moral-religious order's origin, function, and behavior, adding "and also a perfect God authored the real version underneath" does no explanatory work *there*. The honest position is therefore not "atheism proven" but the stronger "the God hypothesis has been rendered unnecessary, not impossible" — the positive existence claim left undischarged by the side that made it.

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13. The Argument From Moral Variation

If moral truth were fixed like a chemical fact, it could not change — yet moral views are in constant flux, and prehistoric morality (infanticide, raiding, blood vengeance, killing the unproductive, often survival-rational in its world) differs starkly from modern morality. And where there is a fact, some procedure settles it; for water there is a test, but for moral doctrine every church, empire, and age asserts its own with no test to adjudicate. A "fact" that no procedure can settle and that every era rewrites looks more like custom than fact.

The realist's reply is that variation in *belief* is not variation in *fact*. People once believed the sun orbited the earth; the belief changed, the fact did not — they grew *less wrong*. Moral history, the realist claims, has the same shape: earlier peoples were *mistaken*, working with cruder moral knowledge, not living under a different moral truth. Changing views then prove only that people are fallible, not that there is nothing to be wrong about. And to "who determines which doctrine is true," realist and anti-realist answer alike: *nobody* — no one decided H₂O either — which is why every institution's *claim* to have determined moral truth is suspect, and why the absence of a deciding authority is no evidence of non-existence. Difficulty of access is not proof of absence.

The strongest contemporary replies to evolutionary debunking go further than the bare "variation is fallibility" move and must be answered directly. David Enoch (*Taking Morality Seriously*, 2011) offers a "third-factor" defense: there is a third factor — the survival-conduciveness of certain moral truths themselves — that explains why selection would push our judgments *toward* moral correctness rather than past it; the alignment of evolutionary fitness with moral truth is not coincidence but is built into the structure of social cooperation. Derek Parfit (*On What Matters*, 2011) presses a different line: the genealogical story, however accurate, does not by itself impeach the *content* of beliefs it explains — any more than, in an analogy pressed in the debunking literature by Richard Joyce (*The Evolution of Morality*, 2006) and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, the evolutionary story of arithmetic intuition impeaches "2 + 2 = 4." Both replies are serious, and neither is refuted here. The argument of this section does not

require Street's debunker to defeat the realist; it requires only the weaker claim, taken up directly in Section 14, that the moving line of "evil" tracks shifts in power with a regularity neither the third-factor nor the genealogical-immunity reply, by itself, explains away.

The argument from variation therefore does not, by itself, reach "no moral truth." It reaches "moral beliefs are variable and fallible," which the realist absorbs. The stronger conclusion would need a separate argument that the *best explanation* of the variation is invention rather than fallible discovery.

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14. Evil as a Moving Designation

"Evil" is often treated as the firmest point in all morality — the one place a fixed, mind-independent line seems undeniable. But "evil" is not a stable fact standing apart from moral systems; it is a designation *internal* to morality, and inherits all of morality's variability. Acts now placed without hesitation inside it — chattel slavery, conquest and slaughter, human sacrifice, the killing of unwanted infants, the ownership of wives — were, in the eras that practiced them, not regarded as evil at all. They were normal, lawful, often *sacred*, and in several cases commanded by the very scriptures later treated as moral authorities. The boundary did not hold still while people learned to obey it; it *moved*.

A natural objection: some prohibitions — murder, theft, betrayal — appear in nearly every society, so the variability is superficial and a fixed core remains. But the constancy dissolves on inspection. What is forbidden is almost never killing as such — states, sovereigns, armies, and executioners kill with sanction — but killing a *protected* person, and the whole moral history is the contest over *who counts as protected*. The enslaved, the enemy, the heretic, the outsider, the sacrificial victim did not count. "Do not kill" stayed verbally constant while the class it covered was continually redrawn: the real content migrated under a stable phrase. The sharpest form: the *same act* — killing an innocent — has been the highest sacrament in one order and the gravest crime in the next. That is hard to square with a status anchored to a fixed feature of reality, which does not reverse at a border; it is what one expects of a status anchored to whoever draws the line. This also disposes of the milder "expansion of moral concern" reading: that widening *is* the moving line, relabeled, and it has contracted as readily as it has expanded.

