

Objective Morality Without Moral Convergence — 41

Christian Disagreement, Divine Clarity, and the Epistemic Limits of Moral Apologetics

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Central claim

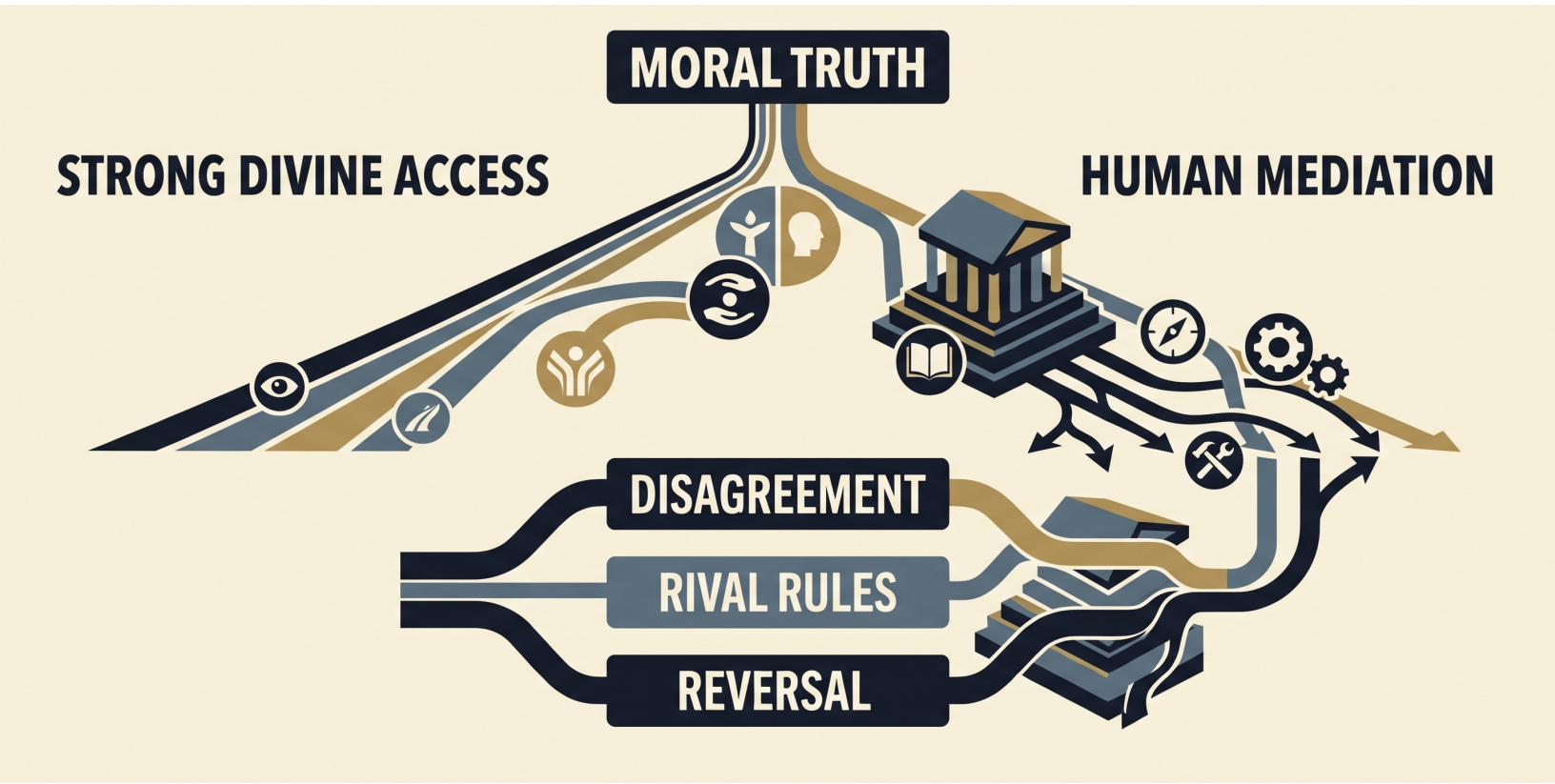
Christians and apologists who present biblical theism as a clear, reliable, publicly accessible moral framework face an evidential problem: it should produce a recognizable moral-reliability advantage over ordinary human mediation. Yet durable high-stakes disagreement, competing interpretive methods, historical reversal, and ordinary social mediation are more readily expected under human mediation, so the record lowers comparative support for strong divine moral access. This does not refute theism, moral realism, or every divine command theory; a weaker account remains live but needs independent evidence of reliable access.

