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PERSISTENT PROBLEMS IN MODIFIED DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Human Performance Management
The University of Mississippi

by

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ABSTRACT

I argue that there are persistent problems in contemporary modifications of divine command theory. Divine command theory states that God's commands are moral obligations only because he commands them. Modified divine command theories attempt to add to or amend the justification for God's commands being moral obligations. The problem is that they aren't successful at escaping the Euthyphro dilemma, which states the following of God's commands: they are either a) moral obligations because they are commanded by God, or they are b) commanded by God because they are moral obligations. Modified divine command theories attempt to navigate between these two alternatives, but they fail to do so successfully. This becomes evident when we see how these theories solve what I will call the arbitrary worry, the worry that on divine command theory, we have no guarantee that God's commands will not be arbitrary or worse, despotic. Two contemporary attempts to modify divine command theory show this to be the case: Robert Adams' *Finite and Infinite Goods*, and Linda Zagzebski's *Divine Motivation Theory*. Adams solves the worry by positing that God must be loving to issue obligatory commands, however in doing so he posits value independent of God, namely, the value of relationships and lovingness. Zagzebski solves the worry by positing that God's nature and thus his motivations are good, which generate our obligations. However she identifies goodness only with whatever God's nature happens to be, meaning that whatever motivations he is capable of having will generate obligation for us, and we don't know the extent of his nature or what motivations he is capable of having. Adams thus lands on the second horn of the dilemma, and Zagzebski on the first.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will argue that there are persistent problems in contemporary modifications of divine command theory. The problem is that modified divine command theories of ethics aren't successful at escaping the Euthyphro dilemma. This becomes evident when we see how these theories solve what I will call the arbitrary worry. I will explain in full detail later; for now it will suffice to say that the worry is that on divine command theory, we have no guarantee that God's commands will not be arbitrary or worse, despotic. Two contemporary attempts to modify divine command theory show this to be the case: Robert Adams' *Finite and Infinite Goods*, and Linda Zagzebski's *Divine Motivation Theory*. Each solves the arbitrary worry in a different way, but in ways that put them on the respective horns of the Euthyphro dilemma, Adams on the second and Zagzebski on the first.

A word of clarification to the reader about what I am *not* saying. I am not saying that theistic ethical theorists are misguided when they appeal to God or other divine persons for grounding their theory. Indeed, if God's nature or will was of no concern in a theistic ethical framework, the theory would be subject to much greater problems. The question is not whether God *should* be part of an ethical framework, since I take it to be obvious from a theistic perspective that he should. The question with which I am concerned is *how* God should play a role in a philosophically (and theologically) coherent ethical framework. Divine command theory has an answer to this question that is plainly unsatisfactory. Adams and Zagzebski each have a more specific answer. However, while they hope to navigate the horns, neither succeeds.

I'll review divine command theory and the Euthyphro dilemma. Then I'll state the arbitrary worry and show how contemporary modifications of divine command theory try to resolve the arbitrary worry but fail to navigate between the horns.

DIVINE COMMAND THEORY, THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA, AND THE ARBITRARY WORRY

Divine command theory¹ states that God's commands are our moral obligations.²

Whatever he commands us to do, we are obligated to do, and an act's being wrong consists in being contrary to God's commands. Moral obligation is completely dependent on God and his commands. This dependence is attractive to many theists, who believe that without God, there would be no morality, and that God can be the only source of moral obligation.

However, the Euthyphro dilemma gives us pause before accepting divine command theory. The dilemma consists in having to accept one of the following two possibilities concerning God's commands: God's commands are moral obligations just because he commands them (the first horn), or, he commands them because they are moral obligations (the second horn). So which should the theist accept? The first horn grounds morality in a potentially arbitrary divine will, but the second posits value independent of God, thus the dilemma. Divine command theory claims the first. But this approach makes God no more than a supreme being who issues arbitrary commands. Consider: if God's commands are moral obligations just because he commands them, then he could command us to torture innocents for fun and we

¹ For more discussion on various approaches to Divine Command Theory, see: Murphy, Mark, "Theological Voluntarism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/voluntarism-theological/>>.

² Divine command theory focuses on the morality of obligation, and that will be the primary focus in this paper.

would be obligated to do it. He would not be doing anything wrong in doing so, since wrongness consists in breaking divine commands. This concern leads me to discuss the arbitrary worry.

By arbitrary worry, I mean that on divine command theory, we have no reason to think God's commands are non-arbitrary as universal moral standards. God could command us to torture innocents for fun, and this would be a moral obligation, along with a command to feed the hungry, which would also be a moral obligation. There seems to be a moral contradiction between these two acts; one strikes us as morally horrifying and the other as noble. But there are no universal moral principles at work beyond "obey divine commands," and on divine command theory, there don't have to be nor can there be, since God's commands themselves are the grounding of morality. Thus, divine command theory gives us reason to worry that God's commands are arbitrary as universal moral standards of action. They may or may not be benevolent, loving, or have any other property we consider morally praiseworthy, and they may in fact be cruel and harsh. Divine command theory makes no guarantees.