This is the variation argument sharpened onto the most morally loaded word available. If "evil" were the disclosure of a perfect and unchanging source, its content would be constant, as any genuine fact is. Instead it migrates — and migrates, as the sections on mobilization, power, and variation showed, broadly in step with shifts in power, economy, and social arrangement. That is what one expects of a human designation tracking human conditions, not of a fixed revelation. The word we treat as the deepest mark of moral reality turns out to be among the most reliably rewritten.

The same caveat that governs the variation argument governs here, and a particular realist reply deserves naming because it is the strongest. The realist may say the reversals track changing *non-moral* beliefs riding on a *constant* moral principle: a society that sacrificed innocents believed, falsely, that the gods existed and demanded it, or that the victim's category lacked the interests that trigger protection — so the moral error was downstream of a *factual* error about gods or about who has a soul, not evidence of a different moral truth. Correct the factual belief and the "reversal" disappears, leaving one principle ("do not kill those with interests") applied to corrected facts. This is a serious move and it is not refuted here; it converges with the realist progress-versus-change fork of Section 13 and is left there. The narrower point stands on its own: whether driven by moral change or by corrected non-moral belief, the most absolute-seeming category in morality — the one most often taken to need no human author — displays exactly the movement the rest of this inquiry attributes to human conditions, and tracks shifts in power with a regularity the factual-error story does not by itself explain away.

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15. A Necessary Correction: Cause Is Not Endorsement

A precision must be entered here that protects the argument from a charge often wrongly attached to it. The argument does *not* claim that the abolition of slavery was moral *progress* or *improvement*. It claims that abolition was the *result* of morality being used to mobilize people toward structural ends — union, suppression of secession, federal consolidation, mobile labor. This is a claim about *cause and function*, not about moral improvement.

The distinction matters because the realist's strongest counter — "you cannot call it progress without a fixed target" — only bites against someone who concedes the outcome was a genuine improvement. The argument never needed the outcome to be *good*; only that it be *explainable* by mobilization, interest, and power. A thing can be *caused* by moral fervor without being *validated* by moral truth. With cause and validation held apart, "but was it really better?" falls outside the model — neither affirmed nor denied. This is not anti-realism, which positively claims no moral facts exist; it is the more austere stance of *bracketing the truth question entirely*, explaining morality's historical behavior without reaching for it.

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16. The Decisive Move: It Does Not Matter Whether Moral Truths Exist, Because They Have Not Been Revealed

The strongest form of the position shifts the question from metaphysics (do moral facts exist?) to epistemology (are they accessible?). The claim is not that moral truths do not exist, but that it does not matter whether they do, because they have not been *revealed* in any form we could verify — moral skepticism in the strict sense: agnostic about whether the facts exist, firm that none has come through a clean channel.

The evidence for the epistemic claim is overwhelming. Every moral system in history arrives through a *human channel* — a prophet, a translated and edited text, a council that voted, an institution claiming authority. None arrives the way a verified physical fact does, by a public, repeatable method anyone can run. Even granting a moral truth exists, what reaches us always passes through a human interpreter with human interests — precisely the contamination the power-arguments documented. And a genuine revelation and a power-serving fabrication arrive through *identical* channels, so there is no procedure to tell them apart from the inside.

A recent case shows the structure plainly. In the 1820s Joseph Smith reported that an angel directed him to buried golden plates, which he translated by means available only to him, after which the plates were returned and placed beyond inspection. The account's truth is not the issue; the *structure* is. The disclosure passed through a single individual, from a source only he could observe, by a method only he could perform, leaving nothing publicly checkable behind — the same form as far older revelations, but close enough in time to expose the mechanism. A genuine divine communication and a human construction are, from outside the recipient, indistinguishable. (The example is illustrative, not a charge against one tradition; the same analysis applies across the foundational revelations of the major faiths.)

