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Stumbling on the Threshold
A Reply to Gwiazda on Threshold Obligations

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Abstract

Bayne and Nagasawa have argued that the properties traditionally attributed to God provide an insufficient grounding for the obligation to worship God. They do so partly because the same properties, when possessed in lesser quantities by human beings, do not give rise to similar obligations. In a recent paper, Jeremy Gwiazda challenges this line of argument. He does so because it neglects the possible existence of a threshold obligation to worship, i.e. an obligation that only kicks in when the value of a parameter has crossed a certain threshold. This article argues that there is a serious flaw in Gwiazda's proposal. Although thresholds may play an important part in how we think about our obligations, their function is distinct from that envisaged by Gwiazda. To be precise, this article argues that thresholds are only relevant to obligations to the extent that they transform a pre-existing imperfect obligation or act of supererogation into a perfect obligation. Since it is not clear that there is an imperfect obligation to worship any being, and indeed since on a certain conception of moral agency it is highly unlikely that there could be, the search for a rational basis for the obligation to worship must continue.

1. Introduction

An orthodoxly conceived monotheistic God[1] is said to have many key defining properties, among them being the property of worship-worthiness.[2] Under some conceptions of religious belief, that property gives rise to an obligation to worship.[3] But what is the rational basis for this obligation? One plausible answer suggests that God's maximal-excellency grounds the obligation.[4] But in the pages of this journal, Timothy Bayne and Yugin Nagasawa have dismissed this answer. They do so by way of an argument from analogy: since we have no obligation to worship, or do anything akin to worship to, beings with lesser versions of those excellences, we likely have no obligation to worship God either. Jeremy Gwiazda has recently challenged this argument.[5] He does so on the basis that it neglects the possibility of there being a threshold obligation to worship, *i.e.* an obligation that only kicks-in once the value of a parameter crosses a certain threshold. He uses this proposal to argue that the maximal-excellence account of worship is still viable.

In this article, I challenge Gwiazda's proposal. I do so on the basis that threshold obligations, while unobjectionable in themselves, are only likely to arise in a narrow range of circumstances. Specifically, they are only likely to arise when there is a pre-existing imperfect obligation that the crossing of the threshold transforms into a perfect obligation. Since it is not at all clear that there is an imperfect obligation to worship any sort of being, and since on one plausible conception of moral agency there could never be, Gwiazda's proposal cannot be used to support the maximal excellence account of the obligation to worship God.

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[1] To borrow a term employed by Graham Oppy. See Oppy, G. Arguing about Gods (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[2] For example, see Sobel, J. H. Logic and Theism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) chapter 1. Sobel argues that worship-worthiness is the defining property of God. Bayne and Nagasawa Bayne, T. & Nagasawa, Y. "The Grounds of Worship" (2006) 42 Religious Studies, 299, pp. 302-303 note that discussions of worship-worthiness rarely feature in discussions of divine attributes but suggest that most believers take this to be the case. Certainly, worship both as a psychological and behavioural activity features prominently in the doctrines and teachings of many religions. Take Catholicism as an obvious example. Catholics maintain that God is the only being worthy of worship but that lesser beings (saints and angels) are worthy of veneration due to their relationship to God.

[3] This seems to be the position of some leading Christian philosophers such as Richard Swinburne and Thomas V. Morris. Both are cited by Bayne and Nagasawa in their article "The Grounds of Worship", *ibid* as supporting this obligatoriness thesis. I am not entirely convinced that such an obligation is a natural consequence of theistic belief, but since it is presumed by the authors with whom I am engaging I will accept it for sake of argument.

[4] Crowe uses this in his response to Bayne and Nagasawa's original article. See "Reasons for Worship: a Response to Bayne and Nagasawa" (2007) 43 Religious Studies 465-474. Bayne and Nagasawa respond to Crowe in "The Grounds of Worship Again: a Reply to Crowe" (2007) 43 Religious Studies 475-480.

