Religious Studies (2026), **62**, 962–979
doi:10.1017/S0034412526101644

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

God, justice, and accountability

F. J. Elbert

Independent Scholar, Durango, CO, USA
Email: fjelbert@protonmail.com

(Received 15 August 2025; revised 4 May 2026; accepted 5 May 2026; first published online 28 May 2026)

Abstract

This paper argues for the non-existence of God conceived as a perfectly just Supreme Lawgiver who holds all rational agents accountable for commands attributed through revelation. Unlike divine hiddenness arguments that appeal to God's love, this argument examines the procedural requirements of perfect justice: just accountability requires that agents recognise the existence of the authority to which they are subject. If God justly holds all blameless, non-resistant agents accountable to revealed commands, such agents must believe they have adequate evidence that the Commander exists. Yet many conscientious agents, including canonised saints and sincere seekers, report lacking adequate evidence despite sustained, non-resistant effort. The resulting epistemic situation is incompatible with just accountability since no-one can be justly obligated to obey commands from an authority whose existence they cannot recognise. The argument concludes that no recognisably perfectly just Supreme Lawgiver exists who holds all accountable to revealed commands. The conclusion leaves open the possibility that a non-commanding deistic God exists, but argues that God as the revealed Commander whose justice is recognisably exercised does not exist. Abrahamic conceptions of revealed divine legislation, moral obligation, punishment, and forgiveness cannot be grounded in recognisably just divine authority.

Keywords: God; divine justice; due promulgation; divine hiddenness; revealed law

Introduction

A God who leaves sincere, devout followers without what they take to be adequate evidence of his existence cannot be the just judge the Abrahamic faiths proclaim. If God is a Supreme Lawgiver, then his existence, the ground of his authority, and his commands must be sufficiently clear to all who are aware that commands are attributed to him, since commands that are not duly promulgated are not binding.[1] The focus in this paper is adequate evidence of his existence.[2] Even if there were broad agreement about what commands a putative Supreme Commander had issued and what characteristics of a Creator could ground absolute authority, those commands would not have binding force without knowledge of his existence. A message in a bottle giving a command has no authority without some evidence the putative commander exists.

Yet some diligent and devout theists deny that they have adequate evidence of a Supreme Commander's existence. Some take it that they have evidence, but that it is not sufficient for the demands that accompany belief in a Supreme Commander's existence.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0), which permits re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the same Creative Commons licence is used to distribute the re-used or adapted article and the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Others merely hope that a Supreme Commander and perfectly just Judge exists without believing that he does. Finally, there are also non-resistant non-theists who are open to submitting to God's will and who, despite genuine efforts to find what they take to be adequate evidence of his existence, conclude that they have not found it. However, the very existence of all such agents, as I shall argue, is evidence for the non-existence of a perfectly just Supreme Commander.

The argument of this paper targets God conceived as holding all accountable to commands attributed to him through revelation (whether from scripture, prophecy, or religious experience). Whether God is thought of as literally or only analogically a person does not by itself determine if the binding force of the command presupposes knowledge of God's existence. The issue is whether the binding force of a command derives from its attribution to a commanding person or whether it merely restates what natural law or conscience independently establishes. If a command's authority depends on being issued by God, then knowledge of God's existence is a prerequisite for that command to bind; without evidence that the commander exists, the command provides no independent reason for action. If, however, commands merely repeat what natural law or conscience already establishes, without providing independent grounds for the moral obligation under consideration, then this argument does not directly apply, since the binding force derives from natural law itself rather than from recognition of the commander's existence.[3]

The core argument of this paper differs from arguments from divine hiddenness, which focus on God's perfect love. Divine hiddenness arguments purport to show that a perfectly loving deity would make his existence known to all those open to believing that he exists and entering a loving relationship with him. They conclude, because there are non-resistant non-believers, that a perfectly loving God does not exist. In contrast, this paper addresses the procedural requirements of just accountability when commands are attributed to divine authority through revelation. The question is not whether a loving God would hide himself from some of us, but whether a just Commander can hold blameless non-resistant agents accountable to commands when those agents do not believe that they have adequate evidence that he exists. The focus on conditions necessary for recognisably just accountability has several important implications.

The argument from just accountability marks a crucial shift in the dialectical burden of proof. In the context of recognisably just accountability, the non-theist does not need to provide reasons for thinking there are no justifying reasons for a Designer's differential treatment of blameless non-resistant agents who judge that they lack adequate evidence of his existence while others believe they have it.[4] The prima facie evidence of such differential treatment is already supplied by those agents' testimony. Given that a perfectly just Supreme Commander must make the grounds of accountability recognisable, the theist must provide evidence either that apparent differential treatment does not obtain or that it has a recognisable justifying reason, rather than appealing to the bare possibility of such a reason. Unknown reasons, by definition, cannot be recognised by the very agents held accountable.

A formal statement of the argument

One cannot be justly obligated to obey commands attributed to a source when one blamelessly believes one lacks adequate evidence that the source exists. The requirement of having adequate evidence of God's existence arises from the logic of accountability, not from a metaphysical similarity between divine and human authority. Commands attributed to God cannot justly bind those who blamelessly believe they do not have adequate evidence that a commanding God exists. If conscientious non-resistant agents are merely

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hoping God exists or believe despite what they judge to be contrary evidence, they have no recognisable grounds for accountability to commands attributed to him. For God to hold sincere non-resistant subjects accountable to commands attributed to him without ensuring they believe they have adequate evidence of his existence violates the requirements of just accountability.

Just accountability has both objective and subjective components. Of the commander, it requires making evidence of his existence, authority, and commands readily accessible to those commanded. Of the commanded, it requires being open to recognising legitimate authority and not resisting available evidence. The argument of this paper focuses on the subjective component: even granting that objective evidence exists, if those who have made reasonable epistemic efforts and remain non-resistant do not believe they have adequate evidence, the justice requirement is not met. For blameless non-resistant agents, the subjective and objective components must coincide; objective evidence they cannot recognise does not satisfy due promulgation. A commander fails to duly promulgate his existence and authority if blameless, conscientious agents cannot recognise adequate grounds for believing he exists.

Because the claim is that a just Commander must make sufficient objective evidence recognisably available to blameless non-resistant agents, and because what counts as adequate may vary across agents, there is no need, and in principle no possibility, to specify a precise threshold for 'adequate evidence'. What matters is that conscientious agents, after sustained effort, judge that whatever reasonable standard applies, they do not meet it. The argument below, if sound, shows that this subjective condition is not met.