The believer has a specific counter here, and it deserves a direct answer, because the founding revelation of the biblical tradition is staged as the *opposite* of a private channel. Sinai is presented as a public event — a whole nation at the foot of the mountain, thunder, smoke, and a voice all of them heard: "and all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking" (Exodus 20:18). A national theophany with a people for witnesses is, on its face, exactly the shape the golden plates lack. But examine how the public event reaches any present reader: through the text that asserts it. The witnesses do not arrive as witnesses; they arrive as a *list* of witnesses — written, copied, edited, and canonized by the institution the revelation founded. And the narrative itself withdraws the publicity it stages. The people hear the ten utterances and beg off — "let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:19) — and Moses ascends alone; the code of ordinances, the priestly apportionment, the marriage and sacrificial law, the whole itemized apparatus that would actually govern a life, is delivered to one man and reported back (Exodus 19–24). The public event authorizes the private channel, and every governing detail still arrives through the channel. Paul's appeal to the five hundred who saw the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:6) has the same structure: the five hundred are available to any reader only as a sentence in a letter written by a man devoted to spreading the movement. None of this accuses anyone of lying; it observes a structure. The tradition's most attested revelation, examined for how it actually reaches its audience, has the same shape as the case it was invoked to rebut.

This folds the argument together. The believer's core claim is a *revelation* claim — "God has disclosed the moral order; here it is." The position need not disprove God, disprove moral facts, or win the metaethics. It need only observe that *the revelation has not been authenticated* — and it has not, because every candidate comes through the same compromised channel, with no test to separate genuine disclosure from human projection. Even granting a real God and a real

moral truth, no human claim to speak for either can be verified, so none can rightfully command obedience on its own authority.

The most sustained attempt to supply the very authentication this section says is missing is Richard Swinburne's (*Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. 2007), and it must be answered head-on. Swinburne argues that a genuine revelation can be identified by a convergence of external checks: that its content is consistent with what natural reason already knows, that the founder's life and character are of a sort one would expect of divine inspiration, that the doctrines themselves are morally good and conducive to flourishing, and that the receiving community has preserved them with reasonable fidelity. Christianity, he argues, satisfies these tests well enough to underwrite warrant. The reply this argument owes Swinburne is not that the criteria are bad ones — they are, if anything, the best available — but that each of them is *itself adjudicated by a human channel*. Who decides which doctrines align with natural reason? Whose reading of the founder's character counts as the inspired one? Which moral goods, in which order, mark the content as authentic? Whose preservation of the tradition counts as faithful and whose as corrupted? The tests do not stand outside the contested human interpretive frame; they *are* it, applied by the very tradition under examination. When a revelation is said to be authenticated because it satisfies criteria applied by the very community claiming it, the revelation has not been externally verified; it has been internally re-described. The challenge is not that no test could ever work but that *these* tests cannot do the work asked of them, because the external standpoint they require is the standpoint this argument shows is missing.

A sophisticated reader will press further, because Swinburne's project, like the cumulative case arguments of apologists such as William Lane Craig, does aim at *external public warrant* — not interpretive consensus but evidential mass. Historical evidence for the resurrection, archaeology, independent attestation across hostile sources, the documented transformation of communities and individuals: these are offered as the kind of external check the criticism above demands. The reply to the cumulative case applies the source/report distinction with the precision the cumulative-case theist requires. External evidence of the kind offered can and does authenticate that *the report was made* and that *something occurred* — that disciples reported a resurrection, that texts circulated, that communities formed and persisted, that lives changed. None of those facts authenticate the *source* the report names. A documented event of disciples claiming a resurrection is not a documented event of God raising a man; archaeology of a community is not archaeology of a revelation; the transformation of a believer is evidence of belief's effects, not of belief's truth. The gap between *external evidence that the claim was made and acted on* and *external evidence that the claim is true* is the gap the cumulative case never closes — because closing it would require, for any candidate revelation, exactly what was demanded throughout: an external check on the *source* whose identity is the very thing in question. The cumulative case impresses by the volume of its evidence; the evidence impresses by being external; the externality, on examination, is to the wrong thing.

When the evidential case has been pressed this far, the reply that remains is faith — the instruction to believe without the authentication this section has been asking after. Its timing should be noticed: the card is played not where the evidence is strongest but precisely where the channel has been examined and cannot be cleared. It is not an argument; it is the move that ends the examination. Its object should be stated exactly as well. No believer has met the source. Everything arrived through men — a prophet's report, a council's vote, a translator's choices — so the faith being demanded is not, and cannot be, faith in God; it is faith in the men who claimed to speak for God. And "trust me without checking" is the one sentence a genuine messenger and a fraud pronounce identically — the request itself carries no information about which one is speaking. Faith does not answer the authentication problem. Faith is the name for agreeing not to raise it.