Now, the divine command theorist can answer this worry in different ways: yes, God could command torture of innocents for fun, or no, God couldn't do this. If the answer is yes, God could do this, the arbitrary worry is in full force. This makes morality contingent on a divine will that may or may not be benevolent (even if his will is benevolent, it is of no moral import, since the divine will is prior to the commands that ground morality). If the answer is no, God couldn't do this, then there is a moral limit to what God can command. If this limit is real, it is the source and standard of our moral obligations. There is another possible response: That God *could* command cruelty but *would* not. But if he has a reason for choosing not to command torturing innocents for fun, then that reason is source and standard of moral obligation instead of God's commanding it. It may be so that God would not command cruelty, but the fact remains

that according to divine command theory, anything God commands is a moral obligation, whether he commands arbitrarily or not. Even if he promises not to command torture of innocents for fun, he is not obligated to keep his promise unless there is a moral standard that governs him, and divine command theory rejects such a standard.

I believe that something like the arbitrary worry has motivated contemporary moralists and ethicists to modify divine command theory. They attempt to save the theory from charges of arbitrary commanding and moral despotism. If it can be guaranteed that God will command non-arbitrarily, then divine command theory is suitable for grounding our moral obligations in a principled way that comports with our moral sensibilities. Unfortunately, as I will show, attempts to modify the theory to answer the arbitrary worry land it back on the first or second horn of the Euthyphro dilemma.

ADAMS' MODIFICATION: GOD'S LOVINGNESS AND RELATIONSHIPS

In several articles and ultimately in his book *Finite and Infinite Goods*³, Robert Adams makes a significant modification to divine command theory: the commands of a *loving* omnipotent being constitute our moral obligations. He attempts to navigate the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma by arguing that God's commands are moral obligations because *he* commands them, and importantly, *he* is perfectly loving. Adams focuses on moral *obligation*; he thinks obligations arise from social relationships and should be understood in our relationship with The Good, who is God, and God's commands are made in the context of his relationship with us. God is The Good in virtue of his lovingness, and this is not a standard of goodness external to him, since his lovingness is his valuing of what resembles himself and is valuable.

Adams is a theistic Neo-Platonist, giving the role of the Good of Platonism to the command-issuing person of God. He argues that a loving, omnipotent being functions as the Good:

“On my view, the infinite transcendent Good is God... The part played by God in my account of the nature of the good is similar to that of the Form of the Beautiful or the Good is Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*. God is the supreme Good, and the goodness of other things consists in a sort of resemblance to God.”⁴

As such, to love God is to love The Good, and obeying his commands is obligatory and right:

³ Adams, Robert Merrihew. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

⁴ *Ibid.* 3, 7

“The good is *worth* loving and doing; an obligation is what we *have* to do... I argue that obligation, premoral or moral, should be understood in terms of social requirement, and that moral obligation should be understood also in relation to the good... I argue further that the requirements constituting moral obligation are best understood as divine commands.”⁵

So obligation occurs in the context of social relationships, and since The Good is a person with whom we have a relationship, our moral obligations are best understood as obligations to The Good, or divine commands. Adams appeals to our everyday activity to support his theory. He believes that his theory makes the most sense of our interactions and intuitions, and appealing to our intuitions is his strategy for answering significant questions and establishing vital premises in his argument.

At the outset, we must understand the importance of loving for Adams, particularly *Eros*, the kind of love at work in his theory. Loving a person in this way consists in valuing the relationship with them for its own sake:

“In speaking of *Eros* I seek to be guided by the character of the attitudes that we would normally recognize as concrete paradigms of *Eros*. The central feature of those paradigms is that the lover desires or prizes, for its own sake, some relationship with the beloved... *Eros* need not be either self-interested nor altruistic, in the sense that it is not aimed at the good of either party... Even in a more beneficial relationship, lovers prize the relationship for its own sake and not just because they believe it would be good for one or both of them. They would rather be happy together than in some other equally flourishing way; and if they desired the relationship in such a way that they would have no interest in it at all if they did not think it would be beneficial, we might doubt that they really love.”⁶

The “character of the attitudes we would normally recognize as concrete paradigms of *Eros*” (again appealing to our interactions and intuitions) is prizing the relationship for its own sake. This is his definition of love. Love is central to Adam’s theory, since (again, according to our intuitions) we believe that to love is praiseworthy and to be loving is admirable:

⁵ Ibid 8

⁶ Ibid 139-140

“We want to love and be loved, and we want others to think well of us... We desire these relations for their own sakes, and that is typically why we regard them as benefitting us... We would be ashamed not to value personal relationships, for their own sake, above economic benefits... Thus it seems we *ought* to value personal relationships for their own sake.”⁷

The reader might be tempted to adopt the view that mere benevolent motivation is praiseworthy. However this is consistent with having no relationships, and Adams doesn’t think this really captures what we value in our interactions with others:

“To lack this resource (valuing a relationship for its own sake) would be a misfortune, but not a moral deficiency or fault, on this view. But this is implausible. If I cared nothing for personal relationships for their own sake, then unless I had managed to avoid having anyone close to me, I would be open to criticism as failing those close to me in a very serious, painful, and obnoxious way... It is often *morally* good, perhaps even morally imperative, to be interested in a personal relationship for its own sake.”⁸

So love (specifically love as *eros*) consists in valuing relationships for their own sake, and relationships are intrinsically *valuable*. Failure to value relationships this way is moral failure. Thus relationships are *excellent*, as Adams uses the term: “The claim that *x* is excellent implies not only that it is good to value *x*, but that this goodness of valuing *x* is grounded in the excellence of *x* and is independent of ulterior values that may be served by the valuing.”⁹ It is good to value relationships, but their being relationships means we also have an obligation to value them; he will later argue that obligation is within the social context of relationships.