Theists differ over whether God's justice must be wholly recognisable by the same standards we use to recognise human justice.[5] However, the just accountability requirement presupposes only a minimal recognisability thesis: that the standards relevant to recognising just treatment, such as due promulgation and treating like cases alike unless there is a justifying reason to do otherwise, apply when assessing whether divine treatment is recognisably just. Views that reject this thesis and hold that divine justice is wholly opaque to us fall under the category of unrecognisable justice addressed later; such views concede C2 below by denying that God's justice is recognisable to those held accountable.

Consider the core argument:

P1. If a just Supreme Commander holds all blameless rational agents accountable to commands when they are aware of commands putatively issued by him, then all blameless non-resistant rational agents believe they have adequate evidence that such a God exists.
P2. Some blameless non-resistant rational agents do not believe they have adequate evidence that a Supreme Commander exists.
C1. Therefore, there is no just Supreme Commander who holds all blameless rational agents accountable to commands when they are aware of commands putatively issued by him.
P3. If there is no just Supreme Commander who holds all blameless rational agents accountable to commands when they are aware of commands putatively issued by him, then no recognisably perfectly just Supreme Commander exists.
C2. Therefore, no recognisably perfectly just Supreme Commander exists.

The argument above, if sound, shows that blameless non-resistant agents cannot be justly held accountable to commands attributed to a Supreme Commander. The conclusion is not that a perfectly just God does not exist, but that no God exists whose justice blameless rational agents can recognise as perfect. And that conclusion, as we will see, is sufficient to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

undermine the authority of revealed commands whenever their binding force depends on the recognisable justice of the Commander who is said to have issued them. The argument does not apply to conceptions of God where God: (1) does not reveal commands (such as Deism); (2) is not taken to be just or where perfect justice is not one of his core attributes; or (3) where God grounds the moral law only by reason or conscience rather than revealed commands attributed to God.

Several theological frameworks require some discussion as they relate to the foregoing 'argument from justice'. Theological determinists may maintain that God does no injustice in withholding knowledge of his existence from some agents since God foreknows they would not obey even with such knowledge. But this appeal to foreknowledge implicitly accepts P1's explication of accountability (relying on due promulgation and treating like cases alike) by offering a justifying reason for differential treatment. To reject C1, determinists must therefore reject P2, claiming no-one is genuinely blameless, since all who lack knowledge of God's existence are culpable because they would disobey him even if provided the requisite evidence. However, this is a highly speculative metaphysical claim that does not undermine the strong empirical evidence later provided for P2. The determinist response relies on counterfactual claims to which we have no epistemic access and thus fails to provide a recognisable justification for withholding adequate evidence from apparently blameless agents.[6]

Throughout this paper, I use 'Abrahamic tradition' or 'the Abrahamic conception of God' as shorthand for traditions that conceive of God as a Supreme Commander who holds all accountable to commands attributed to him through revelation, and in which the act of revelation is independent evidence of the bindingness of the command. Many within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam conceive of God in this way, though not all theological positions in these traditions do. I am not making claims based on textual interpretation but rather targeting a widely affirmed conception: a God who issues binding commands whose authority derives from being attributed to divine will.[7]

The preceding discussion examined how various theistic frameworks related to the core argument. Before turning to the defence of the premises, several terms require clarification. P1 refers to 'blameless non-resistant' rational agents. Such agents are non-resistant in the sense that they are open to submitting themselves to the authority of a Supreme Commander if they take themselves to have the requisite evidence justifying obedience. They are blameless in that they have made the appropriate epistemic efforts (which may not be the same for every agent), such as engaging in spiritual practices, considering arguments, and doing so conscientiously and diligently. Together, these terms identify agents who are both psychologically open and epistemically responsible. If they lack evidence for the existence of a perfectly just Supreme Commander, the failure is not theirs.

P1 also claims that rational agents must 'believe they have adequate evidence'. Here, the concern is about what agents believe about their epistemic situation after conscientious reflection. 'Adequate evidence' means evidence the agent judges sufficient by reasonable standards to ground accountability to commands.

It is worth noting that nothing in the argument above and its defence assumes or denies a Divine Command Theory on which God's commands are the metaphysical ground of right and wrong; the argument only targets the procedural conditions under which commands presented as divine could justly bind.

It is helpful to indicate why the argument has a two-step structure moving from C1 to C2. Some theists who accept the doctrine of invincible ignorance could accept C1 but reject C2. Such theists accept C1 because a just God would not hold those aware of commands attributed to him accountable for disobedience on those occasions when rational agents are blamelessly unaware of the evidence for his existence. However, the failure to hold the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

blamelessly ignorant accountable still fails the treat like cases alike test. P3, if true, shows that theists cannot reject C2 by an appeal to invincible ignorance.

Consider what occurs if a Supreme Commander were to treat blameless non-resistant agents differently so that some get evidence of his existence and are held accountable to his commands, while others do not get adequate evidence and so are not held accountable. Many blameless agents may not be aware of a justifying reason for this differential treatment; from their perspective, it looks arbitrary. And even if God has some mysterious reasons for such differential treatment, such justice cannot ground recognisable accountability. The upshot is that the requirement of justice that we treat like cases alike unless there is a justifying reason for differential treatment establishes that no recognisably perfectly just Supreme Commander exists.

Before turning to a defence of the premises, it is important to emphasise the dialectical shift this argument brings about. When someone claims to be a Supreme Commander who holds rational agents accountable to commands, that claim itself generates justificatory demands. Initially, the burden is on the putative Commander to make it easy for those held accountable to recognise the grounds of accountability, which includes the existence of the Commander. Subsequently, the burden on the rational agents is to be open to submitting to a supreme authority and to conscientiously examine the evidence for his existence presented to them.

The justificatory demands have significant implications for appeals to divine mystery. In theodicy, 'God might have reasons we cannot grasp' may block the inference from evil to God's non-existence, since the mere compatibility of God's existence and evil suffices. But the relevant existence claim here concerns a perfectly just Supreme Commander; failing to recognise the Commander's perfect justice is failing to recognise that such a being exists. Appeals to mystery concerning the reasons a Supreme Commander might have for differential treatment thus become an admission that recognisable just accountability fails. What served as a shield in theodicy now concedes the conclusion.

A defence of P1

Consider the following reasons for accepting P1. P1 does not rely on one contested conception of justice among many. It relies only on the minimal requirement that accountability to an authority requires recognition of that authority's existence, or culpability for failing to recognise it. The due promulgation requirement is minimal because it: (1) requires only adequate evidence, not certainty; (2) allows different agents to have different evidence; and (3) identifies what is necessary to distinguish justice from the mere exercise of power. Without recognisability, justice collapses into the inability to determine the source of commands from a putative perfectly just Supreme Commander. Blameless agents who do not recognise adequate evidence may not be able to distinguish between: (a) mysterious divine justice, (b) a powerful but unjust creator, (c) false gods falsely claiming to be a Supreme Authority, (d) there being no Supreme Commander but human cognitive limitations resulting in some agents blamelessly attributing commands to such a commander, or (e) some humans intentionally falsely claiming that their preferred moral positions have divine backing. Acting on commands attributed to God without being able to distinguish these scenarios puts agents and others at grave moral, spiritual, and practical risk.

