

## Why restraint is religiously unacceptable

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**Abstract.** I begin this essay by articulating an argument in support of the claim that theistic citizens ought not to support coercive policies for which they lack an adequate secular rationale. That argument employs various claims regarding God's nature to show: (i) that theistic citizens should expect to discern secular corroboration for each religiously grounded moral truth to which they adhere; and (ii) theistic citizens should doubt any religiously grounded moral claim for which they cannot discern an adequate secular rationale. I dispute both (i) and (ii) and conclude that theistic citizens may reasonably reject the claim that they ought not to support coercive policies for which they lack an adequate secular rationale.

### I

#### INTRODUCTION

Here is a common complaint regarding liberalism. Liberalism requires that coercive laws enjoy public justification and thus that such laws should be supported by widely shared moral and factual claims. Because religious claims are invariably controversial, liberalism discourages citizens from relying on religious claims when arriving at political commitments.<sup>1</sup> Religious citizens should exercise *restraint* regarding any inclination to decide political issues on religious claims; religious citizens *should not* support coercive political policies for which they lack a non-religious rationale. This kind of self-limitation might seem to violate a theist's overriding commitment to obey God. A theist may reasonably balk at committing herself to a policy of restraint given the prospect that she might have overpowering religious reasons to support a given coercive policy but lack the secular corroboration required by restraint. If she commits herself to restraint, she commits herself to a policy that might require her to disobey God. And the prospect of such a conflict renders the doctrine of restraint religiously unacceptable.

This is a religious version of the 'strains of commitment' argument Rawls develops in support of his two principles of justice. He writes:

... when we enter into an agreement we must be able to honour it even should the worst possibilities prove to be the case. Otherwise we have not acted in good faith. Thus, the parties must weigh with care whether they will be able to stick by their commitments in all circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul Weithman 'Religion and the liberalism of reasoned respect', in Paul Weithman (ed.) *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 176.

Because commitment to restraint might require the theist to disobey God, and because disobedience to God is anathema, the theist cannot in good faith commit herself to restraint.

In this essay, I will articulate and evaluate an argument designed to allay the concern expressed in the prior paragraphs. I will discuss a *theistic* case for the claim that religious citizens ought to commit to a policy of exercising restraint. I will begin by clarifying what restraint requires (ii); articulate the theistic case for restraint (iii); comment briefly on the significance of the theistic case (iv); and conclude by indicating two problems with the theistic case (v) and (vi). I conclude that the theistic case fails to establish the claim that citizens should exercise restraint regarding their religious convictions.

## II

### SECULAR CORROBORATION V. RESTRAINT

What territory does the concept of restraint cover? It will be helpful to lay out that terrain before we consider why citizens should exercise restraint. It is natural to assume that citizens in liberal democracies are morally (and certainly legally) free to settle on their political commitments on the basis of whatever considerations they find plausible. And it is equally natural to assume that the considerations citizens find plausible are those they arrive at on the basis of all the reasons they think are relevant to a given political commitment. These two natural assumptions imply the *laissez-faire* position that citizens are morally free to arrive at their political commitments on the basis of their grasp of all relevant reasons. Otherwise put, a *laissez-faire* approach to political decision making lays down no constraints on the sorts of reasons on the basis of which conscientious citizens may support policies.

Different agents, given their distinctive histories, backgrounds, etc., will arrive at their political commitments on the basis of different evidential sets – in large-scale democracies citizens will unavoidably disagree about what counts as a good reason, as well as what good reasons there are, given a particular rendering of that concept. In particular, some agents will regard certain religious sources of belief as relevant to their political commitments, others will regard different religious sources as relevant, and still others will deny that religious sources of belief generate evidence at all. This creates a potential problem. If a sufficiently large proportion of the population arrives at their political commitments on the basis of the evidence furnished by their favoured religious sources of belief, then citizens in the minority might well find themselves subject to coercive laws, the rationale for which is at least partly but uneliminably dependent on parochial religious sources of evidence. In a religiously pluralistic society, this will have problematic consequences, given the resentment and consequent instability likely to ensue. The *laissez-faire* position that imposes no restrictions on the sorts of grounds on

which it is morally permissible to support coercive policies leads naturally (though not, of course, inevitably) to this result.

What can be done to ensure that this unhappy state of affairs fails to obtain? The only real option seems to be that we convince religious citizens that they should not support any political policy which can only be justified on a religious basis. Although religious citizens *can* so support their political commitments, and although no one would dream of rendering it *illegal* so to support political commitments, we try to convince religious citizens that they *should not* do so. They should restrain their natural and understandable inclination to support political policies for which they lack corroboratory non-religious grounds. So restraint is a restrictive policy: it permits an agent to support coercive policies *only if* she has adequate secular grounds for those policies. The ‘only if’ provides restraint with its critical edge: citizens who lack an adequate secular rationale for a given policy should not support that policy.

The prohibition internal to restraint imposes on citizens a correlative but distinct obligation to seek out secular grounds for coercive policies: if citizens should not support policies just on religious grounds, then they *should* seek secular grounds. Why does a commitment to restraint impose an obligation to pursue secular corroboration? If some course of action is an unavoidable means to discharging a given obligation, then pursuing that course of action is likewise obligatory. If parents can discharge their obligation to satisfy a child’s needs only by holding down a job, then their obligation to provide for the child implies an obligation to pursue gainful employment. As a matter of realistic fact, citizens can discharge their obligation not to support coercive policies for which they lack an adequate secular rationale only by actively seeking out secular grounds for their favoured policies.<sup>3</sup> Pursuit of secular corroboration is an unavoidable means to the end of discharging the obligation to exercise restraint. Hence, the obligation not to support policies on uncorroborated religious grounds implies an obligation to pursue secular corroboration.

But a commitment to seek out secular grounds does not imply a commitment to restraint.<sup>4</sup> An agent can be committed in good faith to acquiring secular corroboration for her religiously grounded moral beliefs, and thereby for the coercive policies dependent on her religiously grounded moral beliefs,

<sup>3</sup> I assume that abstaining from supporting coercive policies is not a realistic option.

<sup>4</sup> Many advocates of restraint appear to believe otherwise. Consider, for example, the following argument of Robert Audi’s: ‘Thus, when there must be coercion, liberal democracies try to justify it in terms of considerations – such as public safety – that any rational adult citizen will find persuasive and can identify with. This is one reason why religious grounds alone are not properly considered a sufficient basis of coercion even if they happen to be shared by virtually all citizens’, from ‘The State, the church and the citizen’, in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, 48. Consider, again, Gerald Gaus’s claim that ‘now the reverse side of our commitment to justify imposing our norms on others is a commitment to refrain from imposing norms that cannot be justified’, in *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay in Epistemology and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 162.

without also being committed to refrain from supporting coercive policies when secular grounds for those policies are not in the offing. Why is that the case? An agent can discharge her obligation to pursue secular corroboration for coercive policies without also exercising restraint. The latter is not related as means to the former end in the way that the former is related to the latter. That an agent ought to pursue secular corroboration for religiously grounded moral claims does not require that she withhold support from religiously grounded moral claims for which she lacks secular corroboration, any more than an agent who has an obligation to seek gainful employment thereby incurs an obligation to support her children. She may have the latter obligation, but she does not have it in virtue of having the obligation to seek employment.

Distinguishing between the obligation to pursue secular corroboration for coercive policies and the obligation not to support coercive policies absent secular corroboration provides the opportunity to make an important point: *a rejection of restraint does not imply indifference to secular corroboration*. Theists can wholeheartedly endorse the project of pursuing secular corroboration for their religiously grounded moral claims and just as wholeheartedly reject the doctrine of restraint.<sup>5</sup> And that is a good thing: theists have no reason to avoid, and every reason to pursue, secular corroboration for religiously grounded moral claims and thus for policies supported on the basis of those claims. Of course theists should be interested in acquiring more evidence for their religious convictions, and thus their religiously grounded moral claims, and thus for coercive policies based on those religiously grounded moral claims. What plausible objection could there be to having more evidence for one's beliefs? What credible protest could there be to the claim that religious citizens should put in a good faith effort to discover widely acceptable secular grounds for coercive policies which they support on religious grounds?

