

COMMENTS FOR FREDERICK CHOO

“Theism is Incompatible with Moral Error Theory”
Saint Louis University Natural Theology Conference

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1. ARGUMENT RECAP

I’ll begin with a short summary of the debate. St. John Lambert (2022) has argued that traditional western monotheism is compatible with moral error theory. Lambert believes that the best argument against his position is the *divine goodness argument*.

- (P1) Theism is true. (For reductio)
- (P2) Moral error theory is true. (For reductio)
- (P3) If theism is true, then God instantiates the moral property of being good.
- (P4) If moral error theory is true, then God does not instantiate the moral property of being good.
- (C1) Therefore, God instantiates the moral property of being good and God does not instantiate the moral property of being good. (Lambert 2022, 5)

The two of you agree that (P3)—theism-entails-goodness—is key premise. Lambert denies the premise; you affirm it.

In support of theism-entails-goodness, you raise the *conceptual argument*.

If our concept of God includes moral goodness, then for any possible world in which God exists, there would be moral properties, and so moral error theory must be false. Therefore, theism is incompatible with moral error theory.

Lambert responds to the conceptual argument by asking us to consider two scenarios: Gram Oppy's less-than-morally-perfect God scenario (1992, 468) and his own moral-error-theory scenario. Lambert judges that "almost everyone" will agree that God exists in both scenarios. It follows that the concept of God includes neither moral perfection nor moral goodness (2022, 8).

"Not so fast!" you reply. First, his response to the conceptual argument proves too much. We can use similar scenarios to erode the remaining divine attributes. Second, the surveys you conducted show that Lambert's intuitions are shared by far fewer people than he believes. Roughly speaking, only half of the participants agreed with Lambert's and Oppy's response to the No-Perfectly-Good scenario, and even fewer agree with Lambert's response to the Moral-Error-Theory-World scenario. More to the point, even fewer participants, roughly one third, were willing to believe that these scenarios were compatible with the God of traditional western monotheism (God-TWM). So, Lambert's arguments fail and moral error theory is incompatible with traditional western theism.

2. RESPONDING TO THE SURVEY

2.1 My Survey Response

Summary complete, I'll offer my two cents. I'd like to begin by responding to your survey.

I am a philosophy graduate student who specializes in philosophy of religion. I am a theist and I belong to an Abrahamic religion.

I think that God-TWM must have all of the attributes listed in your fourth survey question. That is, I think that the God of traditional western monotheism (God-TWM), must be

- Omnipotent
- Omniscient
- Omnibenevolent
- Creator of everything in the universe
- Worship-worthy
- The greatest possible being*
- Necessarily existing*
- Immaterial, and
- Eternal or Timeless.

Finally, I judge that while God exists in all seven scenarios presented in your paper, God-TWM exists in only the error theory scenarios.

TABLE 1: THEISM VS. TRADITIONAL WESTERN MONOTHEISM

Scenario	God	God-TWM
1. Not-Perfectly-Good	yes	no
2. Not-All-Powerful	yes	no
3. Not-All-Knowing	yes	no
4. Creator-of-Almost-Everything	yes	no
5. Moral-Error-Theory-World	yes	yes
6. Epistemic-Error-Theory-World	yes	yes
7. Normative-Error-Theory-World	yes	yes

2.2 Response Explanation

I'll begin with the Oppy-style scenarios (1–4 in [Table 1](#)). Given the Not-Perfectly-Good scenario, Oppy insists that it is “natural to say that God does exist, but that he is not quite as we imagined him to be” (1992, 468). I add that it is just as natural to say that God exists, but that God does not fit the description I assign to God-TWM. I expect God-TWM to exemplify certain attributes—for example, the omni-attributes—and these attributes are compromised in the Oppy-style scenarios. God exists but God is not God-TWM.

Perhaps I should apply the same reasoning to error theory scenarios, but have not. When I consider an Oppy-style scenario, I begin by denying the existence of a being matching my description for God-TWM. I then consider the closest live option. When I consider an error-theory scenario, I begin by reconsidering the nature of reality. In particular, I imagine that I and many others have systematically mistook certain descriptive properties for normative ones. Now it hits me, all along I have been ascribing certain normative properties to God, when I should have applied descriptive ones. Realizing my mistake, I take a look at my description of God-TWM and adjust for the error. In Lambert's scenario (i.e., moral-error-theory world) I replace a thin concept—God is morally perfect—with a thick one—God loves all created beings, always promotes their well-being, keeps his word, etc.¹

In summary, when I consider the Oppy-style scenarios, I concluded that God is not quite what I imagined God to be—that is, that God is not God-TWM. When I consider the error-theory scenarios, I conclude that reality is not quite as I imagined it be—that is, certain (perhaps all) normative claims I believed true were false. It follows that both my concept of God and my concept of God-TWM were mistaken.

3. RETURNING TO THE ARGUMENTS

At this point I'd like to return to the conceptual argument for the theism-entails-goodness premise.

The conceptual argument for theism-entails-goodness not only requires us to think about the content of our concepts, but to think about them terms of conceptual possibility. More to the point, it requires a strong link between conceivability and possibility, otherwise neither the conceptual argument nor Lambert's

¹ I should add that while I think that moral goodness is a thin concept and I think that omnibenevolence is a thick concept: An omnibenevolent being is a being that cares for and attempts to promote the well-being of all creatures. In fact, I would insist that the being described in Lambert's scenario is omnibenevolent but not morally good, because there are no moral properties.

counterargument will have implications for the actual world. It follows that both arguments require a modal theory that allows conceptual possibility to inform us about what can and cannot be the case in the actual world. I know of one such theory, modal rationalism. According to modal rationalism, all conceptual possibilities are metaphysical possibilities and all conceptual necessities are metaphysical necessities.²

This leads me to the following difficulty.

Moral error theory is either metaphysically necessarily true or metaphysically necessarily false.³ Now according to weak modal rationalism, it is impossible for something to be both metaphysically necessarily false and conceptually possible.⁴ It follows that any survey participant who believes that moral error theory is metaphysically impossible and that moral error theory is conceptually compatible with the God of western monotheism has assumed a modal theory other than weak modal rationalism—a modal theory irrelevant to the conceptual argument.⁵

With this in mind, I would like to suggest that thinking about the various scenarios in your survey help us to clarify the concept of traditional western monotheism. However, I think that it indicates little about the actual (read metaphysical) compatibility or incompatibility of traditional western monotheism and error theory.

² There are several versions of modal rationalism. The version expressed here is weak modal rationalism, which I believe to be the most plausible version of the theory. For an overview of Modal Rationalism see Chalmers (2002).

³ Lambert should agree with this statement. See his modal argument on page 10 and his discussion of necessary moral truths on pages 12 and 13.]

⁴ Assume for *reductio* that ϕ is both conceptually possible and metaphysically necessarily false. According to weak modal rationalism, conceptually possibility entails metaphysical possibility. So, ϕ is metaphysically possible. But since ϕ is metaphysically necessarily false, ϕ is also metaphysically impossible, which is absurd. QED.

⁵ While some philosophers allow us to use impossible scenarios to refine and better understand our concepts, counterpossibles are prohibited by weak modal rationalism.

REFERENCES

- Chalmers, David J. 2002. "Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?" In *Conceivability and Possibility*, edited by Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne, 145–200. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Oppy, Graham. 1992. "Is God Good by Definition?" *Religious Studies* 28 (4): 467–74. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500021867>.