When commands are attributed to God, that attribution is doing specific work: the binding force comes from the attribution to God. We are held accountable because these commands are ascribed to God. 'God said this' is what makes them supposedly obligatory. If attribution to God is what grounds the obligation, then recognition of that attributed source must be possible. I cannot be obligated by commands attributed to source X if

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I cannot recognise whether X exists. The attribution is supposed to ground the obligation, but if I cannot identify the attributed source, the attribution cannot do its grounding work.

Again, what is being appealed to here is not a contested theory of justice but the logic of accountability. Consider an analogy. I cannot be responsible for failing to measure by the standard meter bar in Paris if I do not know it exists. Accountability requires not only that a standard exists, but that the accountable party can recognise it.[8]

A just God would not require us to act where the risk of immorally doing grave harm to others is high from our own point of view. Scriptures seem to countenance commands prescribing genocide, stoning for adultery, and theft. Theists disagree about whether God's perfect goodness is inconsistent with commanding such things.[9] But this very dispute illustrates the problem: without adequate evidence of God's existence and nature, sincere agents cannot reliably distinguish genuine divine commands from false ones. The difficulty is enhanced when we remember that some theists have thought they were commanded to go on Crusades, burn witches, torture heretics, and practise slavery. We run this risk of grave immorality in every case in which a command directs us to seriously harm another, since we are considering cases where we blamelessly lack evidence that God exists.

The potential for error cuts both ways. Theists may act on false commands and do grave harm, while blameless non-believers might fail to obey commands requiring charity or forgiveness beyond what natural moral law requires. From the theistic framework, both involve disobedience to divine commands carrying grave spiritual consequences. If evidential absence of the Supreme Commander's existence creates grave spiritual risk for both believers and non-believers, this strengthens P1: a just God would provide adequate evidence to all, precisely because the stakes are so high in both directions.

Some may argue that P1 is false because rational agents can be held accountable for failing to believe that God exists even if they lack consciously accessible evidence for thinking that God exists. Suppose, as some theists maintain, that we either do or are likely to have a special belief-producing faculty if God exists.[10] The faculty in question, the *sensus divinitatis*, reliably produces the belief that God exists when functioning properly. On this view, since every rational agent would believe that God exists were it not the case that they have culpably damaged the *sensus divinitatis* by their commitment to sin, all can be held justly accountable for failing to believe that God exists.

There are two difficulties with this objection to P1. First, even granting that this faculty exists, it does not establish the prerequisites of just accountability. A rational agent may reflect on what seems to them to be a groundless belief and come to abandon it after considering that there are explanations for the belief occurring as plausible as God's existence. For example, they may think that whatever process that produces the false beliefs in polytheistic gods also produces a false belief in a monotheistic God. Or they may think that belief is the result of transmission by testimony from other sincere believers who were originally duped by false prophets. They may blamelessly conclude they have been treated in an arbitrarily different manner by the putative perfectly just Supreme Commander since they are relevantly similar to those in those more favourable conditions (all are blameless non-resistant conscientious rational agents). Whether or not they retain belief in God's existence, it may occur to them that they have been treated differently from those who claim to be aware of adequate evidence (perhaps due to differences in intellectual capacities), and this recognition might lead them to doubt blamelessly that a perfectly just Supreme Commander exists. And that reflection in some cases might lead them blamelessly to give up their belief that such a Supreme Commander exists. Thus, blameless non-belief is preserved even granting that there is a *sensus divinitatis*.

The second difficulty is it is more likely than not that this specialised belief-producing faculty does not exist. Since people freely choose to engage or not engage in sinful

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

behaviour as individuals, on the sin hypothesis of disbelief in God, one would expect such disbelief to be randomly distributed. Instead, what we find is that belief and disbelief in God is geographically and temporally clustered. As Maitzen (2006) argues, a more plausible explanation of such clustering of belief by groups is the very familiar phenomenon of transmission of belief via testimony. The upshot of both difficulties is that a belief I hold without recognising adequate grounds for it is just the kind of belief that rational reflection could lead me to abandon. Giving up belief in the existence of the Abrahamic God is blameless in cases where what is at stake is just accountability to an authority whose existence I must be able to recognise.

There is a close relationship between the injustice of being required to act on commands without adequate evidence and the injustice of being held accountable for obeying false gods. Those who act without adequate evidence that a perfectly just Supreme Commander exists are at increased risk of following a false god. If, as many within Abrahamic traditions maintain, worshipping or obeying false gods is among the gravest sins, then a just God would not require agents to act on commands without adequate evidence of his existence, as doing so would put agents at grave risk of committing precisely this sin while attempting obedience.

Finally, a just God would not require agents to act with 'a divided mind and will'.[11] Consider a theist who believes themselves commanded to shun family members or condemn behaviours they think are harmless. Without adequate evidence that the Commander exists, morally sensitive believers face an impossible situation: they believe themselves morally obligated both to obey God and to avoid what they have reason to believe is morally wrong. A just God could not put those disposed to trust in his goodness in such torment, requiring them to act against their moral judgement without providing evidence that would resolve the conflict.

A defence of P2

If P1 is correct, the plausibility of the overall argument now turns on the empirical claim in P2. P2 claims that some blameless non-resistant rational agents do not believe they have adequate evidence that a Supreme Commander exists. What is at issue is what some rational agents believe about their epistemic situation, not whether God actually exists. Moreover, P2 can be true even if objective evidence exists. All P2 claims is that some sincere non-resistant agents, after conscientious reflection and sustained effort, report that they do not believe they have adequate evidence for believing that God exists. Nothing here turns on how many such agents there are; the argument requires only that some cases of this sort exist, and not all are culpably self-deceived or mistaken about how much evidence they have for the existence of a Supreme Commander.

The existence of blameless rational agents in three distinct categories provides evidence for P2: (1) non-resistant non-believers who remain genuinely open to belief but judge that they lack adequate evidence; (2) non-resistant theists who believe God exists and maintain religious commitment but conscientiously judge that they lack adequate evidence for that belief; and (3) those who engage in religious practice but do not believe God exists, basing their commitment on hope or trust rather than belief.

