

AN ESSAY ON DIVINE COMMAND ETHICS

A Dissertation

by

JEREMY ALAN EVANS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2007

Major Subject: Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

An Essay on Divine Command Ethics.

(August 2007)

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Twentieth-century analytic philosophy ushered in a renewed interest in an ethical theory known as the Divine Command Theory of ethics (DC). Consequent to the work of G.E. Moore, philosophers have been involved in metaethics, or how we may ground ethical terms such as “good” and “right”. The traditional DC response is to argue that God is the source of good, and best serves that role in that He is an “ideal observer” of all states of affairs. The question is how is God’s will relevant to determining the moral status of actions? At this point one may distinguish between what God wills and what God in fact commands. However, the contemporary debate is to determine whether it is God’s commands or God’s will that is primary in determining moral obligation. The most vivid portrait of this distinction is found in the binding of Isaac. There we note that God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but it is not at all clear that God wills the actual death of Isaac. Thus, in this work I will present and defend a coherent DC view of ethics, whereby our moral obligations are derived from the commands of God. In chapter II I will provide a brief history of philosophers who have endorsed DC. In chapter III I will

argue that the best ground for objective moral values is best defined by DC. Chapter IV will be devoted to my particular argument for DC. I will take up the task of defending the traditional command view of DC. Chapters V and VI will be devoted to developing plausible responses to major objections to DC. In chapter V I will attempt a resolution of the famous Euthyphro dilemma, and in chapter VI I will argue that endorsing a DC view of ethics in no way negates the autonomy of the moral agent.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Wendy Michelle Evans, my joint heir in the grace of life; and to my daughter Avery Michelle Evans, whose wonder in her infancy has helped turn my heart of stone into a heart of flesh. I love you both.

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I would like to thank my committee, Dr. McCann, Dr. Austin, Dr. Aune, and Dr. Harris for the commitment of their time and resources into the content of this work. Your grace and charity contributed substantially to its completion.

Thanks are also due to the department of philosophy at Texas A&M University. You have been the picture of collegiality and professionalism during my tenure here.

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To Wendy, thank you for making our home one of laughter. Your peccadilloes never cease to amaze me, and I love those things about you. Also, thank you for offering me time to work without my having to ask for it.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Alvin Plantinga notes in his address *Advice to Christian Philosophers* that Christian academicians should frame their respective intellectual queries, and seek answers to them, from the Christian point of view. In metaphysics the burden is to articulate theories that ground God's sovereign authority. In epistemology it is to offer plausible rejoinders to the evidentialist burden, or the skeptic's case for the prima facie incompatibility between noetically deficient mediums whereby we gain knowledge and our ability to have certainty about anything epistemic. Regarding ethics, consider Plantinga's advice:

In ethics, for example: perhaps the chief theoretical concern, from the theistic perspective, is the question of how right and wrong, good and bad, duty, permission, and obligation are related to God and to His will and to His creative activity. This question doesn't arise, naturally enough, from a non-theistic perspective; and so, naturally enough, non-theistic ethics do not address it. But it is perhaps the most important question for theists to tackle.¹

As a contribution to this enterprise, it is my intention in this work to give an adequate account of God's authority and role in the moral sphere. To be precise, I will defend what is known as the Divine Command theory of ethics (henceforth DC). Traditionally there are two paradigms from which the DC proponent may work. The first emphasizes God's *commands* as the foundation of normative deontology. Under the command paradigm, certain ethical states of affairs obtain in the world. These states of affairs record the moral value of any human action. We may characterize these states of affairs consisting in its being (1) morally required by God, (2) morally permissible, or (3)

This dissertation follows the style and format outlined in the *Chicago Manual of Style, 14th edition*.

¹ Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), 253.

morally neutral. According to DC ethics, these states of affairs are related to God's commands as follows:

(DC1) The state of affairs of person P being morally obligated to do action A depends on God commanding that P do A.

(DC2) The state of affairs of P's being morally permitted to A depends on God not commanding that P not do A.

(DC3) The state of affairs of A being morally neutral depends on God's commanding neither that P do A nor that P not do A.

The second paradigm of DC ethics emphasizes the nature and content of God's will (rather than command) as preeminent in giving rise to moral obligation. Proponents of the divine will formulation may characterize the relevant human action in the same way as the command proponent, but, given the centrality of the will rather than the command, the propositions concerning moral obligation are altered to:

(DW1) The state of affairs of P's being morally obligated to do A depends on the state of affairs of God's willing that P be morally obligated to A.

(DW2) The state of affairs of P's being morally permitted to A depends on the state of affairs of God's willing that P be permitted to do A.

(DW3) The state of affairs of A being morally neutral for P depends on the state of affairs of God's willing that P be allowed to do/refrain from doing A.

What all members of DC theory have in common, according to Mark Murphy, is that they hold "what God wills is relevant to determining the moral status of some set of entities (acts, states of affairs, character traits, or some combination of these)."² In what follows I will be defending the command formulation of DC as the preferable view; the justification for this, and the relation between God's relevant will and commands will be enunciated as the argument advances.

² Mark Murphy, "Theological Voluntarism." In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/voluntarism-theological/>.

In order to advance my thesis it is pertinent for me to stipulate the assumptions under which I will be working for the duration of the project. Indeed, if I were to examine every secondary and tertiary idea underlying the nature of my project, I would never develop the specific content of the thesis. As Douglas Blount notes, “Instead, one can do little more than acknowledge such assumptions as playing a crucial role in one’s work, and invite others to consider their worth for themselves.”³ Thus, in this section I will acknowledge several assumptions upon which the discussions in the consequent chapters follow. For a number of assumptions I will provide a *prima facie* defense for their plausibility.

In the following discussion it will be assumed that God exists. When I make reference to “God” I am in agreement with Nelson Pike, who writes:

The term ‘God’ is a descriptive expression having an identifiable meaning. It is not a proper name. As part of this first assumption, I shall suppose further that ‘God’ is a very special type of descriptive expression--what I shall call a title. A title is a term used to mark a certain position or value status as does e.g. ‘Caesar’ in the sentence ‘Hadrian is Caesar.’ To affirm of some individual that He is God is to affirm that the individual has some special position (e.g. that He is ruler of the universe) or that the individual has some special value status (e.g. that He is a being than which none greater can be conceived)...It is a logically necessary condition of bearing the title ‘God’ that an individual be perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient, and so on for all the standard attributes traditionally assigned to the Christian God. If we could assume that in order to be Emperor (as opposed to Empress) of Rome one had to be male (rather than female), then if ‘x is Caesar’ means ‘x is Emperor of Rome’, then ‘If x is Caesar, then x is a male’ would have the same logical status as I am assuming for ‘If x is God, then x is perfectly good.’ ‘If x is God, then x is omniscient,’ etc.⁴

To be more precise, I will be assuming a fairly orthodox Christian view of theology according to which God is loving, omnipotent, omniscient, and so forth, and is creator of the universe. Certain of the attributes involved in these working assumptions will be

³ Douglas Keith Blount, “An Essay on Divine Presence,” (unpublished), 3.

⁴ Nelson Pike, “Omnipotence and God’s Ability to Sin,” In *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969): 209.

brought into question at a later time, such as God's goodness and what it means for God to be loving. I will address these issues when I respond to major objections to DC.

Except in chapter III, I will also be assuming that objective moral values exist. By objective I mean that there is a moral order that exists independent of human convention. In making this assumption I will take it that the meaning of "good" is grounded in God's nature rather than, for example, non-evaluative natural properties. Robert Adams has recently defended this position, utilizing a realist conception of ethics whereby comparative predication entails relational properties that involve resemblance to something that is maximally excellent.⁵ By resemblance Adams means that "moral excellence" is an aspect of axiological excellence, where axiological excellence is to be understood as, "resembling God in a way that could serve God as a reason for loving the thing."⁶ The particular strength of Adams's position is that the good becomes inherently personal, but more pointedly the personal agency typified by God entails that moral goodness is grounded in something that is the paradigm of goodness. Adams explains:

Theists have sometimes tried to infer the personality of the supreme Good from the premise that persons, as such, are the most excellent things we know, from which it is claimed to follow that the supremely excellent being must be of that sort. A more cautious line of argument begins with the premise, harder to deny, that most of the excellences that are most important to us, and of whose value we are most confident, are excellences of persons or qualities or actions or works or lives or stories of persons. So if excellence consists in resembling or imaging a being that is the Good itself, nothing is more important to the role of the Good itself than that persons and their properties should be able to resemble or image it. That is obviously likelier to be possible if the Good itself is a person or importantly like a person.⁷

⁵ Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The content spans roughly from pages 13-130.

⁶ Adams, 36.

⁷ Adams, 42.

If we are willing to accept that goodness is a relational property where the relata are agents and a paradigm of moral goodness, then a sufficient prima facie case has been made that goodness is personal, unlike Platonic archetypes, and more like the traditional God of theism.

The structure of the essay will be as follows. Given that no thought occurs in a historical vacuum chapter II will articulate a brief history of DC ethics. In order to provide continuity of thought among philosophers, we will present the history in a topical approach rather than a chronological one. For example, some philosophers justify a DC version of ethics from a “God as first cause” argument, whereas others approach it from a “laws entail a law-giver” approach. It is with the history of these and other themes that we are mainly concerned, because these themes will recur throughout the work.

In chapter III we will engage the topic of whether and to what extent morality is dependent on God. We will begin this chapter by considering what conditions must be met in order for a value to be objective, and then we will consider the more promising non-theistic accounts of objectivity in light of these conditions. We will argue that no substantial non-theistic claim to the objectivity of values without God succeeds. We will then provide reasons for the argument that our metaethics project is more feasible if we ground it in supernatural or theistic terms.

In chapter IV we will present a positive argument for DC ethics. As we noted earlier, the current debate in DC ethics concerns the priority of God’s will verses God’s commands. I accept the traditional command approach as correct, so that the utterances of God generate obligations upon those He has commanded. However, this commitment does not come at the expense of articulating a role for God’s will in relation to the

commands He does in fact utter. In order to provide substance to the content of God's relevant will, we will distinguish between His antecedent and consequent will. We will argue that given God's role as both Creator and Sustainer, all existing things are a matter of God's consequent will in that He sustains them in existence. However, we will be arguing that moral obligation is a matter of God's antecedent will. The argument will take on a more robust form at that time.

In chapter V we will be responding to the major objection to any DC theory of ethics. We will address the Euthyphro dilemma, derived from the Platonic dialogue of the same name. Within this dialogue we find a dichotomy of possibilities that are seemingly unattractive for DC ethics. Given Plato's account, it seems that if God's commands alone ground moral values, then it seems that morality is arbitrarily contingent on the will of one being, so that anything might have been good or evil. Alternatively, God might command only actions that are good on independent grounds. But if we choose this, the second horn of the dilemma, then there is a source of good that exists independently of God, which contradicts the fundamental claims of the DC theory. We will be defending DC against this charge by articulating a doctrine of divine simplicity. The thrust of this view is that God's nature is essentially perfect, and the perfect-making properties are not merely exemplified by God; rather, *God's being is* omniscience, omnipotence, and the like—that God is not distinct from His actions. Such a view diminishes the concerns of Euthyphro in that God's commands flow from His nature, and are not capricious. It is not that we reject the concerns of Euthyphro, it is that we reject the latent theology and logical structure of the dilemma underlying the objection. Divine Simplicity will resolve this concern.

In chapter VI we will be addressing other concerns that arise from my discussion of divine simplicity. It may be argued that if God's nature is so construed, then God's impeccability, omnipotence, and freedom are compromised. One may rightly question whether or not this is a God worthy of worship. We will address the ramifications of these attributes, and propose several reasons why the God of traditional Christian theism is indeed to be worshipped; *Soli Deo Gloria*.

CHAPTER II

A PARTIAL HISTORY OF DIVINE COMMAND ETHICS

Contemporary metaethics has seen resurgence among philosophers and religious thinkers of the ethical position commonly referred to as divine command ethics. Fundamentally a divine command theorist holds that moral obligations owe their existence to the positive commands or prohibitions of God. Accordingly, William Frankena notes, “an action or kind of action is right or wrong, if and only if, and because it is commanded or forbidden by God.”⁸ Generally speaking Frankena’s statement of the divine command view is correct, with the exception that some philosophers do not stipulate a causal relationship governing moral obligation. My purpose in this chapter is to examine the views of historical figures endorsing divine command ethics, as well as articulate their respective modes of justification for such a view. My approach will be topical in nature rather than chronological, so as to provide continuity of thought addressed to particular themes. This chapter is a non-exhaustive survey of the extant literature, and considerable attention is given to more recent developments.

The God as First Cause Argument

There are two forms of the cosmological argument for God’s existence. The first argues for an original cause efficacious in power to bring about the universe. The second form argues for a sustaining cause that is the source of the universe’s continuing to be. All versions of the cosmological argument begin with the assumption that the universe exists and that something outside the universe is required to explain its existence. The strength of cosmological arguments is derived from the fact that they are mostly based on

⁸ William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 28.

uncontroversial premises. Such premises include that there exist things that are caused and these things are not *causa sui*. The conjunction of these two premises with the conceptual entailment of the title God (by definition the uncaused first cause) provides a general scheme of how theistic philosophers arrive at a divine command theory of ethics.

Such arguments derive from Aristotle's metaphysics, where a distinction is made between actuality and potentiality. The movement from potentiality to actuality requires efficient causality; something that is pure potentiality cannot perform on itself (or, something cannot confer existence on itself). Granted, Aristotle believed in a plurality of uncaused, self-existent actualities. However, his reasoning is the foundation for future philosophers, especially theistic philosophers such as Aquinas, concerning the primacy of God in the contingent created order, including the moral order (or at least it may be taken this way). This suggests a dependency of what is morally just on the divine will.

Traditionally construed, God is the efficient cause of all contingent things, including moral values. Accordingly, Hugh of Saint Victor writes:

The first cause of all things is the will of the Creator which no antecedent cause moved because it is eternal, nor any subsequent cause confirms because it is of itself just. For what He did not will justly, because what He willed *was to be just*, but what He willed was just, because He himself willed it. For it is peculiar to Himself and to His will that that which is His is just; from Him comes the justice that is in His will by the very fact that justice comes from His will. When, therefore, it is asked how that is just which is just, the most fitting answer will be: because it is in accord with the will of God, which is just.⁹

The principles we may derive from this text include these two: first, moral values are ontologically dependent on the will of God, for the divine will is considered to be paradigmatically just,¹⁰ and second, the divine will has no cause prior to it. To be more

⁹ Hugh of Saint Victor, as quoted in Janine Marie Idziak, "In Search of 'Good Positive Reasons' for an Ethics of Divine Commands: A Catalogue of Arguments," in *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

explicit, such arguments deny any metaphysical possibilities independent of God's creative act; these non-possibilities include Platonic Forms, or the proposal that such principles are brute facts. To deny these possibilities is to assert contingency simpliciter of all aspects of the created order; the divine will is absolute in terms of its efficacy.

Thomas Aquinas builds on the Aristotelian tradition in the same manner as Hugh of Saint Victor, proposing that justice and righteousness as found in the created order depend simply on the divine will. His most prominent argument invokes the conception of God as first cause. Janine Marie Idziak explains that for Aquinas, justice depends on the imitation of some rule, and the rule of an effect is due to its cause.¹¹ As such, since the first cause of all things is the divine will, it is also the first rule from which everything is judged. An antecedent consideration, not mentioned at this point by Aquinas, is that the success of such an argument depends not only on God as first cause, but also on God as uncaused in His nature and will. Of course, one may note this as a positive argument for an ethic of divine commands; but secondarily, this reasoning is implicit in his "Fourth Way" to argue for the existence of God. He writes:

Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest.¹²

I make reference to this passage for two reasons. Recently Robert Adams has argued that in order to avoid an infinite regress of explanations regarding axiological concepts, one must first offer an account of the source by which all excellent things are being

¹¹ Ibid., 50.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne): 26. Hereafter I will cite this work as Aquinas followed by a volume and page number from this translation.

measured.¹³ Such an account may be inferred from Aquinas's point that "resemblance" entails a thing by which the likeness is being measured. Given that perfect being theology regards God as omnibenevolent, God may serve such an explanatory role in the realm of value. Also, and not to be anachronistic, the 20th century turn in the analytic tradition consequent to G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* seeks an answer to just such a question. In what do we ground the term "good" and how does the "good" relate to moral obligation? One may argue that such concerns were not on the radar of Aquinas, but that need not worry us here. The concept "good" may have other axiological definitions, but its extension certainly includes the domain of our discussion, namely moral values.

Second, if we begin with Aquinas's understanding of God as first cause, then the notion of comparative predication has strong prima facie force as a basis for an inductive a priori argument for the existence of God, but more relevantly it provides a plausible account of objective moral values grounded in personal agency. The causal import of the cosmological argument allows for morality to be "part of the furniture of the universe."

The cosmological argument for an ethics of divine commands is also found in Reformation and Protestant theology. Janine Marie Idziak argues that Martin Luther and John Calvin are both considered to be divine command ethicists. Part and parcel of their reasoning stems from the Reformation's three dogmas: Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, and Sola Gratia, a theme to which I will return in a section on theological motivations for divine command theory. More related to our present inquiry, both make an appeal to the uncaused nature of God's will with the expressed intention to guard God's sovereignty. Implicit in Idziak's presentation of the Reformers (or as I take her text to say) is the

¹³ Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46.

conjunction of two propositions: (1) sovereignty requires that no external factors influence God's creative act, and (2) from (1) it follows that every feature of the created order follows solely from God's will.

Note how these theses resonate in the *Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther:

The same reply should be given to those who ask: Why did God let Adam fall, and why did He create us all tainted with sin, when He might have kept Adam safe, and might have created us of other material, or of seed that had first been cleansed? God is He for whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as a rule for its standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself a rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because He so wills it. Causes and grounds are laid down for the will of the creature, but not for the will of the Creator.¹⁴

With similar justification Calvin writes, "The will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness, so that everything which He wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of His willing it."¹⁵ Just as God established the natural laws by divine fiat, likewise moral principles derive only from His will and creative act. Theistic voluntarism, specifically a divine command theory, follows from such a view. More will be said concerning the specific function of law for Luther and Calvin later, but suffice it to say that their construction of divine command ethics does not require any epistemic commitment concerning belief in God on the part of the agent; the law is universal and manifest to all.

The Puritan theologian John Preston speaks of God's causal efficacy with regard to the moral order. For Preston God is, "The first without all causes, having his being

¹⁴ Idziak, 50.

¹⁵ Ibid., 51. See also John Calvin *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann's, 1997) III.32.2.

and beginning from himself.”¹⁶ To deny God’s causal efficacy in creation means that God is a necessary cause at best, contingent on the natural order to construct a functioning telos. We find the background for such reasoning in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, where the question arises whether the gods love what is good because it is good, or is it good because the gods love it? Preston is committed to the second horn of this dilemma in that if God were to choose something because He perceived it to be good, then God would be causally affected by something external to Himself. If one holds the view that sans creation God exists timelessly alone, as Preston does, then such external factors are not logically possible; God is absolute in creation.

A Conceptual Account from the Divine Attributes

A second line of reasoning in support for an ethics of divine commands is an a priori conceptual analysis of the attributes of God. Traditionally God is construed as being omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent, along with other traits being part of the position generally referred to as perfect being theology. The purported purpose of such an approach is to show that endorsing a divine command theory is compatible with an established attribute or collection of attributes of God, and that in denying a divine command approach the compatibility is compromised.

Janine Idziak notes that Ralph Cudworth invokes such a method in postulating that divine command theory guards God’s omnipotence. In his work *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* he writes:

This doctrine hath been chiefly promoted and advanced by such as think nothing else so essential to the Deity, as uncontrollable power and arbitrary will, and therefore that God could not be God if there should be anything evil in its own nature which he could not do.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51. Of course, Cudworth is a noted opponent of divine command ethics.

Earlier I noted that omnipotence is a central attribute of God for perfect being theology. However, if we consider Richard Swinburne's notion that omnipotence entails God's ability to make anything right which He wants, then there is no intelligible way to articulate an action that God is morally forbidden to do.¹⁸ Consider a state of affairs in which certain actions are wrong independent of the will of God. The supposed entailment of postulating the independence of moral values from divine voluntarism is twofold. First, such a view calls for a deontology such that God does not exercise any prerogative in determining moral values. Second, from the postulate that moral values exist, let us say "in themselves," we may infer that God is bound by His own nature to do what is morally right. God does not have the power not to do what is right according to this standard, which entails that God does not have free will either. Such a notion has been dismissed especially in the medieval literature as blasphemous. Gabriel Biel, a disciple of William of Ockham, specifically endorses divine command ethics as a safeguard to God's omnipotence. Biel writes:

God can do something which is not just for God to do; yet if he were to do it, it would be just that this be done. Wherefore the divine will alone is the first rule of all justice, and because he wills something to be done, it is just that it be done, and because he wills something not to be done, it is not just that it be done.¹⁹

Of course, from a modern vantage point it seems Biel is not so much concerned with responding to Euthyphro-type arbitrariness objections. From the notion that "the divine will alone is the first rule of all justice," it follows for Biel that God is not bound to any law. But, if one postulates an arbitrariness objection one misses the point entirely. If by arbitrary one means "up to God and only God," then Biel concurs. However, if one

¹⁸ Richard Swinburne, "Duty and the Will of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1974): 213-214.

¹⁹ Idziak, 53.

means by arbitrary that God selected a command of a specific type *out of a number of command options*, then Biel disagrees. The commands follow from the will of God, which “can be neither different nor new nor changeable.”²⁰ There are no other options to be found such that arbitrariness obtains, whether or not we like the content of the command. Also, Biel’s formulation is commensurate with the doctrine of God’s impeccability; it follows that since God cannot act against His own will, God is logically incapable of sinning. God remains good, and no explicit conceptual contradiction follows from His omniscience.

Persons rejecting a divine command approach consider the inalterability of moral values just as much a strength of their position as those who favor an ethics of divine commands. To endorse divine commands means, as Richard Price mentions, “that we must give up the unalterable natures of right and wrong, and make them dependent on the divine will.”²¹ This statement is, of course, intended to be an indictment against the position. Andrew of Neufchateau considered this in his earlier writings, and responds:

Just as the first and highest truth is related to other truths, so is the first goodness related to other good things. For no less does something being true from the first truth have its status of being true from it than does another being good from the first good take its status of being good from that. But that notwithstanding, something is true according to itself by its nature in such a way that it cannot fail to be true...Therefore, that the created will be subject and conformed to the divine will and that it will conformably to the divine decree and as God wills it to will is a good for a rational creature other than God and cannot be present in him and fail to be good or just.²²

Janine Marie Idziak argues that it follows for Andrew that moral claims are necessary truths, and since the constituents of nature are contingent, they cannot ground necessary

²⁰ Ibid., 53.

²¹ Ibid., 54. Price is a noted disputant of divine command theory.

²² Janine Marie Idziak, *Questions on an Ethics of Divine Commands* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 57.

moral truths.²³ The relationship is one between certain metaphysical and epistemic commitments; there is a logical priority of the metaphysical on the epistemic. A Platonic construct may well suffice at this point for a number of theists. However, the residual constraints on God's freedom seem eminently problematic. Hence Andrew of Neufchateau endorses a divine command theory in an effort to thwart the apparent threats to such central theistic doctrines.

Others, such as Gottfried Leibniz, provide a modified view and reject Andrew of Neufchateau's position. Leibniz writes:

Neither the norms of [the] conduct itself nor the essence of justice depends on God's free choice, but rather on eternal truths, or objects of the divine intellect. Justice follows certain rules of equality and proportion which are no less grounded in the immutable nature of things and in the divine ideas than are the principles of arithmetic and geometry.²⁴

Earlier I noted that such views require a modified divine command theory. A few points of clarification are required. First, in order to endorse a Leibnizian model one must hold that God is metaphysically free but morally constrained to produce the best possible world, hence I refer to this view as a weaker postulate of divine command ethics. God is morally constrained by His nature to create the best possible world; such a view does nothing to prohibit God's apprehension of the way the world could have been, but serves as a delimiting factor as to which world God chose to create.

To say that God is morally constrained seems unproblematic, for "what has one given up" in saying that God always does or creates what is best? But such a notion provides the motivation for the second issue, namely what Leibniz calls "objects of the divine intellect." If divine ideas are archetypes of creation and have no being apart from

²³ Ibid., 57-58.

²⁴ Quoted in Michael Murray, 5 (unpublished).

God, then the doctrine of divine ideas is merely God's apprehension of His own creative will. The plurality of ideas perhaps consists in a countably infinite series of counterfactuals the content of which are the various ways agents may imperfectly participate in creation. I find this commensurate with Leibniz. Accordingly, one may claim that antecedent to creation there were no counterfactuals, there was only God's willing. More importantly, "the suggested contention that a divine command theory must be adopted in the realm of ethics because there cannot be anything independent of God may be seen as an attempt to capture the religious insight of the absolute centrality which God is [ontologically] to enjoy."²⁵

Peter of Ailly provides similar reasoning as a consequence of his cosmological argument. Previously I noted that cosmological proofs involve arguments from the absurdity of *causa sui* postulates; something must be the efficient cause of things, and no created thing can serve that function. For Ailly the case for divine commands is similar, for there necessarily must be one first obligatory law, and no created law "enjoys this status for the reason that no created law has from itself the power of binding."²⁶ Of the first proposition, namely that one law is absolutely first, Ailly writes (and I quote in its entirety):

Proof: Just as there is not an infinite regress in efficient causes, as the Philosopher proves in *Metaphysics* II.3; so there is not an infinite regress in obligatory laws. Therefore, just as it is necessary to reach one first efficient cause, so it is necessary to arrive at one first obligatory law, because the principle is entirely the same in both cases.

Therefore, just as no created thing has of itself the power of creating, so no created law has of itself the power of binding.²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

It is noteworthy that Ailly has as the “first obligatory law” the divine will, just as it is the first efficient cause. The essence of arguments like those of Leibniz and Ailly is more to guard God’s omnipotence and freedom than God’s goodness. One may hold that necessary moral truths exist independent of God, and that God only does what is good by His nature. But such premises compromise God’s freedom and God’s omnipotence. To postulate anything as necessarily existing that is not God is anathema to such defenders, and a divine command theory guards against this supposed anti-theological insurgence. In the contemporary literature such concerns have found possible answers, but I will delay that discussion until I take up the views of Philip Quinn.