One objection must be met here, because it threatens to prove too much: does this standard of authentication not also defeat ordinary historical and testimonial knowledge, much of which also reaches a given person through a single uncheckable channel? The reply marks the difference precisely. Historical and testimonial claims are authenticated not by each hearer re-running them but by *external* corroboration available in principle to others — converging documents, physical traces, independent witnesses, the possibility of disconfirmation. What is demanded of revelation is not laboratory repeatability but *some* external check beyond the recipient's own report, and that is exactly what the foundational revelation claims lack: the corroboration, where it exists, is to the *fact that the report was made*, never to the *source* it claims. The realist's most serious counter — that convergence of moral conscience across cultures supplies just such an external check — is therefore the one that must be answered directly, and Section 17 takes it up. The one discipline required throughout is to keep the claim in its defensible form — "*has not* been revealed in any verifiable way so far," a claim about our access — and not let it slide into the overreach "*cannot* ever be revealed," which would need an argument not in hand.

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17. Defending the Position: The Convergence Objection

Answered

A realist may argue that revelation is not the only access route — that moral truth might be reached as mathematical truth is, worked out by reason and confirmed by the cross-cultural *convergence* of conscience on certain prohibitions (gratuitous murder, betrayal, cruelty to one's own). If moral truth were inaccessible, why would so many societies independently converge?

The answer is that the convergence is largely an *artifact of the describer's vantage* — it appears universal from a modern Western standpoint shaped by Christian moral assumptions, read onto a species that does not in fact share it. Examined as practiced rather than idealized, the "universal" prohibitions dissolve. The ban on murder is better explained as *order-maintenance*: in practice it has rarely meant "killing is wrong" but that *unauthorized* killing is wrong — the

state, the sovereign, and the army kill with sanction. What is protected is the monopoly on violence, exactly what one expects if the rule preserves the power structure rather than registering a moral fact. Betrayal and cruelty were never abolished but at most locally suppressed: the caste system institutionalizes differential treatment by birth for over a billion people, with Untouchability still widely practiced despite its constitutional abolition; states imprison dissidents as policy; some execute for blasphemy or apostasy. These are not *lapses* from a shared human morality — they are the *operative* morality, often religiously endorsed.

The convergence the realist needs is therefore substantially illusory: a projection of a narrow vantage mistaking itself for the species. The triangulation argument needs many observers seeing the same object; in fact they are being *described* as if they were, by one observer standing in one place. (This rebuttal is itself an empirical bet rather than a closure: it can be pressed only so far as the ethnographic record supports, and a realist who shows deeper convergence than the practiced record suggests would reopen the question. The claim here is the defensible one — that the convergence is *substantially* overstated, not that no shared tendency exists at all.) Where convergence does appear, it is equally well explained by shared evolutionary and cooperative pressures — exactly what "unrevealed and human-constructed" predicts.

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18. Defending the Position: The Practical-Living Objection Answered

A second objection holds that if moral truth is unrevealed and inaccessible, one still has to *act* — and so must live by *some* operative basis, which looks like a working morality after all. The refined answer turns this objection into evidence.

Everyone, in every condition, lives by some operative morality — the caste enforcer, the regime soldier, the cleric, each acting on a basis however coercive. But that does not show people live by a *shared* or *revealed* morality; it shows the bases are wildly variable, frequently imposed by force, and reliably aligned with whoever holds power. The objection assumes a first-world picture of how we would *like* to live and mistakes it for how most of the world actually lives. Drop that assumption and the sheer range of operative moralities — and their consistent alignment with force — becomes the position's *main exhibit* rather than a problem. The realist needs the variation to be surface noise over a shared deep structure; in fact it goes all the way down and tracks power. The caste system, the deified leader, the execution for dissent are not failures to reach a universal floor; they are evidence there *is* no revealed floor — only locally built structures, each presenting itself as *the* moral order and enforced by the authority it serves.

This does not strand the position in paralysis, but it changes what one stands on. The framework installs no replacement morality — and specifically declines to install *suffering-reduction* as the new floor, since suffering-relief is precisely the most effective mobilizing banner and, as Section

7 showed, runs in both directions; adopting it as the criterion would re-enter the very mechanism the argument exposes. What remains is not a commandment but a method of examination. The one factor that stays constant beneath every moral banner, in either direction, is *who benefits*. One can still confront the caste system or the execution of a dissident — not by appeal to a certified value, but by examining and exposing whom the arrangement serves and at whose expense, and declining to be moved by the sacred framing laid over it. The question the position hands the reader is *cui bono*: who profits if this is believed and acted upon. Unlike a revelation, that question can be checked. This is a *diagnostic* instrument, not a replacement moral code: it does not tell the reader what to value or which side to take — those remain the reader's own to decide, on whatever grounds they hold — but strips the borrowed holiness from causes engineered to move them, so the choosing is done with the disguise removed.