I should note that to put matters this way is seriously to understate why theists should be interested in pursuing secular corroboration for religiously grounded moral claims. In addition to their desire to acquire whatever evidence for their beliefs they can, theists should pursue secular corroboration for their secular policies out of compassion and, indeed, respect, for their fellow citizens. Given that being constrained from acting as one wishes is painful, and given that being constrained for reasons one does not accept exacerbates that pain, compassion should motivate religious citizens to explain as well as they can, in terms their fellow citizens can understand and

<sup>5</sup> Thus, those who reject restraint regarding religious beliefs, as I do, can wholeheartedly accept Robert Audi's principle of theo-ethical equilibrium: 'where religious considerations appropriately bear on matters of public morality or of political choice, religious people have a prima facie obligation – at least insofar as they have civic virtue – to seek an equilibrium between those considerations and relevant secular standards of ethics and political responsibility', from 'Liberal democracy and the place of religion in politics', in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff *Religion in the Public Sphere* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 37.

accept, why their favoured policies are appropriate. So long as religious citizens can achieve secular corroboration for their favoured policies, it would be perverse for them not even to attempt to acquire that corroboration, and it would be even more perverse for them not to articulate a secular rationale for their favoured policies if they did accept a secular rationale for those policies.

The question, then, to which the advocate of restraint must provide an answer is the following: why should religious citizens who have done what they can to acquire secular corroboration for their religious norms but who have discerned no such corroboration, abstain from supporting coercive policies on the basis of those norms?

### III

#### A THEISTIC CASE FOR RESTRAINT

In this section, I will articulate an argument in support of the claim that citizens in liberal democracies should exercise restraint with respect to their religious beliefs when determining whether they will support one or another political policy.<sup>6</sup> I will divide that argument into two parts. In the first part ((1)–(6)), I rely heavily on claims about God’s nature in order to show that, if theism is true, human beings must have access to secular grounds for moral truths. This part of the argument is reminiscent of various formulations of the problem of evil. Whereas the proponent of the argument from evil claims that, given God’s moral perfection and omnipotence, we should not expect there to be any evil, so much evil, or certain types of evil, the proponent of the theistic case for restraint claims that, given God’s moral perfection and omnipotence, we should expect human beings to have access to a great good, viz., moral knowledge. Moreover – and importantly for our purposes – human beings must have *secular* access to moral knowledge; since religious sources of moral knowledge enjoy only limited distribution, the access to moral knowledge guaranteed by God’s goodness and omnipotence must not depend uneliminably on religious sources. In the second part of the argument ((7)–(9)), I turn to the issue of restraint proper and provide an argument in support of the claim that citizens ought to exercise restraint. Because it is likely that religiously grounded moral truths enjoy secular corroboration, theists who can discern no secular corroboration for a given religiously

<sup>6</sup> The argument I will articulate bears a family resemblance to arguments found in Robert Audi ‘Liberal democracy and the place of religion in politics’, 18–21, and Michael Perry *Religion in Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75. I should note that, although the theistic case I develop in this essay was suggested by both Perry and Audi, I do not intend to explicate their arguments, so the issue of how well my formulation of the argument captures their intentions is beside the point. No argument I articulate should be blamed on either.

grounded moral claim ought not be confident enough in that claim to impose it on their fellow citizens.<sup>7</sup>

Before I proceed, I mention three assumptions that undergird the theistic argument. First, the argument is addressed to citizens who worship the traditional theistic deity, viz., an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect creator of the universe. Second, the argument works only if God's commands are co-extensive with our moral obligations. If we have good reason to believe that God commands  $x$ , we perforce have good reason to believe that we ought to do  $x$ . Conversely, if we have good reason to believe that  $x$  is obligatory, then we have good reason to believe that God commands  $x$ . Third, the argument will be convincing only to those for whom it is of overriding importance that they live their lives in accordance with God's commands and thus in accordance with their moral obligations. Theists typically believe that they have an obligation to obey God and that that obligation overrides all others. Although controverted in the general culture, none of these assumptions is likely to be objectionable to the main-line theist. These preliminaries noted, here is the argument.

*i. Secular access*

(1) *God wants each human agent to discharge her moral obligations.* This follows from the claim that God is morally perfect. A necessary condition of an agent A's counting as morally perfect is, not just that A discharges A's moral obligations, and not just that A wants to discharge A's moral obligations, but also that A wants other agents to satisfy their moral obligations. That is why, were we learn that A is entirely indifferent as to whether or not other agents tell the truth, oppress the poor, torture the innocent, remain faithful to friends and spouse, etc., that would in and of itself provide us with adequate grounds for denying that A is morally perfect.

(2) *In order for a (human) agent to discharge her moral obligations (over the long term), she needs to know what her obligations are.* Suppose that there is some agent, 'Adam', who unreflectively, effortlessly and flawlessly acts as he ought to act. Whenever Adam acts, he performs the action he ought to have performed, even though he isn't aware that he ought to perform that action; thus Adam doesn't govern his actions, first, by determining which course of action he ought to pursue and then, second, by acting in accord with his determination. Adam is what we might call a *paradisal* moral agent, one who naturally, without hesitation or resistance from contrary inclination, acts in accord with the moral law. If God had decided to

<sup>7</sup> I distinguish throughout between moral truths and moral claims. A moral claim is either true or false, so that all moral truths are moral claims but not vice versa. If the theistic case is sound, then, if a given religiously grounded moral claim is true, we should expect to find secular corroboration for that truth. We do not, of course, expect that each religiously grounded moral *claim* will enjoy adequate secular corroboration.

create human beings so that we naturally discharge our moral obligations as Adam discharges his, (2) would be false: it would not have been the case that acting morally requires that we have adequate grounds for moral truths.

Unfortunately, actual human beings do not find themselves in the state Adam inhabits. We are not paradisaic moral agents: we act wrongly on a regular basis, are often ignorant of what we ought to do and our ignorance is one of the factors that inhibits us from acting as we ought. More generally, although an agent with no moral sense to speak of might in fact perform the appropriate action on a given occasion, she is at best lucky and we know that, over the long term, she is not likely to be so fortunate. For human agents, then, consistent, long-term adherence to the moral law requires that we know what our moral obligations are and can govern our actions in light of our knowledge of those obligations.<sup>8</sup>

(3) *Since God wants agents to discharge their obligations, and since acting morally requires that agents know what their obligations are, God wants agents to have moral knowledge.* The dictum that ‘one who wills the end wills the means to the end’ applies as straightforwardly to God as it does to ordinary human beings. If God wants human beings to act morally, and if knowing how to act morally is an unavoidable condition of agents like us acting morally, then God also wants us to know how to act morally.

(4) *Since God wants agents to have moral knowledge, and since God can ensure that human beings have access to moral knowledge, God has set things up so that agents have access to moral knowledge.* On the traditional theistic understanding, God has created the world and all that is in it; in particular, God has created human beings and has provided them with various important characteristics. In addition to opposable thumbs and the ability to walk upright, God has provided humans with various cognitive capacities: sense perception, introspection, memory, inference. Those capacities enable us to acquire knowledge of important sorts – about the physical world, about the past, about other people and their states of mind and about God. In addition, because God wants us to have access to moral knowledge, and because God has it within God’s power to provide us with access to moral knowledge, God has provided us with cognitive capacities that enable us to acquire moral knowledge.

We might think that (4) should actually read: since God wants agents to have moral knowledge, and since God can ensure that human beings have moral knowledge, God has set things up so that agents have moral knowledge. After all, just as it was in God’s power to create us so that we, like Adam, naturally discharge our obligations, so also was it within God’s power to create us so that we have infallible and intuitive knowledge of our

<sup>8</sup> As I will use the term in this essay, ‘moral knowledge’ is roughly synonymous with ‘reliably formed, true moral beliefs’. Thus, an agent who has adequate grounds for a true moral belief has moral knowledge.



obligations. God could have created us in such a way that our capacity to discern moral truth surpasses our capacity to discern mathematical truth: just as we know that  $2 + 2 = 4$  just on reflection, so also we could have been made so that we know that we should give money to *this* person on *this* occasion just on considering the proposition. In such a case, God would have created us, not just so that we have *access* to moral knowledge, but also so that we are in fact *guaranteed* to have moral knowledge. Why, then, is (4) formulated in the weaker ‘accessibility’ way?

In the first place, to adopt the stronger conclusion would be to accept a conclusion we know to be false: human agents regularly adhere to moral claims we know to be false; hence, it cannot be the case that God’s goodness and omnipotence guarantees moral knowledge. To conclude from the considerations I have adduced that human agents must have moral knowledge would be just as absurd as to conclude that, because God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, no evil exists.