Several clarifications are important. First, defending P2 does not require showing that objective evidence does not exist, or that agents lack adequate evidence. P2 only requires establishing that some blameless conscientious rational agents believe they lack adequate evidence, which is supported by their testimony. Second, P2 does not require proving that some people fit into all three categories; evidence that some people fit into one category suffices. Third, P2 requires that the agents in question have made appropriate epistemic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

efforts and either remain open to belief or do believe that God exists, and that their failure to believe they have adequate evidence is not due to negligence or resistance.

The philosophical literature appraising Schellenberg's divine hiddenness argument includes extensive discussion of whether any non-resistant non-believers exist. For Schellenberg's defence of the existence of non-resistant non-believers and his categorisation of distinct types of such non-believers, see Schellenberg (2007, ch. 10). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review this literature, even if objections against category one succeed, such objections face severe difficulties when applied to devout theists in categories two and three. Claims of culpable resistance become implausible when applied to those who maintain decades of devout practice.

Evidence that people in categories two and three exist is substantial. Some theistic philosophers defend the claim that it is morally and epistemically responsible for religious practice to be based on hope that God exists rather than belief (Pojman 1986; Howard-Snyder 2013; McKaughan 2013; Malcolm and Scott 2021; Rioux 2021; Howard-Snyder and McKaughan 2023). Their defence of religious practice based on hope alone is evidence of its occurrence; the mere empirical fact of such practice is all P2 requires.

Anthropological and sociological research documents religious believers experiencing despair over the suspicion that their religious beliefs may be false.[12] It is implausible to suppose that all theists who experience such despair think they have adequate evidence yet feel despair from the suspicion that God does not exist. Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2023) cite psychological studies reporting that religious believers commonly experience doubts ranging from significant to belief-cancelling. For some such cases, the doubt reported plausibly reflects a judgement that they lack adequate evidence for God's existence. Such testimony comes from individuals already disposed to believe God exists, who are precisely those with the greatest motivation to find doubt-dispelling evidence if it exists.

Finally, some saints have experienced tormented doubt described as the 'dark night of the soul', including Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Mother Teresa.[13] Mother Teresa underwent this torment for approximately fifty years, writing: 'In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me – of God not being God – of God not existing. I find no words to express the depths of the darkness.'[14]

In the defence of P1, we examined the possible role of sin in the corruption of the *sensus divinitatis*. But some will appeal to sin to argue that, even assuming there is no *sensus divinitatis*, there are no non-resistant agents who believe that they lack adequate evidence of God's existence. Here sin is appealed to not to reject P1 but to show P2 is false. The claim is that the desire to do as we will, to be completely autonomous agents rather than submitting to God's authority, has undermined our ability to evaluate fairly the evidence for God's existence that God has given us. However, as we saw in the discussion of P1, cultural factors are a better explanation of the temporal and geographical clustering of non-belief than sin. Moreover, to explain away the self-testimony of all three categories of agents by appeal to sin, without any empirical investigation of their actual characters or behaviour, is to employ an unfalsifiable hypothesis of a kind we would reject in any other domain of enquiry.

In addition, granting for the moment that there are successful arguments for God's existence, such arguments are notoriously complex. A more likely explanation for their rejection, in at least some significant range of cases, is cognitive limitations (even among the highly intelligent), rather than sin or resistance to God's will. And this is even more plausibly true of those who are highly devout yet not trained in critical evaluation of complex arguments. Such individuals are much more likely to judge that they lack adequate evidence because of unfamiliarity with some relevant consideration than because of resistance to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

believing God exists, especially when they report desperately wanting to believe that he does.

A defence of P3

Before turning to a defence of P3, it is worth briefly considering C1. Some theists may object that C1 is uninteresting, since a just Supreme Commander would naturally fail to hold blameless non-resistant agents accountable when they lack adequate evidence of his existence. Such theists may grant that devout practitioners who doubt, and even some atheists and agnostics, are blameless and so would not be held accountable by a perfectly just God for their judgement that they lack adequate evidence for belief in God's existence.

But P3 shows why this concession does not eliminate the argument's force. Even if God does not hold all accountable (as C1 concludes), differential treatment in the provision of evidence remains. Some blameless non-resistant agents think they receive adequate evidence of God's existence; others, equally blameless and non-resistant, report that they do not. These agents appear relevantly similar: all are open to belief, have made appropriate epistemic efforts, and remain conscientious. If God has the means to provide adequate evidence to all such agents (and an omnipotent and omniscient God, as the Abrahamic traditions conceive of him, surely does), then differential provision without recognisable justification appears arbitrary. However, no readily accessible proposed justifying reason for this differential treatment survives scrutiny, as the objections and replies below demonstrate. The formal constraint on justice requires treating like cases alike unless there is a justifying reason for differential treatment. In the absence of evidence that such a reason exists, we cannot recognise the Supreme Commander's differential treatment of conscientious, non-resistant agents to be perfectly just.

A theist might object that there is no differential treatment because God holds no-one accountable and extends mercy to all. But this response faces a dilemma. First, if God does not hold anyone accountable to revealed commands, then Abrahamic scriptures and traditions systematically misrepresent God's relationship to humanity. God presents himself through revelation as holding people accountable, yet on this view, he does not. The resulting situation is one in which blameless agents, responding conscientiously to the same evidence, reach incompatible conclusions: some believe God holds them accountable (taking scripture at face value), while others conclude that no recognisably just Supreme Commander exists. Both groups are blameless, yet at least one is profoundly wrong about something of ultimate importance.

Second, such systematic confusion itself constitutes differential treatment. Those who believe they are accountable to a Supreme Commander bear burdens (psychological strain, behavioural restrictions, fear of punishment, life-shaping obedience) that differ radically from those borne by people who, equally blamelessly, reject accountability and structure their lives accordingly. A perfectly just God would not create or permit pervasive, blameless, high-stakes confusion about his justice and grounds for accountability. If God truly holds no-one accountable to revealed commands, this concedes C1; combined with P3, it yields C2.

A theist might object that differential treatment is only temporary. Some people may receive adequate evidence in earthly life, others in the afterlife, so that similar cases are ultimately treated alike. However, this objection fails the due promulgation requirement. Commands are presented as being currently binding, yet evidence required for blameless agents to recognise the Commander's existence is not provided now. The temporal mismatch between promulgating commands in the present and deferring justifying evidence to the future constitutes a failure of due promulgation.