Preview:

Target claim	Expected difference	Observed pressure	Bounded conclusion
Biblical theism supplies distinctive, public moral clarity.	Sincere Christian inquiry should converge more reliably than ordinary human mediation predicts.	Major disputes persist over actions and interpretive rules, while judgments reverse with social change.	The record lowers comparative support for strong divine access; ontology and weaker revelation claims remain open.

The issue is not whether objective moral truth exists or whether Christians can reason well. It is whether the observed record supports a claim of distinctively clear Christian access to that truth.

Visual preview:



The visual begins with moral truth, contrasts the convergent path expected under strong divine access with institutionally filtered human mediation, and groups disagreement, rival rules, and reversal with the latter. It depicts comparative evidential fit; it does not deny objective morality or decide which disputed judgment is correct.

Abstract

Persistent Christian moral disagreement weakens the claim that biblical theism supplies clear, reliable, publicly accessible moral guidance. The relevant question is not whether objective morality exists, whether a deity could ground it, or whether Christians sometimes judge well. It is comparative: if a strong divine-access account should produce more determinate convergence among sincere adherents than ordinary human mediation should, which account better fits the record examined here? Historical disputes over slavery and current divisions over sexuality, abortion, punishment, gender, and political authority combine with deeper disagreement about how texts, traditions, conscience, and social knowledge should govern moral judgment. Historical reversals add further pressure because positions once defended as biblically warranted are later condemned through rival Christian interpretations. These strands form a cumulative case: they are more expected when moral judgment is filtered through ordinary cultural, institutional, psychological, and interpretive mechanisms than when one public framework reliably resolves high-stakes disputes. The result is limited but consequential. It does not establish atheism, moral anti-realism, or the falsity of divine command theory. A weaker account may hold that objective moral truth has a divine ground while human access remains fallible and contested. That retreat is coherent, but it gives up the original evidential claim unless independent evidence identifies a reliable access mechanism. Moral apologists should therefore separate grounding from knowledge and proportion claims of divine clarity to the clarity actually displayed.

Keywords: objective morality; Christian ethics; moral disagreement; divine command theory; moral convergence; moral epistemology; religious disagreement

1. The Apologetic Claim Under Pressure

Arguments connecting theism and morality make importantly different claims. Some are metaphysical: objective values or obligations are said to depend on a divine reality. Sophisticated versions of this family explain goodness through resemblance to a perfectly good deity, obligation through divine commands, or moral law through a cooperative relation between divine and natural facts (Adams, 1999; Evans, 2013; Murphy, 2011; Quinn, 1978). These proposals deserve evaluation on their own terms. A disagreement among believers does not by itself show that none of them is true.

A stronger public claim can accompany the metaphysical one. In some apologetic uses, Christianity is presented not merely as an account of what makes moral claims true but as a distinctively clear and reliable way for human beings to identify moral truth. On this reading, scripture, tradition, conscience, communal discernment, or some combination of them should deliver a practical advantage over moral inquiry conducted through ordinary human means. The claim is not only that there is a moral landscape. It is that Christians possess a better map.

This paper addresses that stronger claim. A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity, including the attributes, intentions, commands, and revelatory practices assigned to it. The target here is a Christian God-concept joined to a *strong divine-access hypothesis*: sincere Christian communities possess clear, reliable, publicly accessible moral guidance sufficient to produce more determinate convergence on major action-guiding questions than ordinary human mediation would produce. The comparator is the *human-mediation hypothesis*: Christian moral judgments arise through scripture and theology, but also through the same interpretive, institutional, cultural, political, and psychological processes that shape other moral communities, without a public mechanism that reliably resolves their hardest disputes.

The governing thesis is straightforward. Persistent high-stakes disagreement, conflict over the rules of interpretation, historical reversal, and alignment with ordinary social mediation are more expected under human mediation than under strong divine access. The record therefore lowers the comparative support for the strong hypothesis. This is an argument about evidential fit, not a shortcut from disagreement to falsity.

The intended reader may reasonably believe that theism grounds moral truth or that a Christian tradition contains profound moral insight. The requested change is narrower: do not move from a claimed divine source to claimed reliable access without supplying the missing bridge. Do not count Christian agreement as evidence of guidance while treating every disagreement as irrelevant. If the access claim takes credit for convergence, it must also accept exposure to persistent nonconvergence.