In the second place, theists will want to explain an agent’s lack of moral knowledge in something like the same way they often explain the existence of evil, viz., by the ill use or the misuse of the ability freely to deploy cognitive capacities. Appeal to free will plays an important role in explaining why God provides human beings only with access to moral knowledge but does not guarantee that we have moral knowledge. One of the most important moral choices a human being makes is whether or not she is interested in determining what she ought to do. The decision to pursue knowledge regarding how we ought to act is itself a moral choice of great importance. To guarantee moral knowledge would circumscribe the operation of human freedom in that very important area. Hence, God provides us only with access to the moral truth.

(5) *Since God has set things up so that agents have access to moral knowledge, they must have access to adequate secular grounds for moral truths.* First some terminological preliminaries. In order for an agent to have moral knowledge she must have adequate *grounds* for moral truths. For purposes of this paper, I distinguish between religious and secular grounds for a given moral claim.<sup>9</sup> A religious ground is one the evidential force of which depends on the existence of God, appeal to religious authority, or theological considerations. For example, a putative perception of God as commanding us to give of our excess to the less fortunate counts as a religious ground. In that case, the religious ground reliably indicates a moral truth only if God exists: a putative perception of God is not a reliable basis for belief unless God exists and can actually be present to an agent’s consciousness. A secular ground is a ground,

<sup>9</sup> I take this distinction between secular and religious grounds from Robert Audi ‘The separation of church and state and the obligations of citizenship’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, **18** (1989), 278; and ‘Liberal democracy and the place of religion in politics’, 26.



the evidential force of which does not depend on the existence of God, appeal to religious authority, or theological considerations.<sup>10</sup>

Religious and secular grounds can be variously related to a given moral claim C. It is possible for an agent to have religious grounds for C but not secular grounds for C, to have secular grounds for C but not religious grounds, and to have both religious and secular grounds for C. The point of (5) is that, whatever religious grounds for a given moral truth an agent might have, she also has access to adequate secular grounds for that truth.

Why does the fact that God has ensured that humans have access to moral knowledge entail that we have *secular* access? The answer hinges on the limited distribution of all religious sources of knowledge. Suppose that the Bible is God's revelation and that it contains all the ethical truths we need to know in order to act appropriately. In having authored the biblical text and in having ensured its preservation over the ages, God will have arranged human affairs in such a way that those who have access to that text will be able to acquire the moral knowledge they need to act in a morally appropriate manner. But not all agents have access to the Bible: some human beings cannot lay hands on the Bible, no matter how assiduously they attempt to do so. Access to the Bible is *population-specific*. (Of course, God could have ensured that the biblical text was universally distributed, but God has not done so.) We can generalize this empirical point: there are some agents who have access to *no* sacred texts which, it is plausible to suppose, provide access to the moral knowledge they need in order to act morally. We can generalize even further: there are some agents who have access to no religious practices of belief-formation which, it is plausible to suppose, provide access to the moral knowledge they need to act morally. Simply put, *all* religious sources of knowledge are population-specific; there are *no* religious sources of moral knowledge to which every human agent has access.

We have every reason to suppose that God's desire that agents have moral knowledge extends to agents so circumstanced: God wants those who lack access to population-specific religious sources of moral knowledge to discharge their obligations. Hence, God wants them to have access to moral knowledge. Hence, we have good reason to believe that God provides them with non-religious or secular access to the moral truth. If the case for (5) is roughly correct, then citizens can acquire moral knowledge without having to participate in religious practices of belief formation. This negative point is all we need in order to make the theistic case for restraint work.

(6) *Since each human being has access to adequate secular grounds for moral truths,*

<sup>10</sup> Parasitic on the distinction between secular and religious grounds is a parallel distinction between religious and secular *norms*. A religious norm is a religiously grounded moral claim – a moral claim to which an agent assents for religious reasons. (Thus, a religious norm need not have religious content.) Similarly for secular norms.

*then religiously grounded moral truths will likely be corroborable by adequate secular grounds.* Suppose that the Bible reports God as condemning avarice; citizens who have access to the biblical text thereby have access to religious grounds for believing that it is morally wrong for them to pursue monetary wealth without limitation. If the argument up to this point is correct, there must be secular paths to that truth available to such citizens. Given that secular sources of moral knowledge are not population-specific in the way that religious sources of knowledge are, religious citizens who believe that avarice is wrong on religious grounds may also acquire adequate secular grounds for that claim. That is, citizens who have access to the Bible must *also* have access to secular grounds for the moral truths contained in the Bible, just as citizens who lack access to the Bible have access to secular grounds for the moral truths contained in the Bible. Since there is nothing particularly special about the moral impropriety of avarice, we may generalize from that moral truth to all moral truths: no matter what moral truths a given citizen accepts on religious grounds, she has good theological reason to believe that she has access to adequate secular grounds for those truths.

The notion of ‘access’, which I have loosely employed up to this point, requires clarification. The notion of accessibility is ambiguous as between (at least) two interpretations. I will explicate a weak and a strong understanding of that notion. (No doubt there are many others.)

According to the *weak* understanding of accessibility, for an agent to have access to moral knowledge is for it to be *possible* for her to acquire adequate grounds for moral truths. The notion of ‘possibility’ is famously elusive, and its meaning in this context is far from clear. I will attempt to clarify the notion.

What it is possible for an agent to know is constrained in crucial part by the cognitive capacities with which she is endowed. If we are to enjoy knowledge regarding a given subject matter, we must acquire reliable information about that subject matter – otherwise our beliefs are, even if true, only fortuitously so and thus do not constitute knowledge. An agent’s cognitive capacities enable her both to receive and process information. But if an agent’s cognitive capacities enable her to acquire knowledge about certain subject matters, they also constrain the information to which she has access and thus limit the knowledge she can acquire. For example, an agent who has telepathic powers can acquire knowledge which agents who lack such powers cannot acquire. An agent who can ‘read minds’ directly and immediately has a cognitive capacity, a means of acquiring information, that (presumably) most human beings lack. Now suppose that there are certain states of mind which are detectable only by telepathy. Then only telepaths have access to knowledge about those states of mind. Only they can learn about those states of mind; for ordinary mortals, knowledge about those states of mind is *impossible*.

Although it is necessary that an agent has the appropriate cognitive capacities, it is not a sufficient condition of its being possible for her to acquire knowledge of a given sort: in addition to having the required information receptor and processor (cognitive capacity), an agent must also have the appropriate information. An agent might have the capacity, for example, directly to perceive God, but if God is resolutely absent from her consciousness, having that capacity doesn't translate into the possibility of perceptual knowledge of God. It is impossible for an agent to perceive God so long as God has a standing policy of not being present to her consciousness.

The weak interpretation of accessibility, then, is as follows. In order for an agent to have access to knowledge of a given sort, it must be possible for her to acquire knowledge. In order for it to be possible for an agent to acquire knowledge of a given sort, she must have the appropriate cognitive capacities and be able to acquire the requisite information. Hence, for God to provide us with weak access to knowledge of a given sort, God must create *us* with the requisite capacities and place us in an *environment* containing the relevant information.

If we adopt the weak interpretation of accessibility, then the claim that God's moral perfection and omnipotence ensures access to moral knowledge is entirely consistent with the claim that an agent's prospects for acquiring moral knowledge are quite dim. That an agent has the capacity to acquire moral knowledge, and that she is in an environment which contains the information required for moral knowledge, provides no indication at all whether, for example, the required information is extraordinarily difficult to come by. If this is the case, then even if all humans have weak access to moral knowledge, it is possible that only a small moral elite has the realistic prospect of acquiring moral knowledge. Thus, even if God ensures that human agents have weak secular access to moral knowledge, we have no idea whether or not human agents who conscientiously and assiduously attempt to acquire moral knowledge will be likely to succeed in their endeavour.

It follows that an agent's having just weak access to moral knowledge does not suffice to enable her to discharge her moral obligations. If this is the case, then the argument presented for the claim that God ensures secular access to the moral truth supports an interpretation of that claim which employs a more demanding understanding of accessibility than the weak understanding. It seems to support what I will call the *strong* understanding of accessibility. According to that understanding, if an agent has access to moral truth, it is not only *possible* for her to discover the moral truth given her noetic endowment and the information available to her, but it is also *likely* that she will discover the moral truth given a good-faith effort to discover the truth. If we adopt the strong understanding, what does the first part of the theistic argument look like?