Lest we worry that Adams is appealing to the intrinsic value of relationships to establish God’s goodness as a loving being (which he admits would impale him on the second horn of value independent from God), Adams reminds the reader that he only wants to make sense of our intuitions, not give a definitive account of the meaning of ‘good’:

⁷ Ibid 143

⁸ Ibid 144-145

⁹ Ibid 22

“A vicious circle might be suspected here, on the ground that the concept of appreciation may involve a conception of the good, and I am using it to explain the nature of the good. I would remind any who harbor this suspicion that I am not offering a reductive analysis of the meaning of ‘good’ but I am speculating about what is there in reality corresponding to our talk about good. And an important part of what is there, I am suggesting, is something in God analogous to what we call appreciation in ourselves. This analogy is not destroyed by the fact that God’s appreciation does not involve reference to an external standard, since God *is* the standard.”¹⁰

Relationships resemble God and thus are valuable, and since they are valuable, God values them.

A thing’s resemblance to God is why it has value, not just that God values it, though he does. If a thing only had value in virtue of God valuing it, then nothing about the thing itself would constitute its value, it would only be God’s act of valuing it that mattered. This robs the thing of what we typically mean by excellence:

“Does the excellence of *x* explain God’s love for *x*, or the other way around? Intuitively, as I’ve said, the excellence of *x* should have its grounds not simply in God’s attitude, but in something in *x* itself. Among the features of the role that I think ordinary understanding assigns to excellence, moreover, are not only that it is good to value the excellent, but also that the excellence of something provides a reason for admiring or loving it, and that it is good to admire or love the excellent *for* that reason. This suggests that the excellence of *x* should provide God with a reason for loving *x*, and that God should love *x* for that reason, which will presumably be grounded in whatever it is in *x* that grounds *x*’s excellence. These grounds, I have suggested thus far, are constituted by *x*’s resemblance to God, or by whatever it is in *x* by virtue of which *x* resembles God. On this account, it seems to be *x*’s excellence (or its grounds in *x*) that explains (or helps explain) God’s love for *x*.”¹¹

The excellence of relationships is grounded in the resemblance of relationships to God. God values what is *valuable*, and what is valuable is excellent insofar as it resembles God. The worry of value independent from God is resolved by reminding us that value consists in resemblance to God. He is the standard of value. Relationships resemble God to the extent that they are intrinsically valuable, and good. Since God values them for their own sake (as resemblance to him), and to love (in the *eros* sense) is to value relationships for their own sake, he is perfectly

¹⁰ Ibid 34-35

¹¹ Ibid 35-36

loving. Because he is perfectly loving, he is the transcendent Good. God values what is valuable, and what is valuable is so as a resemblance to him, so he is the transcendent Good that all other goods (or things of value) resemble, insofar as they are good. This value of relationships is why God cares about them for their own sake and in so doing, he cares about us as well:

“If we are right in regarding many personal relationships as excellent, we may reasonably infer that divine perfection includes valuing them in whatever way is necessarily involved in *appreciating* them... Since such relations would involve the transcendent Good, however, it seems that their possible excellence would give God at least as much reason to be interested in them for their own sake as anything else about finite beings. Some may think that if creatures like us are to exist at all, what God would have most reason to care about in their regard is their well-being. But if our well-being is constituted by enjoyment of the excellent, what could enhance it more than the opportunity to enjoy a relationship with God that God prizes for its own sake? That is an opportunity that can be available to us only if God does care about the relationship for its own sake, and not just for the sake of its possible contributions to our well-being.”¹²

Because God loves perfectly and because love is intrinsically valuable as resemblance to him, he is the best candidate for The Good based on how we understand goodness. His perfectly valuing what is valuable, along with a thing’s value consisting in resemblance to him makes God the best candidate for the transcendent Good:

“Suppose you have a strong general disposition to value good things, loving some, liking more of them, respecting still more of them. Suppose in addition you have a conception of goodness and use it in such a way that you may be said to have an attitude of being *for* the good in general – for example, in allowing your conceptions of goodness to determine, for the most part, what qualities you count as reasons for loving something... The suppositions would be sufficient, I think, to warrant us in describing you as someone whose motives (including loves) are integrated around a love of goodness...then we can say that your organizing, integrative principle is love for the transcendent Good, and for God if God is that Good.”¹³

God’s lovingness is the special feature of his character that makes his commands moral obligations. Since we can only go wrong within a relationship (wrongness consisting in failure