Theological Motivations for Divine Commands

There is no dearth of literature conjoining the theological themes of justification, sanctification, and glorification to some version of divine command morality. In this section I want to look at the ideology grounding such a connection in the writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin, for their writings differ greatly from their Catholic predecessors in that these themes are more concretely addressed in their work. I will begin with a look at Luther’s two kingdoms, and segue into Calvin’s theological ethics.

It is important to note that Martin Luther makes a distinction between the doctrines of Law and Grace. Law is a broad construction, including the power of the state over individuals, the Decalogue, and the natural law. The natural law is universally binding, for all persons (whether theistic, atheistic, or agnostic) have epistemic access to its content. Reason may give us knowledge of the natural law, for the intellect is the offspring of the divine intellect. Saint Thomas Aquinas develops a similar theme in

Summa Theologica.²⁸ A major difference between Luther and Aquinas regards the noetic effects of sin on fallen humanity. Sin affects the will so as to confuse what the mind may know with clarity, including the significance of Divine laws such as the Decalogue and Christ's commission in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). This aspect of Luther's thought necessitated distinguishing the function of law from the function of grace. In light of this theological distinction, Luther argues that persons may grasp the truth in the Gospel as God mediates through grace. Grace functions as an epistemic bridge for one to understand the Law, and the understanding of the law awakens the individual to their own sin and culpability.²⁹ Hence, he utilizes a moral doctrine to introduce the doctrine of justification, or more pointedly, ontologically reconciling the relationship between fallen humanity and God. In order to understand this, we must first understand Luther's two uses of law.

The first use of law, as found in the Decalogue, is to bridle the wicked.³⁰ Luther's view of humanity after the fall is compatible with psychological egoism, the view that humankind is selfish by nature. Psychological egoism is a descriptive theory, and such descriptive states of affairs are not likely to mesh with what is normative. Man is, "wholly turned to self and to his own," seeking that which is guided by desire.³¹ Laws, however, provide a rubric to which persons may conform in establishing communities. Thus, the first use of law for Luther is conventional; society demands something to restrain man's deficient nature. And whatever fulfills this function must be absolute.

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume 8, 10-11. .

²⁹ A relevant text utilized to underscore these doctrines is Ephesians 2:1-10.

³⁰ I am using J.B. Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26.

³¹ See Schneewind, 27.

A second use law for Luther is specifically soteriological. From the precepts of the first use of law we may arrive at the conclusion that mankind is in a state requiring reconciliation. The law “reveals unto man his sin, his blindness, his misery, his impiety, ignorance, hatred and contempt of God, death, hell, the judgment and deserved wrath of God.”³² However, such edicts as the Decalogue

show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own inability.³³

Luther is not saying that persons cannot behave as the laws require. Luther grants that the natural power residing in humanity is not entirely corrupted by the fall. He notes, “I make a distinction between the spiritual and the natural. The spiritual [endowments] are certainly corrupt, so that no man loves God or keeps His law; but the natural [endowments] are sound.”³⁴ Mankind has the ability even after the fall to self-govern and follow the edicts of reason; reason conjoins with the natural law “written on the heart” to provide a socially cohesive structure.³⁵

A significant note is that for Luther we may control the content of our actions; we may choose to murder or not to murder in a given time and context. What is beyond our natural control is the underlying motivation for our actions. From this Luther drives his doctrine of Grace. In his “Sermon on the Three Kinds of Good Life,” Luther explains that God does not “just want [good] works by themselves...He wants them to be performed gladly and willingly; where right motive and joy are absent, these actions are

³² As found in Luther’s *Commentaries on Galatians*. Here quoted by Schneewind, 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵ For reference, see Schneewind, 28.

dead in God's eyes."³⁶ Earlier I noted that Luther spoke of the destitution of humankind as a consequence of the fall; no one seeks God, and the privation is such that our motives for action are self-centered in nature. Our motive should be to honor God, which is impossible given that we are at enmity with God. To overcome the chasm, God provides grace to empower the will to defeat the love of self and regenerate love unto God. Our free will extends only to natural (secular) matters.

For Luther, and thematically throughout Reformation theology, issues of moral evaluation necessitate the dichotomy of Law and Grace. The secular person abides in the realm of Law (I Timothy 1:9), and the regenerate person abides in the realm of Grace. Previously I noted Luther's cosmological argument for divine commands, but it is his theological motivation that is preeminent for his adoption of voluntarism. The Law is an absolute standard binding on the saved and unsaved alike, though the saved are in a sense "above" the Law. Luther's soteriology follows from the Pauline thesis that to break one aspect of the Law is to break the entirety of the Law (Galatians 3:10); for in this the relationship between faith and regeneration may be devised. Persons are no freer to believe than they are free to have a proper motive for their actions. God thus regenerates persons unto faith, and faith unto the realm of Grace. Of course, a theological fatalism is the byproduct of such a view, but that is not of concern here; the relationship of Luther's theological themes to a divine command theory is.

A prominent contemporary of Martin Luther and noted voluntarist is the Reformation's John Calvin. In many respects Calvin agrees with Luther, especially regarding the doctrines of sin, justification, and God's efficacious activity in bringing about these states of affairs. Calvin also agrees with Luther that humans are bound by the

³⁶ Ibid., 27.

dictates of two kinds of rule, earthly and divine. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Calvin writes:

[there is] a twofold government in man, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men...the former sort of government pertains to the life of the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life-not only with food and clothing but with laying down laws whereby a man may live his life among other men holily, honorably, and temperately. For the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter only regulates outward behavior.³⁷

Calvin is more explicit than Luther on the noetic effects of sin, for he believes that persons are so bound in the will to sin, that even the moral law (natural law) is obscured. Hence, God provides us with a “written law to give us a clear witness of what was too obscured in the natural law.”³⁸ This written law is evident in the Decalogue as well as the decrees of the Levitical holiness codes, among others. More specifically, the Ten Words reveal the dichotomy between duties toward God and civic duties. The first table shows duties to God, the second table shows duties to man.³⁹ It is the second element that is of secular significance, for man is by definition a “social animal”⁴⁰ and naturally seeks convention. He writes:

...we observe that there exist in all men’s minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order. Hence no man is to be found who does not understand that every sort of human organization must be regulated by laws, and who does not comprehend the principles of those laws. Hence arises that unvarying consent of all nations and of individual mortals with regard to laws.⁴¹

Recall for a moment that Luther proposes two functions of law, namely, to “bridle the wicked” and to reveal knowledge of sin unto man through grace. Calvin adds a third

³⁷ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* trans. Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann’s, 1997): III.xix.15. Hereafter *Institutes*.

³⁸ See the *Institutes* II.viii.1.

³⁹ See the *Institutes* II.ii.24.

⁴⁰ *Institutes* II.ii.13.

⁴¹ This quote is borrowed from Schneewind, 33.

function of law as a byproduct of Luther's first function, namely that when we know what the law requires we are accountable to its content. This cognizance is "an apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes significantly between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony."⁴² Much like the themes of modern philosophers such as Descartes and Leibniz, Calvin distinguishes between what the intellect apprehends as just and what the will prompts the person to do. The deviation between the will and intellect is not bridged for Calvin by any appeal to human freedom, for humans are not free consequent to the fall. Nor is it the case that, given this restriction in human activity, persons can initiate any positive action to reconcile their ontological deficiencies. Given that the will is corrupt, no one can choose rightly without grace; the question is not *can* we bring about the state of affairs that we will to bring about, it is whether or not the will is free in any meaningful sense. This third use of law Calvin sees as the necessary intermediate function of law between Luther's two functions, for in it resides human accountability. Second, one may also see how such a doctrine entails the theological fatalism traditionally ascribed to Calvin and hyper-Calvinists; for persons not predestined to salvation sin "necessarily and willingly. Because they want to do what is sinful, they sin voluntarily, not because of compulsion."⁴³ Further, one may construct a meaningful concept of grace, for in it resides the unmerited favor of God such that when God regenerates the individual, faith simultaneously occurs. The byproduct is a transformed person, and the election of the individual prompts an obedience motivated by a love of

⁴² See Schneewind, 34 or Calvin's *Institutes* II.ii.22.

⁴³ See Schneewind, 34-35. For further reference see *Institutes* II.ii.4 and II.iii.9.

God, not the mandates of the law.⁴⁴ As for those not elect, the natural law can guide the unregenerate to some extent, for it pervades the created order; it does not circumvent the necessity of grace. Calvin writes:

As for the virtues that deceive us with their vain show, they shall have their praise in the political assembly and in the common renown among men; but before the heavenly judgment they shall be of no value to acquire merit.⁴⁵

The moral actions that persons perform are moral only in a secular sense, and from this communities may prosper. But this is only one aspect of reconciliation that Calvin seeks to overcome, and it is of less significance than the second-reconciling the relationship with God is primary. As he notes, *Sola Gratia* is the necessary and sufficient means for this resolve, and the moral worth of secular actions is “of no value to acquire merit.”

It is interesting to note the distinction made in the ethics of Luther and Calvin in contraposition to secular ethics. Their endorsement of the divine command theory dovetails with antecedent theological themes that culminate in the doctrine of soteriology. The problem as they see it is one of sin, a deficiency of being that may be overcome if and only if the motivation of the individual changes to regard God before self.

Is Kant a Divine Command Theorist?

A.T. Nuyen argues in a recent article that Kant is a divine command theorist. Such a view does not mesh with the consensus of Kant scholarship, but it serves us well to consider in what way Kant might be deemed a divine command ethicist. Nuyen admits that, “there is a sense in which Kant is a DCT (divine command theorist), but there is a

⁴⁴ This is given considerable attention in Schneewind, 35-36. Calvin addresses this in the *Institutes* III.ix.4 and III.vii.1-5.

⁴⁵ See Calvin’s *Institutes* II.iii.4, or in Schneewind, 36.

sense in which he is not.”⁴⁶ The center of the argument hinges on a reevaluation of the Euthyphro dilemma and to what extent Kant endorses either the autonomy of ethics or the dependence of objective values on God. According to Nuyen, “Kant’s view is that it is the case both that something is wrong because God forbids it and God forbids it because it is wrong.”⁴⁷ Let us consider the coherence of such a view.

Nuyen argues that if Kant is a divine command theorist, then he must be so in a strong sense, where “strong sense” is defined as entailing that morality is, “impossible without religion, which is another way of saying that God is the source of morality and the only basis of its validity.”⁴⁸ The question is in what way is God the only basis of morality’s validity? Nuyen argues that strong dependence is the byproduct of God’s being the cause of morality by being the Legislator of moral law.⁴⁹ The purported evidence for such a view comes from Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, where Nuyen says, “We find many passages where the language is decidedly that of a DCT.”⁵⁰ Consider Nuyen’s evidence for such a view:

For instance, Kant defines “moral religion” as that which consists “in the hearts disposition to fulfill all human duties as divine commands.” Some ten pages later, Kant writes: “As soon as anything is recognized as a duty, obedience to it is also a divine command.” A few pages after that, he says that “when men fulfill their duties to men (themselves and others) they are, by these very acts, performing God’s commands.” The “essence of reverence to God,” Kant tells us, is “obedience to all duties as His commands.” Finally, toward the end of the *Religion*, we have a slightly different definition of religion: “Religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ See A.T. Nuyen, “Is Kant a Divine Command Theorist?” in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 15 (1998): 441.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 441.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 442.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 444.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 444.

⁵¹ Ibid., 444.

Admittedly one cannot avoid the explicit appeal to DCT in *Religion*, so let's turn our attention to what version of DCT Kant endorses.

Nuyen argues that it is not “unreasonable” to read Kant as saying that “the concept of duty means a command given by a moral Law-giver” and that understanding the concept is “identical with” understanding what it means.⁵² More specifically, Nuyen argues that Kant arrives at his conclusion about moral legislation from two premises:

- (1) No law exists without a law-giver, no command without a commander.
- (2) Regarding moral law, God is, necessarily, the law-giver.⁵³

Premise (1), it is argued, may be grounded on a correlation between moral law and judicial law. According to Nuyen, Kant compares what he calls an “ethical commonwealth” with a state:

Just as there has to be a law-giver (of constitutional laws) to allow a mass of people to unite itself into a whole, (the legislators being people themselves or their representatives, in a free state), there has to be a public law-giver “for an ethical commonwealth.”⁵⁴

Premise (2) argues that the legislator of moral laws is God himself, for in an ethical commonwealth the law-giver must be someone “other than the populace” who can represent all “true duties as at the same time his commands.”⁵⁵ Thus for Kant, according to Nuyen: “This is a concept of God as the moral ruler of the world. Hence an ethical commonwealth can be thought of only as a people under divine commands.”⁵⁶ Thus, in *Religion* one can argue that Kant endorses a DCT grounded in the notion that morality depends on religion in the sense that moral laws are legislated by God. This picture of

⁵² Ibid., 445.

⁵³ Ibid., 445.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 446.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 446.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 446.

Kant provides his account of the objectivity of values as grounded in God. The project now turns to how the second horn of Euthyphro's dilemma is integrated into Kant's moral theory.

Nuyen points out what most scholars of Kant like to emphasize, namely that in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant argues that it is not the case that an action is obligatory because God commands it; rather, "it is a divine command because it is obligatory."⁵⁷ When posed with the question of the moral authority of the Bible Kant explains, "I should try to bring the New Testament passage [containing divine commands] into conformity with my own self-subsistent moral principles."⁵⁸

It is in this notion of "self-subsistent" principles that the bridge between the autonomy thesis and the dependence of ethics on God lies. "Self-subsistent" moral principles are known to us through practical reason, which is why we "are not to look upon moral laws as arbitrary and as wholly unrelated to our concepts of morality."⁵⁹ The question becomes how it is the case that both something is a duty because God commands it, and God commands it because it is a duty. To answer this, Nuyen turns our attention to Kant's second *Critique* where "there is a mutual dependency between freedom and morality: the latter on the former for *ratio essendi* (for its reason why), and the former on the latter for its *ratio cognoscendi* (that of freedom)."⁶⁰ If we think of God as the moral law-giver in the sense that God creates moral properties along with all the natural properties, then God is that which brings morality into existence (*ratio fiendi*).⁶¹ In His creative act God brings into existence laws in the same manner as a state legislator

⁵⁷ Ibid., 446.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 446.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 447.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 449.

⁶¹ Ibid., 447.

creates a body of laws that are “said to exist with a certain reality.”⁶² Through his commands God creates the “logical space for morality to be possible.”⁶³

While God is the logical ground of morality, God in turn “depends on morality to be an idea in our thought.”⁶⁴ In this sense one may read Kant saying that morality is the reason of knowing (*ratio cognoscendi*) of religion. Thus, Nuyen argues that the mutual dependence of religion and morality may be fashioned out of a Kantian framework, for:

The relationship between God and morality is asymmetrical: God is the *ratio essendi* (freedom creates the logical space for law) of morality and not conversely because God is self-determining; morality is the *ratio cognoscendi* of religion but not conversely because morality is “knowable through unassisted reason.”⁶⁵

In declaring the mutual dependence of religion and morality through this Kantian framework we have an account of the non-arbitrariness of God’s commands as well as how finite human agents can have ideas of God’s existence. Nuyen explains, “The answer lies precisely in the fact that while God is the *ratio essendi* of moral laws, morality is the *ratio cognoscendi* of God.”⁶⁶ In other words, all of our ideas of God are derived from practical reason, and arbitrated through moral precepts. God cannot command evil because “practical reason” renders such a notion inconceivable. Indeed, since “practical reason is the only cognitive means to religion, we can take God’s moral commands to consist in the moral laws of practical reasons. Thus, we are to take God’s laws as “addressed to man’s holiness,” and to understand the “concept of divine will as determined according to pure moral laws alone.”⁶⁷

⁶² Ibid., 449.

⁶³ Ibid., 449.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 449.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 450.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 451.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 452.

Robert Adams' Transcendent Account of the Good

In the next two sections I will be articulating the most recent developments in divine command literature, most notably in the works of Robert Merrihew Adams and Philip Quinn. I will begin by looking at Adams' argument, which is most exhaustively treated in his work *Finite and Infinite Goods* where he makes two arguments that he thinks justify a divine command theory of morality. The first is a semantic argument from the notion of moral obligation, and the second is an argument from the notion of necessary moral truths. In the following section I will look at Philip Quinn's recent work on the causal argument for divine commands. I will later be giving a more thorough treatment of this (Adams' and Quinn's) literature because most of the subsequent discussion in this essay will be derived from it, though by no means are the other views without merit or utility. I will begin with a brief treatment of the work of Robert Adams—which will receive a more thorough treatment in chapter II.

Robert Adams has recently defended this position, utilizing a realist conception of ethics whereby comparative predication entails relational properties consisting in resemblance to something that is maximally excellent.⁶⁸ By resemblance Adams means that “moral excellence” is an aspect of axiological excellence, where axiological excellence is to be understood as, “resembling God in a way that could serve God as a reason for loving the thing.”⁶⁹ The particular strength of Adams' position is that the good becomes personal, but more pointedly the personal agency typified by God entails that moral goodness is grounded in something that is the paradigm of goodness. Adams explains:

⁶⁸ Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13-130.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

Theists have sometimes tried to infer the personality of the supreme Good from the premise that persons, as such, are the most excellent things we know, from which it is claimed to follow that the supremely excellent being must be of that sort. A more cautious line of argument begins with the premise, harder to deny, that most of the excellences that are most important to us, and of whose value we are most confident, are excellences of persons or qualities or actions or works or lives or stories of persons. So if excellence consists in resembling or imaging a being that is the Good itself, nothing is more important to the role of the Good itself than that persons and their properties should be able to resemble or image it. That is obviously likelier to be possible if the Good itself is a person or importantly like a person.⁷⁰

If we are willing to accept that goodness is a relational property where the relata are agents and a paradigm of moral goodness, then a sufficient prima facie case has been made such that goodness is personal, unlike Platonic archetypes, and more like the traditional God of theism.⁷¹

Robert Adams offers a plausible account of objective moral values as well as a unique account of deontological obligation. It has not been my intent to agree with Adams, I am merely offering exposition of what I find to be his most compelling case for divine command ethics. In fact I disagree with several aspects of his approach. I will address this as I present my own theory of divine commands, and hopefully offer some suggestions that improve on aspects of his theory that I find particularly compelling. I now turn my attention to the details of Philip Quinn's causal argument for the divine command theory.

Philip Quinn's Causal Argument

In an article entitled, "Divine Command Ethics: A Causal Argument," Philip Quinn proposes a causal, normative theory of divine commands. He writes:

⁷⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁷¹ See Michael Murray, "Do Objective Ethical Norms Need Theistic Grounding," currently unpublished.

For every proposition which is such that it is logically possible that God commands that p and it is logically contingent that p, a sufficient causal condition that it is obligatory that p is that God commands that p, and a necessary causal condition that it is obligatory that p is that God commands that p.

For every proposition which is such that it is logically possible that God commands that p and it is logically contingent that p, a sufficient causal condition that it is forbidden that p is that God commands that not-p, and a necessary causal condition that it is forbidden that p is that God commands that not-p.

For every proposition which is such that it is logically possible that God commands that p and it is logically contingent that p, a sufficient causal condition that it is permitted that p is that it is not that case that God commands that not-p, and a necessary causal condition that it is permitted that p is that it is not that case that God commands that not-p.⁷²

Quinn's intention is to formulate an account of divine commands whereby God is the agent that creates moral obligations or prohibitions from His legislative activity. His theory has undergone several revisions, and I will be focusing my account on those revisions. However, it should be noted that despite the revisions the theory remains a causal one. As such, I will first note the initial problems with Quinn's 1979 work, and then offer his account of how these objections may be overcome.

If we consider the three causal relationships Quinn proposed, two things are to be noted. The first is that stipulating p as a causally sufficient condition of q just means that the relationship is causal necessity, but not logical necessity. In the governing necessary (causal) condition, it is not logically necessary that if p then q. From these postulates, Quinn notes, "Where God's commanding p is logically possible and p is contingent, God's commanding p is a causally sufficient and necessary condition of p's being morally obligatory."⁷³

⁷² See Philip Quinn, "Divine Command Ethics: A Causal Theory," in Idziak, *Divine Command Morality*, 312.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 310-312.

William Wainwright notes an objection to Quinn's thesis, which Quinn addresses.⁷⁴ The objection is:

Some statements of moral requiredness appear to be necessarily true. For example, it seems necessarily true "that everyone refrains from gratuitous torture of innocents is obligatory."⁷⁵

In his later work Quinn revises his position, holding that some obligatory states of affairs are necessary; that is, they obtain in every possible world.⁷⁶ The revision stipulates the compatibility between his causal theory and his treatment of God's will as being primary in causing moral obligation to obtain; but he stipulates the theory not in explicitly causal terms but rather in proffering the relationship between God's will and God's beliefs ("beliefs" eventually to be replaced with "intentions"). The divine will is, a la Ockham and Biel, immutable-and as such may be considered necessary in itself.

Following Thomas Morris, Quinn adopts the position of absolute creation, which holds:

God is the creator of necessary as well as contingent reality. As [Morris] sees it, in order to be absolute creator, God must be responsible somehow for the necessary truth of all propositions that are necessarily true... Thus, for example, even if it is necessarily true that murder, theft, and adultery are morally wrong, God is responsible, according to the absolute creationist, for the necessary truth of the proposition that murder, theft, and adultery are wrong.⁷⁷

Borrowing from Michael Loux, Quinn postulates that necessary truths involve the asymmetrical relation of "metaphysical dependence" between certain divine beliefs and facts being necessarily as they are.⁷⁸ The relevant divine belief is a strong belief, which may be defined as "a person x strongly believes that p if and only if x believes that p and

⁷⁴ See Philip Quinn, "An Argument for Divine Command Ethics," in Michael Beatty, ed., *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), henceforth, Quinn 1990a. See also "The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1990), henceforth, Quinn 1990b. See also "Divine Command Theory," in Hugh LaFollette, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), henceforth, Quinn 2000.

⁷⁵ See Wainwright, 98.

⁷⁶ Quinn modifies his approach in Quinn, 1990a, 301.

⁷⁷ Quinn (2000): 63.

⁷⁸ Quinn (2000): 63-64.

does not entertain that non-p.”⁷⁹ From this Quinn argues that since God is omniscient, “divine beliefs correlate perfectly with truth and divine strong beliefs correlate perfectly with necessary truths.”⁸⁰ Thus if moral truths necessarily obtain, it is because God strongly believes that they obtain.

To account for the relationship between God’s willing states of affairs and God’s beliefs about them (for they are independent of one another but “perfectly coordinated”), Quinn writes:

There is controversy over which divine acts bring about moral requirements, permissions, and prohibitions. As I see it, it is at the deepest level God’s will, and not divine commands, which merely express or reveal God’s will, that determines the deontological status of human actions.⁸¹

To be more specific:

“The idea is that moral facts about deontological status are as they are because God has certain antecedent intentions concerning the actions of creaturely moral agents, and necessary moral facts about deontological status, if there are any, are as they are because God has strong antecedent intentions concerning the actions of moral agents.”⁸²

A distinction must be made between three key concepts in order to grasp Quinn’s formulation. Quinn explains:

It is standard to distinguish between God’s *antecedent* and God’s *consequent* will: God’s consequent will is God’s will absolutely considered, as bearing on all actual circumstances; God’s antecedent will is God’s will considered with respect to some proper subset of actual circumstances.⁸³

God’s antecedent intentions are the necessitating causes of moral obligations. As such, no account of the reconciliation between God’s willing and strong believing is required;

⁷⁹ Quinn (2000): 64.

⁸⁰ Quinn (2000): 64.

⁸¹ See Quinn (2000): 55.

⁸² See Quinn (2000): 64.

⁸³ See Mark Murphy, “Theological Voluntarism,” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [accessed 8 August 2006]; available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2002/entries/voluntarism-theological/>.

the antecedent intention is the “sole cause” of, for instance, the prohibition of harming innocents. Necessary moral facts are brought about by God’s strong antecedent intentions, where a strong antecedent intention is “S strongly intends that p if and only if S intend that p and does not consider not-p.”⁸⁴ The notion of necessity follows from God’s strong antecedent intention, for if it is necessarily the case that harming innocents is wrong, it is because God strongly antecedently intends that no one bring about these states of affairs. More formally:

For every human agent x, states of affairs S, and time t, (i) it is morally wrong that x bring about S at t if and only if God antecedently intends that x not bring about S at t, and (ii) if it is morally wrong that x bring about S at t, then by antecedently intending that x not bring about S at t God brings it about that it is morally wrong that x bring about S at t.⁸⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter I have given attention to the historical arguments in favor of a divine command theory of ethics. I have not attempted to articulate criticisms of views, nor has this been a project of modifying or providing positive arguments in support of such views. Rather, it is has been a project of representing the landscape of argumentation as to why one may hold such a view.

There is continuity amongst a number of the theories, such as the God as first cause argument and God as the grounds of necessary moral truths. I have attempted to order the theories to accommodate the continuity, though this is not necessary for my project. Recent developments in the philosophy of language and modal logic, namely those developments that occurred with the analytic turn, bracketed off the discussion in the works of Adams and Quinn; both rely heavily on contemporary modal logic in their

⁸⁵ Quinn (2000): 56.

discussion of possible worlds and the nature of necessity. As such I treated them individually rather than thematically as I did the other philosophers. In each case I presented the theories partly in response to major objections, for their theories have undergone several revisions. Thus I proposed their theories not in their final form, but rather as they are found progressively in response to such objections. My motivation in giving Adams and Quinn priority follows from how they fit into my discussion, and as such they received privileged consideration. I will build on this historical background as I offer my own divine command theory. It is to this project that I now turn my attention.

CHAPTER III

NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL ACCOUNTS OF MORALITY

There is an ongoing debate as to whether morality is dependent on religion, and the dependency relationship itself has been given different characterizations. Some argue that morality is normatively dependent on God—often on the basis of a “laws entail a lawgiver” premise. Another line of thought has it that morality is logically dependent on religion.⁸⁶ Here the discussion turns on whether or not ethical notions are defined by explicitly theological terms, or at least deduced from such concepts. A third line of inquiry examines whether a person could be motivated toward moral actions if God does not exist.⁸⁷ However, after the publication of G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* the conversation focused on metaethics proper: or how we define the ethical term good.⁸⁸ The reason Moore’s work was so influential is that it focused ethics on its foundations—without which all of our ethical inquiries are a waste of time, like shifting deckchairs on the Titanic. Moore’s purpose was to articulate an argument proving that any account according to which moral properties may be reduced to non-moral terms must fail; this is famously known as the open-question argument. Moore invites us to answer the question “what is good?” By this Moore means not that we are to offer an account of what things are good, or exhibit goodness, but rather that we are to explicate the property (or properties) of goodness. Moore argues that only three options are possible for answering such a question.