[5] Gwiazda, J. "Worship and Threshold Obligations" (2010) Religious Studies, Online First, doi:10.1017/S0034412510000508

The remainder of the discussion is divided into three parts. First, I try to clarify Gwiazda's argument by drawing particular attention to the thought experiments he uses to support his case. Second, I examine the distinction between perfect and imperfect obligations and argue, with Gwiazda's thought experiments as my guide, that threshold obligations only arise when there are pre-existing imperfect obligations. Finally, I argue that it is unlikely that there is a pre-existing imperfect obligation to worship any sort of being.

2. Gwiazda's Account of Threshold Obligations

I begin with a reconstruction of what I take to be Gwiazda's central argument. The argument is clearly intended as an attack on Bayne and Nagasawa's analogical refutation of the maximal-excellence account of worship. Hence the conclusion reached is not that worship is actually rational, but that it could be rational because Bayne and Nagasawa's attack fails. This modest interpretation seems to track what Gwiazda actually says. The argument is as follows:

(1) There are such things as threshold obligations.

(2) If the obligation to do X is a threshold obligation, then it only takes effect once a parameter (or set of parameters) exceeds a certain value (or range of values).

(3) The obligation to worship God could be a threshold obligation.

(4) The analogical argument against the maximal-excellence account of worship assumes that the obligation to worship is not a threshold obligation, i.e. that it is present (in weaker forms) at all possible values of the relevant set of parameters.

(5) Therefore, the analogical argument against the maximal-excellence account fails.

It would seem that (1) and (3), not (2) and (4), are the controversial premises here. Premise (2) is just Gwiazda's definition of threshold obligations. He uses this to identify the examples he adduces in support of premise (1). So if premise (2) is controversial, then its controversial nature can be discovered through an investigation of premise (1).

Likewise, premise (4) would appear to be an uncontroversial interpretation of Bayne and Nagasawa's argument, and so only if premise (3) is correct is their argument in trouble. In the remainder of this section I try to clarify Gwiazda's defence of (1) and (3).

I start by setting out Gwiazda's definition of a threshold obligation. Gwiazda defines a threshold obligation as: "an obligation that arises only when a property is possessed beyond a certain degree ... [it] act[s] not in a continuous fashion, more in a digital (on-off) fashion."[6] He goes on in an endnote to clarify that threshold obligations may operate in a continuous fashion once the threshold has been crossed. In other words, he suggests that the burden imposed by the obligation may gradually increase once the threshold has been crossed, but that prior to that the obligation is switched off. This latter point appears to be nothing more than a "by-the-way"-suggestion on Gwiazda's part, but since it doesn't seem particularly worrisome, I will not focus on it here.

The definition itself is, however, significant since it is used by Gwiazda to identify the examples he uses in support of premise (1). Indeed, immediately after defining the concept, he presents two hypothetical scenarios (with a third consigned to an endnote) which he claims demonstrate the existence of threshold obligations as he has defined them. Since I will be referring to them again later, I've given these examples names that do not appear in Gwiazda's original presentation:[7]

> **Hungry child**: A child refuses to eat his peas at lunch. By mid-afternoon he complains about being hungry but the parent refuses to feed him until dinner. Initially the parent's refusal seems justified and violates no obligation, but suppose they continue to withhold food after the child starts to suffer medical complications arising from hunger. Surely then they have breached an obligation?

> **Malicious Martians**: A cohort of invading Martians demand that we send the smartest human to compete in an intelligence contest on Mars. If the human wins, Earth will be spared; if the human loses, the Earth will be destroyed. Surely the smartest human has an obligation to participate?

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[6] Gwiazda (n 5), p. 2 of the online version. Footnote omitted.

[7] "Hungry child" and "Malicious Martians" appear on p. 2, "Affirmative Action" is found in endnote 6 to Gwiazda's article.

Affirmative Action: It might be the case that past wrongs to a group do not justify present reparations until those wrongs have risen above a certain threshold.

The examples are not all equally compelling. Gwiazda himself admits that Affirmative Action is contentious, and from my perspective it is not clear that Malicious Martians really generates a full-blown obligation as opposed to an opportunity for supererogation. Nevertheless, I think the examples do provide some support for the notion that thresholds shape the content of our obligations. I also think they share a structural similarity that undermines Gwiazda's attempt to apply the threshold obligation concept to God. I will discuss this in part two. But before I do so, I need to discuss a complication.