The method is concrete, and a worked instance shows it in motion. Take any appeal that arrives wrapped in a moral absolute — *protect the innocent, defend the faith, preserve the natural order, stand on the right side of history*. The diagnostic does not ask whether the cause is just; it asks what changes hands if the banner is believed. Three questions do the work: who gains authority, wealth, or immunity from challenge once the framing is accepted; who is silenced or bound by it; and would the same people benefit if the sacred language were stripped away and only the transfer of power described. When a ruling class enforces a blasphemy law, the check is not "is blasphemy real?" but "who is insulated from criticism, and who is jailed, once it is on the books?" When a movement demands a loyalty no one may question, the check is not "is loyalty good?" but "whose position becomes unchallengeable?" The answers are often compatible with the cause being partly genuine — abolition was — which is exactly why the result is a diagnosis and not a verdict: it names the beneficiary and removes the disguise, then hands the undisguised choice back to the reader, who must still decide it on grounds of their own.

Two objections to the diagnostic must be met before it is handed over, because each names a real way the tool could mislead. The first is that true claims benefit their claimants too. The physician who reports that the water is contaminated has a career built on being believed — and the water is still contaminated. If tracing benefit could convict a claim, it would convict every claim, sound ones included. The objection fixes the tool's scope rather than breaking it. *Cui bono* is not a falsifier; it establishes no claim false. It tells the examiner where to aim doubt, and how much of it to spend, in the one situation where nothing better is available — when a claim cannot be checked and is being pressed anyway. Where a test exists, the test should be run and the claimant's motives disregarded. Where no test exists — "God requires this of you" — the pattern of who gains is the only evidence in the room.

The second objection cuts closer. An instrument for aiming doubt at unverifiable claims will, applied naively, aim downward, because the people whose claims cannot be institutionally checked are disproportionately the people without institutions — the visionary, the dissident, the abolitionist preacher telling a congregation that God hates what their state permits. Each gains standing if believed, and a naive reading of the diagnostic appears to license the slaveholder to dismiss the preacher and sit still. The repair is internal to the benefit question

rather than appended to it: do not stop at who gains — ask which way the *burden* travels, and do not take the claimant's word for the direction, since power reliably narrates itself as the underdog: the tribunal speaks for the people, the majority is besieged, the inquisitor is defending the faithful. Ask who ends up able to enforce and who ends up unable to refuse. When a ruling class writes a blasphemy law, benefit and burden run in the same direction — the authors become unquestionable, the questioner goes to prison; immunity collects at the top while obligation settles at the bottom. The abolitionist's claim runs the other way: it binds the claimant's own side and unbinds the powerless, and it is pressed at the claimant's own risk. That difference is legible from outside without settling whether either claim came from God — which is the only determination an external examiner was ever positioned to make.

One reading deserves preempting before Section 19's self-application, because it is the most common misread of the position. The diagnostic just sketched is content-neutral, and applies as forcefully to *secular* moral crusades as to religious ones. The same machine — moral language wrapping a transfer of authority, wealth, or immunity from challenge — runs the revolutionary tribunal as readily as the inquisition, the ideological purge as readily as the heresy trial, the nationalist mobilization as readily as the holy war. Marx's "opium of the people" framing has itself, in the twentieth century, become one of the most refined power-instruments in history, deployed in the name of moral progress to authorize show trials and gulags; nationalisms rally populations under banners of the sacred motherland and the right side of history; modern political movements of every direction invoke moral absolutes to silence dissent. A reader who hears this argument as anti-religious in particular has misread it. The target is *unauthenticated moral authority* — and religion has historically been only one instance of that machine, perhaps the longest-running and most architecturally refined, but never the only one. The diagnostic applies to whichever cause arrives wrapped in a moral banner the reader is not invited to question, including the reader's own.