⁸⁶ William Frankena, “Is Morality Logically Dependent on Religion?” in Paul Helm, ed. *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁸⁷ Michael Martin takes up such a concern in *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Prometheus Books, 2002).

⁸⁸ Moore, G.E. *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

1. Goodness is a complex property that can be broken down by analysis into its parts, in which case one can offer an illuminating definition of the property that works by identifying the various parts that combine to constitute goodness (in the same way that, for instance, one might define the property of being a bachelor as being a male human over a certain age who is unmarried) or
2. Goodness is a simple property that itself cannot be broken down by analysis into parts, in which case the only accurate definitions are those that trade in synonyms and so shed no real light on the nature of the property. (There must be at least some simple properties, Moore argued, since they are needed as the building blocks out of which all more complex properties would have been built) or
3. Goodness is no property at all and the word ‘good’ is meaningless, in which case, of course, no definition can be offered.⁸⁹

What we are driving at in answering this question is nothing less than the foundation of ethics—the account of our value term “good” in its objective existence.⁹⁰ More specifically we want to consider who it is that has the best answer to the question of the source of objective values, our concentration being on moral values. Are objective moral values inextricably tied to a divine origin, or can naturalism proffer and account that is validated through the conditions of objectivity? Or are moral properties, “emergent properties” that supervene upon certain physiologically complex organisms and particular social configurations?”⁹¹ It is the project of this chapter to argue that objective moral values are best grounded in a theistic construct. Second, we will turn our attention to the possibility of naturalistic accounts of objectivity, only to conclude that such accounts fail. In this second part of the project we will consider an evolutionary account of objectivity,

⁸⁹ This account found in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Moral Realism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

⁹⁰ Admittedly some are not concerned with objective value and postulate other types of value, both moral and otherwise. Our primary concern is to consider what makes values objective, and not give substantial attention to the postulate that values, both moral and otherwise, are subjective.

⁹¹ See Paul Copan, “God Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality.” Currently this work is unpublished.

and ask whether under such an account there can be proper moral motivation for human actions. What we will find, if my argument is correct, is that the motivation for human actions will ultimately fail if the foundation upon which those actions are based is flawed. Admittedly there are objections to such a view, the most pointed of which is the Euthyphro objection. This objection will be addressed in chapter IV.

Perspectives on the Objectivity of Values

It is interesting to note that when G.E. Moore provided his tripartite analysis of the possibilities of defining the good he did not consider a fourth option, namely a supernatural entity that is goodness itself. We want to consider this possibility, but only after we have made clear what it means for a value to be objective. After all, if there is one aspect of ethics upon which both theists and atheists can converge, it is that objective moral values are a basic part of human moral evaluation. For example, Kai Nielson writes:

It is more reasonable to believe such elemental things [as wife beating and child abuse] to be evil than to believe any skeptical theory that tells us we cannot know or reasonably believe any of these things to be evil. I firmly believe that this is bedrock and right and that anyone who does not believe it cannot have probed deeply enough into the grounds of his moral beliefs.⁹²

If we assume objectivity as a basic moral starting point, then we need to offer an account of objectivity to arbitrate among the competing views of its source. And so the discussion begins with defining the necessary and sufficient conditions of objective value. William Wainwright provides an excellent definition:

First, value claims are either true or false. Second, values are universal. If something is good or right or beautiful, it is good or right or beautiful at all times and all places. Third, values aren't products of our desires. The goodness of truthfulness or friendship, for example, can't be reduced to the fact that we desire them or would desire them if we were fully informed. But while these conditions

⁹² Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), 10-11.

are necessary they are not sufficient. To be objective in the intended sense, values must also be part of the “furniture of the universe.”⁹³

I think the first condition is mostly uncontroversial, at least in the parlance of moral realism.⁹⁴ What is to be emphasized under this first condition is that the values spoken of are not merely *perceived* to be true or false; rather the commitment is that for any action the perceived value intended in the action is either objectively present or not. In other words, our perceptions of value in an action perhaps motivate the action, but do not ground the value of the action. It is interesting to note how this principle vies with some naïve forms of utilitarianism. The truth or falsity of a value claim is settled *before* any action ever takes place. Of course, we may only find out after the action whether or not there was any [good] in performing the action. But what this entails is that even if we endorse teleological ethics of some sort, the ends do not justify the means. The ends only reveal whether or not our perceptions of the value in the action were correct.

The second condition requires some polishing, for it seems to confuse what is objective with what is absolute. For something to be absolute means that it admits of no exceptions, such as the claim that murder is wrong at all times and all places. Objective value, per condition three, means that these values are not constructs of value preference, nor do we (or I) ground the truth value of the proposition per condition one. What this leaves as the ground of objective value is that these values exist independent of human minds and constructions. In connection with Wainwright’s condition two, it is important to realize that there can be a state of affairs whereby two or more values that we hold dear are in conflict with one another. One might think of the famous “murderer at the door”

⁹³ William Wainwright, *Morality and Religion* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 49.

⁹⁴ One might, however, be a moral antirealist and question this first condition. One proponent of moral antirealism includes J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

dilemma where the value of truth-telling clashes with the value and regard for human life. What this conflict means, then, is that we must make a distinction between prima facie duties and all-things-considered duties. Once this is done, our claim to the objectivity of values through condition two remains sound. It can be objectively true that the value of life is greater than the value of truth-telling, especially when it is the case that in the act of truth-telling one brings it about, or makes it more reasonable to assume, that life will be lost. Even if we struggle with what seems to be moral failure “come-what-may,” we must not confuse the category of moral obligation with that of moral value. If we recall, what we determined through condition one is that moral value is anterior to any obligation. This makes for a lingering question as to whether or not one has any moral obligation to evil agency (Hitler’s henchmen, for example). But that is not our concern here.

The third condition of objectivity counters the notion that objective values are grounded in desires.⁹⁵ What we can agree to is that what persons have a tendency to pursue is the fulfillment of their desires—but we must not claim that desire fulfillment yields objective value. If we recall, Moore argued against such a claim in the *Principia*, highlighting the fact that reducing goodness to a set of properties, such as pleasure or happiness, will not work. There is an asymmetrical dependency relationship between goodness and the descriptive properties of what is good. As we know, to postulate that “pleasure is good” does nothing to answer the question “is the good pleasure?” The implication of this objection carries over to other complex properties such as preference and happiness. If we replace the variable x with any property or set of properties in the

⁹⁵ We could also speak of preferences, because it seems to me that desires and preferences are not the same thing. One may desire something but not prefer to another course of action, say a greater desire. Preference is connected to the settled intent of desire satisfaction.

proposition ‘x is good,’ the question will always remain whether or not “the good is x.” Moore’s response to the problem is that the good is unanalyzable, “Good is good, and that is the end of the matter.”⁹⁶ I will soon be arguing that the good is a person who is intentional, causal, and so forth, much like the God of traditional theism.

I think the sufficient condition of objectivity, that values are part of the furniture of the universe, is certainly correct. If the discussion at hand is not a matter of ontological fact, then the previous three conditions do not have any footing. Without value being part of the furniture of the universe value statements may be true, but only as a matter of subjective or conventional definition (contra condition one).⁹⁷ We have good reason not to accept this as a condition of objectivity, for if I am the truth-maker of a moral proposition then two things (at least) follow. First, I can never enjoy any moral progress. To say that a person is progressing morally means that they are advancing toward a value external to themselves. It is a value they are “mapping” onto. On the other hand, if I ground the truth of values, then I can never be wrong. Even if my mind changes and the content of the moral proposition is its logical compliment, no absurdity follows. Why? It goes back to who grounds truth—in this case the truth is always contingent on me. More can be said, but I think this suffices. The second issue is that there is an odd relationship under this scheme between the moral values derived from my edict and their import on a wider community. Does my having the property of truth-maker in any sense obligate other persons to the values I define? There is no reason to think so. Consider the fact that under this rubric *all* moral values are determined by the

⁹⁶ See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 6.

⁹⁷ Some noncognitivists argue that there are no truth values ranging over moral propositions, and moral statements are merely a matter of preference. For example, see C. L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,” *Mind* 46 (1939): 14-31.

individual—including competing claims on value between persons. Not only is it the case that contradictory propositions can both be true, it also follows that no imposition of obligation can occur from one agent to the other. My reasoning hinges on the first aspect of our discussion, namely that under this construction no one makes any moral progress. Obligation, in virtue of the very concept, entails both moral progress and moral lapse (when one strays from obligation). But if we cannot make any moral progress, then we have no reason to think that we have any obligations of any kind. It seems the subjectivist paradigm is found wanting.

Perhaps we are on better footing to hold a conventionalist account of values whereby values are a matter of social adoption. There is the obvious question of what it is that makes these values true. More pointedly, what is it about a society such that it provides a suitable source of objective values? The motivation for asking this question is straightforward—at least under the subjectivist account of value we have a definite ontology, the self governs value. It is not very clear what it is about a society that gives it such a clear function. It has been argued that what grounds moral values or truth (and there are moral truths) is a matter of rational deliberation and choice.⁹⁸ If one adopts this stance, which is traditionally called constructivism, a sufficient account of rationality must be provided. Specifically, how there can be convergence on a rational principle within a culture to determine what maximizes rights and liberties? Whether or not these rational choices are aimed at some value is not the real question; rather the question is how can it be the case that rationality is merely a matter of cooperatively rubbing our heads together? To point out the obvious, combining a thousand leaky buckets does not mean that we have one that is functioning properly. But supposing this possible, and I

⁹⁸ For example John Rawls work *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

doubt that it is, then all we have done is beg the question. If we are trying to ascertain the objective source of human value, which is an explicitly ontological category, we do not determine its essence simply by thinking it—an explicitly epistemic operation. What the epistemic project does is ground what is *perceived* to be true about values, but in no way entails that these values are intrinsic.

But even if we grant that the truth-making condition is met, such an account will not likely get through the other conditions of objectivity. I think the real concern here is how it can be said, apart from theism, that morality is a part of the furniture of the universe—our sufficient condition for objectivity. If constructivism defaults into a view like Christine Korsgaard’s such that values are “grounded in the structure of rational consciousness” and “projected onto the world” then there *is* no sufficient grounding for objectivity.⁹⁹ Further, I do not see a clear reason for thinking these “projections” could satisfy the necessary condition of objective values being independent of our desires and preferences. In fact, if what we have is that through tacit consent we arrive at what we desire as a community, there still remains the problem of whether or not our collective perspective on human needs and desires is correct. I agree with the constructivist that our worldview is largely a matter of where we stand and how we see things to be—hence our perspective on the resolution. But all this reveals is how important it is to be standing in the right place so that our perspective is, to borrow from the normative notion, as it *should* be. I think there is another serious concern, similar to the one that affected the

⁹⁹ Korsgaard, Christine, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 116. This point is more developed by William Wainwright in *Religion and Morality*, 53.

subjectivist account of values—namely that objectivity requires the “possibility of error.”¹⁰⁰ Suppose we take the following:

(P1) Murder is wrong at all times and all places. Or,

(P2) Torturing innocent children for fun is morally wrong.

What we have in these two propositions is an appeal to universal moral principles that admit of no exception. But what is implicit in their content is that they are not grounded in our judgment regarding them. Rather, these propositions have a truth value independent of our perceptions and beliefs about them. They are not to be likened unto collective preference claims, nor to mere matters of judgment — such as on which side of the plate to organize our dinnerware—which highlights my concern very nicely. If moral values (or even other values) are mind-dependent in the sense that constructivism has charged, then it is entirely unclear what it would mean for someone to err in judgment. The ontological implications of such a view deny moral realism, and ground the objective nature of value in rationality. So long as this is the standard, then there is nothing to arbitrate between competing claims about a moral proposition *when identical standards of rationality are employed*. At best, the constructivist may claim that in such cases bivalence does not hold, which undermines the original assertion about the truth value of moral propositions. It is not that moral propositions do not have any truth values, the problem is that they can have mutually exclusive truth values in the same time and in the same way—which is counterintuitive.

If we do not endorse either of these subjectivist stripes, then what is left for non-theistic accounts of objective value? We could postulate that ethical statements such as (P1) and (P2) are true even if God does not exist, and in order to avoid the snafus of our

¹⁰⁰ See Wainwright, 53-54.

previous discussion, assert that these truths are “brute facts” about reality. The strengths of such a view are obvious. In saying that these statements are true we have grounded value independent of any human minds or constructions—thus the truth condition is met. Further, it seems that the brute fact view postulates moral values as real values, in some sense they are ontologically a part of the furniture of the universe. And from this our sufficient condition of objectivity is met as well. Also, given that their ontology is not contingent upon our perceptions of their value, these values would exist even if it were to be the case that no human existed—thus they are independent of our preferences and mere judgments. But there is a lingering concern, having to do with the principle of “queerness.” Even if the necessary and sufficient conditions of objectivity have been met, one may still inquire about the “oughtness” of the principles that get articulated.¹⁰¹

Consider Michael Martin’s account of the Argument from Queerness:

1. If there were moral facts, they would have an intrinsic prescriptive quality.
2. If moral facts have an intrinsic prescriptive quality, then naturalism is not true.
3. Naturalism is true.
4. Hence, there are no moral facts.
- 4a. Therefore, objective morality is impossible.¹⁰²

Martin finds premise (1) of the argument problematic, and in fact denies that moral facts have an intrinsic prescriptive quality—the prescriptive quality follows from “what the moral fact is” and the “psychological state of the agent.”¹⁰³ But I find this attack on premise (1) seriously flawed. Its most obvious difficulty is that the psychological state of the agent has nothing to do with the prescriptive force behind the moral fact. Whether or not I *accept* the force of the statement’s content is not the same as whether or not I *should*

¹⁰¹ This is a concern of J.L. Mackie in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

¹⁰² See Michael Martin’s book *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 37.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 37.

accept the force and content of the statement. It is unclear what Martin means in stating that the prescriptive quality comes from moral facts and psychological states, but it seems the best reading is that these two conditions are conjunctive properties. It is the case that (1) if it is a moral fact, and (2) the psychological state of the agent understands and accepts the content of the moral fact (e.g. an ideal observer), then the agent is bound by its content. But here it seems (2) falls prey to some of our earlier concerns, namely that a condition of objectivity must be that obligation be independent of our desires and beliefs. An analogy will help here. If we take the statement “Racial discrimination is morally wrong” and apply Martin’s critique, we can see his error. What we have in this statement is that the representative force follows from the fact that there is a negative value term ranging over a specific action; if the statement were “Racial discrimination is morally permissible” the prescriptive nature changes. In this second version there are two possibilities open to the agent, and these possibilities follow from the concepts of the statement. If an action is morally permissible, then the agent is free to either perform or not perform that action. Thus, I do not see how the conjunction of moral facts and psychological states refutes in any way what Mackie proposed in the “queerness” objection. At best Martin’s critique arrives at something like a Kantian Hypothetical Imperative. Concerning racial discrimination, if we deny it as a means to human flourishing we have good reason to not to practice it. The contingency of its moral reprehensibility is obvious—if discrimination does promote human flourishing, then there is rational, if not pragmatic grounds, to endorse it.

Obviously, the Categorical Imperative will not arrive at this conclusion. The Categorical Imperative has the universalizability principle as its maxim; we act according

to that rule whereby we could at the same time will that it (discrimination) become a universal law. The practice of discrimination cannot be morally permissible in this system. Discrimination succeeds only when a select group benefits from its practice, which is a violation of the universalizability criterion. Further, the Categorical Imperative systemically includes treating persons as ends-in-themselves and not as a means to an end. But this is just what we mean by (1). (2) holds that *if the agent both* understands and accepts the moral fact, then the agent is bound by its content. Given that Kant holds that reason binds the will, the agent is bound to the content through intellection, whether or not they accept it. Thus, it appears this possibility will not work.

Martin's own proposal, which will be our final candidate for a naturalist account of objectivity, is to make an epistemic argument from an ideal observer theory (henceforth IOT).¹⁰⁴ According to this theory, the meaning of ethical expressions is "analyzed in terms of the ethically significant reactions of an observer who has certain ideal properties such as being fully informed and completely impartial."¹⁰⁵ Once we define the term in this way, the normative construct follows therefrom. Martin's view holds:

1. X is morally wrong = If there were an Ideal Observer, it would contemplate X with a feeling of disapproval.¹⁰⁶

According to Martin, the strength of IOT is that it postulates an agent, whether hypothetical or real, whose properties of being fully informed and completely impartial are "reducible to empirical properties and are not ethical ideals on a par with being

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 49-73.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 50.

completely just or fully benevolent.”¹⁰⁷ IOT is a cognitivist model; hence ethical propositions have truth values that are not relativistic. Contra subjectivist views, the analysis of ethical expressions does not contain egocentric terms, thus its content does not vary “systematically with the speaker.”¹⁰⁸ In fact, ideal observers, being fully informed and unbiased, will agree upon the content of each ethical expression. Thus, objectivity is garnered at least in two senses. First, there are moral facts. Second, IOT is compatible with non-subjective values. Martin explains:

Instead of moral values being based on psychological states such as pain, pleasure, and desires, moral value is based on non-subjective states. These would include character traits, the exercise of certain capacities, the development of certain relations with others and the world.¹⁰⁹

Concerning the exercise of certain capacities, an IOT holds that moral properties are properties such that the content of ethical statements have (either relationally or non-relationally) characteristics of human experience (such as apparent rightness).¹¹⁰ This overcomes, at least prima facie, the “queerness” objection to moral propositions. The moral wrongness of rape, for example, has the phenomenological property of “appearing to one” as being morally wrong—just as under proper conditions I will be appeared to “greenly” when I say that the grass is green. I’m afraid this last statement falls prey to a major theistic point, but more on that in a moment. Central to this thesis is that it is a view about the *reactions* of an impartial observer to a moral proposition or purported moral facts. Under most accounts, the impartial observer need not be omniscient about non-moral facts, but rather have awareness of relevant data in relation of one agent to another.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

I think the IOT is ultimately doomed to fail. First, contrary to the claim cited above, IOT does not provide a good response to the “queerness” objection. There are several lines of response here, beginning with the fact that an IOT is merely an account of the factual content of moral and non-moral properties; it does not locate any being who could plausibly impose moral “requiredness” on any agent. Granted, one might hold a relational account of obligation where phenomenologically moral “oughtness” simply *appears* in either our experience or of the content of a moral proposition; and then maintain that the moral judgments of an ideal observer count as properly basic beliefs. For instance, J. Budziszewski argues that there are moral truths we can’t not know unless we engage in self-deception or, as the Apostle Paul explains, suppress the truth in our conscience.¹¹¹ I think the point here is significant, for even if we endorse IOT it presumes a second level of obligation, namely that of epistemic obligation.¹¹² If it is the case that our perceptions determine the content of our deliberation on matters moral, then it becomes all the more important, and indeed obligatory, that we be looking in the right direction in order to be appeared to “rightly.”

Another concern reverts to our rubric for objectivity. Even if I granted a cognitivist approach to IOT and the dispassionate nature of its scope (per necessary condition (3)), IOT fails to address the sufficient condition of objectivity—that is, it does not explain how values are a part of the furniture of the universe. If the IOT argues that they are brute facts, then our previous concerns arise and we have good reason to reject them. In a similar vein the IOT might postulate a Moorean hypothesis that value features are simple and unanalyzable. But even so, we still have the problem of efficient causality

¹¹¹ Budziszewski, J. *What We Can’t Not Know* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2003), 28-51.

¹¹² Perhaps the epistemic supervenes on the moral.

as to their obtaining in the actual world. Recall that IOT postulates a hypothetical entity, not an actual one—and this entity has a psychological response to the content of moral propositions and actions. Hypothetical entities do not have the potency to obligate, nor evaluate, nor have any reaction (emotive or otherwise) to ethical concerns. There are other objections, such as the Euthyphro problems faced by IOT, but these objections suffice for our purposes.

A Theistic Construction

In order to avoid the pitfalls of the previous views, let us consider how it a theist might ground objective values in God. By objective I mean that there is a moral order that exists independent of human convention. In making this assertion I am grounding the metaethical term “good” in God’s nature rather than identifying it with, for example, non-evaluative natural properties. Robert Adams has recently defended this position, utilizing a realist conception of ethics, according to which comparative predication as to value entails relational properties consisting in resemblance to something that is maximally excellent.¹¹³ By resemblance Adams means that “moral excellence” is an aspect of axiological excellence, where axiological excellence is to be understood as, “resembling God in a way that could serve God as a reason for loving the thing.”¹¹⁴ The particular strength of Adams’ position is that the good becomes personal, but more pointedly the personal agency typified by God entails that moral goodness is grounded in something that is the paradigm of goodness. Adams explains:

Theists have sometimes tried to infer the personality of the supreme Good from the premise that persons, as such, are the most excellent things we know, from which it is claimed to follow that the supremely excellent being must be of that sort. A more cautious line of argument begins with the premise, harder to deny,

¹¹³ Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13-130.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

that most of the excellences that are most important to us, and of whose value we are most confident, are excellences of persons or qualities or actions or works or lives or stories of persons. So if excellence consists in resembling or imaging a being that is the Good itself, nothing is more important to the role of the Good itself than that persons and their properties should be able to resemble or image it. That is obviously likelier to be possible if the Good itself is a person or importantly like a person.¹¹⁵

Once again, if we are willing to accept that moral goodness is implicitly relational, where the relata are agents and a paradigm of moral goodness, then a *prima facie* case is made by Adams such that goodness is personal, unlike Platonic archetypes, and more like the traditional God of theism.¹¹⁶

It is a central tenet of Christian thought that God has created persons in His image, and it is in virtue of this fact that our value is ontologically grounded in the conjunction of how God views Himself and how, per the *Imago Dei*, He views us. As we noted in chapter II, God is for theists the efficient cause of all that in any way has being. The implications of this supposition are twofold. First, this postulate is contrary to the “brute fact” thesis discussed in the previous section. If values exist as a matter of brute fact, then these values are beyond the creative will and control of God. If we postulate moral values as abstract objects, then God is at best a craftsman, molding the moral order from preexisting essences into creation. And second, this view rejects theistic views that hold necessary truths are beyond God’s control.¹¹⁷ What are some principles that lead one to think theism has more explanatory power in grounding objective values than its naturalistic counterpart? Paul Copan writes:

- (a) **Simplicity:** Theism offers a much simpler alternative to naturalism: humans have been made in the image of God, whose character is the source of objective moral values; by contrast, naturalistic moral realists assume a pre-

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁶ See Michael Murray, “Do Objective Ethical Norms Need Theistic Grounding,” currently unpublished.

¹¹⁷ See Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 204.

existent independent moral realm and the eventual evolution of valuable human beings who find themselves subject to comply with this moral realm. Theism offers a ready moral connection between a good God and humans.

- (b) Asymmetrical Necessity: Even if ‘murder is wrong’ is a necessary truth, it need not be analytic (cp. “water is H₂O”); also, a necessary truth may still require some kind of explanation (e.g., “water is necessarily H₂O” still requires an explanation for water’s existence and structure). Furthermore, certain necessary truths are logically prior to/more metaphysically basic than others: “*Addition is possible* is necessarily true because *numbers exist* is necessarily true and numbers have certain essential properties. The necessity of moral truths does not diminish their need for grounding in the character of a personal God. God, who necessarily exists in all possible worlds, is the source of all necessary moral (and logical) truths that stand in asymmetrical relation to God’s necessity. The necessarily existing good God is explanatorily prior to any necessary truths, whether moral or logical.
- (c) Cosmic Coincidence: Even if we grant that moral facts are just brute givens and necessarily true, a problem remains—namely the huge cosmic coincidence between the existence of these moral facts the eventual emergence of morally responsible agents who are obligated to them. That this moral realm appears to be anticipating our emergence is a staggering cosmic coincidence that begs for an explanation.
- (d) Accounting for Human Value: Even if this Platonic realm of moral forms exists, there is no good reason to think that valuable, morally responsible human beings should emerge from valueless processes. Theism offers a far more plausible explanation for human value, as it does a better job than nontheistic accounts of explaining human dignity.¹¹⁸

I have dealt with (c) in the previous section, especially in relation to the conjunction of brute facts with IOT. My intention in this section is to offer an argument for the necessity of a personal agent to ground objective values. I agree, generally, with the approach taken by Robert Adams—that the property of goodness requires a paradigmatic standard of goodness by which it is being gauged. Given that in the previous section the problem of the “queerness” of objectivity was such a concern, I will argue that grounding objective values in an agent who embodies those features provides a sufficient account of moral obligation.

¹¹⁸ Paul Copan, “God, Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality,” currently unpublished.

Robert Adams writes that God's commands provide the best cumulative case connecting the entailment of the expression "moral obligation" to what is "semantically indicated" in that expression.¹¹⁹ To be more specific, he writes of four features that are "constraints" on the nature of moral obligation; features that set the parameters of what is semantically indicated, but are seldom jointly articulated sufficiently to provide an account of moral obligation. First, moral obligations are "things that we should care about complying with." Second, it follows that certain emotive responses are appropriate when a wrong is done, and these responses (perhaps including guilt) are both within the individual toward herself, and from the community. Third, moral obligations are something "that one can be motivated to comply with," and as such should be "grounds for reasons to comply." From these suppositions, Adams provides a fourth feature, "it is part of the roles of moral obligation and wrongness that fulfillment of obligation and opposition to wrong actions should be publicly inculcated."¹²⁰

According to Adams, morality is inherently social, even if one were to confine the "social" implications strictly to the agent in her relationship to God. The last condition is an explicit statement of the social element in moral evaluation. More importantly, according to social theories, "having an obligation to do something consists in being required (in a certain way, under certain circumstances or conditions), by another person or group of persons, to do it."¹²¹ To reveal why the secular dimension alone is not satisfactory, Adams elucidates several conditions, each of which is necessary for moral obligation to obtain from "social bonds." First, the social bonds must be grounded in

¹¹⁹ See Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 235-236.

¹²⁰ These four features are drawn from Adams, 235-236. A more thorough treatment of these features may be found in William Wainwright, *Religion and Morality* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Philosophy of Religion Series), 84-92.