2. Grounding, Access, and Action Guidance

Moral ontology asks what makes moral claims true. Moral epistemology asks how agents can know which moral claims are true. A successful answer to the first question does not automatically answer the second. Even if a deity grounds objective value, finite communities may still misidentify the content, priority, or application of moral requirements.

This point survives refined answers to the Euthyphro problem. Plato's dialogue asks whether piety is approved because it is pious or pious because it is approved (Plato, 1997). Contemporary divine command theories avoid a crude choice between arbitrary power and an external standard by relating commands to a necessarily loving or perfectly good divine nature (Adams, 1999; Evans, 2013; Quinn, 1978). Suppose one of these accounts succeeds. Human agents must still distinguish an authentic command from a mistaken interpretation, inherited prejudice, political convenience, institutional self-protection, or a rival theological reading. Metaphysical success does not confer interpretive immunity.

The difference becomes visible when broad moral nouns are translated into action. Christians may agree that love, justice, holiness, mercy, dignity, and faithfulness matter while disagreeing over which laws, permissions, prohibitions, and institutions those terms require. Agreement at the level of praise words is not yet agreement at the level where bodies, freedom, punishment, wealth, family, violence, and political power are governed.

This yields an *action-guidance criterion*: alleged moral consensus supports a claim of distinctive access only to the extent that it produces reliable convergence on concrete, high-stakes judgments rather than shared honorific language. A framework may sustain community and moral reflection without meeting this stronger evidential standard. That is not failure by definition; it is a limit on the apologetic conclusion.

The criterion also prevents an unfair inference from disagreement. Moral disagreement is philosophically complicated. It need not defeat moral realism, and its epistemic significance depends on the competence, independence, evidence, and relationship of the disputants (McGrath, 2008; Tersman, 2006). A recent study of more than four hundred moral philosophers even found substantial agreement on many cases commonly described as controversial (Boespflug, 2026). That finding is a useful warning: no argument should assume that moral inquiry always produces chaos. It also sharpens the present question. If trained inquiry can sometimes converge, a strong public-access claim should identify where Christian access produces a comparable and distinctively explained advantage.

The access burden

A religious moral framework does not gain epistemic superiority merely by positing a divine ground. To support a public claim of distinctive clarity, it must identify a method that distinguishes correct moral content from rival sincere interpretations more reliably than ordinary human mediation does.

3. A Cumulative Pattern, Not a Disagreement Slogan

No single dispute carries the case. The evidential pressure comes from several related strands: action-guiding division, disagreement over interpretive rules, historical reversal, and the visible alignment of moral judgment with ordinary social forces. Each strand is limited; together they form a cumulative comparison.

3.1 Action-guiding division

Christian communities have defended incompatible positions on slavery, religious coercion, war, capital punishment, abortion, same-sex relationships, gender authority, divorce, economic obligation, and the moral scope of state power. The point is not that every Christian disagrees with every other Christian or that no broad consensus

exists. The point is that many disputes concern precisely the high-stakes actions on which a claim of clear public guidance should matter most.

Current survey evidence offers a bounded illustration. In the United States, the 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study found that 55 percent of Christians favored legal same-sex marriage. Yet 62 percent of evangelical Protestants opposed it, while 70 percent of Catholics and 56 percent of historically Black Protestants favored it (Smith et al., 2025). The same report records sharp intergroup differences on abortion and transgender acceptance. These figures do not measure sincerity, theological competence, or global Christianity, and a change from telephone to mainly online and paper methods complicates exact trend comparisons. They securely establish a narrower point: contemporary Christians who invoke a common religious identity and overlapping scriptures remain divided on concrete moral and legal judgments.

3.2 Disagreement about how to decide

First-order disagreement is compounded by second-order disagreement about the rules that should resolve it. Christian interpreters differ over plain meaning, genre, historical context, covenant, natural law, ecclesial authority, conscience, experience, canonical harmony, theological development, and the relation between narrative description and moral command. Hays’s account of New Testament ethics, for example, emphasizes a complex movement among text, community, symbolic world, and practical judgment rather than mechanical rule extraction (Hays, 1996).

Complexity is not itself a defect. Mature moral reasoning may require it. But complexity matters to the access claim because competing methods can direct equally serious readers toward incompatible conclusions. If there is no public, independently identifiable rule for ranking those methods, possession of the same texts does not generate the predicted resolution. The interpretive dispute merely moves one level upward.