¹² Ibid 145

¹³ Ibid 191

to value the relationship), and God perfectly values relationships, his commands will always be constitutive of perfectly valuing relationships. Any typical moral wrong we can conceive of (theft, murder, etc.) is some version of a failure to love another person or persons, thus failure to value your relationship with them. Adams thinks this is intuitive given our experiences with relationships, the guilt we feel when we harm our relationships, and the release from guilt when we reconcile. Only within a social context we have real obligation, and we have obligations to God within the context of our relationship with him:

“The most important difference between the right, or obligation, and the good, in my opinion is that right and wrong, as matters of obligation, must be understood in relation to a *social* context, broadly understood, but that is not true of all the types of good with which we are concerned. The beauty of a scene or the badness of pain can be understood in abstraction from any social setting. Something similar seems true even of the excellence of courage... If I have an obligation, on the other hand, I believe it can only be in a personal relationship or in a social system of relationships.”¹⁴

What is good and bad can be understood outside of any social context and outside of any obligations. Furthermore, badness is understood in terms of goodness and not vice versa, while right and wrong are understood in relation to one another. Wrongness always consists in failing in the context of a relationship with a person:

“If an action is wrong, likewise, there must be a person or persons, distinct from the agent, who may appropriately have an adverse reaction to it. For the meaning of the obligation family of ethical terms is tied to such reactions to the wrong. My main project in this chapter is to argue that facts of obligation are constituted by broadly social requirements... I will argue further that those that have full moral validity are aptly understood as constituted by divine commands, and thus by requirements arising in a social system in which God is the leading participant... We can understand the role of obligation and still ask ‘Is there really something that is suited to fill this role? And if so, what is the best candidate?’ The best candidate, I will argue, is to be understood, roughly, in terms of social relations and, ultimately, in terms of divine commands.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid 233

¹⁵ Ibid 233-234

If God is the Good, The Right is what God commands. We experience guilt and a deep sense of wrongness when we fail to love and harm our relationships. Obedience to God, who is the Good as a perfectly loving being, avoids this guilt and wrongness, since he does not fail to love and value relationships. God's commands constitute moral obligations in the context of our relationship with him. And because he is loving, we know that he will command consistently with valuing his relationship with us for its own sake, and his commands will not be alienating or cruel. Adams argues for this by first arguing that obligations are found only in social contexts:

“Suppose I have done something that has offended a friend, resulting in an estrangement. I think I was wrong to do it; I feel guilty. But if there is a reconciliation and my friend forgives me, I will feel released from the guilt. Indeed, I will *be* released from the guilt. The view that in such a case the guilt (not an emotion, but an objective moral condition) consists largely in an alienation produced by the wrong act is supported by the fact that the ending of the alienation ends the guilt.”¹⁶

So guilt is an objective moral condition that one is released from when reconciliation with the wronged person occurs. Adams thinks this makes the best sense of the way we come to acquire the concept of guilt:

“This should not surprise us if we reflect on the way in which we acquired the concept, and the sense, of guilt. In our first experience of guilt its principal significance was an action or attitude of ours that ruptured or strained our relationship with a parent. There did not have to be a failure of benevolence or a violation of a rule; perhaps we were even too young to understand rules. It was enough that something we did or expressed offended the parent, and seemed to threaten the relationship. This is the original context in which the obligation family of moral concepts and sentiments arise. We do not begin with a set of moral principles but with a relationship, actual in part and in part desired, which is immensely valued for its own sake. Everything that attacks or opposes that relationship seems to us bad.

Of course this starkly simple mentality is pre-moral. We do not really have the concepts of moral obligation and guilt until we can make some sort of distinction, among the things we do that strain relationships, between those in which we are at fault or wrong and those in which we are innocent or right (not to mention those in which we are partly wrong and partly right). In grasping such a distinction we must learn to make some critical judgments about the moral validity of the demands that people make on us.

¹⁶ Ibid 239

Nevertheless, I believe it is not childish, but perceptive and correct, to persist in regarding obligations as a species of social requirement, and guilt as consisting largely in alienation from those who have (appropriately) required of us what we did not do.”¹⁷

So the guilt, and thus the wrongness of an act, consists in its alienating character, not in failure to comport with a principle. If an act is alienating, the act is a failure to value the relationship appropriately. This constitutes the wrongness of the act, that it is accompanied by guilt that intrudes on the relationship, not that it fails to meet a moral standard. Adams is aware that this position, committed primarily to relationships and social contexts rather than moral principles, is uncommon:

“This is a controversial position. It is widely agreed that learning about guilt begins in the way that I have indicated, and that the values we place on good relationships, not only with parents but also with peers, is crucial to moral development. But some moralists hold that in the highest stages of the moral life (perhaps not reached by many adults) the center of moral motivation is transplanted from the messy soil of concrete relationships to the pure realm of moral principles, and a corresponding development is envisaged for the sense of guilt.”¹⁸

Obligations are found in social contexts. We come to know this, according to Adams, because our moral sentiments first arise within social contexts, and we first value relationships before we grasp moral principles. Rightness and wrongness are characteristic of actions within the contexts of relationships, not just in virtue of meeting demands of moral principles. Since obligations are found in relationships, moral obligations are found in our relationship with God, as his commands:

