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Kiliba, Edgar Mwemezi

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FROM COMMANDS TO NATURAL FACTS: THE ARBITRARY NATURE OF MORAL ONTOLOGY

Edgar Kiliba (535745)

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Abstract

Any comprehensive theory of the realist position in metaethics must be equipped with a version of moral ontology. Metaethical theological voluntarism, which purports that supernatural facts, i.e. commands issued by a divine being, determine moral states of affairs, has been accused for a long time of rendering morality 'arbitrary'. Implicit in this widely-accepted objection is the idea that a moral theory cannot have an arbitrary ontological foundation because then anything could have been right or wrong. This paper gives a detailed analysis of this objection that theological voluntarism is arbitrary and makes the case that a commitment to avoiding arbitrariness imposes constraints on the formulation of a moral theory. In particular, this paper argues that accounting for such a commitment decreases the significance that natural facts play for moral theories that maintain a naturalist account of moral ontology.