In brief, the argument is as follows. God's moral perfection and omni-

potence ensures that God will create the world in such a way that moral agents will be able to discharge their obligations. Creating the world in that way requires that God provide human agents with strong access to moral knowledge, which amounts to the claim that God: (a) endows human beings with the cognitive capacities necessary to receive and process information required for moral knowledge; (b) fashions an environment that contains the information required for moral knowledge; and (c) ensures that that information is not inordinately difficult to come by. Since each religious source of moral knowledge enjoys only limited distribution, it would be inordinately difficult – in many cases, physically impossible – for moral agents to learn about their obligations if they had to consult such a religious source. Hence, God must ensure that we have a reasonable chance of acquiring moral knowledge without having to rely on religious sources of information. That is, God must provide us with a good chance of acquiring secular grounds for the moral truth.

*ii. Restraint*

(7) *Since religiously grounded moral truths will likely be corroborable by secular grounds, then we have good reason to doubt religiously grounded moral claims for which we lack adequate secular grounds.* The argument for (7) hinges on a familiar type of inference. The structure of that type of inference is as follows: if I have good reason to believe that A is likely to occur only in the presence of B, and I apparently perceive A but cannot after the appropriate investigation discover signs of B, then I should, *ceteris paribus*, doubt that I actually perceived A. Suppose I have good reason to believe that the occurrence of *As* is almost always correlated with the occurrence of *Bs*: I know that the legendary but elusive snark leaves in its path markings of a distinctive and easily recognizable sort. And suppose that I have moderately good evidence that a snark was in the vicinity in the recent past: I apparently saw the snark in all its furtive glory in broad daylight and in normal perceptual conditions, my eyesight is excellent and I know what to look for. In order to check my conviction regarding the snark's presence, I scour the area for signs of its activity: I attempt to discover the distinctive markings with which I know that genuine snark sightings are correlated. If I discover the appropriate markings, I will have powerful corroboration for my apparent perception of the snark. But if I fail to discover the requisite markings, not only have I failed to verify my conviction, but I reasonably *doubt* the veridicality of what I took to be a snark sighting.

If (6) is correct, then failure to acquire secular corroboration for a religiously grounded moral claim C should have the same implication for our confidence in C that failure to perceive distinctive snark markings should have for our confidence in the claim that we have perceived a snark. Because it is likely that we will discover secular corroboration for a given religiously

grounded moral truth if we engage in the appropriate investigation, our failure to discover the expected secular corroboration provides us with reason to doubt C. Suppose that an agent, Lauren, adheres to a religiously grounded moral claim for which she can discover no secular corroboration. Thus, suppose that she adheres to the claim that homosexuality is a sin, but cannot, after an appropriate analysis of the relevant information, discern secular corroboration for that claim. What should she conclude? Well, if the first part of the theistic argument is correct, she should expect to discover a secular rationale for her belief that homosexuality is sinful: if homosexuality really is sinful, then she should expect to discover secular corroboration for that claim. Since she cannot discover any such rationale, she now has evidence *against* the claim that homosexuality is sinful. Since the ‘signs’ which indicate the ‘presence’ of a moral truth are missing, she reasonably doubts the claim that homosexuality is sinful.

(8) *It is irresponsible for citizens to support coercive policies on the basis of moral claims they have good reason to doubt.* I take it to be fairly obvious that responsible deliberation and decision-making with respect to political matters imposes epistemic obligations of some sort on citizens in liberal democracies. Here is the gist of an argument for that claim. The more important a decision we must make, the more concerned we should be to attempt to ensure that our decision is correct. That we should be more concerned to decide important decisions correctly than to decide trivial decisions correctly has epistemic implications: we should do what we can to ensure that, when faced with an important decision, we make that decision on the basis of the best grounds available to us. Thus, for example, we should make important decisions in light of all the relevant evidence which we can feasibly acquire and on the basis of a judicious analysis of that evidence. If I am entrusted to invest my child’s college funds, I should base my investment decision on my best analysis of the market and not on a whim or guesswork. We do not have similar expectations for the bases on which we make trivial decisions: that I pick a brand of beer for the evening barbecue without accumulating evidence about my guest’s preferences generates no cries of condemnation. In short, we should proportion our epistemic expectations for a given decision with the importance of that decision: the more important a decision, the higher our epistemic standards should be for the rationale on the basis of which we make that decision.

Among the more important decisions we make are those which coerce other agents. In a democratic society, each of us has the power to influence the way that other citizens may exercise their freedom and, since acting in accordance with values one freely adopts is amongst our most cherished commitments, any decision we make to reduce or to constrain free action is of particular importance. If the proportionality claim I defended in the prior paragraph is correct, citizens in democratic societies have an obligation to

ensure that the grounds on the basis of which they support a given political commitment satisfy a fairly high epistemic standard. Given that responsible agents should attempt to ensure that very important decisions are decided on their best grounds, and given that coercive decisions are extremely important, it follows that conscientious citizens in democratic societies should restrain themselves from deciding political issues on epistemically disreputable grounds.<sup>11</sup>

This conclusion is obviously quite vague. In particular, it provides us with no guidance at all in identifying the epistemic threshold a citizen's rationale must pass in order to count as admissible. Since this step in the argument, contentious though it is, is not my concern in this essay, I will settle the matter by fiat. A citizen who is aware of an objection to some policy for which she lacks an answer, that is, a citizen who supports a policy which she cannot defend to her fellow citizens, should not support that policy until such time as she can resolve that objection. Even if she believes that she can resolve that objection given sufficient time and effort, she should withhold support for the objectionable policy until such time as she can satisfactorily respond to that objection and thus resolve her doubts.

(9) *Hence, it is irresponsible for citizens to support coercive policies based on religiously grounded moral claims for which they lack adequate secular grounds.* Given that God has set matters up so that we have secular access to moral knowledge, and given that having secular access to moral knowledge means that agents who pursue secular corroboration for religiously grounded truths will likely succeed in that endeavour, we should doubt religiously grounded moral claims for which we lack secular justification. And since it is irresponsible for us to coerce our fellow citizens on the basis of a rationale we have good reason to doubt, religious citizens have good reason to restrain themselves from supporting coercive policies for which they lack secular justification. To gloss Brian Barry, 'no [uncorroborated] conception of the good [and thus no religious norm] can justifiably be held with a degree of confidence that warrants its imposition on those who reject it'.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV

##### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE THEISTIC CASE FOR RESTRAINT

Before I explain why I believe that the theistic case fails to establish the claim that religious citizens ought to exercise restraint, I will comment briefly on why I take the theistic case to be an important, even if ultimately unsound, contribution to the issue regarding restraint.

<sup>11</sup> This argument entails that the laissez-faire position on restraint mentioned in (ii) is false: responsible citizens are not free to decide political matters on any grounds they please.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Barry *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 169.

The liberal doctrine of restraint is unavoidably epistemic.<sup>13</sup> That is, the doctrine of restraint is unjustifiable if certain epistemic claims are likewise unjustifiable. The theistic case exemplifies the dependence of restraint on epistemology; as we have seen, that case depends uneliminably on two epistemic claims. First, grounds admissible as a basis for coercive policies must pass a given epistemic threshold (8). Second, religious norms that lack secular corroboration fall below that threshold (7). From these two epistemically loaded claims it follows that citizens should exercise restraint regarding moral claims based on uncorroborated religious grounds.

Any argument that relies so heavily on an epistemic threshold raises the obvious question: are there non-religious grounds that are both essential to healthy political deliberation and decision-making but fail to pass the epistemic threshold that mandates restraint? If there are, then we may articulate this query into a general argument against restraint regarding religious belief. One such argument is as follows.<sup>14</sup> Healthy and responsible political deliberation requires that agents have recourse to moral considerations; an agent who supports funding for nuclear weapons without considering the moral problems raised by the prospect of annihilating millions of innocent civilians has hardly decided that issue responsibly. If we ignore for the moment the theistic case for restraint, we have no justification for believing that secularly grounded moral norms necessarily or generally enjoy an epistemic status superior to religiously grounded moral claims. The most plausible analysis of their epistemic status is that they are roughly comparable. But that the epistemic status of secular and religious norms is comparable implies that *whatever* epistemic threshold the advocate of restraint adopts, she can advocate restraint regarding religiously grounded norms but not secular norms only on pain of arbitrariness. If the epistemic threshold she adopts is very low, such that secular norms pass the epistemic threshold required for admissible grounds, then so do religiously grounded norms; if the epistemic threshold she adopts is fairly high, such that religious norms fall below that threshold, so also do secularly grounded norms. No matter where the epistemic threshold falls, religiously and secularly grounded norms enter into or are excluded from political deliberation together.