“When I say that an action’s being morally obligatory consists in 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 that they are consistent with the divine nature having properties (being perfectly loving) 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

¹⁷ Ibid 239-240

¹⁸ Ibid 240

good candidate for the role of defining moral obligation... The divine command theory, as I conceive of it, is a theory of the nature of obligation only, and not of moral properties in general. In particular, it is not a theory of the nature of the good, but presupposes a theory of the good... Since my theory incorporates these restrictions, I rely freely on the account of the nature of the good that I have presented.”¹⁹

God’s commands are moral obligations because in the course of valuing relationships for their own sake, we do what we can to preserve the relationship. Since God is loving, his commands will consist only of those actions that preserve the relationship. God’s commands are moral obligations because of the value of our relationship with him:

“It remains true, however, that the fear of punishment is not the best of motives, either morally or religiously; and emphasis on it can lead to the suspicion that the obligations under discussion do not fully fill the emotional and motivational role that we expect of *moral* obligations. There are better motives for compliance with divine commands, grounded in subtler aspects of a complex structure of requirements and sanctions. I would particularly stress reasons for compliance that arise from a social bond or relationship with God. As in the case of human social bonds, the force of these reasons depends on the value of the friendship, which theistic devotion will rate very high indeed.”²⁰

Since God is morally perfect in his lovingness, whatever he does (including his issuing commands) is consistent with moral perfection. Thus, if we obey his commands perfectly, our actions would be consistent with moral perfection. Whatever he has commanded or will command is identical with our moral obligations. Within the context of our relationship with God, since he is The Good, obeying his commands is identical with acting consistently with The Good, so his commands are The Right.

¹⁹ Ibid 250-252

²⁰ Ibid 252

Adams on the second horn

As stated before, Adams solves the arbitrary worry by stipulating that God is loving, he values relationships for their own sake, and he commands consistently with valuing relationships for their own sake. Relationships are valuable, and God, as a loving being, values them. Thus we can rely on God's commands being consistent with lovingness, and we needn't worry that he would oblige us to torture innocents for fun, since torture of innocents is the kind of command God's lovingness wouldn't permit him to issue.

But, this non-arbitrary feature puts Adams on the second horn of Euthyphro's dilemma. Adams argues that relationships are the appropriate context for obligation. This will strike many as odd, and as an inappropriate place to ground obligation. Normally, we think of obligations in the context of relational distance, perhaps with an authority figure or with someone who has been wronged to which we have a duty; intimate relationships, on the other hand, don't seem as duty-oriented. In the context of a relationship characterized as loving (even according to Adams, where the parties value the relationship for its own sake), we think obligation has a diminished role, and the actions of each party with respect to the other are not duties but cheerful opportunities to show kindness and affection. Happily married couples often shy away from speaking in terms of obligation to one another. In loving relationships, a good-faith assumption is at work and people are happy, not obligated, to treat each other well. Perhaps Adams avoids this characterization because obligations would have to come from somewhere else, not so closely tied to lovingness, and in danger of being arbitrary.

But let's grant the plausible if unusual characterization of obligation being primarily within loving relationships. There are still problems. Suppose that the context of being in a

relationship generates obligation for the persons involved. This would make sense of the value of relationships, that they generate the obligation to value them and thus dictate how we may act within them. If so, then our moral obligations aren't constituted solely by God's commands, since the relationship itself dictates what we must do. His commands might be superfluous, or particularizations of a primary moral duty we have to him, apart from his commanding. Having a moral duty apart from his commands puts Adams squarely on the second horn of the dilemma. If relationships generate obligation, God does not have to actually command for us to have moral obligation. Adams addresses this when he considers the objection that his theory doesn't require God, only the value of relationships and hypothetical commands that *would* issue from a perfectly good being that doesn't actually exist:

“Given the importance we have ascribed to goodness, we might wonder if it matters whether commands are really being issued by God. It may be suspected that all the work in my theory is being done by the supposed goodness of God and God's commands – that really nothing would be lost if we just said that our overriding, fully moral obligation is constituted by what *would* be commanded by a supremely good God, whether there is one or not. My reasons for thinking that that is not an adequate substitute for actual divine commands parallel my reasons for not being satisfied with an ideal, nonfactual human authority as a source of moral obligation.

First of all, I do not believe in the counterfactuals. I do not believe that there is a unique set of commands that would be issued by any supremely good God. Some commands, surely, could not issue from a perfectly good being; but there are some that such a deity might command and might not command. This is most obvious, perhaps, where religious ceremonies are concerned. Many people believe they are under divine commands to perform certain rituals. Few of them would claim that any supremely good God must have commanded everyone, or someone, to perform those particular rituals. Something similar may be true of more controversial cases. It is not obvious to me, for example, that there is not a diversity of principles regarding euthanasia that could have been commanded by a supremely good God; perhaps different weightings of the importance of preventing suffering as compared with other values at stake would be possible for such a deity. I may still think I have grounds, in my own and other people's moral sensibilities, and in whatever evidence I take myself to have of God's dealings with humanity, to believe that God has in fact issued certain commands on the subject. And since commands must be communicated in order to be commands, those who are subject to the commands would presumably have had different feelings, perceptions, or evidence on the

subject if God's commands had been different; but that does not imply that a perfectly good God could not have commanded differently."²¹

This will hardly be convincing to theists who believe God commands everyone equally.