3.3 Historical reversal

Moral positions defended as biblically warranted have later been rejected by many Christians as grave wrongs. The American controversy over slavery is especially probative because participants appealed to a shared canon while dividing over both conclusions and interpretive method. Noll documents how the Bible’s authority was widely affirmed even as readings of slavery helped produce a theological crisis (Noll, 2006). Abolitionist achievement can rightly be described as Christian moral reform, yet Christian defenses of slavery were also real. The tradition supplied resources to both sides, while social location, political interest, moral experience, and hermeneutic choice helped determine which resources governed.

Historical reversal does not prove that the later position is correct simply because it is later. It establishes a different constraint: a community that has reclassified major judgments once defended as divinely warranted cannot use current confidence as a substitute for an account of error correction. The question is not whether reform occurs, but whether a reliable mechanism explains why the reform tracks moral truth rather than ordinary moral learning.

3.4 Ordinary human mediation

Moral judgment is formed within traditions, institutions, loyalties, emotions, and histories. MacIntyre’s account of tradition-constituted reasoning and Haidt’s work on intuitive and socially embedded judgment differ greatly in method and ambition, but both make one modest point plausible: reasoners do not approach moral questions from nowhere (Haidt, 2012; MacIntyre, 2007). Religious reasoners are not exceptions to human cognition merely because the content they assess is religious.

This creates a parity test. If Christian disagreement correlates with denomination, political identity, region, generation, and contested interpretive authority in ways familiar from other communities, then ordinary mediation already predicts much of the pattern. A strong divine-access hypothesis must explain what additional, discrimi-

nating result it predicts. Without that difference, the divine label redescribes the process rather than showing that it is more reliable.

Table 1 makes the cumulative structure explicit. It does not assign numerical weights or claim that any strand proves the conclusion alone.

Table 1: Evidence ledger for the comparative access claim. Each strand pressures strong public access while leaving moral truth and weaker revelation accounts open.

Strand	Observed record	Comparative pressure	What it does not show
Action-guiding division	Durable conflict over concrete permissions, prohibitions, and institutions	Less convergence than a strong clarity claim leads us to expect	That every participant is equally informed or that no moral truth exists
Interpretive-rule conflict	Rival methods govern text, tradition, conscience, and context	No uncontested public rule reliably resolves the first-order dispute	That complex interpretation is inherently irrational
Historical reversal	Positions once defended as divinely warranted are later condemned	Error correction resembles contested human moral learning	That later judgment is automatically correct
Social mediation	Judgment varies with institutions, identities, loyalties, and cultural pressures	Ordinary mechanisms already explain much of the pattern	That religious conviction is reducible to politics or psychology

Taken together, the four strands do more than document disagreement. They expose the same missing difference: neither outcomes, interpretive rules, error correction, nor social patterning displays the general reliability advantage that strong divine access leads us to expect. That shared pressure is why the evidence is cumulative rather than merely repetitive.

4. Why the Pattern Favors Human Mediation

The comparison does not require invented probabilities. Let the strong divine-access account and the human-mediation account make different qualitative expectations. Strong access expects a recognizable advantage: across sincere, informed Christian communities, major disputes should be resolved more determinately, more stably, or through a publicly reliable corrective process. Human mediation expects a mixture of shared language, local convergence, durable conflict, interpretive fragmentation, and change responsive to social as well as theological pressures.

The record examined here resembles the second expectation more closely. That is an inductive judgment, not a mathematical measurement. Its logic is the familiar expected-difference bridge: when evidence is less expected under one account than under a live comparator, the evidence lowers the former's comparative support. The appendix states this relation exactly without pretending to know numerical likelihoods.

Two visible arguments carry the result.

The expected-difference argument

1. If strong divine access is correct, sincere Christian moral inquiry should display some public reliability advantage over ordinary human mediation.
2. Persistent action-guiding division, rival interpretive rules, and reversal display no clear general advantage and are readily expected under human mediation.
3. Therefore the observed pattern lowers the comparative support for strong divine access, unless independent access evidence restores the difference.

The every-outcome fork

Either the access claim predicts a difference or it does not. If it predicts greater convergence or reliable correction, persistent failure to display that difference counts against the strong claim. If sin, finitude, culture, and mystery make every pattern equally compatible with divine access, the weakened claim may remain possible, but agreement can no longer be advertised as distinctive public confirmation.