¹²¹ See Adams, 238-239.

something good, not merely perceived to be good. The difference stipulated here is ontological rather than phenomenological. Right value (communally) comes from that which is grounded in something good.¹²² Another salient feature may be summed up in the adage “consider the source,” for Adams writes that the “personal characteristics” of persons imposing social requirements are “relevant to the possibility of social requirements constituting moral obligation.” We have more reason to follow the mandates of that which is “knowledgeable, wise, or saintly” than those of one who does not exhibit such features. Finally, the restriction on compliance follows from the gradation of good obtaining between the good demanded and on the degree to which “making the demand” affects the relationship in a quantifiably better way. Though these conditions are necessary, the list may be modified to include other social standards that “approximate” the moral requirements for obligation.

Adams’ contention is that the objectivity of moral obligations, which he views as requisite for social theories, cannot be accounted for on any secular model. If conventionalism is right, then “society would be able to eliminate obligations by just not making certain demands,” where conventionalism is defined as the truth of moral propositions being determined by a particular social setting. The supposed objection against divine command ethics as being uniquely silent on social issues such as slavery serves as a perfect analogue. The Bible, it is argued, seems to make slavery morally permissible given that there is no explicit prohibition in either the Old or the New Covenant. However, Adams notes that secular moral theories are in no better shape, for “moral reformers have taught us that there have been situations in which none of the

¹²² This entire discussion is obtained from Adams, 244-245.

existing human communities demanded as much as they should have.”¹²³ The moral rightness or wrongness of an action may reduce to the specific needs of a given community, but this does not account for the objectivity of, say, the intrinsic value of a human life. Adams’ conclusion is that:

These are all reasons for thinking, as most moralists have, that actual human social requirements are simply not good enough to constitute the basis of moral obligation...A divine command theory of the nature of moral obligation can be seen as an idealized version of the social requirement theory. Our relationship with God is in a broad sense an interpersonal and hence a social relationship. And talk about divine commands plainly applies to God an analogy drawn from human institutions.¹²⁴

The purported force behind Adams’ statement is that divine commands provide the objectivity independent of our beliefs and motivations. And since God is, at least in perfect being theology, morally perfect, then God fills the role “semantically indicated” of the good.

Second, divine command theory offers an account of the emotions (such as guilt) brought about from wrong actions, for God is a person against which these actions are being done. Granted, divine command theory is particularly theistic, and the concern may arise that atheists have no cognitive access to what is morally required. However, Adams contends that this may be resolved in that the content of commands may come to us through the design of our mental faculties, so that we are aware through conscience of what is socially required.¹²⁵ One may honor *most* social obligations through Adams’ cognitive thesis. We have ideas of social good and progress because God designed us to understand how we are to function as a social entity. For example, one may come to

¹²³ Ibid., 247.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 248-249.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 257.

understand that it is in his or her better interest to have regard for others. When we fail in this assignment, the requisite negative emotions such as guilt occur for those that are functioning properly cognitively. This aspect of Adams's theory does not require belief in God; only that "the order of knowing is not the same as the order of being" as the Scholastics say. Thus Adams may differentiate between adherence to right conduct between human persons and right conduct between humans and God. It is this latter aspect that motivated my previous comment that one may honor *most* social obligations; God is a member of every social system, and wrongs done against Him are equivalent in type to the wrongs done against humans. So, the theory has compatible notions with secular ethics, it just views them as incomplete.

I now turn my attention to Adams' argument from necessary moral truths. Suppose that we are obligated to not harm innocent children for the fun of it. According to Adams, obligation arises from the prohibitions of God. But if one were to ask whether this obligation obtains without God, either ontologically or per His command, Adams is committed to the view that no such obligation holds. This follows, he thinks, from the discussion of the nature of necessary moral truths. Michael Murray explains, "A number of theists have argued that moral claims are necessary truths and as such require some non-natural entities as their truth-makers."¹²⁶ According to Adams and in the tradition of Anselm, God is the suitable candidate to fill such a role. However, and Adams notes this in chapter IV of his book, if God does not exist or if God is quantifiably morally different [for the worse] than we believed Him to be, then Adams's theory of value does not hold. For the purpose of theoretical evaluation, Adams proposes we assume God exists and

¹²⁶ See Michael Murray, "Do Objective Ethical Norms Need Theistic Grounding." This article is unpublished.

morally fits the category of candidate as the good, thus “excellence is the property of faithfully imaging such a God, or of resembling such a God in such a way as to give God a reason for loving.”¹²⁷ More appropriate, I think, is Adams’s later contention that:

Another possibility, perhaps no more satisfying, would be to say that we evaluate possibilities from our standpoint in the actual world and that excellence in any possible world is measured by conformity to the standard of excellence as it is in the actual world—so that, on my theory, what God is like in the actual world will determine the nature of excellence in all possible worlds.¹²⁸

What Adams is striving for is a non-contingent account of what is excellent; for to him the standard of excellence should have a definitive ontology such that persons may know and map onto it. A contingent account of excellence provides no such ontology and reduces, in Adams’s estimation, to conventionalism. Thus, the best explanation is that God necessarily exists and His ontology is such that in every possible world “in which creatures like us exist, he commands them not to lie, to protect the innocent, and so on.”¹²⁹ The force behind such an argument is that it seems implausible, given the nature of God, that there would be some world in which torturing children for the fun of it would be morally permissible. And, with each state of affairs there is a triad of theological value judgments (morally forbidden, morally required, and morally neutral) such that God has an expressed will that God necessarily issues under relevant circumstances. Supposedly, this avoids God commanding that which seems to be abhorrently evil, for the content of His character is one of the relevant conditions for what is commanded. Adams explains:

We should be clear...about some things that are not claimed in the divine command theory that I espouse. Two restrictions, in particular, will be noted here. One is that when I say that an action’s being morally obligatory consists in

¹²⁷ Adams, 46.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹²⁹ See Wainwright, 96.

its being commanded by God, and that an action's being wrong consists in its being contrary to a divine command, I assume that the character and commands of God satisfy certain conditions. More precisely, I assume they are consistent with the divine nature having properties that make God an ideal candidate, and the salient candidate, for the semantically indicated role of the supreme and definitive Good. It is only the commands of a definitively good God, who, for example, is not cruel but loving, that are a good candidate for the role of defining moral values.¹³⁰

We have noted that Adams' view is a "Platonic" account of the good, and this may bring up some problems. But Adams' view is not a traditional Platonic view, and for the most part I think the lingering objections can be assuaged.

Polishing and Amending the Transfinite View

I think the first objection one may lob at Adams is that if we accept his "Platonic" archetype model of goodness, then God merely exemplifies goodness rather than *is* goodness. But I think this is to misconstrue his model. What Adams means by "Platonic" model is to offer an account such that the phrase 'x is good' implies that it is intrinsically good to value x, and this even of divine agency. But one can certainly value good that is intrinsic to oneself with no necessary external referent by which that good is being measured. What I have in mind here is a Trinitarian model; the co-instantiation of perfect making properties across the three Persons of the Trinity. More importantly, though, there is nothing incoherent in the idea that one can be both *an* exemplar and *the* paradigm of an attribute, in this case goodness. What is the upshot of this response? First, God is not good via resemblance to any external standard, nor is He good through His resemblance to His essential properties. Rather, God's goodness is an essential attribute of His existence; hence He is necessarily good and recognizes this about Himself. Thus we may adopt a Platonic "shift" whereby instances of the good "are

¹³⁰ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 250.

likenesses or imitations of the Forms under which they are classed.”¹³¹ In other words, things are excellent insofar as they resemble or imitate God (rather than ideas). God, whose existence grounds the possibility of comparative predication, empowers the argument originated by Aquinas that if creatures are good insofar as they image God, then goodness may be predicated of both God and all of the elements of the created order (hence the attribution of the social element mentioned above). I think other objections might arise. For example, in postulating that God knows His own goodness and loves Himself for it, one might claim that God is narcissistic. But this hardly follows. Narcissism has to do with a self- concept that is deluded, or the magnification of attributes that the agent does not really embody. Under this construction, God’s recognition of His perfect-making properties does not merit the charge of narcissism—it is recognition of an ontological truth. Just as persons can introspect and find attributes that are desirable and good, all the more for the One who embodies the fullness of being. So I do not think this objection has any merit.

Does Adams’s theory satisfy our criteria presented above? I think it does. Given that God’s goodness supervenes on His actions we have a solid account of these values being a part of the furniture of the universe. Further, given that these properties are objectively grounded in God’s essential nature, and that persons are made in the image of God, we have a promising account of the necessary conditions of universality and truth being met. It is not that God merely exemplifies these properties; it is that God both exemplifies goodness and is the standard by which actions are measured. As we argued, it does not make sense to postulate something as a standard that does not exemplify the properties that it is the standard of. There is the lingering concern that if this argument

¹³¹ Ibid., 28.

goes through, then one becomes subject to belief in God; it would be incoherent to hold such a view without belief in God. But as we noted, given that God's goodness supervenes on creation, the epistemic question of belief becomes unnecessary. God is the best semantic indicator of these values, and the epistemic pathway to moral knowledge is not entailed through this theory. If we agree with Richard Taylor, though, then one might want to reconsider the plausibility of naturalism in light of theism's more promising account of moral values defeat of the "queerness" objection. Richard Taylor writes:

A duty is something that is owed. But something can be owed only to some person or persons...Similarly, the idea of an obligation higher than this, and referred to as moral obligation, is clear enough, provided reference to some lawmaker higher than those of the state is understood. In other words, moral obligations are more binding upon us than our political obligations. But what if this higher-than-human lawgiver is no longer taken into account? Does the concept of moral obligation still make sense? The concept of moral obligation is unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone.¹³²

Conclusion

What must remain clear is that this has been a project in grounding the good; it has not been a project in grounding moral obligation—the topic of Taylor's quote. But I bring this up to highlight a very important feature of our discussion. If God offers the best account of moral value, then God will offer the best account of moral obligation. It will be at this point that the naturalist concern about theistic belief will take shape. But this is the project of my next chapter, where I will make an argument for the Divine Command theory of ethics.

¹³² Taylor, Richard. *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83-84 (text emended for context).

CHAPTER IV

DIVINE COMMANDS, DIVINE WILL, AND MORAL OBLIGATION

“To be a theological voluntarist” writes Mark Murphy “is to hold that entities of some kind have at least some of their moral statuses in virtue of certain acts of divine will.”¹³³ It may be the case that the status of actions described as obligatory are so in virtue of a “single supreme obligation”, namely to obey God.¹³⁴ The traditional version of DC ethics is built upon such a framework, such that “all of the more workaday obligations that we are under...bind us as a result of the exercise of God’s supreme practical authority.”¹³⁵ Hence, the traditional DC theory is a normative metaethical thesis, and “it is a version of theological voluntarism because it holds that all other normative states of affairs, at least those involving obligation, obtain in virtue of God’s commanding activity.”¹³⁶

Granted, the traditional DC view dominated the literature of the Medieval Scholastics, and perhaps developed even sharper teeth in the contemporary works of Robert Adams. The current trend is to give an account of what it is in DC ethics that makes it an “interesting thesis” and an “informative account” of normative concepts, properties, and states of affairs.¹³⁷ Thus the emphasis shifts from a normative metaethical view to a descriptive project in which a version of DC is fashioned in terms of some acts of divine will. Let us distinguish these two accounts; the normative interpretation will be

¹³³ See Mark Murphy, “Theological Voluntarism,” [accessed 8 August 2006]; available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/voluntarism-theological/#1>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, #1.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, #2.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, #2.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, #3.

called DCN, and the metaethical interpretation will be called DCM.¹³⁸ In either case, proponents of DC are in agreement regarding one thing, namely that what God wills is relevant to how moral obligation obtains.

In this chapter I will be defending a traditional DC theory of ethics whereby moral obligation arises from the commands of God. In order to succeed in my task, I will first challenge Mark Murphy's thesis that DC ethics is best articulated in a will formulation. I will offer a sketch of Murphy's thesis, and give criticisms as to why such a construal will not work. Next, I will turn my attention to the development of my own theory regarding DC ethics. Here I will discuss (1) how the will of God is integrated into a meaningful DC ethic, (2) how a DC theorist can ground God's authority in a meaningful way such that He has "practical" authority with regard to the content of His commands, and (3) what moral obligation entails and why moral obligation is only binding on defective moral agents

Mark Murphy's Divine Will Formulation

"Assume" writes Mark Murphy "that theological voluntarism is an account of obligation-type properties. A second issue concerning the proper formulation of the view concerns the relevant act of divine will."¹³⁹ According to Murphy, there are three options that exhaust our possibilities:

- (1) That it is obligatory for A to f depends on God's commanding A to f.
- (2) That it is obligatory for A to f depends on God's willing that A f.
- (3) That it is obligatory for A to f depends on God's willing that it be obligatory for A to f.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Mark Murphy uses the allotment of DCT-N and DCT-M. Since I have been working with DC in previous chapters, I will continue to follow that naming.

¹³⁹ Mark Murphy, "Theological Voluntarism", #5.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., #5.

I will save discussion of (1) for later, given that I will defend it in my own theory.

Murphy thinks that the dispute is between (1) and (2), for (3) “is, understood in one way, no competitor with (1) or (2); and understood differently, it has little argumentative support.”¹⁴¹ Let us consider why (3) should be rejected, and orient the rest of our discussion on the debate between (1) and (2).

What we have in (2) is that some person be bound by moral requirement to perform a certain action. God’s commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was God’s willing that Abraham be morally obligated to sacrifice Isaac. Murphy notes that this view can be given either a metaethical or normative version. According to the normative version, all humans are required to do what God wills that they be morally required to do. Thus, “particular actions that God wills that we be morally obligated to perform become actual moral requirements.”¹⁴² Every human, as such, is morally required to obey God’s will, and all of the particular moral obligations are specifications of this general moral requirement. However, the metaethical version of (3) “does not appeal to a general moral requirement that is particularized under the content of God’s will.”¹⁴³ Contrariwise, the metaethical thesis is that God creates moral obligations *ex nihilo*, that is, “out of normative nothingness.”¹⁴⁴

What becomes clear is that the normative and metaethical versions of (3) differ in their explanation of moral obligation, and in the implications of what obligations there are. The metaethical thesis explains the existence of particular moral obligations in terms of God’s power to “actualize normative states of affairs; no normative states of affairs

¹⁴¹ Ibid., # 5.

¹⁴² Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 11.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

obtain prior to God's willing."¹⁴⁵ Given that the normative thesis explains moral obligation in terms of the normative state of affairs that that persons are morally required to obey God, "it follows trivially that humans are under a moral obligation to obey God."¹⁴⁶ We have already noted that the metaethical view does not have this implication. Thus, our first objection is that the normative and metaethical versions of (3) are distinct theses, neither view entails the other.

One of the reasons for accepting (3) is that it best supports the doctrine of divine sovereignty. The doctrine of divine sovereignty over creation is, "that nothing distinct from God is independent of God."¹⁴⁷ The dependence referenced here is an ontological dependence; thus one state of affairs contributes to the obtaining of the other state of affairs. Philip Quinn, for example, argues that this dependence relationship can be understood in one of two ways. There is the stronger thesis which holds that all states of affairs, even those involving or entailing God's existence, are metaphysically dependent on God's willing them. The weaker dependence holds that only contingent states of affairs are metaphysically dependent on God's will.¹⁴⁸ It is this second dependence relationship that Quinn endorses. The problem with Quinn's view is that in morality, most states of affairs are wholly distinct from God's existing. Murder's being morally forbidden and love's being morally required are "obviously distinct from God's existing, and so if God is sovereign over creation in this moderate sense then the obtaining of those normative states of affairs is dependent on God's willing that they obtain."¹⁴⁹ God's sovereignty, thus construed, does not support the claim that any normative states of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

affairs obtain, nor “does it show that the moral requirements that we are under are a result of a prior moral requirement to obey God. Rather, the appeal to sovereignty shows only that God’s will must enter into any complete explanation of why a normative state of affairs obtains.”¹⁵⁰ This argument shows that we might get a metaethical version of (3) from Quinn’s argument, but we do not get the normative version. Consider an example. From the supposition that promise-keeping is a morally obligatory state of affairs that obtains, we do not derive the normative principle from its dependence on God’s existence. Murphy writes:

This state of affairs is, I think, wholly distinct from the existence of promises: one can conceive of its being morally obligatory to keep promises yet no one has made any; and one can accept that promise-keeping is obligatory while not accepting that there are any promises to keep. One can, pace Anselm, conceive of God’s non-existence while conceiving that it is morally obligatory to obey God, and one can accept the view that obedience to God is morally required while denying God exists.¹⁵¹

Thus, the preferred conclusion to the sovereignty thesis is not that the moral requirement to obey God implies God’s existence. Even if one finds a way to make the relationship between the normative and metaethical versions of (3) symmetrical, what we have through the argument from divine sovereignty is not what (3) argues. In fact, if moral requirement does not imply God’s existence, then the obligation to obey God is distinct from His existence. If moral obligation is distinct from His existence, then the only other option for (3) is that obligation depends (metaphysically) on God’s will; but this is the claim of (2), not (3). For these reasons, we will not consider (3) a live option for our discussion.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

I will now articulate what the dispute is between (1) and (2), first giving priority to the development of (2). What we will find is that there is much common ground here, but a central disagreement will center on the relationship of speech acts and their informative and obligating power. What I hope to provide is a solid defense of DC in terms of the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of God's commands. It will be on these points that Murphy and I will disagree—for I agree in large part, one proviso, with his views on the content of God's will. So after I offer Murphy's will construct, I do not have much interesting to say against it merely in terms of what God wills. I do have a bone to pick with his thesis about DW as normative; so it will be there that he and I part company. For purposes of clarity, from this point forward I will refer to (1) as DC and (2) as DW respectively to keep the contrast between the command formulation and will formulation clear.

Mark Murphy's Argument from Proposition (2)

What DW asserts about morality is that the act of will “that is relevant is God's will that some persons be bound by moral requirement to perform a certain action.”¹⁵² Indeed, one of the strengths of such a view is that it is common currency among theists to claim that they performed a certain action because it was God's will. The project for this view is to articulate a thesis of God's activity that specifies a sense of willing that lies between two extremes. The first of these extremes is that one may specify a sense of

¹⁵² See Mark Murphy, “Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation” in *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1998): 10. Since I am referencing two Murphy works, I will henceforth cite this one as Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, followed by a page number. Hugh McCann points out that this sounds more like (3) than (2). My rejection of (3) is largely due to the problem of speech-acts, which I will address in a moment. I think the other concerns we provided before are sufficient for a rejection of (3) as a viable hypothesis. This may just be an instance of inconsistency for Murphy. Rather than say that the act of will that is relevant is God's will that some persons “be bound by moral requirement to perform a certain action,” he can say the relevant act of will is God's [antecedent] will for an agent to perform an action.

willing that is “too strong.”¹⁵³ If a picture of God’s sovereignty is drawn such that His will is efficacious in all human actions, then no one could possibly violate a moral requirement.¹⁵⁴ Second, if one specifies a sense of willing that is too weak, then it “does not seem appropriate to connect that sense to moral obligation.”¹⁵⁵ Let us first consider the strong sense of God’s willing.

The strong sense of “God wills that X” is “that in which God intends that X.”¹⁵⁶ What is needed for DW is a weaker sense of willing that does not entail intending, for God’s intentions guarantee a state of affairs obtaining because it follows from God being omniscient and rational.¹⁵⁷ As the argument goes, if God is omniscient with regard to human actions, then God knows whether or not a certain state of affairs, say Abraham’s sacrificing Isaac, obtains. As Murphy notes, if we suppose that God intends that Abraham sacrifice Isaac and God knows that Abraham will not sacrifice Isaac, then God is irrational, for “it is irrational to intend a state of affairs that one knows will not obtain.”¹⁵⁸ The problem is obvious—it must be the case that if God intends this state of affairs, then it is not true that God knows that Abraham will not sacrifice Isaac. If God intends the sacrifice to obtain, then God knows that the relevant act of sacrificing will obtain. To state the strong sense of will otherwise, “what God wants God gets.”¹⁵⁹ Such a result is counterintuitive, for the very problem that we are dealing with is the narrative of human moral failure, not success. We need an account of willing that avoids this

¹⁵³ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁵⁴ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁵⁵ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁵⁶ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁵⁷ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁵⁸ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁵⁹ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 16. Murphy also uses this as an argument against thesis (3) above.

counterintuitive approach, one that is strong enough to account for moral obligation but is not so strong as to preclude moral violation.

At this juncture Murphy considers a promising resolution proposed by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*. There we find a discussion of how it can be the case that God's will is necessarily fulfilled, in a sense, while circumventing the negative effects of the earlier postulates. Aquinas writes:

The words of the Apostle, *God wills that all men be saved*, etc., can be understood in three ways. First, by restricted application, in which case they would mean...*God wills all men be saved that are saved, not because there is no man whom He does not wish to be saved, but because there is no man saved whose salvation He does not will*. Secondly, they can be understood as applying to every to every class of individuals, not to every individual of each class; in which case they mean that God wills some men of every class and condition to be saved...but not all of every condition. Thirdly, they are understood of the antecedent will of God; not of the consequent will. This distinction must not be taken as applying to the divine will itself, in which there is nothing antecedent or consequent, but to the things willed.¹⁶⁰

The third construal is what theologians have drawn on to resolve the apparent discrepancy in Scripture on doctrines of eschatology and soteriology. God wills, for instance, that all persons be saved and yet not all persons are saved (I Tim. 2:3-4, Matt. 7:13-14). A moral corollary may be found in the Holiness Code of the Old Testament or in the Sermon on the Mount of the New Testament where Jesus utters the imperative "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:48)." As Mark Murphy notes, "What makes this coherent is that the sense of willing in which God wills that all be [saved] is antecedent: prior to a consideration of all the particulars of a person's situation."¹⁶¹ To make the moral point, God wills that all men be perfect prior to and independent of any action being instantiated by the agent(s). The sense in which everything that God wills

¹⁶⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume 1, 272.

¹⁶¹ See Murphy, "Theological Voluntarism," #6.

obtains is grounded in God's consequent will; that is, posterior to and with regard to particular actions by moral agents. The upshot is that the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will grounds a sense of willing strong enough for moral obligation to obtain, but it is not as strong as the intention thesis that effectually makes God the author of sin (for nothing, under this rubric, occurs independent of God's intentions). Murphy explains:

There remains the possibility that moral obligations can be held to depend on God's antecedent intentions. These might be thought to have the requisite strength to be associated with moral requirements, and since not all of God's antecedent intentions need be fulfilled, this association would not have the unwelcome implication that necessarily no moral obligations are violated... This is possible, because God's antecedently willing that S F does not entail that it is the case that S will F.¹⁶²

If we recall, Murphy is a proponent of the DW formulation, whereby morality is primarily a matter of God's will. I think he has given sufficient defense for the cogency of how God can will a state of affairs and yet that state of affairs not obtain. He contends, however, that such a distinction only makes sense under a DW formulation; for under the DW formulation "God's capacity to impose moral obligations is not objectionably contingent, depending on a very special set of institutional facts. Rather, what is relevant in a command is that God is expressing His antecedent intentions regarding human action."¹⁶³ The "institutional facts" Murphy references must be DC's analogue of human speech-acts to that of divine speech-acts; God's speech-acts impose moral obligation in the same way that human speech-acts do. He writes:

For it to be possible for one to give another a command to F, there must be a linguistic practice available to the addressee in terms of which the speaker can formulate a command. This is not just for the sake of having the means to communicate a command; rather, commands are essentially linguistic items, and

¹⁶² See Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 18-19.

¹⁶³ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 19.

cannot be defined except in such terms. Imagine, though, that a certain created rational being, Mary, inhabits a linguistic community in which there is no practice of commanding. One can successfully make assertions to Mary...but one cannot successfully command Mary to do anything. Here is the question: so long as Mary's linguistic resources are confined to those afforded by this practice, can God impose obligations on her?¹⁶⁴

Murphy's emphasis here is that there is an asymmetrical dependence relationship between what God wills and what God commands. For, as Murphy argues, "It is far from clear that it is a real option for God to command that A F while not intending that A F."¹⁶⁵ The dependence of the commands on the will hinges on a "sincerity condition," for if God commands what He does not intend, then God is "insincere" in uttering the injunction. Contrariwise, God might intend for humans to act in a certain way while not commanding them to do so.¹⁶⁶ The reasoning is forthright. Proponents of DC are bound to answer this question in the negative, while proponents of DW answer in the affirmative.

We have provided the contrast between DW and DC to facilitate our own argument for DC, for it is in response to these issues raised by Murphy that we are writing. Before we turn to our own DC construction, there is one more element of Murphy's argument to be considered. Murphy argues that the DW approach is superior to the DC approach for another reason, for DW is "capable of providing defenses of several commonly held deontic theses that [DC] cannot."¹⁶⁷ Thus, we consider the following three theses:

- (1) If one is morally obligated to F, and ? -ing is a necessary means to F-ing, then one is morally obligated to ? .

¹⁶⁴ See Murphy, "Theological Voluntarism," #7.

¹⁶⁵ See Murphy, "Theological Voluntarism," #6.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, # 6.

¹⁶⁷ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 20.

- (2) If one is morally obligated to F, then it is possible for one to F (“ought implies can”).
- (3) If one is morally obligated to F and is morally obligated to ? , then one is morally obligated to F and to ? .¹⁶⁸

The claim that God’s intentions regarding human actions determine our moral obligations provides an apologetic for DW on all three of these claims. For if God intends the ends, then God intends the means; “So, if God intends that S F, and S’s ? -ing is necessary if S is to F, then God (being rational) intends that S ? .”¹⁶⁹ Second, God does not intend what God believes to be impossible. Therefore, “If God believes that it is impossible for S to F, then it is impossible for S to F, and God (being rational) does not intend that S F.”¹⁷⁰ Finally, it is a tenet of “rational intending” that one’s “separate intentions should be joined to an “overarching plan.” From this we may derive, argues Murphy, that “if God intends that S F and God intends that S ? , then God intends that S both F and ? (and is morally obligated to both F and ?).”¹⁷¹

There are other factors Murphy provides as defense, but what we have so far suffices for our purposes—at least as a rubric for DW and the concerns for DC. So what is the task for the DC view? I think our project, in order to be successful, must give response to three questions:

- (1) How might the DC proponent respond to the claim that God’s commands are only a byproduct of His will (and hence the preeminence of the divine will)?
- (2) How might the DC proponent respond to the linguistic analogue of the “non-imperative community” (see the problem of Mary above)?
- (3) How might the DC proponent respond to the claim that only through a DW approach may one endorse all three claims regarding rational intending?