Consider his example of religious rituals: Adams doesn't capture what most believe; religious people believe everyone should partake in some rituals like confession, prayer, baptism, and many others. Even supposing there are some commands of God that are particular, religious people believe the commands are particular only to the occasion, but otherwise principled. If God specifically commanded a particular confession for a particular sin that a particular person committed, I take it most theists would claim that God's command was only particular because it was a singular application of a broader command to confess sin. In trying to salvage God's role in his theory, Adams has admitted that God's lovingness isn't sufficient to determine what his commands would be in some instances. But it's not clear what instances these are, why God's lovingness doesn't apply to them, or what, besides lovingness, does determine these commands. Adams is perilously close to the first horn here, in trying to avoid the conclusion that relationships generate obligation and place him on the second horn.

But suppose relationships don't generate obligations on their own. Suppose they are a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral obligation, and God's commands within the context of our relationship with him constitute moral obligation for us. Could God's commands be sufficient but not necessary for moral obligation? Certainly not, at least not for any theory that claims the mantle of divine command. So according to Adams, it must be that God's commands and a relationship with him are necessary conditions of moral obligation. But consider whether one of these conditions is doing the real work for Adams, and whether the other really plays a role. Our relationship with God, by itself, sets the stage for moral obligation,

²¹ Ibid 255

according to Adams. But this relationship can't generate obligation on its own, even if the relationship is with God, since it would be the *relationship*, not God, generating the obligation. The relationship can generate no obligation itself. When God does command, we have moral obligation in one of two ways: one, either the relationship generates the obligation *on his command*, or two, the relationship is constituted entirely by his commanding and our receiving the command. If the latter is true, then talk of the value of the relationship is superfluous, since his commands don't combine with anything to generate moral obligation. If the former is true, then our relationship with him does generate moral obligation, but only at God's command. Is this because he commands they do so? Or is it because some dormant normative feature of our relationship with him is activated by his command? A normative feature of our relationship with God that is separable from his commands lands Adams on the second horn again, so it would have to be God's command that our relationship with him generates moral obligation. But if he must command that his commands be obligatory, he must also command that his obligatory-making commands are obligatory, leading to an infinite regress of commanding. This is only avoided by having God's commands constitute moral obligations on their own, apart from any additional value of relationships. And if we admit that relationships don't contribute along with God's commands to the generation of obligation, we give over the entirety of obligation generation to commands.

Either relationships themselves generate moral obligation for Adams, or they contribute nothing. Either option is troublesome. God's lovingness is the solution to the arbitrary worry, and his lovingness is relational. Supposedly, it is because God values his relationship with us for its own sake that we know his commands will be consistent with valuing relationships for their own sake. But as we've seen, unless this is because relationships are intrinsically valuable,

relationships can't contribute anything to the generation of moral obligation without the contribution being separable from God's commands. And it won't do to say that relationships are intrinsically valuable because God values them. Suppose God didn't value his relationship with us for its own sake, and thus failed to love us. Adams would call this a moral failure, and for his theory, it would mean that morality would completely break down. But on what grounds would it be a moral failure? Either God is failing to establish their value, or he's failing to recognize their intrinsic value. If he's failing to establish the value, it's hard to see it as a moral failure, since there is no value going unrecognized. But if he's failing to recognize value that is already there, that value is independent of his activity. For God to value a relationship for its own sake, it seems there must be value to the relationship, independent of him. If relationships generate obligation out of their intrinsic value, Adams is on the second horn. If they do not, then God's valuing relationships has no moral bearing on what sorts of commands he gives, putting him back where he started, on the first horn.

ZAGZEBSKI'S MODIFICATION: GOD'S GOOD NATURE AND MOTIVATIONS

In her book *Divine Motivation Theory*²², Zagzebski constructs her ethical theory around God as the grounding of morality in virtue of his nature and motivations. She attempts to navigate the horns by arguing that God's *motivations* are good because they are his motivations, and they perfectly express his nature (even more so that his commands, thus her appeal to motivations), and importantly, his nature is good. Hers is a kind of virtue theory, in which exemplars have proper emotions towards the right kinds of intentional objects:

“I have outlined an account of emotion according to which in a state of emotion E the agent has a distinctive feeling toward an intentional object construed in a way peculiar to E in her consciousness. In an emotion E, the intentional object x of E is seen as falling under a thick affective concept A. One of the basic features of exemplars that makes them good is that their emotions fit their intentional objects. An emotion E fits its intentional object x when x is A. The agent can express her emotion by making the judgment “x is A.” Such a judgment is both cognitive and intrinsically motivating. This means that the exemplar's emotions are intrinsically motivating states that fit their objects. When an emotion fits its intentional object, it is good in the same way that true belief is good. Emotions have intrinsic value in this way.”²³