There is, then, a powerful consistency argument against restraint regarding religiously grounded norms. The challenge to the advocate of restraint is that of discovering some relevant difference between religious and secular norms in virtue of which it is reasonable to advocate restraint regarding the former but not the latter. Only by identifying some such relevant difference

<sup>13</sup> I do not mean to imply that the doctrine of restraint is solely dependent on epistemic claims. Pragmatic considerations, for example, play an important role in the case for restraint as well as epistemic considerations.

<sup>14</sup> In order to preserve continuity with the prior discussion, I formulate the argument against restraint as undermining restraint regarding religious *norms*. But the argument can easily be generalized to religious beliefs.



can the advocate of restraint non-arbitrarily exclude religious but not secular grounds from political deliberation. The theistic argument meets this challenge by showing that we have good reason to expect independent corroboration for religiously grounded moral truths, and thus we have adequate grounds for doubting uncorroborated religious norms, but that we lack such expectations for secular norms, and thus we have no reason to doubt uncorroborated secular norms. Although it appears arbitrary to require restraint regarding uncorroborated religious norms but not to require restraint regarding uncorroborated non-religious norms, that appearance is illusory: the relevant difference which warrants differential treatment of religiously and secularly grounded norms is *expectability* – we reasonably expect independent corroboration of religiously grounded moral truths but not of secularly grounded moral truths. The theistic case, if sound, constitutes a decisive response to (what I take to be) a powerful objection to the doctrine of restraint.<sup>15</sup>

Having articulated the theistic case for restraint, and having indicated why I believe that that case is significant, I will turn, in the next section, to the task of evaluating that case. I argue that those who reject the claim that religious citizens should exercise restraint may reasonably object both to (6) and (7).

## V

### IS SECULAR CORROBORATION TO BE EXPECTED?

The claim that religiously grounded moral truths are likely to be corroborable by secular grounds is the linchpin of the theistic case for restraint. If secular corroboration is not to be expected, then we have no reason to moderate our confidence in uncorroborated religious norms; and if we have no reason to moderate our confidence in uncorroborated religious norms, then we lack reason to exercise restraint with respect to those norms. In short, if (6) is false, the theistic case is unsalvageable.

#### *i. Clarification of (6)*

In order to identify what is wrong with (6), we need to identify one of (6)'s crucial assumptions. It is important to realize that (6) is not equivalent to the claim that, because human agents have secular access to moral knowledge, then there are likely to be corroboratory secular grounds for a given religiously grounded moral truth to which an agent assents. That is, (6) is not a claim regarding the *existence* of adequate secular grounds for moral truths. Rather, (6) is a claim regarding the likelihood of an agent's *discovering*

<sup>15</sup> I have attempted to articulate that objection in 'Liberalism and mysticism', *The Journal of Law and Religion*, forthcoming.

corroboratory secular grounds. We can imagine circumstances in which there is in fact secular corroboration for a given religiously grounded moral truth, but in which an agent does not have any way of acquiring that corroboration, and thus in which she is unlikely to succeed in her pursuit of secular corroboration. The theistic case purports to show that God will ensure that agents do not find themselves in that situation: God's goodness and omnipotence ensures that citizens are in a strong secular position to discover moral truths.

So (6) is a claim about the success agents may expect to have in a particular pursuit. To be sure, (6) presupposes that there are in fact adequate secular grounds for religiously grounded moral truths: if it were not in fact the case that for a given religiously grounded moral truth to which a given agent adheres there is a corroboratory secular rationale for that moral truth, then we would not expect such her to be able to discover an adequate secular justification for that moral truth. But (6) might be false even if that presupposition is true.

The claim that agents will likely succeed in acquiring secular corroboration for religiously grounded moral truths presupposes something further, viz., that the agents who pursue secular corroboration go about their task *in the appropriate manner*. Thus, for example, we can expect that an agent will succeed in discovering secular justification for a given true religious norm only if she sincerely pursues secular justification. Insincere agents will tend not to investigate a matter as thoroughly as they should, and thus, even if they happen upon a secular rationale for some moral truth, will not be likely to have arrived at an adequate secular rationale for that moral truth. The theistic case for restraint provides us with no reason to believe that an agent who insincerely pursues secular corroboration is likely to discover that corroboration.

Much more important than a sincerity condition is an *epistemic* condition on success: agents who conscientiously pursue secular corroboration will likely enjoy success in their pursuit only if they employ their cognitive capacities in an epistemically appropriate manner. Surely an agent who sincerely pursues secular corroboration, but who, out of a misguided mistrust of rational argumentation, refuses to consider objections to her moral convictions, is not likely to discover adequate secular corroboration for the religiously grounded moral truths to which she adheres. Again, if an agent is unable or unwilling to govern her beliefs in light of the appropriate canons of inference, we have no reason to expect that she will discover the secular corroboration she pursues. We should not expect her to succeed in discovering an adequate secular rationale, not because of some defect in her cognitive situation that lies outside of her control – God will take care of that! – but because of her failure to pursue secular corroboration in accord with the canons of rationality.

In short, then, the theistic case for (6) assumes that God has so constructed an agent's cognitive situation that, if only she employs her cognitive faculties in the appropriate manner, she can expect to discover an adequate secular justification for the religiously grounded moral truths to which she adheres. (6) thus presupposes a division of labour: God establishes the conditions of an agent's situation that remain invariant in relation to her own activities, and agents employ their cognitive faculties sincerely and rationally. If both partners accomplish their appointed task, we should expect agents to succeed in their pursuit of secular corroboration.

*ii. Secular access in epistemically hostile conditions?*

Once we recognize that the likelihood of an agent's acquiring secular corroboration depends on whether or not she rationally deploys her cognitive capacities, it is apparent that she might find herself so situated that, *no matter how sincerely and reasonably she deploys her cognitive capacities*, it is not likely that she will be able to acquire secular corroboration for some of the religiously grounded moral truths to which she assents. In fact, it seems that an agent might be so hostilely circumstanced that, *no matter how rationally she employs her cognitive faculties*, it is *highly unlikely* that she will discern an adequate secular rationale for some of the religiously grounded moral truths to which she adheres.

My argument is fairly simple. (1) Whether it is rational for an agent to assent to a given claim depends in uneliminable part on the testimony of other agents. (2) The testimony of *other* agents can be so skewed as to render it unlikely that an agent who pursues secular corroboration for a particular moral truth will succeed in that pursuit, *no matter how assiduously she adheres to the canons of rationality*. (3) The prospect that an agent's failure to discern secular corroboration for her religiously grounded norms is a consequence of the misuse or ill use of God-given cognitive capacities and not of the falsehood of those norms entitles her to refrain from committing to a policy of restraint regarding uncorroborated religious norms.

Ad (1): whether or not it is rational for an agent to assent to some proposition depends not only on the way in which she arrives at her convictions (e.g., the procedures she pursues in collecting and evaluating evidence and the inferences she makes from that evidence), but also on the cognitive commitments on which she cannot but rely when evaluating a particular claim. Otherwise put, what it is rational for an agent to believe depends, in part but in unavoidable part, on other things she believes. That Socrates rationally assented to a Ptolemaic theory of the solar system surely depended not only on the way in which he collected and evaluated the evidence available to him, but also on the *background beliefs* on which he relied to evaluate the Ptolemaic theory. Because the background beliefs on which moderns rely are very different than those on which Socrates relied, it is not

rational for us to accept the Ptolemaic theory. The difference between what it is rational for us and Socrates to believe is explicable not (necessarily) by the way moderns collect evidence and the way Socrates did, but by our very different background beliefs.

Most of the convictions to which we adhere are dependent for their justification on our taking something to be true on the say-so of others. The point is a familiar one: although I have never directly perceived the Aurora Borealis, I have talked with those who have, or seen a television show in which a scene of the appropriate sort is labelled 'Aurora Borealis', or the like. I have arrived at most of my convictions not by (direct) acquaintance of the first sort but by (indirect) acquaintance of the second. A less familiar, though just as plausible, claim is that human agents are in no cognitive position to circumvent testimony; any attempt we might make to show that our reliance on the testimony of others is reliable is itself unavoidably dependent on our reliance on the unchecked testimony of others.<sup>16</sup>

From these claims about rationality and testimony, it follows that what it is rational for an agent to believe depends in crucial but uneliminable part on the testimony of others. We form most of our beliefs, and also most of our background beliefs, by depending on the unchecked trustworthiness of others and it is by relying on those beliefs are we able to arrive at a rational evaluation of other beliefs. To recur to the prior discussion of Socrates, I assume that the 'procedure' by which he acquired his (by hypothesis) rational belief in the Ptolemaic theory was roughly the same as that by which moderns rationally believe that the Ptolemaic theory is false, viz., by reliance on the testimony of what we take to be competent authorities. The content of what those authorities attest to determines, in large part, which theory of the solar system it is rational for us to adhere.