¹⁶⁸ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 20.

¹⁶⁹ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 20.

¹⁷⁰ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 21.

¹⁷¹ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 21.

Divine Command Formulation and the Will of God

It should be noted that proponents of DC are not saying that God's will is irrelevant to His commands. Rather, what proponents of DC are emphasizing is that God's commands bring about moral obligation, and without the requisite act of commanding no moral obligation obtains. Let us now consider a DC argument.

First, I agree with Murphy that a distinction must be made between God's antecedent will and God's consequent will. But contrary to Murphy, this is what I find problematic for the DW proponent. Robert Adams explains, "The most obvious problem for the divine will theories of obligation is that according to most theologies, not everything wrong or forbidden by God is in every way contrary to God's will."¹⁷² Adams' contention is that the ground of moral obligation is "not to be found" in God's permissive will (understood as either His consequent or even antecedent will), rather, moral obligation obtains under God's *revealed will*.¹⁷³ By revealed will Adams means that which is "substantially" the same as God's commands.¹⁷⁴ Thus, the bridge that covers the gap between a strictly metaethical project (descriptive) and a normative thesis is to be grounded in God's revealed will. I will treat the revealed will of God with more rigor in my section on speech-acts.

But first, what of Murphy's account of rational being Mary who inhabits a community with no concept of imperatives? Under the DW rubric there is a good story to tell as to how God brings about actions in that community, namely that God expresses His preferences regarding their actions in given circumstances. For example, if my wife

¹⁷² See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 259.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁷⁴ Here Adams allows for "counsels" or advice, but the actual commands of God are the most narrowly construed condition of moral obligation.

tells me that she would like for me to wash the dishes, then there is enough content in the expression of her wishes for me to understand, as a rational agent, what state of affairs she desires to see obtain. Further, there may be enough inflection in her voice and sternness in her eyes to relay grades of intensity in her preferences. Though she cannot command me, her will can be known.

I will concede that merely from the perspective of the “non-imperative” community an expression of will accomplishes what the DW proponent wants and the DC proponent cannot provide. However, I think that in constructing the community as such, Murphy has sacrificed his previous assertion about the sovereignty of God. Moral obligation does not obtain when God merely “prefers” or “wishes for” or even *merely wills* an agent to perform an action; but in fact *antecedently wills and commands* that action to be done. Previously we noted that Murphy rejected a preferential model of DW, for it was not strong enough to account for moral obligation. So I think the sovereignty concern is warranted. Further, in creating the “non-imperative” community it seems that Murphy cannot account for God’s rationality. Consider Robert Adams:

It leaves us faced, however, with the question of why God would ever leave the obligatory uncommanded...Why would God ever want something to be obligatory but not command it? Perhaps, of course, in view of a mix of advantages and disadvantages, God would have an antecedent but not a consequent volition that the action be obligatory, and would not command it; but in that case the action would presumably not be obligatory, since what God wills antecedently but not consequently does not happen—certainly insofar as it depends on God. So it seems implausible to think of divine volitions regarding obligations as grounding obligations without issuing the relevant commands.¹⁷⁵

Granted, Adams was not, in this passage, responding to Murphy’s analogy, but I think his argument has force there as well. Traditional Divine Command theories postulate a direct connection between what is commanded by God and how the commands are to

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 261.

produce an intention in the agent on whom the command is directed; this falls in line with Murphy's postulate (2) above (the ought implies can principle). I like the way Robert Adams responds to such claim as Murphy's:

The main benefit I can see in replacing divine commands with divine will in a theory of obligation would be avoiding the problems that attend the requirement that commands must be revealed or communicated in order to exist as commands. This benefit would depend on the assumption that the relevant divine will can be what it is, and impose obligation, without being revealed. But this yields an unattractive picture of divine-human relations, one in which the wish of God's heart imposes biding obligations without even being communicated, much less issuing a command. Games in which one party incurs guilt for failing to guess the unexpressed wish of the other party are not nice games. They are no nicer if God is thought of as party to them.¹⁷⁶

Murphy may contend that God's wishes may be expressed; but the problem remains that it cannot be done as a command. So I see no good reason to maintain a DW view as opposed to a DC view in Murphy's analogy. In fact, if moral obligation is to obtain, then the requisite act of commanding is necessary to impose the obligation.

A Closer Look at Speech-Acts

A good question to ask, and one that elicits concern over DW, is whether or not God's commands are speech-acts. I say this is a concern for DW not because the DW proponent must hold that God cannot speak, but rather because DW does not capture what occurs when in fact God does speak. We have noted that Murphy and others hold that God's commands play merely an informative, not a normative one, and that God's will is what obligates. It is this claim that I want to consider, in light of a distinction drawn out in most accounts of speech-acts, namely that between the illocutionary act of speech and the perlocutionary act of speech. Consider this question: if God utters a

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 261.

command, can it be the case that the only thing that happens is that in uttering the command God *merely informs us of His will*? I will argue against this possibility.

In proper speech-act parlance we may ask “if God commands me to X:”

(1) What does the command of God say? And,

(2) What does the command of God do?

According to J.L. Austin, speech acts have three distinctive elements.¹⁷⁷ The “locution” is the set of words that is uttered, the “perlocution” is the effect of what is said, and the “illocution” is the message conveyed by what is said. What is important here is that in order for speech to be an act, certain conditions must be met; this because speech is ingrained in social customs and institutions.¹⁷⁸ Take, for example, the following words uttered from God to Abraham:

(s) Abraham, sacrifice Isaac.

In uttering this statement several things have been done. A witness might report that God said to Abraham “sacrifice” meaning “take the life of in some way” Isaac. This is the locution of the statement. Second, in saying to Abraham “sacrifice Isaac” God persuaded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac—this is the perlocutionary force of the statement. Further, one may derive from (s) that in uttering those specific words it was the intention of the speaker to *command* Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, rather than offer it as a suggestion or merely as a report of the speaker’s desires—especially in light of relevant facts such as authorial relations or how institutional authority may obtain between the speaker (God) and the hearer (Abraham). This is the illocutionary force of the speech-act.

¹⁷⁷ Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 101-103.

¹⁷⁸ We briefly discussed this when we considered Adams in Chapter II.

The question now becomes whether or not moral obligation is derived from either the perlocution or the illocution of divine speech-acts, or perhaps both. I see this to be the case because DW and DC cannot say the same thing here. If we hold to the DW view that commands are the information highway to God's will, then moral obligation obtained (at least logically) before any divine speech-act—and such a contention seems incompatible with what speech-act theory proposes. Divine speech, as it were, is the divine action of obligating, and the words of the commands are inseparable from the content of the commands. The DW view, of necessity, separates the content of speech from the content of action.

The DW proponent may at this point recur to the possibility of the “non-imperative community” mentioned above, and claim that placing the focus of obligation on speech acts fails under this model—for it would then be impossible for non-imperative communities to be moral. But this need not be the case. Speech-act theory allows for indirect speech, which can have the same locution, illocution, and perlocution as direct speech. I think indirect speech might be what a natural law theorist would want—but in this case we need only postulate that so long as divine commands supervene on the created order—there is no problem (it's not either Divine Commands or natural law, it is both, narrowly construed). The difference between DC and natural law is that between specific revelation (e.g. the Bible) and general revelation (e.g. the created order). The difference between these aspects of revelation is epistemic, not ontological. Both specific and general revelation are divine speech-acts, namely two aspects of God's revealed will. Specific revelation's normative force is more likely to be seen as true from someone from within a theistic tradition because of a commitment to some type of verbal

inspiration. In fact, most theistic traditions have it that their sacred texts are inspired by God. No such theistic (epistemic) commitment is required from the natural law. It is my contention that if divine commands supervene on the natural law, then one may accept the normative force of the natural law and not reckon it to its source. But this difference is merely one of how God speaks, not if God speaks. In other words, the medium of speech is not as important as the content of the speech, and in proposing a “non-imperative community” as a counterargument against DC on this point is strictly an ad hoc maneuver. Why should we postulate a logical construct where God, qua Creator, even considers the act of creating such a community?

Murphy argues that in order for an argument like mine (and Adams) to pass muster, there must be a correlation between human speech-acts and divine speech-acts. If this connection cannot be made, then the DW proponent need not waver. Murphy argues, in tandem with Rawls, Simmons, and Searle, that conventional rules and social paradigms do not confer moral obligation except by way of a moral principle that “entails adherence to those rules is morally required.”¹⁷⁹ Against such an objection one may not invoke moral obligation in terms of God’s will without question-begging (Why obey God—because God said to). Rather, we must construct an independent *moral* principle that implies that adherence to obligations resulting from divine commands is morally binding. What Murphy has in mind is that mere rules are not moral, nor are positional or institutional requirements moral obligations. Why is this objection so problematic? Because if no speech-acts generate moral obligations, then divine speech-acts do not generate moral obligations. But this objection is not, it seems to me, one about speech-act theory—it seems to be one about God’s authority, which is only manifested in

¹⁷⁹ Murphy, *Faith and Philosophy*, 6.

speech-acts. If we can answer this concern, then I think the speech-act model regains its original force, which favors DC and not DW. Let us consider a response to this objection—which is another *tour de force* from Murphy.

Suppose we take the line that God’s commands cannot themselves be sufficient reasons for obedience; why obey them? We could say that if we do not obey God, He will squash us like a bug; or if we do obey He will reward us handsomely. In either case these appeals, and any others like them, are independent of the content of God’s commands, and this makes His act of commanding only one of a number of reasons for doing that action.¹⁸⁰ What Murphy argues is that the DC rubric fails to account for God’s practical authority.¹⁸¹ Interestingly enough, his mode of justification for such a view is that “authority-bearing acts are content-bearing acts: they are speech-acts with propositional content.”¹⁸² Here is where I think Murphy loses one of his major theses. Earlier I argued that if one holds to a speech-act view, then it is going to favor a DC construct at least insofar as the illocutionary force of the speech-act is concerned. Recall, DW loses the authoritative force of the illocution because the content of God’s will is what obligates an agent unto action—especially if, as Murphy later argues, “practical authorities constitutively actualize reasons for action by their commanding acts.”¹⁸³ Thus, if all we have in divine agency is a being that can, in a speech-act’s perlocution, inform us of the content of His will, then it seems that humans can do something through speech-acts that God cannot; for the full force of divine speech-acts is stunted in making something obligatory that does not rely on the speech-act being complete (locution,

¹⁸⁰ See Mark Murphy, “Divine Authority and Divine Perfection,” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49 (2001), 168.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 157.

perlocution, and illocution). On the other hand, Murphy might well contend that his theory is complete, and that humans can generate moral obligations merely through their act of willing, without any recourse to the content of their commanding. But here I recur to Adams's statement that this would be an unfair game.

So where does Murphy go to disconnect God's authority in commanding, so that a DW construct is preferable? He argues it is not the case that God's omniscience, omnipotence, or goodness entails that He has practical authority over us.¹⁸⁴ I would like to consider what it means for an agent to have practical authority. If my take on the issue is effective, we will see that God is practically authoritative, and the DC has no reason to be ill-at-ease.

The question, it seems, is whether or not practical authority is a divine perfection, not whether divine perfections are what ground practical authority.¹⁸⁵ Hence, we cannot make an argument from God's omniscience to His authority because all we get out of the omniscience claim is that God knows what decisive reasons an agent has for acting, which merely "passes along" information to rational creatures giving them decisive reasons to believe that the agent has decisive reasons to perform that action.¹⁸⁶ In other words, God's omniscience entails that He would not tell us to do something when there is not a decisive reason for us to do it.

A similar case can be made from His perfect moral goodness. If we look to morally good agents for insight into a situation, then looking to God for moral insight has some purchase; for a fortiori there is no one morally superior to God. Further, if we take the conjunction of God's omniscience (guaranteeing that He is not prone to epistemic

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 161-174.

¹⁸⁵ This is, at least, what Murphy contends is the key issue, 168.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 160.

mistakes) with His inherent moral goodness, then an even greater case seems to be made for God's practical authority. Murphy dissents, arguing that:

There is a difference between the claim that if God tells us what to do, then we have decisive reason to do it and the authority thesis, which is the claim that God's telling us what to do constitutes a decisive reason for doing it.¹⁸⁷

In other words, the authority thesis entails the compliance thesis. If we hold that the compliance thesis means an agent has compelling reasons for an action, this does not mean that one of those reasons is that God has told him or her to do that action. If we seek the advice of an Aristotelian virtue ethicist who embodies virtue, then this gives us reason to think that the virtuous man or woman has better access to independently existing practical reasons for action.¹⁸⁸

A final consideration is whether or not God's omnipotence entails practical authority. Murphy argues that God's omnipotence does not entail His practical authority, only theoretical authority; I want to consider why he makes this argument and why we should reject it. Certainly divine properties entail theoretical authority over agents, but that is not what is at issue here. Practical authority, writes Murphy, elicits a normative power over an agent, whereas theoretical authority does not.¹⁸⁹ Thus, if we think of omnipotence as a theoretical authority, it "may seem to deny practical authority to God is to deny God certain powers, which is tantamount to denying divine omnipotence."¹⁹⁰ If God cannot provide sufficient reason through his command for an agent to act, then God lacks a power that he could have and apparently does not. And what is worse, it seems that people have this kind of power—we might think of the power of a CEO and over one

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 160.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 161.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 162.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 162.

of his minions as just such a power. Just as my previous concern with DW is that it enables human agents to do something through speech that God cannot, here we have the same concern for the DC proponent regarding divine making properties.

But I think there is a plausible rejoinder to Murphy's concerns; namely that practical authority is to be counted as a divine perfection—and this not *in virtue* of the fact that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. Rather, practical authority is an essential divine property. I think there are several lines of attack here, the first of which resorts to a distinction between direct and indirect speech-acts. If Murphy's concern is that the direct command of God does not provide an agent with any reason to act in a certain way, this need not worry the DC proponent; for we have allowed obedience to the natural law to mitigate this concern. Admittedly, such obedience is not in conformance with a divine command issued through God's literal obligation-generating activity through direct speech, but rather conforms to a command given through indirect speech. Even Murphy writes, "it is plausible that states of affairs that constitute reason-candidates have their status as such only given certain features *of the world*—features about the nature of the created rational beings in those worlds, the nature of the forms of action available to those beings, the characteristics of those being's environment, and so forth."¹⁹¹ Suppose the supervenience thesis works here, what does it say of my previous contention that God's practical authority is not in virtue of His omniscience, and so forth? Under this construal God's practical authority follows perforce from His creating the world with goodness supervening on it—including the intellection of human agents. This is why the distinction between direct and indirect speech is so helpful. Murphy is simply wrong to argue that God's commands do not

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 162.

express compelling reasons for an agent to act. If we consider Abraham, it seems the only compelling reason he had to sacrifice Isaac is because God commanded it—*there is no other story to be told there*. But even if there were, the idea that God’s practical authority is diminished by the fact that his direct speech does not have any purchase with most agents is not decisive in-and-of-itself. We may still derive every element of a meaningful speech-act theory from the content of God’s indirect speech. If Murphy’s concern is that agents have decisive reason for action, this is just as compelling a case as any. For as every natural law theorist would want to propose, there are some things that we can’t not know. In the order of ontology, this is because these features supervene on creation, and have their being from God as their first cause.

I think my account effectively answers another of Murphy’s concerns, namely that divine-making properties must, of necessity, have intrinsic maxima.¹⁹² As the argument goes, if these properties do not have intrinsic maxima, then it is logically possible for God to be more perfect than He is. Thus:

For A to be maximally great is for A to be maximally great in every possible world with respect to every perfection. For A to be maximally excellent in a world with respect to a perfection P is for A to exhibit P to an extent such that no being in any world exhibits P to a greater extent.¹⁹³

Murphy’s argument regarding practical authority may be characterized thusly:

1. Divine perfections must have an intrinsic maximum.
2. Practical authority does not have an intrinsic maximum.
3. Therefore, practical authority cannot be a divine perfection.¹⁹⁴

The first premise follows from Murphy’s argument about intrinsic maxima—namely that no being can be God if it is possible that another being exhibit any of His attributes more

¹⁹² Ibid., 169.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 169.

¹⁹⁴ See William Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, 137.

perfectly than He. The second premise hangs on the notion that practical authority depends on two things (1) the number of rational beings over whom one is authoritative, and (2) on the scope of the actions with respect to which one's dictates constitute reasons for action.¹⁹⁵ Additionally, since the possible beings and scope of actions may be increased, there is no intrinsic maximum. Thus, if practical authority does not have an intrinsic maximum, and divine perfections must have an intrinsic maximum, God does not have practical authority.

Concerning this argument, we need first to observe that its first premise may be questioned. William Wainwright argues that "one plausible interpretation of Murphy's first premise is that God is unsurpassable in the sense that (1) for each perfection which has an intrinsic maximum, God exhibits it to the utmost degree, and (2) for each perfection that lacks an intrinsic maximum, God exhibits it to a superlative degree and is such that no other possible being exhibits it to a greater degree."¹⁹⁶ This reading of the premise is problematic, however, for while it allows that some divine perfections need not admit of an intrinsic maximum, thus blunting the force of the objection, it leaves open the possibility that God might have been more perfect than He is. But this need not be a concern, for if the argument has it is as a logical possibility that another agent might exhibit more excellence than God, we need not accept this as true. What we must conclude, it seems, is that for whatever degree of excellence any agent may exhibit, God exhibits it nearer to its upper maximum than any other possible being. Admittedly, I find it suspect that one deny every perfect or excellent making property does not exhibit an intrinsic maximum, but that is not the concern here. The broadly logical possibility that

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 168.

¹⁹⁶ See Wainwright, 138. Murphy's comments are to be found in Murphy, 169-171.

an agent exhibit said features in greater fashion than God is the issue—and in no way must we say this (logically or otherwise).

Concerning the second premise, Murphy has confused a distinction between a being possessing a divine perfection and exercising a divine perfection.¹⁹⁷ William Wainwright argues, correctly I think, that we can distinguish between God’s “creative power” and its exercise. To quote Wainwright:

That God creates 5 billion rational beings in possible world w1 and 150 billion rational beings in possible world w2 doesn’t entail that God has more creative power in w2 than in w1 since, while God has created 5 billion rational beings in w1, he could have created more.¹⁹⁸

I suspect that even if one holds that God could have created a better world, producing more goodness in it than that of the actual world, does not diminish His goodness in any way; rather, it admits of a distinction between the possession of goodness as an intrinsic property of that being (in this case God), and the manifestation of that perfection through His creative power. Likewise, the distinction between the possession of practical authority and its exercise has some purchase here. Even if there is a concern that God practices more practical authority in w2 than in w1 does not mean He possesses any less in one world over the other. So I think that Murphy’s objection, as it stands is not enough to defeat what the DC proponent needs with regard to the content of God’s commands qua practical authority.

Moral Obligation and Morally Defective Agents

Thus far we have shown how God’s will is integrated into a DC theory, and we have seen why a DC model is preferable to a DW model in normative ethics. I now want to offer an account of moral obligation, and explain why moral obligation binds only on

¹⁹⁷ See Wainwright, 139.

¹⁹⁸ Wainwright, 139-140.

defective agents. In brief, one consequence of my view is that God has no obligations, moral or otherwise. Once a meaningful theory has been set forth, I will then propose how my theory affects the narrative in Genesis 22, otherwise known as the binding of Isaac (which will be addressed in a later chapter).

In order to present a coherent theory of moral obligation, we need to delineate a distinction between two terms, the good and the right. It is a tenet of Christianity that God is essentially good. I will give more attention to what this means when I address the Euthyphro dilemma in chapter V, but suffice it to say that God, existing sans creation, embodied everything that is good and did so independent of any external constraint; for no external agency exists to constrain God in such a context—that of God as the First Cause. Since I am working under a Christian rubric, this means that the Trinity embodied perfect-making features, such as love, without any necessitating external cause. This framework provides the background for our discussion of the relationship between the good and the right, for the good exists anterior to the right. However, I will be arguing that moral obligation follows from what is right, and what is right is grounded in that which is goodness itself. What is important to note at this point is that members of the Trinity were not obligated in any way to exhibit perfect making features; the commitment is to the idea that God is goodness itself.

What every ethical theory that strives for objectivity requires is an account of moral obligation that has moral value prior to the obligation. If we propose moral obligation as something that binds an agent to some moral good, then the value must exist (at least logically) before any agent is obligated to it. As such, we may disagree with the postulate that moral obligation exists before moral good, either temporally or logically,

the supposed entailment of which is that moral good is the byproduct of moral obligation. If this is correct, then the implications for moral agency are quite clear. Moral obligation is understood as the condition that binds an agent morally to some action; which requires some agent for whom it is binding. If, however, an agent is *essentially* morally good, then nothing binds that agent to a moral obligation. Moral obligation requires an agent who is ontologically capable of doing moral evil, and the purpose of the obligation is to draw the agent away from an action (of negative value) that he is about to perform. Moral good is the standard by which all obligations obtain, and obligation is the medium between moral good and morally defective agents. Given that we began this section by noting moral goodness is metaphysically prior to moral obligations, it is possible for us to do moral good before or without being under any moral obligations. As such, God, who is essentially morally good, does good without being under any obligation. In fact, it is conceptually incoherent to suppose that God requires anything to “draw” Him away from one action and to another if our supposition is that He is goodness itself.

Another consideration that is important here is that it is entirely unclear who it is that could obligate God. It is part of the very concept of obligation that the one who is under an obligation is subordinate to the one who obligates. Such a notion restricts the class of potential “obligators” down to a very narrow field when we are speaking of divine obligation, for none of us has the authority to obligate God to any action. It seems, *prima facie*, that we could hold God accountable for the promises He has made, and in this sense have an account of divine obligation. But I think this line of argument fails as well. First, given that the source of the obligation to keep promises would be God, there must be some sort of coherence to the notion of a first person imperative. However, there

is no good reason to suppose this is coherent. Suppose God promises to bless Abraham. Under the first person construct, the obligation would follow from a divine imperative to the same agent: “I command myself to bless Abraham.” But this is exactly where the incoherence resides; for if God obligates Himself unto action, then it is because He knows He is not likely to perform that action—obligation creation, if we remember, is where one agent draws another into an action they are otherwise not going, or are not likely to, perform. Second, in order for God to obligate Himself, He has to have authority over Himself in order to obligate Himself (at least morally). I think it is clear that this makes no sense whatsoever in terms of the concept employed (i.e. authority) or the possibility of applying it.

More could be said, but I think one more thought on this line is enough. If we agree that first person imperatives are incoherent, then perhaps we can re-track and ground divine accountability in the content of what God reveals. God promises to bless Abraham, therefore Abraham has it to his advantage to hold God to His promise. But this is to confuse obligation with accountability. Persons are held accountable (at least rightly held accountable) for actions because they have failed to do something to which they were previously obligated. Since God has no obligations and this because there is no necessity to Him being drawn to keep His promises, it is hard to see how one might hold Him accountable. Thus, the best way to understand what occurs when God makes promises is as a report. God’s promise to Abraham is a report of the way things are going to be between God and Abraham. I will be arguing in chapter V that God is essentially morally good, and as such no obligation is needed to guarantee the content of His promise-making or actions. Suffice it to say at this point, what it would mean for God

to be obligated is entirely unclear. Persons do not have the position to obligate Him, nor is there any coherence to the notion that He obligates Himself. To morally obligate someone is for a person of superior stature to bind another to a specific action; thus moral obligation only obtains on morally defective agents.

Conclusion

What we have been considering in this chapter is how a DC proponent can hold such a view to be superior to DW constructions. It has been my intent to substantiate most of what the DW proponent wants, especially DW accounts that ground moral responsibility as in some way deriving from God's antecedent will. But what we noticed is that DW views are incomplete, for the bridge between the content of God's will (a metaethical issue) and moral obligation (a normative thesis) resides in God's revealed will. To substantiate this claim we have given attention to how speech-acts are to be understood in a DC view, and that DC is a more complete system to ground how it is, via speech-acts, God obligates through His commands.

CHAPTER V

THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

In this chapter I am going to consider an argument that, if successful, seriously damages the plausibility of any Divine Command theory of ethics. Some consider it to be the earliest formulation of what a DC theory entails, only to subvert such a theory to a logical conundrum and utter defeat. Of course I am speaking of the Euthyphro dilemma that comes from the Platonic dialogue *Euthyphro*. There we are invited to consider the ramifications of endorsing a strong theistic ethic. I like Bertrand Russell's formulation of the problem. He writes:

The point I am concerned with, if you are quite sure there is a difference between right and wrong, you are in this situation: is that difference due to God's fiat or is it not? if it is due to God's fiat, then for God Himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say, as the theologians do, that God is good, you must then say that right and wrong have some meaning which is independent of God's fiat, because God's fiats are good and not bad independently of the mere fact that He made them. If you are going to say that, you will then have to say that it is not only through God that right and wrong came into being, but that they are in their essence logically anterior to God.¹⁹⁹

Even on a cursory reading we may see the force of the dilemma. If a theist argues that God loves right actions because they are right, then it follows that these actions are right independently of God's loving them. For instance, if God were not to exist, the actions would be categorized as right would still be right. God, ontologically speaking, does not provide the foundation for ethics (as the objection goes). Further, "if the moral law were independent of God's will, then He no less than we, would be under an obligation to obey

¹⁹⁹ Russell, Bertrand. *Why I am not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 12.

it.”²⁰⁰ Such a claim demeans any strong notion of God’s freedom, even if it were to be the case that God created the world; for prior to creation these moral “brute facts” exist and God, whose very nature is to do good, must create the world such that those features supervene on creation (God is morally constrained to create the best possible world).