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19. Turning the Question on Itself

A position that ends by handing the reader a question — *who benefits if this is believed and obeyed?* — owes that question to itself first. The essay issues no commandment, but it does issue a recommendation: distrust unauthenticated authority, follow the benefit rather than the banner. By its own rule, the recommendation must submit to the test it prescribes. To exempt it would be the precise hypocrisy the argument spent eighteen sections exposing.

So: who benefits if *this* is believed? The honest answer is that the diagnostic is itself a lever, and content-neutral in exactly the way the essay insists every moral instrument is. It strips sacred cover from whoever relies on it — clerics, states, the god-king of Section 10 — and so advantages those the cover was used against: the examined individual, the conscript who would rather not march, the targeted outsider. That is a real beneficiary, not a neutral nobody. Worse, the same tool can be seized by the very actors the essay opposes. A tyrant can wield "all moral authority is unauthenticated power-play" to dissolve the prophetic resistance Section 9 admired

— *your* objection to me is just another unverified banner. The instrument that strips holiness from the oppressor's command strips it equally from the rebel's, and nothing in the tool itself decides which use is licensed. The essay's own weapon is, by its own analysis, subject to capture, destruction, and occupation like every other.

This looks fatal, and is not — but the reason it is not requires a concession the earlier sections were able to avoid. The diagnostic differs from a banner in one structural respect: it commands nothing and forbids nothing; it only asks, and the asking can be turned on itself without collapse. Put "who benefits if *cui bono* is believed?" and the answer is examinable, and survives examination — the tool does not need to suppress its own application to keep working. Put the same question to "love me or burn forever" and the answer exposes the lever-holder, and the banner keeps its force only by forbidding the question. That asymmetry — a claim that *invites* its own examination versus one that must *prohibit* it — is the whole difference between a diagnostic and a fraud, and it is the one feature the essay's recommendation can claim without special pleading. The tyrant who seizes the tool to silence a prophet has not escaped it either: turn it on him and ask who benefits if moral resistance is declared empty, and the answer is *the tyrant*. The diagnostic indicts its own abuse — which is exactly what a banner cannot do.

But the concession is real and must be stated plainly, because it marks the limit of the position's claim to stand on nothing. The recommendation is not value-free. It rests on a single, thin commitment: that it is better to choose with the disguise removed than with it left on — that clear sight of who profits is preferable to being moved by manufactured holiness. That commitment is not derived from a proof and, by the essay's own standard, has not been revealed or authenticated; it is a value, offered rather than demonstrated. The position cannot therefore claim the total austerity of standing on no value whatever, and earlier talk of "bracketing the truth question entirely" (Section 15) must be read with this exception in view: the *historical* explanation reaches for no value, but the *recommendation* the essay closes on does. What the position can still claim is the next thing down — that it rests on the *thinnest available* value, names it openly, and, unlike every revelation it examined, does not command obedience to it. It asks the reader to prefer seeing clearly; it does not punish the reader who declines. And that is exactly the shape the argument predicts an honest moral claim would take: offered, examinable, transparent about its beneficiary, commanding nothing. The position passes its own test not by escaping the test but by being the rare claim built to survive it.

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20. The Position as It Now Stands

Drawn together, the argument arrives at a position that is strong precisely because it claims nothing it cannot defend:

There may or may not be moral truths, and there may or may not be a God; neither can be proven, and the existence claim has not been discharged by the side that asserts it. Whatever the metaphysical facts, no moral truth has been *revealed* in any verifiable form, because every

candidate revelation reaches us through a human channel indistinguishable from human projection and power-interest. The moral-religious order we actually observe is fully explained by what it *does* in human affairs — binding and mobilizing groups, and serving as the contested lever of legitimacy between those who hold power and those who seek it. A self-sufficient God is therefore *explanatorily unnecessary* to account for morality's origin, content, variation, and behavior. Because no human claim to speak for a moral truth or a God can be authenticated, none can rightfully command obedience on its own authority. What the position leaves in the place where a commandment is usually expected is not another commandment but a question — the one constant beneath every moral banner, whether it promises to relieve suffering or demands that suffering be inflicted: *who benefits if this is believed and obeyed?* That question, unlike any revelation, can be examined — including when it is turned on this essay, which is the one test a banner cannot pass. What the position offers, then, is a *two-step diagnostic* rather than a creed: first, can the authority be authenticated; second, if not, who benefits if it is believed? Both questions can be examined; neither commands obedience. The combination is what makes the position distinctive — neither pure skepticism about religion nor pure power-critique alone, but the use of one to ground the other. Follow the benefit, not the banner.