This fork blocks an evidential double standard. A defender cannot count moral convergence as the fruit of revelation and then declare moral nonconvergence evidentially inert merely because error is possible. Error is always possible. The question is whether the framework produces a comparative difference despite that possibility.

The fork also clarifies the status of a weaker divine-access account. It may hold that a deity grounds moral reality, communicates moral truth imperfectly, and permits widespread human error. Such an account is coherent and may have other support. But if it predicts the same disagreement pattern as human mediation, the disagreement does not favor it. Compatibility prevents refutation; it does not create confirmation.

5. Strongest Replies and Their Evidential Price

5.1 Disagreement does not imply that there is no truth

Correct. Scientists, historians, and moral philosophers can disagree while one view is true. The argument is not from disagreement to anti-realism. It is from a specific pattern to reduced support for a claim of distinctive access. The distinction matters because the same defender may be right about moral ontology and overconfident about moral epistemology.

The recent evidence of expert moral convergence strengthens this reply in one respect (Boespflug, 2026). Disagreement is not uniform, and some questions admit stable agreement. Yet that result does not rescue strong Christian access by itself. It asks the defender to make the relevant comparison more precise: where does the Christian framework outperform available human methods, and what publicly identifiable mechanism explains the advantage?

5.2 Christianity has produced moral progress

It has. Christian convictions have animated abolition, civil-rights action, care for vulnerable people, resistance to tyranny, reconciliation, and costly service. Those achievements are evidence about the capacities of Christian traditions. They do not establish an exclusive or uniformly reliable access channel, especially when rival Christians opposed the reforms from the same scriptures.

The access question is selector-sensitive. Which feature of the tradition chose the liberating reading over the oppressive one? If the answer invokes conscience, experience, historical knowledge, testimony from victims, or

a revised interpretive method, those may be excellent sources. The defender must then explain whether they are distinctively divine, ordinarily human, or a cooperative mixture. Calling the successful outcome Christian does not yet identify the reliability mechanism.

5.3 Sin and finitude explain the disagreement

Sin, self-interest, ignorance, and finitude may explain much moral error. The reply becomes evidentially useful only if it supplies a symmetrical way to diagnose error. A community cannot establish its own reliability by attributing every rival conclusion to sin while treating its own conclusion as revelation. The same human vulnerabilities are available on both sides.

If the reply says that no amount of disagreement should surprise us because sincere agents remain deeply corrupt and interpretation remains opaque, it has moved to the weaker account. That move may preserve theology, but it relinquishes the prediction of distinctive public clarity. The explanatory escape and the apologetic claim cannot both remain at full strength.

5.4 Secular moral communities also disagree

They do. This observation supports the human-mediation comparator unless the Christian claim was only that Christians would do no worse than everyone else. Parity is compatible with moral seriousness; it is not evidence of superiority. A defender who advertises biblical theism as the solution to secular moral confusion must show more than the same pattern under a religious description.

The comparison must also be fair. Secular moral inquiry includes multiple theories, institutions, and levels of expertise, just as Christianity includes denominations and interpretive traditions. Cherry-picking a fragmented secular public against a selected Christian expert group would not establish the general claim. The relevant groups, questions, and standards must be fixed independently of the desired result.

5.5 Only the faithful or properly formed community counts

A qualified subset may be more reliable than a broad population. Expertise often matters. But the selection rule cannot be circular. If the “properly formed” community is identified mainly by reaching the conclusions already judged correct, convergence within that group is manufactured by definition.

A noncircular proposal should specify observable qualifications—linguistic competence, historical knowledge, intellectual virtue, freedom from material conflict, exposure to affected persons, or a stable correction procedure—and then show that the qualified community succeeds on evidence not used to select it. Such a result would be relevant independent access evidence. Until then, restricting the sample protects the claim more than it tests it.

6. What Independent Access Evidence Would Look Like

The argument is critical, but it also identifies a constructive burden. A strong divine-access account could regain support by producing a public difference that ordinary mediation does not explain as well. Several kinds of evidence would matter:

- a dispute-resolution method specified before the outcome that repeatedly corrects error across communities;
- convergence on difficult cases where denomination, political interest, and cultural pressure strongly predict division;
- morally important insights reached through the claimed religious method earlier and more reliably than through available comparison methods;
- symmetrical error checks that can identify mistakes inside the favored community, not only outside it; and

- stable success on new cases rather than retrospective relabeling of reforms that have already won broad approval.