On the other hand, if the theist says that right actions are right because God loves them, then it seems that any action God loves is right in virtue of God having loved that action. If God does not have “good moral reasons” for His commands, then His commands are “from the moral point of view, completely arbitrary, and we have no obligation to obey them.”²⁰¹ In a nutshell, advocates of DC need to do one of two things. The first is “admit that God’s commands are not backed by any further moral reasons, while insisting that we nevertheless have an obligation to obey them.”²⁰² The second option is “try to show that the moral values that rationalize God’s commands are not independent of God and do not compromise His sovereignty.”²⁰³

Of course, the Euthyphro dilemma becomes a more compelling story if one agrees that these two options exhibit all of the possibilities; either the arbitrary will formulation or the independence formulation. However, a number of other options are available to the DC ethicists that serve to counter this claim. One may argue that the logic of Socrates as presented in the *Euthyphro* is not sound, for it is based upon a false dichotomy; or one may make the claim that the mode of God’s willing is His perfect nature. Each of these views requires unpacking. I will first argue that the logic of Euthyphro is faulty when one considers the dilemma in light of the doctrine of divine simplicity. After articulating

²⁰⁰ See Wes Morriston, “Must There Be a Standard of Goodness Apart from God?” in *Philosophia Christi* 2 (1996): 127.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 127.

the logical problem, and providing a preliminary defense of divine simplicity, I will then turn my attention in the next chapter to other problems that confront such a doctrine; we will first consider whether or not postulating such a doctrine diminishes God's freedom, and then we will consider whether or not simplicity diminishes God's power.

It is my contention that the theist is on firm ground if he claims that God's goodness is best articulated through the doctrine of divine simplicity. According to divine simplicity God's nature is not composed of different properties (e.g. omnipotence, omniscience), but rather God is a being itself subsisting, whole and entire with no differentiation of parts. If one looks more closely at, for example, the postulate of Bertrand Russell, he makes an implicit commitment to the bifurcation between properties from and the being that exemplifies those properties. However, such a bifurcation is not an essential theistic belief, for the doctrine of divine simplicity has substantial support in the annals of theistic literature (especially Christian). If the property/exemplar dichotomy is rejected, then one has good reason for arguing that the Euthyphro dilemma does not hold. I will now turn my attention to offering an account of divine simplicity, and of how this doctrine resolves the apparent dilemma.

The Logic of Euthyphro and Divine Simplicity

Postulating a doctrine of divine simplicity as a defeater of the Euthyphro dilemma is not without historical foundation. In a relatively recent article, Norman Kretzmann argues that the Euthyphro is dissolved on just such a doctrine. According to Kretzmann there are two theories of religious morality that can be extracted from Euthyphro, theological objectivism (Euthyphro's first horn) or theological subjectivism (Euthyphro's second horn):

(TO) God approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong.

(TS) Right actions are right just because God approves of them and wrong actions are wrong just because God disapproves of them.²⁰⁴

The important project is to show how Kretzmann thinks that (TO) and (TS) are resolved through simplicity, a doctrine which maintains:

God is radically unlike creatures in that he is devoid of any complexity or composition, whether physical or metaphysical. Besides lacking spatial and temporal parts, God is free of matter/form composition, potency/act composition, and existence/essence composition. There is also no real distinction between God as subject of his attributes and his attributes. God is thus in a sense requiring clarification identical to each of his attributes, which implies that each attribute is identical to every other one. God is omniscient, then not in virtue of instantiating or exemplifying omniscience—which would imply a real distinction between God and the property of omniscience—but by being omniscience. And the same holds for each of the divine omni-attributes: God is what he has. As identical to each of his attributes, God is identical to his nature. And since his nature or essence is identical to his existence, God is identical to his existence.²⁰⁵

More specifically, Kretzmann emphasizes the entailment of such a doctrine on identity statements, that “God is good” is more precisely phrased “God is identical with goodness.”²⁰⁶ To be more specific, God is goodness made real, not just the property of goodness, but the reality of goodness.

It seems that one may hold a Platonic account and still derive the same identity claim, namely that “God is good” means that “God is identical with the [property of goodness].” Yet such a distinction is exactly what proponents of divine simplicity desire to avoid, for though God may be exemplifying the same properties, the emphasis for simplicity is that these properties are descriptive of God’s essence, not their own essence

²⁰⁴ Kretzmann, Norman, “Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality” [accessed 10 September 2006]; this version edited from an online text available at http://cavehill.edu/bnccde/_e&ae/nk.htm

²⁰⁵ See William Vallicella, “Divine Simplicity,” [accessed 10 September 2006]; available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-simplicity/>.

²⁰⁶ Kretzmann, #8.

that God chose to exemplify (even eternally). Thus, we may delineate a distinction between kinds of identity claims. Borrowing from Frege, “there are two kinds of identity claims, uninformative, as in $9 = 9$, and informative, as in $9 = 3^2$.”²⁰⁷ The counterpart to our moral discussion obviously involves informative identity claims.

Consider Frege’s famous analogy involving the morning star, the evening star, and the planet Venus. Given that these three names designate the same referent, then “it is true and informative to say that the morning star is identical with the evening star.”²⁰⁸ By identical he must mean to imply that both the morning star and evening star have all and only the same properties. Yet one may consistently hold that the morning star and the evening star are not altogether the same. For “if we focus on the designations rather than on the phenomena themselves, we say that the designations “morning star” and “evening star” differ in sense although they are identical in reference.”²⁰⁹ Thus we have two expressions with one and the same referent, and yet have two different senses. The analogue to simplicity is quite forthright. We have God’s goodness, God’s power, and God, respectively.²¹⁰ The purported strength of such a distinction is that “when God is conceived of as identical with perfect goodness, the kind of distinction that was crucial between (TO) and (TS) becomes a mere stylistic variation.”²¹¹ Thus we arrive at “simplicity counterparts” to (TO) and (TS):

(PBO) God conceived of as perfect goodness itself sanctions certain actions just because they are right and rules out certain actions just because they are wrong.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., #8.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., #9.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., #9.

²¹⁰ Ibid., #9.

²¹¹ Ibid., #9.

(PBS) Certain actions are right just because God conceived of as perfect goodness itself sanctions them, and certain actions are wrong just because God conceived of as perfect goodness itself rules them out.²¹²

What we derive from (PBO) and (PBS) is an objective standard of good that is the sole criterion of moral rightness and wrongness, namely God; these standards follow from His nature, for He has these properties essentially. This is a marked advance from (TO) and (TS), for they left us at the hands of the dilemma with no apparent hope of resolution.

Now we may claim that (PBO) and (PBS) are two ways of saying the same thing:

“actions are right if and only if goodness certifies them as such, and goodness certifies actions as right if and only if they are so.”²¹³ God is conceived of as “the ultimate judge who is identical with the ultimate criterion itself.”²¹⁴ Therefore, the bifurcation between (TO) and (TS) does not obtain under this construction, and the chasm between theological objectivism and theological subjectivism collapses. If there is no dichotomy, then there is no Euthyphro dilemma.

Of course, postulating the simplicity doctrine (henceforth SD) as a defeater of the Euthyphro objection is not without its problems, for the doctrine is highly controversial. Norman Kretzmann’s presentation is no exception, for as William Mann argues, “the solution is too good to be true...because he [Kretzmann] is willing to trade in the locution ‘just because’ for the locution ‘if and only if’. If those locutions were interchangeable, then we could express [Kretzmann] slightly differently:”

(PBO*) God conceived of as a moral judge identical with perfect goodness itself approves of right actions if and only if they are right and disapproves of wrong actions if and only if they are wrong.

²¹² Ibid., #9. (PBO) is in reference to “perfect being objectivism” and “perfect being subjectivism” as counterparts to the previous premises (TO) and (TS).

²¹³ Ibid., #9.

²¹⁴ Ibid., #9.

(PBS*) Right actions are right if and only if God conceived of as a moral judge identical with perfect goodness itself approves of them and wrong actions are wrong if and only if God conceived of as a moral judge identical with perfect goodness itself disapproves of them.²¹⁵

What Mann has drawn out of Kretzmann's argument is the presumption that the 'just because' clause in (PBO) and (PBS) record "genuine asymmetries."²¹⁶ Based on this presumption Kretzmann is able to claim that the two horns end up being equivalent. However, if there is a causal asymmetry that obtains between God's act of approval and the rightness of the action, the question of which of the two is prior may still be revised, which would undermine the resolution provided by Kretzmann. I think this objection is substantial for the SD proponent, and requires further attention. Let us look closer at Mann's argument, and see how the SD proponent might respond.

William Mann proposes a "modal analogue" to the discussion between objectivism and subjectivism, having to do with the relationship between God and necessary truths. The alternatives are: God either affirms necessarily true propositions because they are necessarily true, or necessarily true propositions are necessarily true because God affirms them. SD proponents would presumably want to restate these alternatives as follows:

(NPN) God conceived of as omniscience itself affirms necessarily true propositions if and only if they are necessarily true and denies necessarily false propositions if and only if they are necessarily false.

(NPG) Necessarily true propositions are necessarily true if and only if God conceived of as omniscience itself affirms them and necessarily false propositions are necessarily false if and only if God conceived of as omniscience itself denies them.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Mann, William, "Modality, Morality, and God" in *Nous* 23 (1989): 85.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88. I have renamed Mann's propositions to account for the biconditional relationship. Thus, (NPN) holds that God affirms that certain propositions are necessarily true, whereas (NPG) holds that these propositions are necessary because God affirms them.

Of course, the analogy between (TO), (TS), (NPN), and (NPG) are exact. (NPN) suggests that God knows all necessary truths, affirms their necessity, and cannot curtail their necessity. Further, the necessity of such propositions as $2 + 2 = 4$ determines the content of God's belief. (NPG) implies on the other hand that it is God's willing $2 + 2 = 4$ to be necessarily true that causes this to be so. How can it be that necessary truths are dependent on God, yet God cannot revise them?

It is fair to suppose that freedom (in this case God's freedom in creation) involves "the agent's ability to bring about the opposite outcome or allow the opposite outcome to occur; let us call this the liberty of indifference."²¹⁸ Consider the proposition:

(1) $2 + 2 = 4$ if and only if God affirms that $2 + 2 = 4$

If we suppose the liberty of indifference applies to God, and not only contingent creatures, then we are forced to admit that God is not free with regard to (1), for He does not have the power to actualize its negation. Following Mann, proponents of (NPN) affirm an epistemic variant of (1):

$2 + 2 = 4$ if and only if God *believes* that $2 + 2 = 4$

Proponents of (NPG) affirm a volitional variant:

$2 + 2 = 4$ if and only if God *wills* that $2 + 2 = 4$ ²¹⁹

However, the dichotomy between the epistemic proposition and the volitional proposition never obtains under SD. Proponents of the epistemic thesis hold that beliefs are proper only in regard to how they correspond to the way the world is. But this presupposes there is a Platonic mathematical realm prior to the exercise of God's will as Creator. Under this construal God has a belief, in this case regarding the necessity of the proposition $2 +$

²¹⁸ Ibid., 90.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 91.

2 = 4, and this belief is independent of His will. As such, God's knowledge regarding the proposition is strictly a matter of intellection; that is, God's beliefs about the proposition are mediated through something other than His creative will. But as Mann notes, and properly I think, there are two implications for SD in our discussion of epistemic priority. The first is the equivalence of God's "believing with God's knowing" and the second is "the identity of God's knowing with God's willing."²²⁰

According to SD, God's believing $2 + 2 = 4$ is God's willing that $2 + 2 = 4$. As Mann explains:

It is not as if there are two separate faculties in God, an epistemic faculty and a volitional faculty. It is rather that there is one divine activity, which in some respects from our point of view is more aptly called his believing or knowing, and in other respects more aptly called His willing.²²¹

The implications of this are forthright. The proponent of SD affirms necessary propositions are unchangeable, but also that God wills their content to be exactly what it is. Thus we can...

think of the necessity of truths not as templates according to which even God must channel His activities in the act of creation, but rather as part of the creative expression of this perfectly rational will.²²²

In holding that God is perfectly rational, the SD proponent holds that God's knowing will is the ground of knowledge of all true propositions, contingent or necessary that they are true, and of all false propositions that they are false.

The epistemic variant of the original Euthyphro dilemma only works if one dissociates God's knowledge and will, which is exactly what SD does not affirm. Divine

²²⁰ Ibid., 92.

²²¹ Ibid., 92.

²²² Ibid., 94.

Simplicity does not claim that God's understanding of necessary truths is logically prior to his willing them. In fact, there is no difference in these actions. There is an obvious distinction in the *descriptions* between His knowing and willing, but this does not entail that these are ontologically distinct; the descriptive distinction resides in *how we think about God*. Given this, there is no logical division between His knowing and willing. So the chasm between (NPN) and (NPG) is bridged on the simplicity doctrine, and the DC proponent need not accept the epistemic variant of the Euthyphro as a threat.

We have given sufficient attention to the logical problem of Euthyphro's dilemma, and have shown that the doctrine of divine simplicity provides a sound defense of the problems posed in Euthyphro's disjunction. We have argued that the success of the disjunction relies on the mistake of believing we must prioritize either God's knowledge or God's volition, which actually are not distinct when one endorses a view of God as perfectly simple.

The Euthyphro and Non-Divine Command Theories

There is a reason for thinking that no matter what framework we endorse as our moral position the Euthyphro dilemma may be raised. And of course there is no reason why a DC ethic should be rejected merely on the basis of the Euthyphro if a sufficient case can be made that everyone must give an answer to it. So why do I think that everyone has a Euthyphro dilemma? Part of the response hinges on the nature of the argument itself—but only in an implicitly epistemic sense. If we say that God is good it seems we are using a pre-existing nexus of value concepts to make that claim, or so the objector proposes. I've tried to give reason as to why a simplicity doctrine resolves this concern, but even if it does not I still think there is another line of response to be made—

namely to consider the opponent's view and see if it fares any better with the same problems. Simply put the concern is whether or not naturalistic accounts of goodness require an external, independent standard to which they conform. Upon closer inspection we will find that they do, and that there is no compelling response to this problem, so that the non-theist is in no better shape, at least as far as the Euthyphro objection goes, than the DC theorist. For, suppose we endorse a Platonic criteria of goodness where goodness is a property much like a brute fact. All we have done in postulating this entity is to move the question back one step. Granted, this view allays any arbitrariness—but has in the meantime sacrificed efficient causation. Forms, ideas, abstracta are all causally inert, and do not cause things to be a certain way. How, then, do the Forms come to be as they are? There is also the lingering infinite regress problem, namely why is it the case that these ideas may be postulated, but not verified, as the ultimate stopping point for values? It seems consistent to ask whether or not we can gauge these ideas or Forms by yet another standard of goodness that supervenes on them—and the infinite regress begins anew. If the Platonist argues that the Forms are where the evaluations cease, then the theist is on firm ground in making the same claim about God. But as I've said, at least the theist may postulate not only that God defeats the infinite regress problem, God also defeats the problem of causation and agency to bring about these states of affairs.

Perhaps a teleological ethic is on safer grounds—more specifically a utilitarian schema for determining an “ultimate criterion” for moral values. On this point I think Edward Wierenga is correct. He writes:

We may note that if the objection [Euthyphro] is correct, it can also be applied against utilitarianism: “we must judge for ourselves whether an act whose utility is as great as any of its alternatives is right. To judge this is to make a moral

decision, so that in the end, so far from morality being based on utility, utility is based on morality.”²²³

What is at issue here, I think, is the concern over who has last say in what grounds these values—what is the “stopping point” that provides the grounds of these values? The necessity of the stopping point just is that it provides resolution to infinite regress concerns, that values are not inextricably tied to other systems or account of evaluation. Thus, when we ask “what is good about...” we want the definitive account of good-making properties, not merely *an* account of these properties. As William Alston notes:

Whether we are Platonist or particularist, there will be some stopping place in the search for explanation. An answer to the question ‘What is good about?’ will, sooner or later, cite certain good-making characteristics. We can then ask why we should suppose that goodness supervenes on those characteristics. In answer either a general principle or an individual paradigm is cited. But whichever it is, that is the end of the line...On both views something is taken as ultimate, behind which we cannot go, in the sense of finding some explanation of the fact that it is constitutive of goodness. I would invite one who finds the invocation of God as the supreme standard arbitrary, to explain why it is more arbitrary than the invocation of a supreme general principle.²²⁴

In lieu of our argument of chapter III, it will certainly be the case that relativistic theories of any stripe will not sufficiently allay the concerns of Euthyphro, nor will it be the case that the most sophisticated system of noncognitivism will suffice either. The purpose of this reductio is that it takes the problem to where it really needs to be—*not* prioritizing its implications only on one view. Through a simplicity doctrine I provided how a DC theorist might want to respond to Euthyphro’s concerns; in this section I have provided a defense. Of course, the aim of this element is not to argue that since it is the case that

²²³ See Edward Wierenga, “Utilitarianism and the Divine Command Theory,” in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 313.

²²⁴ William Alston, “What Euthyphro Should Have Said” in *The Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 293.

everyone has a Euthyphro dilemma DC is true. Rather, my aim in this section has been to sober up the minds of the objectors whose rejection of DC hinges on Euthyphro.²²⁵

Other Considerations

In chapter IV we took specific steps to delineate a distinction between something being good and something being right. Recall that goodness is a value term that exists (logically) independent of actions that are categorized as right; right actions are those whose actualization follows in acting from the force of a rule rather than acting in accord with a rule. This highlights an important note in our discussion of Euthyphro. On a pragmatic level it is a “truism” of “evaluational” development that some persons come to understand goodness through someone who embodies these properties rather than understanding the rules by which these properties are being governed. But to point out the obvious, what this says of the one acting lovingly, virtuously, and so forth, is not that they do it out of external compulsion, but that it may be their very nature to act in just such a way. If God’s actions do have a moral component, it does not follow from the idea that He acted under the compulsion of a rule to overcome His hellish proclivities. It does not follow from anything we have postulated that an action is moral only if it is performed under obligation. Instances of supererogation defeat such a claim. Even so, if it is the case that one argues that acting morally is a byproduct of acting under obligation, it still does not follow that we cannot speak of God’s goodness as an amoral fact about Him. I reject such a claim because of its obvious absurdities—the most significant of which is that God is not “morally” good. However, I bring this up merely as a counterpart to the claim that if we endorse the obligation model of goodness, it is logically impossible for God to be good.

²²⁵ For instance, Kai Nielson.

Suppose for a moment that we allow for Platonic essences. All of the fears of arbitrariness are resolved, and so long as one endorses an account of divine goodness that makes it out to be an attribute like the goodness of any other thing, there is no problem with God being good. I think there is another concern besides the problem of God's aseity that requires attention here. It seems to be a leap in logic to infer that if Platonic Forms exist, then God depends on them to account for His goodness. Certainly this dependence relationship is not one of causal dependence—the Forms are causally inert. This is not insignificant, for the original assertion of the dialogue I think is best read as a causal model. Consider again Plato's construction of the dilemma through the mouth of Socrates:

Consider this: is the pious being loved by the gods *because* it is pious, or is it pious *because* it is being loved by the gods?²²⁶

We may now recast the argument in its logical form. In order for Socrates to succeed, the two possibilities must be held as a disjunctive dilemma—that if we endorse the first horn of the dilemma there are unacceptable consequences, and likewise if we accept the second horn of the dilemma. The conclusion, based on this structure should be that one cannot claim *either* aspect of the disjunction to be true without falling into problems. Socrates comes to a different conclusion. Given the absurdity of the claim that the good is determined by the gods it must follow that the other horn is true, QED. But we've noted the problems of causation for Platonic models, so the causal line of argument is far from conclusive.

²²⁶ *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 9. Here the dialogue centers on the pious, whereas we have been concentrating on the good. This distinction is not important, for the reasoning is based on the same concerns. Plato's gods were simultaneously endorsing mutually exclusive value claims on the same proposition.

If we deny the relationship in the disjunction as one of cause and effect, we must then ask what the relationship actually entails. Perhaps we could postulate an identity claim as a rejoinder.²²⁷ In doing so another line might be provided that shows no disjunctive dilemma exists to be resolved. Euthyphro might have responded to Socrates by saying “I have made an identity claim, similar to ‘Jocasta is Oedipus’ mother.’ Am I required to say that she is Jocasta because she is Oedipus’ mother, or that she is Oedipus’ mother because she is Jocasta?”²²⁸ Such an identity claim is not to be understood in terms of a causal relationship, and provides sufficient reason to deny the conclusion of the dilemma.

The problem in postulating identity claims is that one must ground what kind of identity claim is being made. Here it seems to refer to a being’s properties, and given our previous assertion of SD, this poses the question of how we are to understand properties and identity. Alvin Plantinga, contra SD, argues:

If God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property—a self-exemplifying property. Accordingly God has just one property: himself. This view is subject to a difficulty both obvious and overwhelming. No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or indeed know anything at all. If God is a property, then he isn’t a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love, or life. So taken the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake.²²⁹

Hanink and Mar argue that Plantinga’s challenge misses the point. The “believer” confesses that God is both “person” and “Perfect Righteousness” which allows for the conclusion that the property of Perfect Righteousness is a person.²³⁰ Such a response will

²²⁷ This is the line of reasoning in Richard Joyce’s article, “Theistic Ethics and the Euthyphro Dilemma,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30 (1996): 53.

²²⁸ Analogy borrowed from Joyce, 53.

²²⁹ Plantinga, Alvin. *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 86-87.

²³⁰ Hanink, James and Gary Mar, “What Euthyphro Couldn’t Have Said,” in *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 246.

only work if one allows for the possibility that persons and properties are not distinct as a matter of conceptual necessity, which is what SD wants—at least regarding divine ontology. The alternative is that we have a being that (in this instance) either exemplifies Perfect Righteousness or Perfect Righteousness is essentially a part of His nature; that is, righteousness is an essential attribute of God but “not identical with Him.”²³¹ Hanink and Mar contend that such a supposition is acceptable, that “God’s uncreated but essential righteousness is dependent on Him for its existence and identity in a way that does not make God’s existence equally dependent on His righteousness.”²³² This relationship is much like natural numbers, where the number one is an “essential member” of the set of natural numbers. The set cannot exist without the number one, nor can the number one exist without the natural number system. It is still consistent, though, to maintain that the system of natural numbers is “metaphysically more rich” than the number one.²³³ By parity of reasoning, there is no righteousness without God and there is no God without righteousness. All this argument seems to show, though, is that if one holds to a bifurcation of persons and properties, it still does not follow that the disjunctive dilemma of Euthyphro holds. This is no small contribution, for what it elicits is that even if the coherence of SD is questioned, the validity of the disjunction still remains problematic.

There is one more thing I would like to consider about the structure of Euthyphro, and this goes to the causal language integrated into the dialogue. If we have recourse to the assertion of Socrates, and allow for the use of the term “because” in his original argument, it is not at all clear that the meaning of “because” is indefeasibly connected to God’s reasons for approval—which is what the Euthyphro dilemma requires. Thus, what

²³¹ Ibid., 247.

²³² Ibid., 247

²³³ Ibid., 247.

we are aiming at here is allowing for the claim that for some action, God approves of that action because it is good. If I approve of Eggplant Ponchartrain because it is the perfect blend of textured eggplant, Ponchartrain sauce, and angel hair pasta, then these properties must be in the dish for me to discover them. These properties are a part of the dish such that they do not depend on my having eaten or even ascribed these properties to it. But as Richard Joyce has noted, some “because” claims are better understood as “in virtue of” relations rather than cause and effect relations.²³⁴ For example, if we say Allen is a bachelor because he is an unmarried man, we do not understand this as a cause and effect relationship. Allen is a bachelor in virtue of the fact that he is an unmarried man. Seemingly this relationship is symmetrical even in a materially equivalent construct. But certainly what is not gotten at here is that Allen is unmarried because he is a bachelor, where “because” means his being a bachelor is a reason for his being unmarried.²³⁵

One might argue that if God’s reason for loving a thing is not grounded in the thing itself, then His love is arbitrary. But this need not be the case. It is compatible with our thesis that (1) an act is right because God wills it, and (2) God wills an act because it contributes to human flourishing. What this does not entail is that human flourishing is fundamentally what makes an act right. (1) Expresses a metaphysical relationship whereby the rightness of right actions consists in God’s willing them. And I think it is consistent to say that (2) comports with my earlier thesis that DC and natural law may coalesce on a level of divine supervening. More explicitly, what DC and natural law both assert has its genesis in God’s will. Part of natural law theory is that persons have a human nature that is contingent on God’s creative will. Thus, when God exercised His

²³⁴ Joyce, 56.

²³⁵ Joyce, 57.

creative will and brought human nature into existence, there was a blueprint for its full realization. Though I have disagreed with Hanink and Mar in other areas, this is one point upon which we converge, namely that DC and natural law form a structural unity; insofar that they do, the objection that the moral law is arbitrary fades. Hanink and Mar write:

In willing human nature, God also wills the realization of human nature. Moreover, in the Decalogue—to take the central case—God’s will operates legislatively. This realization of human nature is worked out in the conducting of human life. One’s life is excellent insofar as one is rightly oriented toward the goods that constitute human happiness. One is virtuous insofar as one’s conduct is habituated in obedience to God’s legislative will.²³⁶

I think another important aspect of the Euthyphro problem rests on the theological distinction between the gods of Homer and Hesiod and the transition to the traditional Hebraic God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²³⁷ None of the Hellenistic gods were, ontologically speaking, that than which none greater can be conceived. In other words, there is no Greek god that embodies each of the perfect making features of divinity. I think this inspires much of the concern found in Socrates’ claim, but does not warrant any more consideration for our purposes.

The Binding of Isaac

The narrative that most plagues DC theorists is found in Genesis 22, a narrative known in the Hebrew tradition as the binding of Isaac. There we find God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac (Gen. 22:2). Nothing in the narrative indicates that Isaac deserved death (as from the principle of forfeiture, for example); and nothing in the narrative indicates that Abraham was hesitant to perform the action. The text is explicit, that Abraham’s expectation was that both he and Isaac would be returning down

²³⁶ Ibid., 254.

²³⁷ Ibid., 241.

the mountain together, and that God would restore Isaac unto life (Gen. 22:5; Heb. 11:19). Abraham could reasonably project such an expectation because it is through Isaac that God will “number his ancestry as the stars in the sky,” which is impossible to do if Isaac is dead. Granted, this statement of blessing came to Abraham after he obeyed God in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. My point here is that Abraham and Sarah had already received a message from God that this child would be a blessing; in this instance it is revealed how Isaac would be a blessing—Abraham’s expectation of Isaac’s continued life is therefore reasonable. The implication of this narrative in our current discussion has to do with the arbitrariness objection. And it is to this end that I want to concentrate my comments.