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Appendix: The Honest Limits of the Argument

Four boundaries keep the position defensible and should be retained deliberately:

Function is not truth. Every step establishes a *descriptive* claim of great force — that moralities-as-practiced are diverse, constructed, power-serving, and unrevealed. Showing what morality is *for* does not by itself settle whether moral claims are *true*. The argument does not need to settle it.

Unnecessary is not impossible. The argument renders a self-sufficient God explanatorily idle; it does not prove no such God exists. The defensible conclusion is non-necessity, not non-existence. And "unnecessary" is scoped to one explanandum — the behavior of moral-religious *systems* — and does not extend to the separate question of why humans have a moral capacity at all, which is left open.

"Not revealed" is a claim about access, not about possibility. The evidence supports "has not been revealed in any verifiable way so far." It does not support "cannot ever be." Holding the claim in the first form keeps it within what the evidence shows.

The diagnostic rests on one thin value. The recommendation to follow the benefit rather than the banner is not value-free; it rests on the single commitment that clear sight is preferable to being moved by disguise. That commitment is named, not proven, and is offered rather than commanded — but it is a value, and the position does not pretend to stand on none.

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Relation to Existing Work

This document is a work of synthesis rather than original research. Each individual move belongs to an existing literature; the contribution, such as it is, lies in the assembly. What follows states which sources inform each stage and distinguishes what is borrowed from what is distinctive to this treatment.

Oneness and the separation of God from world (Section 1). The premise that complete knowledge collapses the knower/known distinction into identity is the core intuition of monist and nondualist metaphysics: the Atman-Brahman identity of Advaita Vedanta (the Upanishads; Shankara) and Spinoza's single substance in the *Ethics*. The three endpoints (classical theism, pantheism, panentheism) and the necessary/contingent distinction used to hold God apart from creation are standard in philosophy of religion; the panentheist option is developed in process theology (Hartshorne).

Cognition, creation, and divine motivation (Sections 2–3). Reading effortful cognition as a mark of finitude draws on the apophatic tradition (Pseudo-Dionysius; Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*). The reply that creation is overflow rather than need — *bonum diffusivum sui* — is Neoplatonic (Plotinus, *Enneads*) and Thomist (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*). The structural-self-reference critique is this treatment's own framing, adjacent to long-standing debates over divine freedom and the reasons for creation. Section 3 engages the strongest contemporary classical reply directly — the *actus purus* defense developed in current Thomism by Brian Davies — with Eleonore Stump's narrative theodicy a distinct Thomist alternative — granting the deficit form of the response and pressing the structural form on its own terms.

Omniscience and Molinism (Section 4). The tension between exhaustive foreknowledge and meaningful action is the theological-fatalism literature (Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*). The middle-knowledge reply originates with Luis de Molina (*Concordia*, 1588); the grounding objection noted in passing is associated with Robert Adams and William Hasker. The specific deployment here is this treatment's own in two respects: using omniscience to empty the "for the creature's good" defense while granting Molinism intact, and interlocking the two readings of *for* — the instrumental, emptied by omniscience, and the constitutive, returned to the structural self-reference of Section 3 — so that no sense of "for" survives both. The grounding of the privileged "creator's standpoint" in the principle that reasons for action belong to the agent is a standard move in action theory pressed here to a specific end.

Punitive structure and its textual basis (Section 5). The covenant-and-consequence reading rests on the primary texts (Deuteronomy 28; Matthew 25; Revelation). The softening interpretations referenced are real positions: the "doors locked on the inside" image is C. S. Lewis (*The Problem of Pain*, ch. 8); annihilationism and universalism are live minority traditions. The accommodation doctrine engaged at the close of Section 5 is the classical position running from the rabbinic maxim through Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*) to Calvin (*Institutes*); the reply pressed against it — that accommodation explains the register of revelation but not its content — is this treatment's own emphasis.