When defending premise (3), Gwiazda tries gallantly to avoid rendering his application of the TO-concept to God beholden to the examples used in support of premise (1). He does so by observing that the scenarios themselves are merely intended to show that the threshold obligation concept is a sound one and not to show how they function in all possible cases. He reinforces this observation with a specific example illustrating how thresholds might apply to the worship of God.

To understand the example, we need to step back a little and consider the nature of worship. In their original article, Bayne and Nagasawa note that worship is a complex activity involving cognitive, affective and behavioural components. In attempting to show how God's excellences might generate threshold obligations, Gwiazda limits himself initially to showing how thresholds impact upon the affective component of worship. He singles out the feeling of awe for special analysis. He proposes that awe is a feeling that properly arises in response to objects possessing properties that have exceeded a certain threshold. To use my own example, awe would seem an appropriate response to the images from the Hubble telescope due to the strong aesthetic, spatial, temporal, and technological properties they exemplify; but it would not seem an appropriate response to the aesthetic, spatial, temporal, and technological properties exemplified by the images from last night's dinner party that I just uploaded to my Facebook profile.

Gwiazda's analysis of awe seems right to me, but does this show that worship as a whole is a threshold obligation? Gwiazda acknowledges that awe alone is not sufficient for worship. But he maintains that when all of God's excellences are added into the mix (i.e. knowledge, benevolence, power etc.), and when all of them exceed a certain

threshold (as they must in the case of God), then, by inference from the analysis of awe, we could rightly say that someone is under an obligation to worship God.

I think there is something deeply unsatisfactory about this attempt to illustrate how the TO-concept might apply to God. On a standard account, one can only have an obligation to do something if that something is voluntary. Indeed, the assumption of volition seems to be what makes the branding of something as an obligation sensible in the first place. Proclaiming that we have an obligation to alleviate suffering makes sense since we have the power not to; but proclaiming that we have an obligation to breathe oxygen does not since we do not have the power to breathe anything else. This creates a problem for Gwiazda because our basic cognitive and affective states — including those which generate the feeling of awe — would not, on many accounts, appear to be under voluntary control: if the facts seem to us to be a particular way then we can't help but believe that they are that way, and if we desire a certain a thing then we can't simply negate that desire through the force of will alone. Now, certainly, we might be able stop ourselves from acting upon those beliefs and desires, and we might be said to have an obligation to refrain from acting on those beliefs and desires, but that is a power arising at the level of action, it is not something that reaches down into those cognitive and affective states themselves. If this is right, then Gwiazda's awe example is peculiarly ill-chosen. Awe is an involuntary response to a certain state of affairs. That the response is only appropriate once a certain threshold is crossed seems irrelevant to any case for a threshold-based account of the obligation to worship God.

This problem with the awe example might not bear mentioning if its dismissal were not central to the counterargument I am about to launch against Gwiazda. As I see it, the awe example works to create distance between Gwiazda's overall defence of the maximal excellence account and the examples he originally uses to support the existence of threshold obligations. I have tried to block the attempt to create that distance because I think those original examples illustrate something significant about the nature of threshold obligations, something that ultimately undermines Gwiazda's argument. The task of the next section is to spell this out.

3. What Crossing the Threshold Really Means

I proceed now to develop a counterargument to Gwiazda. The counterargument works in the following manner. First, a structural similarity in the three examples Gwiazda uses to support premise (1) is identified. Second, this structural similarity is

deemed to have a principled foundation in the classic conceptual distinction between a perfect and imperfect obligation. Third, this principled foundation forces a reformulation of the original premise (2). And fourth, this reinterpretation undermines the application of the threshold obligation concept to the worship of God. As a result, Bayne and Nagasawa's analogical argument survives and, indeed, the case against the rational grounding for the obligation to worship is strengthened. I will now go through the steps of this argument in more detail.