Moreover, delayed evidence imposes serious present costs. Non-resistant non-believers miss goods that depend on belief (such as transformative grace, altered patterns of life,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relationship with God). Believers who judge that they lack adequate evidence yet act on commands attributed to God face risks of obeying false gods or misattributed commands, together with sustained psychological and spiritual distress. Additionally, recognising that unexplained differential treatment itself provides reason to doubt a recognisably just God exists makes believers vulnerable to ignoring his commands and giving up belief. A recognisably perfectly just Supreme Commander would not impose high costs on blameless agents by withholding evidence from some but providing it to others. While some variation in epistemic development may be inevitable in finite creatures, lifelong differential treatment is arbitrary from the standpoint of those held accountable given their current knowledge.

Objections and replies

Divine law is natural rather than positive law

Another objection is that, in the Abrahamic traditions, divine law is simply natural law, knowable by reason without appeal to revelation. If so, God need not promulgate his existence for moral law to bind, and the present argument would not apply to the conception of God actually employed in those traditions. But this objection succeeds only if all divine demands relevant to accountability are fully accessible to reason without revelation. That condition is not met in Islam, Thomism, or Calvinism.

In Islam, some traditions allow that reason alone can discern some moral truths. However, Islamic law is not generally understood as reducible to natural law. Central obligations such as prescribed prayer, fasting in Ramadan, and pilgrimage depend on revelation for their content and authority (Hallaq 2009).

Aquinas holds a similar position. On his view, although natural law includes basic moral precepts, truths necessary for humanity's supernatural end are not reliably attainable by reason alone. Aquinas makes two related claims about the necessity of revelation. First, knowledge of God's existence requires revelation because, as he says, even truths about God that reason could in principle discover 'would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors'. At the same time 'man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon a knowledge of this truth' (ST I, q. 1, a. 1). Second, knowledge of natural law requirements must be supplemented and reinforced by revelation, since some moral truths 'are known only by the wise and require promulgation to be accessible to all' (ST I–II, q. 100, a. 11). Aquinas here articulates something close to a due promulgation requirement for revealed knowledge. He argues that revelation is necessary precisely because natural reason is both unreliable and differentially distributed, as regards both knowledge of God's existence and moral knowledge.

Nor is this difficulty confined to Aquinas. Calvin likewise holds that creation leaves all of humanity with enough evidence 'to involve the human race in the same guilt' from denying his existence. At the same time, he also maintains that scripture is needed as a guide to distinguish 'the one true God' from 'the throng of false gods'. In addition, God as Redeemer as opposed to God as Creator is known through revelation rather than nature. Revelation is required because of both the limitations of our minds (which readily lapse into the 'forgetfulness of God' and 'the tendency of every kind of error') and the obscurity of God's nature ('the splendour of the divine countenance…is for us like an inexplicable labyrinth' out of which revelation guides us). Thus, Calvin treats revelation as necessary for the reliable identification of the Redeeming God, making its differential distribution morally significant (Calvin 1960, 1.6.1).

Aquinas might object that Divine Providence ensures that those who are open to instruction will eventually receive fuller revelation (*De Veritate* 14, a. 11, ad 1). However, this response does not satisfy the requirement of recognisable justice, since it appeals to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mere possibility that God treats cases alike rather than to evidence that he does. To claim that God will or must provide adequate revelation to all properly disposed agents does not establish that he has. Thus, the appeal to providence is an appeal at best to the hope that the Creator is perfectly just, as opposed to evidence that he is recognisably just.

We can distinguish between commands directed chiefly towards natural moral obligations and those directed towards our supernatural end. Natural law prohibitions on murder, theft, adultery, and lying concern obligations broadly accessible to reason. In contrast, commands guiding us towards our supernatural end, such as those concerning prayer, pilgrimage, and the acceptance of divine grace, depend on revelation for their content and authority. However, if natural law were fully accessible through reason independently of revelation, it would not be clear why revelation repeats commands that mirror natural law requirements. If such commands are given with additional evidence of God's existence, then differential access to that evidence constitutes differential treatment regarding salvation. If instead commands clarify moral requirements not reliably accessible through natural reason alone, then the differential distribution of revealed commands is again not consistent with the requirement of recognisable justice. In both cases, the claim that God need not make his existence adequately known to all who are to be held accountable is undermined.

God is loving, just, and his revealed commands apply only to the faithful

Some may object that the argument relies on a mistaken conception of the relationship of divine love and justice. This objection attacks both P1 and P3. Consider P1 first. It is thought to be false because a loving and just God would avoid compelling rational agents to obey him, and so would not give them conclusive evidence of his existence. God's respect for human autonomy is thus understood as an expression of benevolence. However, it is far from clear that making evidence available to all rational agents would compel belief or, even if it did, force compliance with God's commands. A common Abrahamic thesis is that sin damages our cognitive faculties and obscures the evidence for God's existence that is, in fact, available. Additionally, even if stronger evidence would, in some cases, reduce freedom, it remains true that no-one can be justly held accountable for failing to hope that God exists when they blamelessly judge that they lack adequate grounds for believing that he does. And even if conclusive evidence would compel belief, the argument only requires adequate evidence, not conclusive evidence.

Crucially, this argument does not require the claim that non-doxastic faith is morally or epistemically impermissible. However, even if faith is understood as hope, trust, or some other non-doxastic attitude, a recognisably just God cannot hold blameless rational agents accountable for failing to adopt that stance towards a purported divine commander whose existence and authority they do not have adequate grounds to recognise. Recasting faith in non-doxastic terms changes the attitude required, but it does not remove the problem of just accountability.

Some claim P3 is false because a recognisably perfectly just God need not hold all blameless rational agents accountable to salvific commands. Because these commands are not reliably known by reason alone, God makes them available by revelation while withholding conclusive evidence of his existence so that each person may freely choose whether to comply. Here, God is thought to be just because he does not punish those who fail to hope or trust without adequate evidence that he exists.

But this objection faces a dilemma. If those lacking faith fail to achieve union with God because they fail to adopt the hopeful and obedient stance the relevant commands require, then they are still held accountable in the relevant sense. The difficulty is that their ultimate good is conditioned on compliance. Accountability includes not only punitive sanctions but

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

also any structure in which an agent's highest good is withheld on the basis of compliance with purportedly binding divine demands. Since they are still held accountable in this case, it is not a counter-example to P3.

If, by contrast, beatitude is not conditioned on hope or obedience, then accountability is abandoned entirely. If union with God is attained by all regardless of compliance or non-compliance with God's commands, it is a pure gift. A loving God may produce such an outcome, but justice is not a synonym for benevolence. Without some functioning notion of accountability, there is also no justice in the distribution of goods dependent on compliance with God's commands. Justice is no longer seen through the lens of love; it is subsumed by it. The objection, therefore, fails as a counter-example to P3.