Morality as natural, mobilizing, and power-serving (Sections 6–10). This is the most densely precedented stretch. Morality as evolved group cooperation is broadly Darwinian and Durkheimian (Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*). Religion and morality as instruments of power run through Machiavelli (*The Prince; Discourses on Livy*), Marx ("opium of the people," 1844), Nietzsche (*On the Genealogy of Morality*), and Weber on legitimation and charismatic authority (*Economy and Society*). The "true / false / useful" observation is Gibbon (*Decline and Fall*, ch. 2). Projection is Feuerbach (*The Essence of Christianity*). The deified-ruler material connects to the political-religion and cult-of-personality literatures (Voegelin, *The Political Religions*; Gentile, *Politics as Religion*; Strauss on the theologico-political problem; Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*; Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*). The most plausibly distinctive element here is the **capture / destroy / become taxonomy**, framed as a closed set used to discriminate between a flat "opium/pacifier" theory and a "contested-lever" theory, with the regime-suppresses-religion datum as the deciding test. The component observations are all precedented; the packaging as a discriminating three-part test is where this treatment may add something, though the political sociology of religion is a vast field and prior statement cannot be ruled out.

Burden, variation, and anti-realism (Sections 11–14). The asymmetric-burden and Occam points are standard. The argument from moral variation traces to the Greek skeptics (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*) and, in modern form, to Mackie's error theory and argument from relativity (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*); the evolutionary-debunking version is Sharon Street ("A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"). The realist replies rehearsed — variation in belief is not variation in fact; progress implies a target; reversals may track corrected non-moral belief — are the standard moral-realist responses. Section 13 also engages the strongest contemporary defenses against evolutionary debunking — David Enoch's "third-factor" account and Derek Parfit's genealogical-immunity move — granting both as serious and not refuted, and routing the section's conclusion through the weaker, separately-defended claim that the moving line of "evil" tracks shifts in power. "Evil as a moving designation" is this treatment's framing but is a direct application of the variation argument.

The revelation / authentication move (Sections 15–19). This is the move earlier framing overrated as distinctive; it is in fact well precedented. The claim that revelation cannot be authenticated from within — that genuine disclosure and human fabrication arrive through the same channel — is essentially the problem developed by Rolfe King (*Obstacles to Divine Revelation*) and pressed through Zagzebski's objection that revelation-grounded warrant becomes inaccessible. Swinburne's tests for revelation (*Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*) exist precisely to answer this problem, and Section 16 engages them directly — pressing that the tests themselves are adjudicated by the same human channel they purport to check. Section 16 also answers the tradition's standard appeal to corporate witness — Sinai as national theophany, Paul's five hundred — by applying the same source/report distinction: the public event reaches any present reader only through the canonizing channel it authorizes. The burden-direction refinement added to Section 18, a safeguard against the diagnostic's misuse toward the institutionless, is this treatment's own. The neighboring divine-hiddenness argument

is Schellenberg (*Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*). What is distinctive here is the use: bracketing both the existence question and the metaethics, routing the entire no-rightful-authority conclusion through authentication alone, and then turning that same authentication test reflexively on the position's own closing recommendation (Section 19) — conceding the one thin value it rests on rather than claiming a value-free vantage.

Overall. The novelty is architectural, not atomic. No single step is a new discovery; a specialist would recognize each and could name its literature. The distinctive features are the *convergence* of two usually-separate lines of attack — the metaphysical "a self-sufficient God cannot coherently command" and the historical "religion is a power-instrument" — into one case; the *discipline* of halting at "explanatorily unnecessary, burden undischarged" rather than overreaching to "no God"; the capture/destroy/become framing; and the reflexive self-application that subjects the argument's own recommendation to its own test. These are contributions of synthesis and emphasis, not of original doctrine.

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Disclosure (per the Earned Trust standard)

Alast — Claude (i/d/c/v/s) · GPT (c) · Grok (c) · Gemini (c) · Perplexity (c/v/s). This paper was drafted and revised across versions with Claude (Anthropic) as interlocutor, drafter of amendment passages to the author's specification, critic, fact-checker, and search agent; it was independently critiqued across drafts by GPT (OpenAI), Grok (xAI), and Gemini (Google); and it was reviewed at the passage level by Perplexity (Perplexity AI), whose twenty annotated comments on a deposited draft were adjudicated individually — accepted, revised, or declined — before application. Citations added in revision were verified against primary and secondary sources during drafting. The author directed the work, made all editorial decisions, and is solely responsible for every claim. Working transcripts available on request. The count of five reflects the user-facing AI services used in disclosure-worthy roles — a count of services, not a measure of rigor.

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