An important point is worth mentioning; it would be anachronistic of us to make an argument against child sacrifice from a conventionalist perspective. Robert Adams explains that the binding narrative is missing, “precisely the thought that it is, or might be, morally wrong for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.”²³⁸ Further, its absence from the Genesis narrative, “probably reflects a cultural background in which child sacrifice was a generally accepted practice and disapproval of this manifestation of a parent’s generous piety toward a deity was not part of the religious repertoire.”²³⁹ I am merely trying to avoid a pitfall that befalls much of the discussion concerning this narrative. There would be no cultural backlash upon Abraham if the sacrifice had occurred, and we have no reason to think that “child sacrifice was and is a hideous evil in the life of any individual

²³⁸ See Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 278.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

or culture that has practiced it, despite any religious virtues that they may have exemplified in the practice.”²⁴⁰

Thus, what we need to provide is a plausible account of how the DC theorist might respond to the concern that God’s command to Abraham was morally reprehensible in that it seemingly violates God’s own prohibition against such actions.²⁴¹

I think an underlying problem in the debate between DC proponents and DW proponents is based on an incomplete application of the text. Most, if not all, of the attention has been given to what I call God’s initial command. In Genesis 22:2 God says to Abraham:

Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.²⁴²

Of course, if the act commanded in this verse were to be actualized, then Isaac’s life would end. But one of the factors central to our discussion is the verse preceding this one, and the second imperative following it. Consider the beginning of the narrative:

Now it came to pass [after these things] that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!”²⁴³

If we left this verse in isolation, then the content of the testing would be incomplete. In order to test someone there must be explicit content revealed from one agent to another. Let us call this the content of the imperative. The command may be “have no other Gods before me,” or the command may be “do not murder.” But what is revealed is a specific way in which the agent is required to act. If God were to merely utter “obey me,” then the follower may rightly question “with regard to what?” Hence, what we find in the

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 280.

²⁴¹ Canonically Exodus is after Genesis. I am not being anachronistic, for the injunction against murder is found systematically throughout the Bible, antedating even the written Law (consider the narrative of Cain slaying Able).

²⁴² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible, New King James Version* (London: Word Bibles, 1997), Genesis 22:2.

²⁴³ Genesis 22:1.

moral commands are the revealed will of God explicitly stated as to how an agent may exemplify obedience.

Another consideration from the text is that the narrative identifies two commands from God, the initial command is for the sacrifice, and the second command is from the Angel of the Lord revealing that Abraham *is not* to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22: 12). Thus, in the span of twelve verses God expresses two imperatives to Abraham, one the antithesis of the other, at least with regard to the consequences of the command. *Prima facie*, one may suppose that in commanding logically opposite states of affairs God has shown His will to be arbitrary, but I do not think this is the case. First, what we argued in chapter IV is that DC provides the best case for how God's relationship to speech and its binding force works in speech-act theory. In the case of Abraham we must not confuse the objective of the command with the probable consequences of obedience to the command.

Every moral command imposed by God has as its root the same thesis, namely to reckon whether or not one has anything held in a higher priority than the relationship of the individual to God. In this case, the initial command tests Abraham concerning the content of his ultimate concern; either the life of his son or his belief in the primacy of God. But what is of interest here is that in commanding the binding of Isaac, God brought it about that Abraham was morally obligated to sacrifice him. Now one might one may argue that in imposing the obligation on Abraham to sacrifice Isaac God desired to bring about the intention in Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. I think the narrative indicates something else; namely that in all circumstances where God places a moral obligation on an agent, the intent of the obligation is not necessarily to bring about a specific state of affairs *per se* (Isaac's death), but to bring about *obedience* with regard to the content of

what is commanded. Thus, given that I previously argued that the sacrifice would not be condemned socially, and that Abraham expected Isaac to be with him in some sense after the sacrifice, an account of what Abraham was obligated to do is needed. Second, we must give attention to the intention formation problem of the narrative. If God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and creates the intention in Abraham to bring about the death of an innocent, is this not an instance of intent to murder—hence a violation of God’s own Law (and necessarily arbitrary)? Let us consider these in turn.

There is no textual reason to argue that Abraham balked at the command to sacrifice Isaac on the basis of social constraints or a belief in the finality of death. Abraham had neither of these concerns. What is more, such constructions miss the point that is central to the narrative. Even if we endorse a DW construct and hold that God’s commands play only an informative role in moral obligation, we must take note of what is informed through the commands. If we have recourse to the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve, God uttered a divine injunction against eating of the tree of knowledge. There is no conventional attack on eating of such fruit; in fact, not long after the divine command the serpent appears to Eve making an appeal that the fruit not only brings knowledge (a good thing), but as well makes them (Adam and Eve) as God is.²⁴⁴ Neither knowledge nor being as God is can be a bad thing, especially insofar as these characteristics are divine traits. Recall that our primary aim in wrongdoing is “always some anticipated good.”²⁴⁵ This is not the level upon which we fault Adam and Eve. Rather, in eating of the fruit Adam and Eve violated a known command of God. The perceived goods of knowledge and God-likeness were held in higher esteem than God

²⁴⁴ See Genesis 3:5.

²⁴⁵ See Hugh McCann, “The Author of Sin?” *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005): 150.

Himself. Thus, when one argues that God has no reason to command the things that He does, the theist is on solid ground to claim that the content of a divine command is to produce (reducibly) the same intention in every agent, only the byproduct of which has variation. What is this intention? To obey the known commands of God and have no other perceived good to be held in higher esteem than Him. God's reason for commanding is to see this through in our moral agency.

Conclusion

How does this impact our discussion of Abraham and Isaac? I think Abraham was confronted with the same problem as Adam and Eve—namely that when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, knowing the content of the command automatically means knowing what it would be to not meet the expectation of that command. We have no more reason to think that Abraham would not sacrifice Isaac merely out of knowing what it would be to not obey than we do for any social constraint placed upon him, especially since there were none. If we ask what the perceived good in such an action would be, the answer is the same here as it was in the narrative of the Fall—for the “sake of standing” Abraham might have failed to sacrifice Isaac, and in doing so have failed to set aside a life that is “subordinate to God's edict,” and instead “struck out on his own.”²⁴⁶ This means that Abraham could have seen a good in a personal, independent destiny aimed at becoming like God. In this case, it might just be that the binding narrative is one instance of control over life itself, namely that of Isaac.

So what of the second concern, that when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac He intended to bring about the intention in Abraham to take the life of an innocent (i.e. murder)? What we have argued, I think, sufficiently answers this question. When

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 150.

we differentiate the byproduct of obedience with obedience itself, these concerns are allayed. Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac was not simply intending the death of an innocent, and thus committing murder. Rather, the intention formation process is that in obeying the command Abraham decided to execute God's will.²⁴⁷ In fact, Scripture affirms such a conclusion. Of Abraham it is written:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son. It was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called. He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type."²⁴⁸

Even more pointedly, consider Patrick Lee's comments on Abraham and Aquinas:

One might object that in Abraham's case the death of Isaac is a condition for Abraham's executing God's project and therefore Abraham must intend the death of Isaac directly. But Thomas's [Aquinas] argument is that the role of an executor is a special case. Acts we perform 'on our own' are composed of act-in-intention and act-in-execution; but where a subject executes the intention of a superior, the whole act is divided between partners, with the result that the executor's intention precisely as executor, is no different from the manifest intention of the superior. Hence Abraham's intention is the same as God's: if God does not directly intend death, then neither does Abraham.²⁴⁹

It is not the case that God's intention was to secure the death of Isaac—God will do Isaac in anyway. Nor is it obvious that what God was doing in commanding the sacrifice was producing an intention in Abraham to commit murder. Rather, God set out to "test" Abraham with regard to the content of his faith. If all intrinsic moral evil is a replication of the fall of Adam, I think the test is best understood as whether or not Abraham would liken God to His status and Abraham unto his own. The decisive grounds for revealing this, in this case, just was the binding of Isaac.

²⁴⁷ See Hanink and Mar, 249.

²⁴⁸ Hebrews 11:17-19.

²⁴⁹ See Patrick Lee, "The Permanence of the Ten Commandments," in *Theological Studies* 42 (1981): 433-434. This quotation taken and adapted from Hanink and Mar, 261.

CHAPTER VI

ON GOD'S FREEDOM, POWER, AND BEING WORTHY OF WORSHIP

In the previous chapter we defended the notion that God is necessarily morally perfect, and explained His necessary moral perfection through the doctrine of divine simplicity. As such, we founded the content of His commands in His nature, which is neither arbitrary nor bound by any independent criterion of moral value. And so, we argued that the teeth of the Euthyphro dilemma are brittle and not up to the task of masticating DC when it is founded upon the simplicity doctrine. One may wonder, though, just what the theist has lost in postulating such a doctrine; for in arguing that, necessarily, God is morally good, we may have vitiated two (or more) doctrines that are conceptually mandatory for any perfect being theologian.

Consider the problems of God's freedom and God's omnipotence, respectively. We argued that it is logically impossible for God to will (for Himself) any evil state of affairs. Such a postulate seems to destroy any possibilities of moral freedom in God, if moral freedom is to be understood as the ability to will another (perhaps opposite) state of affairs than one does. Also, such a postulate seems to diminish God's omnipotence in that He does not have the power to actualize an evil state of affairs; God cannot perforce, sin. Let us consider these two problems in turn, for it seems there is a dependence relationship between them. At least descriptively, God's will is anterior to His actions, thus we will place the discussion of God's freedom first and subsequently address the problem of God's power.²⁵⁰ Finally, we will consider how our responses to these

²⁵⁰ I do not mean to circumvent my previous defense of simplicity here, which is why I refer to the descriptive difference made in that chapter.

concerns leaves open the possibility that the traditional God of theism is worthy of worship.

Necessary Existence and God's Freedom

There are several reasons for wanting God to be maximally free. If God is determined by external conditions, then His moral autonomy is compromised. For He, no less than we, is morally evaluated by whatever these external conditions stipulate in conjunction with whatever state of affairs He actualizes. Such a view diminishes God's sovereignty and should be rejected. Our concern is of a different nature, for we argued against any independent criterion of value in chapter IV, and proposed a model of God's activity that divorces Him from any obligation, moral or otherwise. However, if we hold that God acts necessarily as He does, then one may object that we have diminished God's freedom, and concomitantly bound Him morally to a different determining condition, namely His nature. On this model it is consistent to say that God conceives of seemingly an infinite number of *possible* divine actions. However, there is logical necessity with regard to what God actualizes, for God is morally constrained by His nature to do all and only that which is right. What is meant by "constrained" is a bit elusive, but suffice it to say it is not compatible with a meaningful account of divine freedom. Thomas Flint explains the problem well:

If God is a truly perfect being, he has no choice but to create (i.e. actualize) the best world he can create. Failure to do so would point to either a lack of knowledge or benevolence, and such lackings would be inconceivable in the case of "that than which none greater can be conceived." But if God's creative activity is thus determined by essential elements of his nature (i.e. his omniscience and benevolence), one can hardly label his acting of creating a free action and still remain a libertarian in good standing, for libertarianism insists that an agent performs a free action only when his activity is not determined by his nature.²⁵¹

²⁵¹ See Thomas Flint, "The Problem of Divine Freedom," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983): 255.

Flint's conclusion is quite problematic for our discussion; if God is not significantly morally free, then God is not a moral agent.²⁵² So, how might we understand divine freedom in lieu of our claims about the divine nature in response to the objection by Flint?

One suggestion, made by Thomas V. Morris, is to understand divine goodness as "God's acting always in accord with universal moral principles, satisfying without fail moral duties and engaging in acts of gracious supererogation."²⁵³ Let us be clear, on Morris's "duty model of goodness" God has moral obligations to "universal moral principles." As he sees it, a logical problem arises when one jointly commits to three theses: (1) the duty model of divine goodness, (2) a libertarian account of free will, and (3) the claim that God is necessarily good.²⁵⁴ From the notion that God necessarily acts as He does we may conclude, says Morris, "...that God does not exemplify the kind of freedom requisite for being a moral agent with any duties at all."²⁵⁵ This entails that there is no necessarily good moral agent, for "only free acts are morally characterizable as the satisfaction or violation of duties."²⁵⁶ Let us adopt Morris's requirement for

²⁵² This is Alvin Plantinga's language. He writes, "A world containing free creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, neither counts against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good." See his *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdman's Publishers, 1974), 30. Plantinga's construction of freedom as the power to do otherwise certainly fails on our model.

²⁵³ See Thomas Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," in Morris, Thomas V. ed. *The Concept of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 107.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

freedom, that “an agent S performs an action A at a time t freely only if no conditions exist prior to t which render it necessary, or unavoidable, in a broadly logical sense, and by doing so in fact bring it about that S performs A.”²⁵⁷ From our discussion so far there is nothing to prevent the DC theorist from accepting a libertarian account of free will, nor must we deny God’s moral agency or goodness. For it is still coherent to suppose, even under the duty model of goodness, that God fulfills all three conditions. Morris, for instance, makes a distinction between two states of affairs, namely behavior which results from *obeying a rule* and behavior which *accords with a rule*.²⁵⁸ This distinction allows us to bifurcate deontic principles governing human moral agency and divine moral agency. Humans are bound by moral duty, the byproduct of which is that humans act “under obligation.” Following our model in chapter III, however, there is an ontological distinction between human nature and the divine nature. God’s will is “holy,” to borrow a phrase from Kant (more on this in a moment). The goodness of God is distinct from the deontological category of being right; for being right requires an agent to bring about what is moral. Goodness involves no such requirement. We noted in chapter III that the purpose of obligation is to draw an agent toward an action that they are not otherwise motivated to perform, for example, to draw the liar from lying and the murderer from murdering.

The import on our discussion here is forthright, for one may hold that God acts necessarily as He does, acting “in accordance” with principles which would “express duties for a moral agent in his relevant circumstances.”²⁵⁹ Of course, under this

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 108.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 109.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 117.

construction God does not have any duties; nevertheless if God says that He will bless Abraham with a child, then Abraham will be blessed with a child. Morris explains:

R.L. Franklin has characterized the purpose of promising as ‘that of committing a man reliably to future acts’. God can certainly declare his intention to bless Abraham, thereby committing himself reliably to do so (where committing himself amounts to intentionally generating justified expectations in his hearers). The libertarian can hold that, in making this sort of declaration, God is doing something for his creatures with an effect analogous to that of promising, or that even in the analogous sense he is making a promise.²⁶⁰

William Alston, as we noted, has a promising approach that encapsulates what we have said about deontological terms such as “right” and “wrong” and ontological terms such as “good” and “bad”. He invites us to consider God’s goodness as distinct from the goodness of human agents. If we understand God’s goodness as, necessarily, God acts in accordance with His perfect nature, then the axiological values we have put forth regarding divine ontology and divine actions are merely descriptive propositions about His nature. Alston explains:

If we want to say that moral goodness can be attributed to a being only if that being is subject to the moral ought, his moral obligations and the like, then we won’t say that God is, strictly speaking, morally good.²⁶¹

So, our purpose in this section is to offer an account of divine freedom that avoids the pitfalls of necessary perfection. We want to offer an account of freedom whereby God is maximally free, and hence relevant with regard to moral agency, and yet remain true to our thesis that God cannot sin.

There are two conceptions of freedom, says Timothy O’Connor, which pervade the literature on free will. The first is the “openness of the future” to alternative

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 118.

²⁶¹ See Alston, “What Euthyphro Should Have Said,” in Craig (2002), 289.

possibilities for our actions.²⁶² A person acts freely only if she could have chosen a different action. Suppose we are in line at Andrea Braccatto's and are attempting to select from a number of options, say between their fine cappuccino or their latte, and perhaps even whether or not we will have a wonderful éclair. The decision to partake of the éclair and cappuccino is indicative of the fact that agents with metaphysical freedom "are able to select from among significantly different alternatives."²⁶³ What is significant to note in such circumstances, and we can imagine them being moral rather than gustatory, is that freedom is not coextensive with the existence of the alternatives but is a matter of "self-determination." The alternatives are "indicators of the self-determination manifested by one's action, which is necessary for responsibility."²⁶⁴ Thus, it is O'Connor's contention that the freedom that is relevant to moral agency is born from the one action that is chosen, and not from the metaphysical category of worlds-gone-otherwise.

A second notion of freedom, and one that is more central to our thesis, centers on the idea of self-mastery.²⁶⁵ According to O'Connor:

A person acts freely to the extent that he has control of his appetites and impulses and is able reliably to direct his more significant actions toward larger aims. A self-mastered person perforce has a great deal of self-knowledge, including especially knowledge of the factors that incline him to this or that course of action...A free agent knows himself well—knows his own stable purposes, desires, and beliefs—and reliably acts in a way that reflects in some way this self-understanding.²⁶⁶

²⁶² Timothy O'Connor, "Freedom with a Human Face," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXIX (2005): 208.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 209-210.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

Let us apply the concept of self-mastery to the doctrine of God; God has no conflicting aims or practical constraints to which He is subject.²⁶⁷ Nor does it seem that God has any desires, for desire is a passive state that arises from something not fulfilled in the agent with the desire; this mitigates the notion that God could have any irrational impulses.

It seems that O'Connor is on good historical ground in making such a claim, for the notion of rationality is at the core of Kantian ethics. In fact, in chapter I we noted an argument for the tenability of a Kantian DC ethic based on such considerations. Our purpose here is not to endorse that specific argument, but to consider how it advances our discussion on self-mastery. Kant wrote:

If the will is not of itself in complete accord with reason (the actual case of men), then the actions which are recognized as objectively necessary are subjectively contingent, and the determination of such a will according to objective laws is constraint. The conception of an objective principle, so far as it constrains a will, is a command (of reason), and the formula of this command is called an imperative. All imperatives are expressed by an 'ought' and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will which is not in its subjective constitution necessarily determined by this law. This relation is that of constraint. Imperatives say that it would be good to do or to refrain from doing something, but they say it to a will which does not always do something simply because it is presented as a good thing to do. A perfectly good will, therefore, would be equally subject to objective laws (of the good), but it could not be conceived as constrained by them to act in accord with them, because, according to its own subjective constitution, it cannot be determined to act only through the conception of the good. Thus, no imperatives hold for the divine will or, more generally, for a holy will. The 'ought' here is out of place, for the volition of itself is necessarily in unison with the law. Therefore imperatives are only formulas expressing the relation of objective laws of volition in general to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, e.g. the human will.²⁶⁸

Overall we are in agreement with Kant, except that previously we demarcated the good and the right in order to explicate why a being that has a holy will does not have any moral obligations, and Kant does not do so in terms of this distinction. However, the

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 212.

²⁶⁸ See Kant, Immanuel. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), 29-31. This edited version quoted from William Alston in Craig, 286-287.

picture that Kant paints of God, and which is of great use, is one where God is self-sufficient. To quote Mark Linville, “He [God] is not finite, dependent, or a being of needs. God lacks the desire for happiness. And lacking this desire, He lacks any inclinations that could conflict with the moral law. God has a “holy will,” “a will incapable of any maxims which could conflict with the moral law.”²⁶⁹ Linville’s conclusion is that the moral law (a la Kant) for a perfect being is a law of holiness, and not a law of duty. Further, the connection between God’s reason and His will is derivative of that found in the Categorical Imperative. Since the will is the source of moral failure, reason must bind the will. In God, there is perfect reason and perfect will; hence no binding is necessary.

Let us further this line of argument. It is a central tenet of perfect being theology that God is omniscient (i.e. perfect knowledge of the past, present, and future). It seems reasonable, then, to hold that God have complete knowledge of His own actions as well as ours. If this is so, then God has knowledge not just about His actions, but about how He will value (likely to be understood as axiological value) actions. W.R. Carter explains very nicely:

One surely is guilty of some sort of moral failing in the event that one realizes one is about to act maliciously (say), it is within one’s power not to so act, and yet one proceeds to act maliciously. In such cases, the moral transgression lies, not merely with what one does (the malicious action), but with what one does not do (namely, decide to act). Accordingly, I am skeptical of the idea that there is such a world in which an individual ceases by way of moral failing to occupy divine office. No possible world is such that one of its inhabitants sins at t but also is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good at $t - 1$.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Mark Linville, “Euthyphro and His Kin,” in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays*, ed. William Lane Craig and Mark MacLeod (Edwin Mellon Press, 1990), 199.

²⁷⁰ W.R. Carter, “Omnipotence and Sin,” in *Analysis* 42 (1982): 105. It should be noted that God’s relationship to time is not my concern here, even though I understand it has profound implications for any theory of divine epistemology. Suffice it to say that given my defense of SD in the previous chapters, I hold to a tenseless theory of time.

Of course, Carter's concern is to offer a reply to the claims of Nelson Pike on the problem of God's omnipotence, which we will take up in a moment; but the epistemic corollary fits our current theme. In order for God to sin, for instance, it must be the case that God perceives some good in the act of sinning. Prima facie, this good is self-directed, but it need not be the case that this is true (God could, for instance, perceive Himself robbing a bank for the purpose of feeding the hungry, and this not to His own gain). But to endorse such a view as even plausible with God requires one of two things: (1) God can have a deficient intellect such that His understanding of the good in a situation is lacking, or (2) there is no direct connection between God's intellect and His will. The first of these assertions is immediately countered by the notion that as Creator and sustainer of every human action, God cannot be ignorant of those actions.²⁷¹ Further, it requires a concept of the good that is not intrinsic to God, and hence requires Him to ponder the relevant merits of a given action as gauged by some standard. We have already argued against this possibility in chapters II and III; and we have ruled out the possibility of (2) in our discussion of the concept of self-mastery in the current chapter. It seems we are on better ground to speak of a connection between action-directed intentions and their influence on the rational process; this goes more to a defense of the self-control thesis than the possible-worlds suggestion. Since we have a model whereby God may will something (human action) morally and it not come about, what of God's intentions about His own actions?

²⁷¹ I understand that open theism denies such a claim, but that is not my concern here.

First, it is to be noted that an intention “settles an agent on one course or another.”²⁷² Otherwise stated, the agent is “committed to a goal”, and the intention provides a “settled objective.”²⁷³ Thus, I propose that when an agent has an intention, the intention is “conduct controlling” and not merely a “potential influencer of conduct.”²⁷⁴ Hugh McCann proposes that the rationality of intentions “depends on whether the goals they embody are such that, by pursuing them, we gain an acceptable chance of changing the world in ways we believe are better.”²⁷⁵ Thus, when the agent settles on an objective there is a presumption of “epistemic consistency” whereby it is possible for the plan to be “successfully executed without any of the agent’s beliefs being false.”²⁷⁶ Consider this in contrast to the model of sin provided before. It follows from the concept of sin that there is a failure either of will or intellect. If God fails in His intellect, it seems a matter of a false belief regarding an action, and hence He fails the epistemic consistency requirement. If God fails in His will, then it follows from our model that (1) God is not rational with regard to intention formation, for He would have a belief about an action’s merit and then do otherwise, and (2) God would fail the self-control paradigm, for He would be acting according to desires (which have no necessary positive aim) in contrast to His intentions, at least as we have construed rational intentionality. However, there is no reason for us to hold that God is culpable for these snafus. God, as we have argued, is a perfectly rational being whose will is in complete accord with reason. To borrow from Aquinas, God knows and wills Himself, that is, His actualized being. Aquinas writes,

²⁷² See Hugh McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 197.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

“Hence as His essence itself is also intelligible in species, it necessarily follows that His act of understanding must be His essence and His being. Thus, it follows from all the foregoing that in God intellect, and what is understood [His essence] and the intelligible species, and his act of understanding are entirely one and the same thing.”²⁷⁷

But there is a greater issue here than first meets the eye, founded upon the claim that freedom is best understood as the power to do otherwise. The issue concerns God’s act of creation. God, it is often argued, bears some responsibility for creating a sinful world given that He knew anterior to its creation that Adam and Eve would partake of the forbidden fruit (or pick your favorite sin). For, the argument runs, even if it is not within God’s power to create a world of free creatures that always choose to do what is right, it was certainly within God’s power not to create at all. Let us consider the implications of these concerns on our discussion of divine freedom, for it seems God is not in the bank robbing business but is in the work of creation. Can it be said of God that He is somehow culpable for the sin of Adam? This problem is different from the one provided before, for there we were considering whether or not God could sin with regard to His own actions. Now we are considering whether or not God may be found guilty in some way for actions that He wills, but does not directly perform.

It seems that part of the concern here derives from our earlier discussion pertaining to God’s will and human actions, such that God as a matter of Creator and Sustainer of all things in some sense wills certain evil states of affairs; perhaps one has in mind the atrocities of Auschwitz or the genocide in Darfur. For the sake of consistency we cannot deny that God wills these things to be, but this does not commit us to the view

²⁷⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume 1, 188.

that in His willing there is a “joint exercise of agency” between the sinner and God.²⁷⁸ Consider again Hugh McCann’s analogy to make this point. God’s relationship to humans is not “analogous to that of the puppeteer to the puppet—which would indeed destroy our freedom—but rather to that of the author of a novel to her characters.”²⁷⁹ The figures of the novel owe their existence in the author’s creative imagination, and “they are born and sustained in and through the very thoughts in which she conceives them, and of which they are the content.”²⁸⁰ Persons, and for that matter all of the created order, are brought into existence and sustained through the Creator’s will (synonymous with “creative will”).

The power of this analogy is that it identifies the assumption upon which the objection is based, namely that there is a causal-nexus between God’s creative will and human actions. But this is not the case. As McCann notes, the author of the novel cannot enter into the world of the characters and “pervert” their authenticity as agents. In fact, McCann argues, and I concur, that in creating us God does not “act upon us or produce any intervening cause—even an act of will on his part—that somehow makes us do what we do.”²⁸¹ God, as author of the novel, comprehensively provides through His creative fiat the existence of our decisions and the manifestation of our actions. To be precise, God creates us “in or willing,” and the relationship is not as “cause to effect but as will to content.”²⁸² For the sake of clarity imagine the state of affairs where I decide to rob a bank. Under this construction, it is a matter of God’s creative will that I in fact rob the bank. However, nowhere in my decision to rob the bank is God to be indicted, for all that

²⁷⁸ See Hugh McCann, “The Author of Sin?” in *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 22 (April 2005), 149.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 146 and 149.

we have in God's creative will is that God wills to grant existence to my act of deciding to rob the bank.

This leaves a second concern, namely whether or not God is to be indicted for the content of His creative will (or for His having created anything at all). Such a concern is to be likened to a reader finding moral fault in Thomas Harris for creating Hannibal Lecter cannibalizing his victims. And so, to answer this question, and here again I think McCann is correct, we have to consider what it is that makes wrongful willing wrong, or we have to know what constitutes the sinfulness of sin.²⁸³ These questions bring us back to the overall thesis of this work, namely offering a plausible account of DC ethics.