The natural theology objection

A different family of objections does not appeal to special faculties or sceptical theism but rather to the alleged strength of publicly accessible natural theology arguments. Some theists claim that such arguments provide ample evidence for belief in God's existence (for example, by citing fine-tuning for the emergence of conscious life). Yet these arguments presuppose background knowledge in cosmology, modal logic, Bayesian reasoning, or inference to the best explanation that few laypersons possess. Even granting the success of some arguments, they are not uniformly available to all moral agents. Moreover, highly intelligent thinkers with substantial philosophical training (such as Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Plantinga, and Mackie) disagree profoundly about what these arguments establish. A just Lawgiver cannot make the evidence for his existence and the binding authority of his commands this difficult to access. Additionally, devout believers themselves frequently deny that their commitment rests on such arguments. Finally, even if some versions of the ontological, fine-tuning, cosmological, or teleological arguments succeed, none aim to show that a perfectly just Supreme Lawgiver who has exercised his authority exists. And if divine law requires complex philosophical arguments to discern, that itself violates the requirement, defended in P1, that just laws be clearly promulgated to all blameless rational agents.

Open theism

Open theists hold that creaturely libertarian freedom limits divine foreknowledge and control: God cannot ensure outcomes that depend on genuinely free choices. Such theists face a choice: either accept that a perfectly just Supreme Commander would provide all blameless non-resistant agents with adequate evidence of his existence or maintain that libertarian freedom prevents God from giving such evidence to all. In the latter case, God is not perfectly just in the sense of treating like cases alike. While God would not be culpable for this failure, blameless agents may still not recognise a justifying reason for differential treatment. Or open theists could claim God holds the blamelessly ignorant accountable to some mysterious principle of justice known only by him, but this grants C2.

Process theism

Process theists hold that metaphysical constraints inherently limit God's power: God persuades rather than coerces and cannot unilaterally determine outcomes involving creatures with genuine agency. The result is that process theists face three options in response to the argument. First, they may accept P1, which asserts that just accountability requires recognisable grounds, but deny P2 by insisting that all blameless non-resistant agents in fact do believe they have adequate evidence of God's existence. The prior defence of P2 shows that this is empirically implausible. Second, they may accept P1 but maintain that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God lacks the power to ensure that every blameless agent has adequate evidence. But an appeal to limitations on divine power concedes C2, since blameless agents cannot recognise any justifying reason for the resulting differential treatment, even if God is not culpable for it. Third, they may reject P1 altogether by denying that just accountability requires recognisable grounds for differential treatment of blameless non-resistant agents. However, from the perspective of blameless rational agents, that denial renders 'justice' indistinguishable from mere power. The third response, like the second, again, leads to accepting C2.

The Calvinist objection to due promulgation

Even a theological tradition that might seem to reject the due promulgation requirement actually presupposes it. Consider Calvinism, which holds that all deserve damnation due to inherited guilt from the Fall, and that God shows mercy to some (the elect) but not others. One might expect Calvinists to reject P1's requirement that just accountability demands recognisable grounds. If everyone deserves damnation anyway, then it seems a just God need not ensure all have adequate evidence of his existence.

However, Calvinist theology does not escape P1's framework of just accountability. When Calvinists claim damnation is deserved, they ground this in inherited guilt from the Fall, citing Adam and Eve's violation of God's revealed command not to eat fruit from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The entire structure of inherited guilt presupposes that violation of revealed commands is what makes condemnation just. Even if current agents did not personally receive the command, the framework still fundamentally depends on accountability for revealed divine commands. The appeal to the Fall presupposes that the due promulgation requirement was fulfilled at some point for some agents.

Moreover, Calvinists rely on scripture as a justification for stressing obedience to God's commands, and accountability to revealed divine legislation throughout scripture. If due promulgation were irrelevant to just accountability, this theological emphasis would be inexplicable. The structure of Calvinist theology, which is centred on revealed commands, their binding nature, and human accountability to them, implicitly accepts that legitimate accountability requires promulgation.

Additionally, when Calvinists defend differential treatment in election (some receive saving grace, others do not), they invariably offer justifying reasons: God's sovereignty, his freedom to show mercy, and the view that mercy is a gift rather than an obligation. The very practice of offering justifying reasons for differential treatment demonstrates acceptance of the principle that like cases should be treated alike unless there is a justifying reason for differential treatment. Calvinists are not rejecting this principle; they are offering what they take to be justifying reasons that satisfy it.

As we have just seen, the theological tradition one might initially think most likely to reject P1's minimal procedural requirements for just accountability presupposes them. Thus, we have strong evidence that these requirements represent a widely accepted framework rather than one contested conception of justice among many.

Alternatively, Calvinists may appeal to God's sovereignty to justify the different treatment of the elect and the damned. But such an appeal faces a dilemma. One option is to deny P2 by insisting that all human beings are culpable because God's law has been sufficiently made known to them. But this fails for the reasons already given: some agents are devout, non-resistant, and blamelessly convinced that they lack adequate evidence that a Supreme Commander exists. The claim that all are culpable, therefore, does not bypass the argument; it simply denies P2, and does so implausibly.

The other option is to deny the due promulgation requirement. On this view, God can justly punish those who are blamelessly unaware of his existence, while extending mercy to others. However, in this case justice collapses into sheer power. A command that can be

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

violated without ever being encountered is not a genuine command. And punishment for the violation of an unknown law is arbitrary domination rather than just accountability. In that case, divine 'commands' cease to function as authoritative directives at all, since agents discover what the commander forbids only after they have already acted.

Appeals to 'sovereignty' do not create a third option. If sovereignty means only that God may do whatever he wills because he has the power to do so, then it merely names the collapse of justice into power. On the other hand, if it instead means that God is just in condemning all because all are genuinely culpable, then the appeal to sovereignty presupposes the falsity of P2. But we saw in the earlier defence of P2 that we have strong empirical evidence for accepting it.

The P1 is too subjective objection

So far, I have argued that P1–P3 are plausible and that their conjunction supports C2. Several important objections remain. P1 requires that blameless non-resistant agents believe they have adequate evidence that a Supreme Commander exists. But this makes just accountability depend on the subjective judgements of finite agents. Some may object that what matters is whether adequate evidence objectively exists, not whether each agent believes they have it. Such evidence might be found in natural theology, the *sensus divinitatis*, universal moral experience, or the created order. A just lawgiver, such critics maintain, need not ensure subjective alignment between an agent's self-assessment and the objective evidence potentially available. According to these critics, P1 mistakenly assumes a form of epistemic subjectivism.