These are not demands for infallibility. Ordinary reliable methods make mistakes. The relevant standard is comparative: does the claimed access route improve judgment in ways that are recognizable without assuming its truth in advance?

Nor must every divine-access theory accept this public standard. A theologian may understand revelation as forming character, disclosing possibilities of goodness, sustaining a tradition, or addressing particular communities rather than guaranteeing consensus. Adams, for example, gives moral epistemology a significant social-practice dimension even within a theistic framework (Adams, 1999). Such accounts may be more subtle than the strong apologetic claim. Their subtlety should be honored by not using them to promise a kind of public clarity they do not predict.

The constructive burden therefore separates three questions that are too often merged:

1. What, if anything, makes moral claims true?
2. Which human practices reliably identify those truths?
3. Does a specifically Christian practice outperform live alternatives on evidence not chosen after the fact?

An answer to the first question does not settle the second. A meaningful religious answer to the second does not automatically establish the third. Moral apologetics becomes stronger, not weaker, when it states which claim it can actually support.

7. Conclusion

The record examined here lowers comparative support for strong divine moral access relative to ordinary human mediation. Durable conflict over concrete actions, disagreement about interpretive rules, historical reversal, and alignment with ordinary social processes are more readily expected when Christian judgment is shaped through contested human mediation than when one public framework delivers distinctive clarity. This is not a shortcut from disagreement to falsity; it is a comparison of expected evidence.

The strongest cumulative reason is not disagreement alone. It is the missing reliability advantage. The same framework that claims a divine source repeatedly requires contested human selection among texts, traditions, authorities, experiences, and moral intuitions. When defenders invoke sin, finitude, or mystery to explain the resulting division, they may preserve a weaker and more modest theology. But that retreat also reduces the original apologetic force. A map can correspond to a real landscape and still fail to guide its readers reliably.

The principal limit remains clear: objective moral facts may exist; a divine reality may help explain them; and Christian communities may preserve genuine moral knowledge. This paper does not disprove theism, moral realism, divine command theory, or every form of revelation. Independent evidence of a reliable access mechanism could change the comparison. Until such evidence is supplied, Christians and apologists should proportion claims of divine moral clarity to the clarity actually displayed. The decisive question is not merely whether a moral truth has a divine ground. It is: what public method distinguishes that truth from a sincere rival interpretation, and how do we know the method works?

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Plain-language reconstruction

- P1.** If strong divine access is more reliable than ordinary human mediation, then sincere Christian moral inquiry should display some publicly identifiable advantage in convergence, stability, or error correction on major

action-guiding questions.

- P2.** The record examined here includes persistent action-guiding division, conflict over interpretive rules, historical reversal, and dependence on ordinary social and psychological processes, with no clear general reliability advantage.
- P3.** That cumulative pattern is less expected under strong divine access than under human mediation, unless independent access evidence supplies the missing advantage.
- P4.** Evidence that is less expected under one hypothesis than under a live comparator lowers the former hypothesis's comparative support.
- P5.** Therefore the observed record lowers the comparative support for strong divine access relative to human mediation, unless independent access evidence changes the comparison.

Scope condition. The conclusion concerns a strong, comparative public-access hypothesis. It does not entail atheism, moral anti-realism, the falsity of divine command theory, or the falsity of a weaker account on which moral truth has a divine ground while human access remains fallible and contested.

A.2 Symbols

- H : the strong divine-access hypothesis defined in the paper;
- M : the ordinary human-mediation hypothesis;
- E : the cumulative observed record of disagreement, interpretive conflict, reversal, and social mediation;
- P : a probability function representing rational comparative confidence.

A.3 Symbolic reconstruction

Assume positive prior probability for both H and M . The central comparative premise is:

$$P(E | H) < P(E | M) \quad \Rightarrow \quad \frac{P(H | E)}{P(M | E)} < \frac{P(H)}{P(M)}.$$

The implication follows because Bayes' theorem in odds form yields:

$$\frac{P(H | E)}{P(M | E)} = \frac{P(E | H)}{P(E | M)} \cdot \frac{P(H)}{P(M)} < \frac{P(H)}{P(M)}. \quad (1)$$

The displayed inference is deductively valid conditional on the likelihood inequality and positive priors. Its decisive premise, $P(E | H) < P(E | M)$, is not deductively certain and is not assigned a fabricated number. It is supported inductively by the cumulative evidence assessed in the body. Independent evidence of reliable divine access could alter that likelihood comparison; the formalization therefore preserves the paper's bounded, defeasible conclusion.

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