Whether we are considering the narrative of the fall of Adam (Gen. 3) or chronologically prior to that the fall of the angels (Isa. 14; Jude 6) the essence of moral evil is the same: the defiance of a divine command. To be more specific, in defiance of the divine command to not partake of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve acted exactly in the same manner as the fallen angels before them. The purpose of the defiance was to “achieve a certain kind of standing,” an “independent destiny” whereby they would become like God.²⁸⁴ Thus, we may agree with McCann's view that at its core every sin is the same—namely to set oneself in rebellion against God, deciding to do what He has forbidden us to do.²⁸⁵ But let us be clear, we have defended a traditional, normative DC ethic specifically for this reason, that in God's creative will Adam, Eve, and even Satan did exactly as God willed that they do, even though His commands were contrary to what was actualized (see chapter III).

²⁸³ Ibid., 150.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 151.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 151.

Necessary Goodness and Omnipotence

Suppose that we are confronted with the following two competing claims on the goodness of an agent:

(G1) A being that is unable to sin is better than a being that is able to sin but does not.

(G2) A being that is able to sin, but does not, is better than a being that is unable to sin.²⁸⁶

The contrast between (G1) and (G2) brings forth the supposed tension that follows by entailment from our argument from God's moral perfection. (G1) is a precise rendering of the impossibility of God's sinning. Yet, if God is omnipotent, then how can it be the case that God is incapable of sinning? At first blush we are on better grounds arguing for (G2), for in doing so we do not lose any of the moral qualities of God, and on this model He still does not sin, nor do we compromise His freedom or power. However, something seems amiss under any view that has God as able to sin. So, let us first investigate why the implications of (G2) are incoherent, and then turn our attention to a defense of (G1).

In order to defend (G2), one must first explain what it means for God to be able to sin. It does not seem that we will arrive at (G2) through conceptual analysis. The concept of sin means to miss the mark; and this either intellectually or morally (where this mark comes from is of vital significance). The mark certainly is not divine obligation in terms of some independent criterion, neither does it seem to be self-imposed obligation. The incoherence of a first-person imperative is twofold. If we recall, our notion of obligation is a normative thesis whereby an agent is drawn through the imperative to a certain action they otherwise would not perform. God has no need of such an imperative. Second, suppose for the sake of argument that God *did* need an

²⁸⁶ Special thanks to Dr. Robert Stewart for helping me articulate this point.

obligation to draw Him into action; there is no positive prospect of finding a source for obligation. It cannot be God, for the standard must be external to draw Him to the action (for the defect is now within Him, and requires reconciliation to what is normatively right). Nor does it make sense to say that the imperative is a first-person command, for that is conceptually ludicrous (there are no first person commands).²⁸⁷ So it seems, the idea of “calling God down” is not going to succeed based on a conceptual analysis of sin.

Second, and briefly, there are no biblical grounds for arguing that God has the ability to sin. In fact, the systematic testimony of Scripture is that God is both omnipotent and yet does not have the ability to sin. “God cannot lie” writes Paul to Titus. “God cannot swear by a being greater than Himself” explains the writer of Hebrews (6:18). Suffice it to say, Scripture is not committed to the thesis that God’s omnipotence entails that God can do anything. So, let us consider a third option, namely whether or not omnipotence logically entails the ability to sin.

Thomas Aquinas makes a distinction between two types of possibility, namely things that are logically possible and things that are possible in terms of an agent’s abilities. Regarding the first, Aquinas writes:

Everything that does not imply a contradiction is numbered amongst those possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent; but whatever implies a contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence, it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them.²⁸⁸

The import of Aquinas’ distinction on our discussion is that the conjunction of possibility in terms of ability and logical possibility is the essence of divine omnipotence. Thus, “anything that implies a contradiction” involves the conjunction of two states of affairs

²⁸⁷ I am indebted to Hugh McCann for drawing this to my attention.

²⁸⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume 1, 351.

that violate the law of noncontradiction. If something is impossible for God, it must also be logically impossible. Thus Aquinas thinks the dilemma is laid to rest, and argues:

To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to fall short in action, which is contrary to omnipotence. Therefore, God cannot sin, because He is omnipotence.²⁸⁹

However, there is nothing provided yet that proves sinning is both impossible in terms of God's abilities and logically impossible; a contention that seems *prima facie* compatible with Incarnation theology (consider Mark 1). Thus, it seems we need further clarification to make our point.

In Proposition 12, in his work *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, Samuel Clarke argues that the properties of God are coextensive, and hence the properties of God's necessary moral perfection and God's omnipotence entail that God cannot sin. In a rather lengthy narrative Clarke writes:

Free choice in a being of infinite knowledge, power and goodness can no more choose to act contrary to these imperfections that knowledge can be ignorance, power be weakness, or goodness malice. So that free choice in such a being may be as certain and steady a principle of action as the necessity of fate. We may therefore as certainly and infallibly rely upon the moral, as upon the natural attributes of God—it being as absolutely impossible for Him to act contrary to the one as to divest himself of the other; and as much a contradiction to suppose him choosing to do anything inconsistent with His justice, goodness, and truth as to suppose Him divested of infinity, power, or existence. From this it follows that God is both perfectly free and also infinitely powerful, yet He cannot possibly do anything that is evil. The reason for this is also evident. Because, as it is manifest infinite power cannot extend to natural contradictions which imply a destruction of that very power by which they must be supposed to be effected, so neither can it extend to moral contradictions which imply a destruction of some other attributes as belonging to the divine nature as power...It is no diminution of power not to be able to do things which are no object of power. And it is in like manner no diminution either of power or liberty to have such a perfect and unalterable rectitude of will as never possibly to choose to do anything inconsistent with that rectitude.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume 1, 351.

²⁹⁰ Reference Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Company, 1823) Proposition 12.

Clarke's argument offers a necessary gloss on Aquinas, and allays much of the concern in the contemporary literature concerning necessary goodness and moral perfection.

If we mistakenly suppose that there is no logical connection between perfect goodness and omnipotence, or other perfect making properties, then we *may* conceive of a being that brings about an evil state of affairs because it is in its power to do so. Such an argument has been put forth by Nelson Pike, and warrants a closer inspection in light of Clarke's claims.

If we recall, in our introduction we agreed with Nelson Pike that the term God is a title, and with that title comes necessary properties (omniscience, omnipotence, goodness). Also, if a being is God, then it follows de facto that that being is without sin. To make the assertion that a being is God, and does not have these properties is, as Pike argues "logically" inconsistent with the attribute ascription status of the title.²⁹¹ However, in contrast with Aquinas and Clarke, Pike argues that, though the being that is God holds that title, it is logically possible that God might not have filled that status.

Pike writes:

It should be noticed that this third assumption covers only a logical possibility. I am not assuming that there is any real (i.e. material) possibility that Yahweh, if He exists, is not perfectly good. I am assuming only that the hypothetical function "If X is Yahweh, then X is perfectly good" differs from the hypothetical function "If X is God, then X is perfectly good" in that the former, unlike the latter, does not formulate a necessary truth.²⁹²

In distinguishing between the title God and the person Yahweh, Pike argues that he has eased the tension between necessary goodness and omnipotence. It is logically possible for God to sin (a la (G2)), which makes no statement against God doing all and only

²⁹¹ See Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 68.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 68.

things that are not morally evil. To do evil means that individual would not merit the title “God.” The being that is God has the “creative power” to bring about states of affairs the “production of which would be morally reprehensible.”²⁹³

We should first note that the creative power of God is exactly what Clarke argued is coextensive with God’s moral perfection; which is why the inability for God to sin is a perfect making feature. This undermines Pike’s claim on the logical possibility of God’s sinning. Only if we divest the relationship of goodness and power do we obtain this possibility, and under that construction a being that is maximally powerful is not necessarily good. The difference between these two beings is that logical possibilities concerning God’s nature changes, so that “If God is omnipotent, then He can bring about any state of affairs logically possible for an essentially perfect being to bring about.”²⁹⁴ Thus, we need not endorse Pike’s claim that the title God entails such a possibility, nor need we endorse (G2) to alleviate the problem, at least as the problem confronts us now.

If we conclude that the argument from divine title does not work as is, then there still seems to be a lingering problem. Consider the following claim:

The world simply cannot be such that it contains a being that is both (essentially) omnipotent and essentially sinless. Any being that is essentially sinless is such that there is no possible world in which it commits sinful actions. Since such a being cannot sin, it cannot be all powerful and so cannot satisfy one of the requisites of divine office.²⁹⁵

Such an assertion has merit if and only if the tenet of God’s essential perfection is denied, and a doctrine of God’s contingent goodness is endorsed. As such, there are possible worlds in which the being that occupies the divine office (in the actual world) does commit a sin; the power of the agent, then, is to be characterized as the ability to do

²⁹³ Ibid., 72.

²⁹⁴ See Jerome Gellman, “Omnipotence and Impeccability,” in *The New Scholasticism* 51 (1977): 36.

²⁹⁵ See W.R. Carter, “Omnipotence and Sin,” in *Analysis* 42 (1982): 104.

otherwise. Such a claim seems specious for several reasons. First, suppose we agree that freedom is grounded in the power to do otherwise. There is nothing that logically commits us to the belief that the counterfactual entails that God commits a sin. Edward Wierenga notes, “God’s freedom requires that he be able to do alternatives to what he does; it does not require that these alternatives be evil.”²⁹⁶ Second, rather than understand freedom under a counterfactual model, we previously argued that freedom is better understood in terms of self control, or in Kantian terms a holy will. Given that we have already addressed this, let us consider the most damning objection to such a claim.

According to the argument from divine title, God’s goodness is not an essential property of His being, it is only a property of the being that possesses the office of divinity, and in the actual world this being is God (Yahweh). Pike’s argument implicitly entails that there are worlds in which God, or as he says Yahweh, does not possess the office because He is not perfectly morally good in that world.²⁹⁷ We may suppose then, that there are worlds in which the divine office is unoccupied, for there are no beings in that world that are perfectly (or maximally) morally good.²⁹⁸

But we should recall that our commitment is to the interdependence of perfect making properties, and the argument of God’s necessarily being morally perfect follows therein. Given God’s essentially perfect will, as we noted before:

The only way for God to sin is for him to not have the power to carry out the dictates of that will. But to do so would be to “fall short in action.” But God’s power is precisely the power to do whatever His perfect will desires. Hence, for

²⁹⁶ Wierenga, Edward. *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into the Divine Attributes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 212.

²⁹⁷ Such a claim is also compatible with Edward Wierenga’s contingent DC theory, which holds that if it were to be the case that God commanded the gratuitous pummeling of Carl, then DC would not be true in that world.

²⁹⁸ Or perhaps this being loses some other perfect making property that is a necessary condition of possessing the divine title.

God to sin would necessarily be the result of weakness in creative power, and contradict His omnipotence.²⁹⁹

So, there are a couple of points here that we may score against our objectors. The first is that the objectors have yet to show, in any of our discussion, that there are beings with more power than God; rather there are actions that finite beings do (and we've called these imperfect powers) that involve abilities that God lacks.³⁰⁰ Earlier we noted that our discussion of God's freedom occurs logically before God's power, and it is precisely for this reason. As essential perfectionists we are committed to the notion that God's actions are intentional, and hence a matter of His will. Further, given the connection between God's rationality and will, there is some end at which the action is directed. Thomas Morris sees the rationality/will connection to entail the following:

- (1) Agents can only do what they see as good.
- (2) To see evil as good is to be in error.
- (3) God cannot be in error, so
- (4) God cannot see evil as good, and thus
- (5) God cannot do evil.³⁰¹

So it will help our discussion to further our claim on God's ability by clarifying what has been called a *successful act*, which is an act that is successful at producing the end to which it is aimed.³⁰² Concerning God's actions this entails that God must have both the capacity and the all-things considered intention to perform that action. The distinction between God's will and God's power is forthright, for it undermines the contention that

²⁹⁹ See Jerome Gellman, "Omnipotence and Impeccability," in *The New Scholasticism* 51 (1977): 34.

³⁰⁰ I am indebted to Thomas Senor for this point. See his "God's Goodness Needs No Privilege: A Reply to Funkhouser," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006): 428

³⁰¹ Morris, Thomas. *Our Idea of God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 51.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 428.

God lacks the power to perform this action is identical with *God cannot perform this action*. One is a matter of God's willing and the other a matter of God's potency; any action that God "cannot do" may then be understood as God lacking the "will-power" to perform that action.³⁰³

So, we are committed to the view that to sin is logically impossible for God, and this is no condemnation on God's freedom or power. With regard to the claims of Nelson Pike we may conclude that God is comfortably sitting on His throne, and the office is occupied. Let us now consider how this discussion has been drawn into the literature as to its effect on a pivotal soteriological issue, namely whether or not God is a being that is worthy to be worshipped.

On God's Being Worthy of Worship

In light of our discussion on God's freedom and God's omnipotence, we now have a background against which we might respond to the claim that God is not worthy of worship. The argument for this claim is to be understood thusly:

- (1) A Person is praiseworthy for an action only if he could have refrained from performing it.
- (2) A necessarily good being cannot refrain from performing good actions, so
- (3) A necessarily good being is not praiseworthy for any of His actions. If
- (4) God is necessarily good, then
- (5) God is not praiseworthy for any of His actions. But surely
- (6) God is praiseworthy for His good actions. So
- (7) It is not the case that God is necessarily good.³⁰⁴

³⁰³ Ibid., 429.

³⁰⁴ Morris, *Our Idea of God*, 56.

Thomas Morris provides a nice review of the central concern held by many people, both theistic and atheistic, about essential perfection theology. What we want to say at the end of the day is that God is praiseworthy; however, what is proposed in (1) – (3) undermines our ability to make such a claim. We do not praise a calculator for telling us that twice two is four, nor do we praise God for His actions that could not be any way other than they are.

The success of this argument hinges on whether or not premise (1) is true, and we have given good reason to think that it is not. There is nothing in postulating God's necessary goodness that entails coercion or any causal conditions that "make" God who He is. Further, such a claim is successful only to the extent that the counterfactual model of freedom is successful. But we have denied this claim for two reasons. First, even on a counterfactual model it does not follow that the alternative action God perform be evil, it need only be different from the one actually taken. So even if we accept premise (1), there are still accounts of God's activity (logically speaking) that do not require only one state of affairs, *only one type of state of affairs*, namely those that are not blameworthy. But this says nothing against God's ability to refrain from instantiating a specific state of affairs; He could logically instantiate any possible state of affairs of equal (good) value.

Our argument against (1) undermines the claim of (2) as well, for what is required for (2) to be true is that God must be able to refrain from performing any of the good actions that He does in fact do. Thomas Morris argues that the success of (2) "trades on an ambiguity" between the following:

(2') A necessarily good being cannot refrain from ever performing any good actions whatsoever, and

(2'') A necessarily good being cannot refrain from performing any of the good actions he performs.³⁰⁵

Even if we were to agree that (2') is of concern, the answer resides in God's act of creation; nothing necessitated God's act of creation. But it seems Morris is right in claiming that (2'') is the hook, and this, I think, we have shown to be wrongheaded in our argument against (1). Without (1) and (2) the argument does not go through. So we need not worry about (3) as it is based on premises that are unsound.

I think another line of defense follows from God's actions that are supererogatory. Granted, the traditional understanding of supererogation is that it involves going "above and beyond the call of duty." At first blush this seems to rule out the possibility of any divine act of supererogation. However, I think the definition confuses the point to be made in the discussion. The very notion of obligation speaks of a normative claim on an agent to draw them to an action of good value. In other words, deontic statements of the sort made against murder and the like are statements about deficiency in the agent *before* any action ever obtains. The badness of an action consists not in its outcome, but in the will of the agent to act in a certain way. The murderer is guilty of the offense before it obtains specifically because she willed evil—and this independent of whether or not the act fails or succeeds. So what we have is value before obligation, and supererogation is obviously a value-laden term. To argue that a supererogatory act is the byproduct of going beyond what one is obligated to do is categorically backwards. It is better that we understand the nature of supererogation in terms of ontology and not in terms of the traditional normative requirement. Consider the concept of grace. Grace is an unmerited

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 58.

act of favor from one person to another.³⁰⁶ There is nothing in the action required; it is permissible, but not obligatory. But we certainly would not say that when an agent is gracious they are acting under compulsion of some sort (normative or otherwise). Rather, the graciousness in an action is the byproduct of the goodness in the agent performing the action. Even more pointedly, what we find in actions of this kind is a total contrast from the deontological definition. Grace, it seems, exists only when something has gone wrong, there is a fracture in the relationship, and there is no positive prospect of amends. There is seemingly no prospect of recompense for certain wrongs—such as a woman who is the victim of a rape. In such cases what we have is that in order for there to be reconciliation the victim gives twice—first as the object of wrongdoing and then as the agent of amends. Money does not address the wrong done, even if it provides the victim with security of some sort, equally so imprisonment. Rather, the very nature of the goodness of grace is that it seeks to reconcile what has been broken from the other end—from the end of the victim and not from the end of the victimizer. All the more such a claim holds in divine-human affairs. If sin is irretrievably to set oneself in rebellion against God and fracture the divine-human relationship, the only possibility of reconciliation is through a divine act of grace. Admittedly, such grace may not be accepted, but that is a debate of a different stripe. All that concerns us here is that *in even offering reconciliation where otherwise there could be none* God has done something supererogatory.

There is still a second issue to be dealt with here, and that is the implication of the alternative-world model for the relationship between praise and blame. What the objector's argument provides is a strange notion of praise where blame is a necessary

³⁰⁶ I am following the traditional etymology of the Greek *charis*.

condition of praise's possibility; this strikes me as counterintuitive at best. The very success of the alternate-world model hinges on the notion of actions being *conceivably* distinct from what they are; but we are on good grounds to say that in the case of God the conceivability criterion is a bad guide to possibility. Nothing in that criterion says anything of the *kind of power* in the agent such as self-mastery (or control) or being maximally rational. Nor does it say anything of the relationship between reason and the will. The volitional element of agency is irreducibly characterized to the conceivability criterion, or worlds-gone-otherwise, and this supposedly to actions of diminished moral value; I praise you because I can conceive of a world where I could blame you. Let's just say this will not wash.

Conclusion

I think the model we have proposed has a much more promising response to these concerns. We have shown how it can be the case that God's omnipotence does not entail that God can do everything, strictly speaking. We have also dealt with the more problematic issue of God's freedom and proposed a volitional model whereby God's freedom is best understood through the relationship between His intellect, His will, and a notion of self-control (or mastery). We have argued that God is not subject to impulses or desires, for these very concepts are passive in nature and show potency in God's willing and acting. Further, from the supposition provided in chapter III that God has no duties, here we have argued that the praiseworthiness of God's actions may be understood as (1) their being supererogatory in nature, or (2) their being in perfect harmony with actions that for humans would be characterized as moral. Thomas Morris, as we have noted, distinguishes between acting "in accord with a rule" and "acting from a

rule” and holds that God does the former. I think the language is muddy, but it draws to light the difference between the “prescriptive” function of moral principles for human conduct and the “descriptive” element of divine activity.³⁰⁷

So it seems the argument against the praiseworthiness of God fails. There is no reason to think that power and freedom are incompatible with one another, nor should we be inclined to think that the concepts of freedom and power are self-referentially incoherent in divine ontology. Further, the very fact that God is Creator and Sustainer of every contingent being warrants praise in itself; in Him we “live and move and have our being,” as the Bible says. The debt of existence is no small debt, and God’s act of creation and offering of reconciliation is a manifestation of His supererogation.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 60.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this project I articulated that my focus in writing this essay was to provide a coherent account of Divine Command ethics. In order to accomplish this task I have given attention to the epistemological and metaphysical concerns that are part of endorsing a strong thesis regarding theistic ethics.

To be more specific, chapter I provided a brief history of Divine Command ethics; which perhaps is more appropriately to be considered a relevant history of Divine Command ethics. There we surveyed the earliest and most contemporary literature on the subject, and offered exposition on the elements of early theological and later analytic arguments for endorsing a Divine Command theory. As we noted, some have arrived at such a thesis from the doctrine of God's impeccability—the idea that God cannot sin. Others arrived at this view arguing from the notion of God's sovereignty—that no external criteria for morality may be accepted theistically because it impugns God's absolute sovereign reign over all that exists, including the moral order of the actual world. And yet others find more promising analogical arguments for Divine Commands in that we may derive from God as First Cause a related supposition of God as First Good.

Going back to the Reformation, we considered the arguments from John Calvin and Martin Luther that Divine Command theory provides the most coherent ethical framework from a biblical perspective. From the premise that “laws imply a lawmaker” a theological construct was offered to account for the necessity of God's commands to elicit obedience from human agents. As Calvin and Luther argued, violation of any

command (Divine) was sufficient to warrant judgment; their theological construction of commands to the Fall, the Fall to original sin, original sin to Divine judgment, eventually necessitated (from a literal hermeneutic) the controversial doctrines of predestination and election.

The contemporary literature has centered on the relationship of God's will to His commands. In this debate we noted that some have seen a difference between the content of God's will and His commands. The example of Abraham and Isaac drew this distinction out, for it seems that God commanded something (the death of Isaac) that He did not will. We highlighted what we called the Divine Will formula (DW), proponents of which include Philip Quinn, Edward Wierenga, and Mark Murphy. The essence of this view is that persons are obligated by God's will, and not His command. Traditional Divine Command theories (DC) hold that moral obligation does not obtain merely from what God wills (either antecedently or consequentially), but as a matter of what He commands us to do. For the DW proponent, the command is merely informative, for the DC proponent, the command is necessary for moral obligation.

In chapter II we considered an argument for the necessity of God to ground objective moral values. There we provided a rubric for what makes values objective, and argued that since objectivity by definition entails that these values are independent of human minds and constructions, this does not entail that these values are independent of *any* mind (for instance, God's). Thus, we took the criteria of objectivity to have three necessary conditions (true, independent of our desires and beliefs, and universal) and one sufficient condition (these values had to be a part of the furniture of the universe). After providing this foundation, we then considered the possibility of naturalistic ethics

fulfilling these conditions for objectivity, and concluded that each view was found to be lacking. We then argued how theism best accounts for objective moral values.

In chapter III I constructed my own account of Divine Command theory. In order to do this, we first considered the positive and negative aspects of DW. I agreed in large part with the writing of Mark Murphy—that God’s moral will very likely follows from what He antecedently wills. We came to this conclusion because God as First Cause and Sustaining Cause brings about everything through His consequent will—which seems to violate any notion of human autonomy, and makes divine judgment seriously problematic. However, I disagreed with Murphy that moral obligation obtains when God wills (antecedently) that an action be required. My argument hinged on the nature of speech-act theory largely because both DW and DC hold that divine speech-acts have a role to play. Murphy concluded that God’s speech-acts are merely informative. I concluded that this means Divine speech cannot accomplish what human speech can, namely to place obligation on the agent to whom the speech is directed. I then considered the relationship of speech-acts to another concern—God’s practical authority. I concluded that God’s practical authority is not in question under my view. In fact, such an objection is best resolved under my view.

In chapter IV I considered the implications of the famous Euthyphro dilemma on DC ethics. I first elaborated the nature of the dilemma in terms of its logical form, which enabled me to derive where it was that Socrates went wrong in his formulation. I argued first that Socrates provided a false dichotomy. That was we cannot conclude from the absurdity of one aspect of a disjunction is the truth of the other. I noted that both logically and even in the dialogue Socrates did not address this concern. One aspect of

the logical argument against Euthyphro included an appeal to the doctrine of Divine Simplicity. My reason for such a postulate is that it is an underlying assumption of Euthyphro that the wedge of persons and properties is exact, and that at best personal agents are merely exemplars of already existing universals. If we argue that God is simple, then no such a wedge exists. God is pure action, as the doctrine holds. My argument was not intended to be a defense of Simplicity in light of all its problems; rather it was to show how Simplicity provides a plausible rejoinder to the underlying assumption in the dialogue. In committing myself to Simplicity, I made a strong commitment to theological essentialism—the idea that God’s attributes (say goodness) is necessary.

From my argument in chapter IV we elicited two major objections that provided the foundation of discussion in chapter V. For in holding to essentialist language it is argued that the doctrine of God becomes compromised—we lose either His freedom or His power. We argued that no such conclusion is warranted. First, it is not the case that (holding to the model of power as “worlds-gone-otherwise”) counterfactuals entail that God has to perform or even will a state of affairs of logically opposite value, rather He can will a state of affairs of the same moral value and yet these states of affairs be distinct. The logical argument fails. Second, we argued that it is better to understand power in terms of God’s self-mastery or perhaps self-control rather than through counterfactual models of freedom. God, as it were, is perfectly self-mastered, and it would defy His reason to act in a manner that is wrong. We noted that every agent acts according to some perceived good. Non-essentialist, or non-perfect-being theologians allow for the contingency of God’s goodness to resolve the freedom dilemma, but

undermine other attributes to allay its concerns (in this instance, His knowledge a la what He perceives to be good). God’s omniscience guarantees that He will not be aiming merely at a perceived good, but what is in fact good. The implications of a Kantian “holy will” took on a more robust form at that time; for what it offers is that insofar as reason binds the will on defective agents, God’s will and intellect are in perfect harmony with one another.

What we can derive from this is vast, a perfect starting point of which is from Ecclesiastes:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.³⁰⁸

But beyond this theological conclusion, I think it is safe to conclude that endorsing a Divine Command theory is no threat in many ways to what the natural law theorist or even what naturalism wants. We do not have to liken goodness to its source—for in my understanding goodness supervenes on every element of the created order. Just like the distinction between our understanding of properties and natural kinds, no such concern arises under this framework (this is to confuse the order of knowing with the order of being). Admittedly, in the end many will disagree with my thesis. For some it will be a matter of philosophical hurdles that just cannot be surmounted. For others, it is because a view like mine cannot be endorsed in conjunction with certain other worldviews. But this latter issue is not a matter of philosophical (i.e. methodological) discernment; it is a matter of the wedge that exists between competing presuppositions. I do not take such an issue to be a threat to my thesis, for I can retrace my steps to encourage the skeptic to

³⁰⁸ See Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

view its content from within, and not from without, to find the redeeming (pun intended) content of its message.

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