However, the core argument does not assume subjectivism in this sense about evidence or justification. It appeals instead to the due promulgation requirement for just accountability. Where an agent is held accountable to a Supreme Authority, with the eternal consequences that purportedly follow, the objective and subjective components of accountability must coincide for blameless non-resistant agents. The foregoing requirement is a purely procedural requirement of justice and accountability, not a general epistemic theory. Even if perfectly adequate evidence for his existence objectively exists, a just Supreme Commander must ensure that blamelessly conscientious agents recognise it as such. If they do not, despite openness, effort, and non-resistance, then that Commander has failed to provide what just accountability requires.

Consider the state's obligation to give unobstructed traffic signage. It is not enough that a stop sign exists in the abstract. If the sign is hidden behind foliage, then blameless drivers who do not see it are not justly held accountable for non-compliance with the relevant traffic law. The objective fact does not generate just accountability unless it is recognisably available to those held accountable. The ways in which the traffic signage analogy is dissimilar to accountability to God's revealed law support rather than detract from the argument made here. It is essential to keep in mind that God's commands invoke supreme moral authority, require overriding all competing considerations, and (according to many theists) have eternal consequences of the greatest importance. Given these stakes, the requirement that objective and subjective evidence coincide for blameless non-resistant agents is stronger, not weaker, than for human lawmakers.

Thus, P1 is not an epistemic thesis about evidence required for knowledge in general. It is the minimal condition under which accountability to a putative supreme authority is just rather than arbitrary. Rejecting this would collapse justice into power: an opaque, unrecognisable standard indistinguishable from mere domination. Because a Supreme Commander whose existence cannot be recognised by blameless non-resistant rational agents cannot ground just accountability, P1 is not objectionably subjective.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The soul-making objection

Some object that epistemic hiddenness serves soul-making: it enables genuine moral transformation by preserving freedom from coercion. Even granting this, two problems remain. First, agents who do not believe they have adequate evidence cannot be justly held accountable to commands attributed to God, regardless of what other goods hiddenness may serve. Second, even if searching in uncertainty has value, there is a vast gap between that value possibly justifying differential treatment and our being able to recognise it as actually justifying differential treatment. Moreover, if divine hiddenness furthers soul-making, then everyone should experience hiddenness at some point. What hiddenness cannot explain is why some but not others are blamelessly unaware of God's existence.

The sceptical theism objection

Sceptical theists maintain that human cognitive limitations prevent us from knowing whether God has morally sufficient reasons for actions that appear to us to be unjust. But appealing to such limitations here concedes the argument. If God's reasons for differential treatment are unknowable, then blameless agents cannot recognise his treatment of them as perfectly just, which is precisely what C2 concludes.

Conclusion

C2 has significant theological and practical implications. The argument made here applies to any account of God that involves accountability to revealed commands, whether that accountability is understood in terms of strict divine judgement or as the consequence of failing to enter into a proper relationship with a loving God. It shows that no perfectly just Supreme Commander exists whom we can recognise as perfectly just. One might think that appealing to God's mysterious justice provides an escape, but this offers less comfort than it appears.

Suppose MacIntyre (1986) is right that no-one is morally obligated to obey a God solely in virtue of his power, independently of any awareness that he is just. In that case, the appeal to mysterious justice leaves us with no recognisable obligation to obey any purported divine commander. MacIntyre's argument is straightforward: there is no way to infer validly 'I ought to obey X' from 'X is infinitely powerful'. Power alone cannot ground obligation. Moreover, there is no way for a rational agent to make a non-arbitrary distinction between 'I ought to obey X because X is infinitely powerful' and 'I ought to obey Y because X has turned me over to the power of Y' when X and Y give conflicting commands. Suppose an all-powerful Creator permits a demon to influence my beliefs and desires. If obedience is nothing but a response to power, I have no grounds for preferring obedience to the Creator over obedience to the demon, since both are simply powerful beings issuing commands. Without recognisable justice, 'obey the Creator because he is powerful' is indistinguishable from 'obey the demon because the Creator empowered the demon'. Eliminating any recognisable conception of justice leaves rational agents with only the choice of which powerful being to obey, which yields theological incoherence.[15] There is then no remaining way to justify the traditional theistic claim that those subject to a demon's power have a recognisable moral obligation to obey the Creator.

Classical theists who maintain recognisably perfect justice and accountability to revealed commands cannot escape this result by retreating solely to natural law. Even if natural law were adequately promulgated to all, any additional revelation of God's existence provided to some but not others would constitute unjust differential treatment, since some agents would have access to more evidence (natural law plus revelation) than others

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(natural law alone). Additionally, if persistent disagreement among conscientious reasoners about fundamental moral requirements establishes that blameless moral ignorance exists, then natural law also faces a due promulgation problem. Finally, if 'commands' are interpreted so analogically that they lose connection to actual authoritative directives, then revealed law that diverges from natural law loses its binding force entirely. The classical theist faces a trilemma: maintain that a just Supreme Commander issues recognisable revealed commands (which this paper has shown is implausible), retreat to natural law alone (which faces parallel promulgation problems and differential treatment concerns), or interpret 'commands' so analogically that they lose binding force as divine legislation. No option preserves the traditional Abrahamic structure of revealed divine law.

The practical implications are substantial. If no-one is morally obligated to obey the commands of a Supreme Commander whose justice we cannot recognise, then no-one is morally obligated to obey commands that exceed natural moral law or conscience, such as ritual observances like dietary restrictions, Sabbath observance, pilgrimage requirements, or specific prayer obligations. Moreover, we cannot appeal to commands putatively given by a perfectly just Supreme Commander to resolve secular moral debates. Since we cannot recognise such a Commander's existence or justice, purported divine commands provide no evidential weight for moral or political positions. We have no grounds for organising society on the basis of commands attributed to an unrecognisable authority.

There is, in this connection, a crucial difference between acting in accordance with a command and acting because of that command. I might donate to charity in accordance with both secular moral reasoning and putative divine commands. But if I donate for secular moral reasons alone, this is epistemically and morally different from donating on the basis of 'God commands it'. The former can be publicly justified; the latter cannot, if we cannot recognise the perfectly just Commander's existence.

The core argument of this paper undermines key theological doctrines that depend on recognisable divine justice. Traditional Abrahamic theism commits to revealed divine commands having moral authority, human obligations to obey these commands, divine punishment for disobedience, and divine forgiveness as the solution to just punishment. Suppose there is no reliable, recognisable identification of divine authority. In that case, there is no just accountability to commands attributed to a perfectly just Supreme Commander who purports to exercise his authority by means of revelation, and therefore no legitimate punishment and no meaningful forgiveness for disobedience to commands identified as divine.