Ad (2): that the rationality of assenting to a given claim is unavoidably dependent on our unchecked acceptance of the testimony of other agents renders possible a state of affairs in which an agent who, no matter how assiduously she adheres to the canons of rationality<sup>17</sup> does not have the realistic prospect of acquiring adequate secular corroboration for a moral truth she accepts on religious grounds. Rational agents may stand with respect to particular moral truths in structurally the same epistemic relation that Socrates stood with respect to the claim that the earth is not stationary.

Thus, consider a claim at the 'centre' of our moral universe, viz., that all

<sup>16</sup> We can, of course, check a given agent's testimony regarding particular claims. Hence, there are no testimonial claims which we cannot 'in principle' check. But as a matter of realistic and unavoidable fact, whenever we go about checking an agent's claims regarding a particular fact, we rely unavoidably on a host of other testimonial claims we have no realistic prospect of checking. 'In principle' checkability does not translate into the realistic prospect of checking another agent's testimony.

<sup>17</sup> I have in mind here primarily the procedural aspects of rationality, viz., engaging in critical discourse with one's compatriots, doing one's best to accumulate reliable and representative evidence, adhering to appropriate canons of inference, etc.

human beings are equal. Surely it is possible that a cognitive agent who conscientiously attempts to determine whether all human beings are equal finds herself so circumstanced that it is not rational for her to accept the claim that all human beings are equal. Thus, we might suppose that she is raised in a society that consistently degrades members of the female gender: the dominant institutions of her society discriminate against women, so that few attain positions of power and prestige; the hegemonic ideology of her society valorizes 'masculine' virtues; children, particularly female children, are socialized to believe that women are inherently inferior to men, one consequence of which is that the visceral reactions (intuitions) inculcated into members of that society militate against the prospect of women holding authority over or criticizing men; the unambiguous testimony of the morally wise (of both genders) underwrites the prejudice that women are inherently inferior to, and thus of less value than, men. In short, we can imagine a situation in which most of a society's resources for moulding the convictions and subjective experiences of its members are directed in such a way that they render implausible (what we confidently and rationally take to be) a moral truth. An agent socialized in such a way would quite reasonably conclude that those of her own gender are of less value than her male counterparts and, moreover, support public policies in accordance with that conviction, e.g., refusal to extend the franchise to women. (I take it that some agents have found, and do find, themselves in some such a situation.)

How is this possible? How could it be the case that cognitive agents created by a good and omnipotent being could find themselves in so desperate an epistemic situation on so important a matter? Recall that the theistic case assumes a division of labour between God, who ensures that an agent's epistemic environment is conducive to her success in discerning secular corroboration, and particular agents, who employ their cognitive faculties in an appropriate manner. If my argument up to this point is correct, part of an agent's epistemic environment is itself constituted by the epistemic activity of other agents. An agent acquires the background beliefs on which she cannot but rely in governing her beliefs by relying on the unchecked authority of other, putatively competent, agents. But, just as it is possible for *her* to pursue secular corroboration for her religiously grounded norms insincerely or unreasonably, so also is it possible for the agents from whom she acquires her background beliefs insincerely and unreasonably to commit to moral falsehoods, to pass those falsehoods off as truths, and, most importantly, to inculcate their moral prejudices into members of succeeding generations.

God could, of course, interfere regularly in human cognitive affairs, such that God ensures that agents who adhere to false or poorly grounded moral claims do not testify to those claims. But I take it that this kind of interference is unacceptable: it would be improper for God to inflict agents with amnesia

regarding their false moral beliefs when attempting to inculcate those falsehoods in their children, or otherwise to obstruct the ordinary processes of socialization. If this is the case, then it is not up to God whether or not an agent's cognitive environment is such that she has a realistic chance of acquiring secular corroboration for a given religiously grounded moral truth. In short, the division of labour (6) presupposes breaks down: what an agent's cognitive environment is like – whether it is such that it affords her the realistic prospect of acquiring adequate secular corroboration – is up to human beings, not to God.

The conclusion we should draw from this is clear: even if we stipulate of a particular agent that she sincerely and rationally attempts to determine whether there is a secular rationale for a given moral truth, we cannot idealize her out of dependence on the unchecked testimony of others – and in particular their testimony with regard to moral claims. But then, for a given moral truth, it is possible that, as a result of others' misuse or ill-use of their cognitive faculties, no matter how assiduously an agent collects evidence, reflects on that evidence, converses about that evidence with her compatriots, her evaluation of that moral truth is so skewed by the false testimony on which she cannot but rely that she can discover no adequate secular rationale for that moral truth.<sup>18</sup> Given the dependence of succeeding generations on the testimony of their forebears, members of a given generation can, through no fault of their own, find themselves so circumstanced that a sincere and rational evaluation of the available secular evidence is likely to result in acceptance of moral falsehoods.

In order to appreciate the nature of my objection to the theistic case for restraint, recall that the theistic case has a structure similar to that of the argument from evil. Whereas the proponent of the argument from evil contends that traditional theistic claims about God's nature are inconsistent with the claim that evil exists, the proponent of the theistic case contends that theistic claims about God's nature render it likely that agents will have access to a great good, viz., secular access to moral knowledge. One venerable response to the problem of evil is to claim that the theistic God can create a world in which evil can exist so long as evil is brought about by the misuse of human freedom. It seems to me that the theistic case is vulnerable to something like the same response. It is possible that even ideally rational agents will find themselves so circumstanced that they are not likely to acquire secular corroboration for religiously grounded moral truths because (other) human beings have misused their cognitive capacities.

<sup>18</sup> What is an example of a moral truth for which a given agent can not discern an adequate secular rationale? I hope the answer should be clear by now: an agent might find herself ensconced in epistemic conditions which are hostile to *any* moral truth. So, for any given agent, it is possible that she will not be able to discern an adequate secular rationale for an indeterminate number of moral truths. Exactly what those moral truths are cannot be determined without a good deal of information about, in particular, her background beliefs.

Ad (3): If the argument up to this point is correct, an agent who pursues secular corroboration for a religiously grounded moral claim C can fail for two basic reasons: she can discern no adequate secular rationale for C because C is false (the case envisioned by the advocate of restraint), or C is true, but given her perspective on the world, it is not rational for her to accept a secular justification for C. In the first case, the policy of restraint gets the right result: there is no secular justification for a religiously grounded norm because the norm is false. In the second case, the policy of restraint gets the wrong result: the moral claim is true and there is, we may assume, an adequate secular justification for that truth, but the agent is in no position to acquire that justification.

These are the possibilities, but how likely is it that the latter possibility is actualized in a given case? I do not believe that there is a determinate answer to this question. Whether or not it is likely that other agents have employed their cognitive capacities appropriately depends on what those agents decide to do. What the other agents on whom citizens rely decide to do will vary across both historical time and social space. Sometimes the secular claims on which an agent relies to determine the moral truth will be in good working order; sometimes they will not. If this is the case, it seems that it is reasonable for a religious citizen to conclude that, in particular cases, her failure to discern secular evidence indicates more about the poor state of her secular evidence than it does about the falsehood of a moral claim she accepts solely on religious grounds. I don't claim that she should always conclude in favour of her religious evidence, just as I don't claim that she should always conclude that her failure to discern secular evidence counts against a given religious norm. The truth is somewhere in that murky territory between the extremes – a territory in which the articulation of hard and fast rules is more likely to lead astray than to guide one to the truth, viz., theistic citizens should expect that *many* or *most* but not *all* of their religiously grounded moral norms will enjoy secular corroboration.

Even if there is no determinate answer to the likelihood question, there is some firm ground in sight. It seems entirely reasonable for a religious citizen to refuse to commit herself to restraint given the prospect that the secular evidence to which she has access is so botched up that it provides her with unreliable access to a given moral truth. Given the more than merely logical possibility that she will, through epistemic no fault of her own, lack secular justification for a particular religiously grounded moral truth, and given that she has an overriding commitment to obey God, a theist can in good conscience refuse to commit herself to refrain from supporting coercive policies for which she lacks secular corroboration. The strains of a commitment to exercise restraint are too demanding for religious agents for whom obedience to God is an overriding objection.