So to use her example, the proper emotional response to a potentially dangerous object is to see it under a thick concept 'dangerous' and have the proper emotion of fear in response. Likewise with moral concepts; emotions can motivate right action when they are proper responses to affective concepts and the objects that fall under the affective concepts. Exemplars do this well, and God does it perfectly, thus resemblance to God in this way is a measure of one's goodness:

²² Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Divine Motivation Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

²³ Ibid 95

“God is essential to morality, not because it comes from his intellect or his will, but because it comes from his motives. God’s motive dispositions, like ours, are components of his virtues, and all moral value derives from God’s motives. There are many exemplars of goodness in ordinary life, but the ultimate paradigm of goodness and the source of value is God.”²⁴

God has the nature he has, thus he has perfect emotions and motivations, so goodness is identical with what God would desire: “God’s motives are an intrinsic feature of his nature and hence good in the primary sense.”²⁵ In addition to properly recognizing the value in the world, God is also the source of the value, thus his recognition and response is perfect. Because God has the nature he has, he has created the world with the nature it has. As she puts it:

“The thick properties that the world has are those perceived by God. Their existence depends upon God’s affective perception. The lovability of the world comes into existence with God’s loving it; the despicability of certain features of the world comes into existence with God’s hating those features, and so on.”²⁶

As she has argued thus far, God is both the source and the standard of value, similar to Adams. His responses and motivations relative to the world are perfect, and they couldn’t fail to be, since he is the creator of the world.

Later she puts an even finer point on it: “God is good in the same way that the standard meter stick is one meter long.”²⁷ She relies on a theory of direct reference that picks our exemplars of goodness and ultimately, God, for identifying goodness:

“But its (the theory’s) reference to exemplars of a good person can be incorporated into the foundation of a theory without going through the concepts that would permit us to avoid the problems with a purely conceptual foundation. We have a model for constructing a theory of this kind in the theory of direct reference, which became well known in the seventies as a way of defining natural kind terms such as “gold” and

²⁴ Ibid 185

²⁵ Ibid 283

²⁶ Ibid 224

²⁷ Ibid 285

“water.” I propose that we adopt this approach to the need to define the foundational concepts of ethics.”²⁸

The theory of direct reference was a useful approach in metaphysics and philosophy of language for explaining how we can successfully refer to objects of a kind without knowing their natures and what about their natures made them of that kind. Applied to ethics, Zagzebski hopes to have similar success. Typically, theories of ethics and morality seek an exhaustive conceptual analysis of foundational concepts like ‘good,’ and ‘right’ to get the theory going. Zagzebski argues that this is impractical and unnecessary. There is a great deal of disagreement, but even if we navigate the disagreement, the resulting analysis will rely on further moral concepts. Moral concepts can only be based on other moral concepts. If we can fix these fundamental concepts by reference to exemplars that we agree embody these concepts (like a good person), then we can move forward with a working theory. She continues:

“The alternative that I am suggesting is to anchor moral concepts in an exemplar. Good persons are persons like that, just as gold is stuff like that. The function of an exemplar is to fix the reference of the term “good person” or “practically wise person” without the use of any concepts, whether descriptive or nondescriptive. An exemplar therefore allows the series of conceptual definitions to get started.”²⁹

Rather than locate goodness in God’s commands, she locates goodness in God’s nature manifest as his motivations, meaning that because God’s nature is intrinsically good his motivations are intrinsically good. This claim that goodness is intrinsic to God’s nature is supposed to make him morally non-arbitrary. She thus avoids the problem of God’s commands being arbitrary; he can only command consistently with his nature. God commands us not to murder other people. He does this because he is motivated to bring about a state of affairs in which no one is murdered. It is inherent in his nature that he bring about such a state, and the nature of the world is such that a state of affairs in which people murder each other must be repaired.

²⁸ Ibid 42

²⁹ Ibid 42

Whatever his motivations, they are from his nature, so they are good, and they could be nothing else. But if it were possible for God to have such a nature that he was motivated to bring about torture for amusement, then torture for amusement would be good. She just denies that it would be possible for God to have such a nature that resulted in such motives. She elaborates:

“In DM theory, there is no need to solve the problem of whether God could make it right that we brutalize the innocent... since being loving is one of God’s essential motives. The right thing for humans to do is to act on motives that imitate divine motives.”³⁰

“What makes motives good is their similarity to the motives of exemplars of goodness, and in Divine Motivation Theory, the exemplar is God. God’s motives are good intrinsically; their goodness is not explained by their relationship to anything else that is good. It is impossible for God to do or bring about evil, since evil just is what it is impossible for God to do or bring about.”³¹

Goodness is identified by direct reference to whatever God desires or brings about, because his nature permits his desires, and the desires it does permit are good. Cruelty is simply a desire his actual nature doesn’t permit. Goodness is (pointing to God’s nature) *that*.

Zagzebski on the first horn

Zagzebski’s theory tries to answer the arbitrary worry by appealing to God’s nature, which she identifies as good. This is evidenced by her restricted view of omnipotence. God is only able to be and do what his nature allows, and whatever his nature allows is good, therefore God is only able to be and do good.