For many believers, the conclusion poses an existential challenge. Central Abrahamic acts of submission, such as praying 'Let thy will be done', presuppose that one can recognise God's revealed will as just and authoritative. If God's justice is unrecognisable to those most willing to submit, this act of submission cannot be grounded in recognisable just accountability as traditionally understood. One can still submit to what one hopes is God's will as disclosed in natural law or conscience, but this is qualitatively different from submitting to what one recognises as God's just commands.

Though C2 leaves open the possibility that God exists on a variety of conceptions, its implications are far-reaching. For traditions claiming that a perfectly just Supreme Commander issues binding commands through revelation and holds all rational agents accountable to them, the inability to recognise God's perfect justice undermines the entire structure of revealed divine command, human obligation, just punishment, and redemptive forgiveness.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to the anonymous referees at *Religious Studies* for their insightful questions, comments, and objections. Responding to their concerns led to a substantial restructuring of the original draft.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. Fuller holds that a 'law' not made public is no law at all (Fuller 1964, 51). Aquinas similarly claims that a law binds only when promulgated (Aquinas 2006, ST I–II, q. 90, a. 4). It is a reasonable extension that knowledge of the lawgiver's existence must also be made known if the law is to bind rationally.

2. The argument made here concerns evidence of the Commander's existence, which is the minimal condition for just accountability. One might argue that due promulgation also requires adequate guidance on how fundamental commands apply to particular situations, especially where disobedience carries eternal consequences. Whether this is an implausibly demanding standard is addressed in separate work. In other papers out for review, I examine the implications of blameless ignorance of the grounds of authority of a Supreme Commander, and the blameless misattribution of commands to him. Both discussions require addressing issues beyond the space limitations of this paper.

3. Even if this argument does not apply to conceptions of God where personhood is understood purely analogically, it applies to conceptions of God on which he is understood as literally a person who issues commands. Since many believers and significant strands of Abrahamic theology treat God as a literal commander, judge, and lawgiver, this remains a non-trivial result.

4. A likely concern at this point is that all blameless non-resistant rational agents who judge they lack adequate evidence are mistaken in their assessment, even if non-culpably so. However, this is highly unlikely given their diverse backgrounds, religious commitments, and levels of philosophical training. The judgement is shared by devout practitioners across traditions, trained philosophers, and sincere seekers. Note that many such people have a strong motivation to find the evidence compelling if it were available. That such different agents reach the same conclusion suggests the deficiency lies in the evidence's accessibility, not in an exceptionless mistaken self-assessment.

5. I am not defending a specifically theological account of justice, nor claiming that God is metaphysically bound by human norms. My point is epistemic, not metaphysical. For God's treatment of agents to be recognisable as just by those held accountable, God must operate within the minimal conceptual structure of justice of which, if it is true that he exists and his will is the source of all value, he is the author. Any recognisable conception of justice is committed to the requirement to treat like cases alike unless there is a justifying reason to do otherwise. Note that the principle is formal in that it does not specify either what counts as 'like cases' or 'a justifying reason to do otherwise'. Without appeal to this minimal formal principle, blameless agents cannot distinguish justice from the arbitrary exercise of power. Thus, theists face a dilemma: deny the standard, in which case divine justice is indistinguishable from mere domination from our point of view; or accept it, in which case the evidence of differential treatment without recognisable justification yields C2. Either way, no recognisably perfectly just Supreme Commander exists.

6. Molinists might argue that even if theological determinism is false, God could have a justifying reason for denying some agents adequate knowledge of his existence. Molinists might argue that God, having divine foreknowledge of what agents with libertarian free will would choose in the future, deprives some of those who would not believe in his existence in any case of adequate knowledge of his existence. Again, this is a speculative metaphysical claim that does not undermine the empirical evidence for P2. We have no access to such counterfactuals, so the possibility is not a justifying reason for differential treatment accessible to us.

7. The argument from just accountability targets the conception of God widely assumed in Abrahamic practice: a recognisably just Commander who issues binding revealed commands, desires the salvation of sincere seekers, and is not arbitrary or deceptive. If these commitments are weakened or abandoned, the resulting conception is no longer the one at issue.

8. Even in human legal systems, 'ignorance of the law is no excuse' presupposes that the law has been duly promulgated.

9. See Bergmann et al. (2011).

10. Plantinga might object that some have warranted belief that God exists without realising this, since such belief can be rational even without inference from evidence (Plantinga 2000, xi, 168). On his view, if God exists, there is likely a faculty (the *sensus divinitatis*) that reliably produces belief that God exists in all rational agents.

11. MacIntyre contends that we are assured by a proper reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac that God will not require us to act on commands that will produce 'a divided mind and will' in rational agents disposed to obey (MacIntyre 1986, 362).

12. See Luhrmann (2012); Luhrmann (2020).

13. Kolodiejchuk (2007, 336); Nevin (2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press

14. Kolodiejchuk (2007, 192).
15. MacIntyre (1986, 366).

References

Aquinas T (2006) *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 28, Gilby T (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Bergmann M, Murray MJ, and Rea MC (eds) (2011) *Divine Evil? the Moral Character of the God of Abraham*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Calvin J (1960) *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, McNeill JT (ed.), Battles FL (trans.), vol. 2 Westminster, PA: Westminster Press.
Fuller LL (1964) *The Morality of Law*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Hallaq WB (2009) *An Introduction to Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Howard-Snyder D (2013) Propositional faith: What it is and what it is not. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, 357–372.
Howard-Snyder D and McKaughan DJ (2023) The problem of faith and reason. In Fuqua J, Greco J, and McNabb T (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 96–114.
Kolodiejchuk B (ed.) (2007) *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light – The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'*. New York: Doubleday.
Luhrmann TM (2012) *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
Luhrmann TM (2020) *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
MacIntyre A (1986) Which God ought we to obey and why? *Faith and Philosophy* 3, 359–371.
Maitzen S (2006) Divine hiddenness and the demographics of theism. *Religious Studies* 42, 459–478.
Malcolm F and Scott M (2021) True grit and the positivity of faith. *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 17, 5–32.
McKaughan D (2013) Authentic faith and acknowledged risk: Dissolving the problem of faith and reason. *Religious Studies* 49, 101–124.
Nevin TR (2013) *The Last Years of Saint Thérèse: Doubt and Darkness, 1895–1897*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Plantinga A (2000) *Warranted Christian Belief* . Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Pojman L (1986) Faith without belief? *Faith and Philosophy* 3, 157–176.
Rioux C (2021) Hope: Conceptual and normative issues. *Philosophy Compass* 16, 1–11.
Schellenberg JL (2007) *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Cite this article: Elbert FJ (2026) God, justice, and accountability. *Religious Studies* **62**, 962–979. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101644 Published online by Cambridge University Press