One clarificatory comment about my objection to (6). We may distinguish



between a *collective* and a *distributive* interpretation of (6). On the collective interpretation, (6) entails that a high proportion of the set of religiously grounded moral truths to which an agent assents are such that she will discern secular corroboration for those truths. The collective interpretation is consistent with its being highly unlikely that an agent will discern secular corroboration for a subset of the religiously grounded moral truths to which she assents. On the distributive interpretation, (6) entails that it is likely that an agent is able to discern secular corroboration for *each* religiously grounded moral truth to which she assents. I take it to be fairly obvious that the theistic case requires the distributive interpretation: in order to justify the claim that citizens should exercise restraint regarding *each* uncorroborated religious norm, it must be the case that it is likely that a rational and sincere agent is likely to discern secular corroboration for *each* religiously grounded moral truth.

The objection I have presented in this section is directed at (6) as understood in the distributive sense, but I have provided no reason to doubt (6) as interpreted in the collective sense. Thus, I have argued that an agent can find herself in such epistemically hostile conditions that she will be unlikely to discern an adequate secular justification for *particular* religiously grounded moral truths. But even if I am correct about that, it does not follow that an agent has the realistic prospect of being so unfortunately circumstanced that she is unlikely to discern secular corroboration for many or most of her religiously grounded moral truths, much less all such truths. Even given my criticism of (6), it may very well be the case that God's goodness and moral perfection, in combination with generalizations about the way humans actually go about forming their moral beliefs, provide sufficient reason to expect that agents will be able to discern an adequate secular rationale for most of her religiously grounded moral claims.

## VI

SHOULD RATIONAL CITIZENS DOUBT UNCORROBORATED  
RELIGIOUS NORMS?

Suppose that my objection to (6) is not probative; suppose, moreover, that the theistic case provides adequate support for (6). Thus, suppose that, for each religiously grounded moral truth to which an agent assents, it is likely that she will be able to discern secular corroboration for that moral truth. I believe that we should nevertheless reject (7). Thus, even if agents who rationally and sincerely pursue secular corroboration for their religious norms should expect to discover such corroboration if those norms are true, it does not follow that they should doubt (moderate their confidence in) uncorroborated norms. That is what I will attempt to show in this section.

I will do so in two steps. First, I will argue that the role a particular

uncorroborated norm plays in what I will call an agent's 'moral vision' can render it *rationally permissible* for her to persist in adhering to that norm, at least so long as her moral vision enjoys general secular corroboration (vi.i) and (vi.ii). Second, I will argue that, in addition to its being reasonable for an agent not to moderate her confidence in such secularly uncorroborated religious norms, it is *religiously obligatory* in certain circumstances that she refuse to moderate her confidence (vi.iii).

*i. Moral visions*

What is a moral vision? A moral vision is not a collection of disconnected moral injunctions; rather, it is a more or less systematic account of what is good and bad for human beings, an account which involves claims about human nature, the function of human beings in the cosmos, the obligations of human beings given their nature and role, and the like.<sup>19</sup> Thus, a moral vision provides not just a laundry list of the obligations to which we should adhere, but also a systematic and internally articulated explanation as to why we should adhere to those obligations, why those obligations enable human agents to flourish, the relative importance of different obligations, etc.

I will assume that theists place great value on the construction of a moral vision. There are a number of reasons why that is the case. I will mention two.

(1) As I noted above, theists believe that they have an overriding obligation to obey God. Unfortunately, the theist faces an important practical barrier to discharging that obligation. Theists typically form their religious convictions by relying on a variety of belief-forming practices (interpretations of sacred texts, religious experience, tradition, rational reflection). Those practices provide bits of information of a partial, *prima facie* contradictory, and antecedently unsystematized nature. Only by discerning order in the welter of partial and conflicting moral outputs of her belief-forming practices do those practices provide her with the cognitive means necessary for effective moral action. Thus, the unsystematic and partial nature of the moral guidance she receives from the various practices in which she engages imposes on the theist a synthetic task: she ought to do the best she can to integrate the convictions generated by her disparate belief-forming practices into a coherent moral vision.

(2) Not only do theists believe that they have an overriding obligation to obey God, but they also typically believe that their obedience to God must not be limited in scope: the theist ought to obey God in whatever she does, wherever she is, in whatever institutional setting she finds herself, etc. In

<sup>19</sup> I take the term 'moral vision' from Richard Hays *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996). That notion is reminiscent of Rawls's 'comprehensive doctrine' and the ubiquitous 'conception of the good'.

particular, the theist is committed to obeying God in both the public and the private spheres. This kind of totalizing commitment to God often outstrips the theists's occurrent cognitive resources: for many of the problems she faces, she will lack any direct knowledge of God's commands.

Consider any moral-political issue of recent provenance, e.g., nuclear deterrence, in vitro fertilization, genetic engineering, etc. It is safe to assume that the religious belief-forming practices in which a given agent, Lauren, engages do not address any of those issues directly: neither the Bible, nor tradition, nor religious experience will provide her with direct moral guidance on those issues. Nevertheless, that Lauren lacks direct moral guidance on any of those issues does not obviate her totalizing obligation to obey God. In order to discharge that obligation, then, she must have some reliable way of discovering God's intentions with respect to those matters. Constructing a moral vision enables her to do that: her moral vision provides guidance for situations in which she lacks explicit knowledge of God's commands. In constructing a moral vision, Lauren extends moral knowledge which is clearly applicable in certain circumstances to contexts in which that knowledge is not clearly applicable. The pattern is fairly familiar: from the biblical claim that all members of the human species are created in the image of God, Christians draw inferences regarding issues the Bible does not directly address, or which it addresses with unclarity, e.g., racism, slavery, sexism, abortion, etc. From the biblical claim that God has created the natural world and given human beings stewardship of that world, theists reject vivisection, despoliation of the environment, etc.

*ii. Why it is rational to dismiss counterevidence*

A moral vision, then, is the product of a synthesis of particular moral and metaphysical claims into a broad moral framework, a mutual adjustment of apparently conflicting claims, a reinterpretation and extension of particular moral claims, etc. The product is, ideally, a richly articulated complex of belief which provides the theist with accurate knowledge as to how God wants her to act and thus which provides her with reliable moral guidance. Given this account of what constitutes a moral vision and why a theist might value having a moral vision, we can explain why (7) is false: it is neither rationally obligatory nor religiously appropriate for a theist to doubt each religious norm for which she can discern no secular corroboration.

Suppose that Lauren has long been convinced that the Bible is divinely inspired. Given that conviction, she has, as stands to reason, attempted to immerse herself in the world contained within that text in order better to understand her own world and faithfully to guide her actions. As a consequence of many years of reflection on, discussion of, and action guided by, the moral and metaphysical claims expressed in the Bible, Lauren has reconstructed what she takes to be a compelling understanding of the nature

of humankind and, more particularly, the requirements of human flourishing. Because she believes that her divinely imposed obligation to contribute to her fellow citizens' flourishing is overriding, Lauren does her level best to govern her activity in light of the understanding of the moral vision internal to the biblical text.<sup>20</sup>

Suppose further that Lauren has consistently and over the years attempted to articulate a secular rationale for each of the policies she has supported on the basis of the biblical moral vision. And suppose that she has been marvellously successful in discovering secular corroboration for the policies which she believes are mandated by her religious commitments: for every policy Lauren believes is mandated by the biblical moral vision, Lauren discovers a compelling secular rationale. As a consequence of the consistent secular corroboration of her biblically derived moral vision, Lauren is justifiably confident that the moral vision she has discerned in the biblical text is a reliable moral guide. Given that each time she supports a particular policy on the basis of the fact that it is mandated by the moral vision internal to the biblical text, she subsequently discovers a secular rationale for that very policy, Lauren reasonably concludes that the moral vision itself enjoys secular corroboration.

But what if it turns out that some claim partly constitutive of the moral vision of the Bible lacks secular corroboration? What should Lauren do if she believes that the biblical text forbids homosexual marriages but discovers that a secular rationale she once thought warranted a prohibition on homosexual marriages is in fact woefully inadequate? Given Lauren's continuing success in establishing equilibrium between her religiously and secularly grounded moral commitments, it is entirely reasonable for Lauren to commit herself to the reliability of her moral vision as a whole. Lauren has powerful inductive evidence for the claim that her moral vision provides her with reliable access to God's will and thus to the moral truth. To be sure, that her moral vision supports a moral claim for which she can discover no plausible secular rationale certainly generates something of a crisis. Given her theistic understanding of the human condition, she will expect to discover a secular rationale for the claim that homosexual marriages are sinful, if it is in fact the case that such marriages are sinful. That she can discover no such rationale constitutes counterevidence against the claim that homosexual marriages are sinful. (Recall that we are assuming for purposes of argument that (6) is true.)