“If omnipotence is good, which I assume is a conceptual truth, then it should not be defined as maximal power or maximal possible power, or in any way that does not refer to the goodness of the power of an omnipotent being... Omnipotence should not be defined by what an omnipotent being can do or by the properties of what an omnipotent

³⁰ Ibid 260

³¹ Ibid 284

being can do, but by what an omnipotent being is. Power is a certain kind of ability that is unsurpassably good and that expresses itself in the ability to choose a range of acts.”³²

So to address the question of whether God could desire or command evil, she responds:

“The question... is whether God could have been motivated to bring about the states of affairs that are, in fact, cruel, such as the torture of babies. If cruelty is contrary to his nature, the answer is no. DM theory, therefore, does not have the problem of solving the dilemma at the price of making the good and evil of acts and states of affairs accidental properties.”³³

Appealing to his nature rather than to his will is what she considers the key advantage her theory has over divine command theory. So, her answer to Abraham’s dilemma would be that it was never Abraham’s duty to sacrifice Isaac, since God would never (and could never) desire such an act. Even though he appeared to command it, he did not desire that it occur, and his desire is truly indicative of his nature more so than his will or commands.

But what governs his nature? The minimal nature God must have in her theory is the ability to create and the capacity to desire. This minimal nature is compatible with desiring cruelty and creating a world conducive to cruelty. She does not argue that this could not be the case, only that it is not. Recall, her strategy was to fix foundational concepts of ethics with a direct theory of reference:

“For example, gold is roughly, whatever is the same elements as *that*, water is whatever is the same liquid as *that*, a human is whatever is a member of the same species as *that*, and so on. In each case, the demonstrative terms “that” refers to an entity to which the person doing the defining refers directly, typically by pointing. One of the main reasons for proposing definitions such as this was that Kripke and Putnam believed that often we do not know the nature of the thing we are defining, and yet we do know how to construct a definition that links up with its nature.”³⁴

Goodness appears to be the kind of thing we are trying to define but whose nature we don’t know. For Zagzebski, pointing to God’s nature will suffice. Whatever it is, it is good. And

³² Ibid 301

³³ Ibid 285

³⁴ Ibid 42

since it is not the case that God desires cruelty, it could not have been, since his nature is what it is. Others have identified this issue as well. In his book review, John Hare writes: “The problem is that it is not clear that divine motivation theory ends up with a definition at all. We end up with just the exemplar, God, with 'good' being whatever God is motivated to bring about.”³⁵ This is the problem with relying on a theory of direct reference approach for an ethical theory. If we bypass fixing the concept through analysis, the concept doesn't get fixed at all. Though she has made an interesting argument for the non-arbitrary nature of goodness, she has done so by removing all restrictions on what counts as good except “what God is capable of desiring” with no restrictions on what God can desire. Though she suggests that his omnipotence is limited to what a perfectly good being can do or desire to do, “perfectly good being” just refers back to God without fixing a concept. On the surface this appears to solve the arbitrary worry, but only by identifying indiscriminately any desire God could have with goodness. Suppose God began desiring cruelty. This should be impossible on her view of God, and yet her theory could easily explain it. If God started desiring cruelty, it simply means that when he previously appeared not to, it was only a temporary desire for benevolence. Or perhaps he has some latent desire for cruelty that is being temporarily repressed. Even though his nature cannot change, we've no reason to think that we know the full extent of what he can and cannot desire. And if he has some future desire that we haven't known yet, our exemplars will have proven useless, because nothing about them remotely resembles God's true nature.

While there are multiple issues with this approach, the most problematic is this: goodness is a by-product of an extremely underdeveloped divine nature in this view. God is identified as good through direct reference, but this doesn't guarantee anything about his nature or tell us

³⁵ Hare, John. Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews. <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24314-divine-motivation-theory/>

anything about fundamental moral concepts. Though God may appear to be benevolent to us, we might be mistaken; his nature might allow cruelty as well, and we just don't currently experience it. No matter what he does or what motivations he has, her argument says only that *whatever* that nature is, it is the standard of goodness. To say that whatever God's nature is is good while assuming God's nature will only permit benevolence and preferred moral dispositions is underwhelming without significant theological work. As it is, she is squarely on the first horn of the dilemma. Whatever God's nature turns out to be will be good on her theory, and we have no guarantee about what God's nature will turn out to be.

CONCLUSION

These contemporary modifications to divine command theory offer some progress and continue what I consider to be an important discussion, but they fail to navigate the horns of Euthyphro's dilemma. Robert Adams appeals to the intrinsic value of relationships and God's recognition of that value (his lovingness) in order to guarantee that God will command non-arbitrarily and lovingly. His theory is compelling, but he appeals to intrinsic value independent of God, and lands on the second horn. Linda Zagzebski identifies God and God's nature as good via a theory of direct reference in order to try and guarantee that God will command non-arbitrarily from his good nature. Her theory is also compelling, but rather than fix moral principles with conceptual analysis she simply points to God and identifies whatever he does as good, thus landing on the first horn.

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