Nevertheless, rather than inferring from the fact that she can now discover no secular corroboration for her religiously grounded ban on homosexual marriages that her moral vision is doubtful in this instance, Lauren may reasonably infer from the fact that her moral vision has been so reliable a

<sup>20</sup> In the interests of ease of exposition, I refer to the moral vision encoded in the Bible, although the Bible is only one of the sources from which Christians will construct their moral vision.

moral guide in the past that she should continue to trust her moral vision in this case as well, in spite of the apparent absence of a corroborating secular rationale. It might be rational for Lauren to ‘explain away’ her inability to discover secular corroboration for her belief that homosexual marriages are sinful. It might be entirely reasonable for her to regard that gap anomalous, inexplicable, incomprehensible, etc. without being rationally compelled to doubt her uncorroborated religious norms.

That it is reasonable for an agent to categorize counterevidence as ‘anomalous,’ and in so doing to ‘explain it away,’ is a commonplace of the philosophy of science, one made popular by Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi. As both Kuhn and Polanyi argued, a scientist faced with what appears to be counterevidence to an otherwise powerful and empirically adequate theory is not necessarily rationally compelled to quit the theory. That those who accepted the Copernican theory of the solar system could provide no fully adequate response to the objection that, if the earth was actually moving, objects resting on the earth should fly right off, does not indicate any irrationality on their part. The ‘power’ and ‘fruitfulness’ of the new theory was compelling enough to warrant a wait of many decades until Newton finally resolved that problem.

Just as a scientist reasonably persists in her commitment to claims partly constitutive of a fruitful ‘scientific paradigm’ in spite of her inability to answer objections to each of those claims, a theist reasonably persists in her commitment to norms partly constitutive of a fruitful moral vision in spite of her inability to answer objections to each of those norms. And just as it is reasonable for those who accept a given theory in the teeth of counterevidence nevertheless to act on their conviction that that theory is true, e.g., by requesting and expending scarce resources to vindicate that theory, so also is it reasonable for theists who accept a given moral vision in spite of the lack of the expected secular corroboration to act on their conviction that their moral vision is reliable, e.g., by supporting coercive policies which depend on the particular norms internal to that vision. Because their moral vision provides them with reliable guidance generally, they may reasonably be loath not to act on that guidance even when its dictates are subject to counterevidence in particular cases.

Note that nothing I have said absolves dogmatic religious agents of their indifference to counterevidence. I claim only that agents *need not* doubt moral claims for which they lack secular corroboration. All I claim is that a lack of secular corroboration does not suffice to render a given religious norm doubtful – and that is all I need in order to show that (7) is false. But that a lack of secular corroboration does not of itself require agents to doubt uncorroborated religious norms does not entail that a lack of secular corroboration counts for nothing. In some cases, a lack of secular corroboration will tip the scales against a given religious norm such that citizens should

doubt that norm and thus should restrain themselves from supporting coercive policies on the basis of that norm. Whether or not the lack of secular corroboration has this consequence in a given case depends on a variety of factors that vary from citizen to citizen, for example, how much other evidence an agent has for a given uncorroborated religious norm, how important that norm is to the moral vision of which it is a constituent, etc. That variation undermines the blanket claim that citizens should doubt uncorroborated religious norms and thus that they should exercise restraint regarding uncorroborated religious norms.<sup>21</sup>

*iii. Loyalty to God and the strains of commitment*

My overall objective in this section is to articulate a religious version of the strains of commitment objection to the doctrine of restraint and thus to show that the considerations adduced by the advocate of the theistic case do not alleviate those strains. But in order to defend the strains of commitment argument against restraint, I needed to show that it is rational for theists not to doubt uncorroborated religious norms in spite of the fact that they should expect to discern secular corroboration for moral truths they accept on religious grounds. Only if theists are thus rational is a strains of commitment argument against restraint worthy of consideration. After all, the case for restraint is not directed at irrational agents: we should not expect them to find it convincing. So, having shown that theistic citizens are *permitted* by the canons of rationality not to doubt uncorroborated religious norms, I now attempt to articulate why theistic citizens have *good reason* to be loath to moderate their confidence, and thus exercise restraint with respect to, uncorroborated religious norms.

My argument in support of the claim that it is rational for theists not to doubt uncorroborated religious norms draws on putative similarities between the way in which a rational agent evaluates counterevidence to her moral vision and the way that she properly evaluates counterevidence to scientific theories. But there is a disanalogy between a scientific theory and the typical theistic moral vision, one which supports the claim that it is a good and desirable (from a theistic point of view) that theistic citizens discount their failure to discern secular corroboration. In brief, the disanalogy is that the content of a scientific theory does not predict that scientists will discover counterevidence to that theory, whereas the content of a (common sort of) theistic moral vision does predict that its adherents will encounter counter-

<sup>21</sup> Here is another way of putting my point. The theistic case for restraint grants veto power to a lack of secular corroboration: a religious norm that lacks secular corroboration is ipso facto doubtful. I deny that a lack of secular corroboration has veto power; rather, it counts as *one sort* of counterevidence which must be 'weighed' with other sorts of counterevidence and against any positive evidence for an uncorroborated claim. An important source of positive evidence for uncorroborated religious norms that I have attempted to identify is the support a norm acquires in virtue of being an important constituent in a fruitful moral vision.

evidence to that vision. Typically, a theistic moral vision will include claims regarding the limited and distorted grasp human agents have on how they ought to live their lives. Further, a theistic moral vision will (often) involve the claim that religious citizens should expect to find themselves in circumstances in which they must rely on God's guidance when deciding how they ought to act. Thus, theists often believe that having faith in God sometimes involves pursuing a course of action for which they will have no justification other than (what they take to be) God's command that they pursue that course of action.

What is it about a theistic moral vision that provides a basis for expecting that, in certain cases, God will command agents to adhere to norms for which they can discern no secular corroboration? God allows agents to find themselves in such circumstances because they provide an opportunity to exhibit an agent's absolute loyalty and devotion to God. An agent expresses her loyalty to God by her willingness to obey God even when she lacks the reassurance provided by having independent reasons to act as God has commanded. The value of loyalty is sufficiently great that it warrants God's not insuring that we have secular corroboration for each of God's commands.

It might seem that this appeal to the value of loyalty to God is inconsistent with my claim that it is rational for a theistic citizen to refuse to moderate her confidence in a given religious norm in spite of her failure to discern the expected secular corroboration. After all, if it is rational for an agent to adhere to uncorroborated religious norms, then how can adherence to such norms test an agent's loyalty to God? The appearance of inconsistency vanishes if we realize that an agent's loyalty to God can be tested in more ways than by forcing her to choose between her commitment to rationality and her commitment to obeying God. There are any number of commitments an agent might be tempted to privilege over her loyalty to God: a particularly powerful temptation in our culture might be a commitment to acting in accord with only those norms the rationale for which we can acquire by relying solely on our own cognitive powers. It might be rational for her to adhere to and to act upon a given uncorroborated norm, and yet she still might be tempted not to adhere to that norm because she cannot discern why that norm is true by relying on her own cognitive efforts.

That a theistic citizen might reasonably believe that her failure to discern secular corroboration for a given religiously grounded moral claim provides an opportunity to express her loyalty to God further supports a strains of commitment argument against the doctrine of restraint. An agent who adheres to a moral vision which is somewhat out of sync with the secular corroboration to which she has access may believe that her loyalty to God is being tested: is she willing to obey God only insofar as she enjoys secular insight into God's commands, or is she willing to venture further? Given that there is nothing unreasonable about a loyalty that 'explains away' counter-



evidence, it is reasonable for citizens to reject the doctrine of restraint on grounds that it constitutes too demanding a strain on their commitment to God.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For helpful criticism, I thank the participants in the 1998 Calvin College Summer Seminar in Christian Scholarship, particularly its director, Nicholas Wolterstorff, as well as Terence Cuneo and Ashley Woodiwiss. I also thank Michael Perry and an anonymous referee for this journal for constructive criticism.