3.1 - The Structural Similarity

The three examples Gwiazda uses to support the existence of threshold obligations share an interesting feature that goes beyond the mere fact that they each involve thresholds of some description. This feature has to do with the background normative assumptions that make the examples intuitively compelling.

Take Hungry Child for starters. The intuition that Gwiazda tries to pump in this scenario is that once the child's hunger goes beyond a certain point, the parent has an obligation to feed him or her. Furthermore, the implication is that the obligation overrides any justification the parent may have had for denying food to the child in order to teach him or her a lesson. Why does this example seem intuitively compelling? I suggest the reason has to do with the fact that there is a pre-existing general obligation on the parent to look after the child, and that this obligation is crystallised into a concrete course of action in the context described in the example. To be precise, it is crystallised into a concrete course of action once the threshold of severe hunger is crossed. I would submit that it is only if we assume the existence of such a general obligation that the threshold becomes relevant.

This can also be seen in relation to Malicious Martians, however the transition here might be slightly more complex. This example seems intuitively compelling because it is analogous to a Good Samaritan-style case: the smartest human being has an obligation imposed on him because he finds himself in a certain context that makes him the sole candidate for fulfilling a more general moral obligation. Consider the famous thought experiment wherein you are driving your new sports car and happen to pass by a child on the side of the road whose leg is bleeding profusely. Damage to your new car aside, most people would agree that you have an obligation to assist the child in such a situation. But why is this? Again, I suggest the reason is that there is a general obligation to assist others (if the cost to oneself is not too high) that is crystallised into a concrete course of action by the context. This may be a more controversial

interpretation than was the case in the Hungry Child example. Perhaps it is only ardent consequentialists like Peter Singer who think that such a general obligation to assist exists. Fine, leave that to one side. I would still imagine that most ethicists would deem the provision of assistance to those who are in need supererogatory. Thus, even if there is no general obligation to assist, there is at least a general recognition that assistance is morally praiseworthy and it is relatively easy to imagine that praiseworthiness can shift to become an obligation in the particular context of the Good Samaritan case. Something similar, I submit, is going on in the Malicious Martians case.

Affirmative Action is, in many ways, the easiest example to treat in this fashion. Although he only spends a couple of lines on its elaboration, Gwiazda acknowledges that it is controversial. And that controversy clearly stems from the background normative assumptions one has to make in order for it to be intuitively compelling. Again, one must assume initially that there is either a general obligation to issues reparations or restitutions to those people (or groups of people)[8] who have been wronged in the past, or that there is a general obligation to provide assistance to those who are disadvantaged[9], and that this obligation is crystallised into a concrete course of action by the fact that the disadvantage or historical wrong exceeds a certain threshold.

To sum up, all three of the examples Gwiazda uses to support premise (1) share an important structural similarity: They are intuitively compelling only to the extent that we assume there is a general obligation (or supererogation) that crystallises into a more concrete obligation in a specific context. In the case of the examples Gwiazda uses, that specific context is obtained once a certain threshold is crossed or, in the case of the Malicious Martians, when a threshold becomes significant for other (somewhat arbitrary) reasons.

3.2 - The Set of Moral Actions

The structural similarity just outlined is more that just my own idiosyncratic gloss on Gwiazda; it has deep roots in the philosophical analysis of moral action. These deep roots can transform the preceding analysis of the three examples into a principled revision of Gwiazda's definition of a threshold obligation.

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[8] This is where another major source of controversy lies. It is not at all clear that reparations or restitutions are due to people as groups as opposed to people as individuals. There are also other controversies that arise when one adopts a consequentialist or conflicting goods analysis of such policies.

[9] This would presumably involve distributive justice and egalitarian principles. All of which are also controversial.

The principled revision starts by noting the distinction between a perfect and imperfect obligation. This distinction has been defined in a number of ways over the years. In this discussion, I will follow George Rainbolt's definition (he, in turn, follows Mill and Kant).[10] According to Rainbolt the perfect/imperfect obligation distinction captures the idea that some obligations allow for latitude with respect to the actions that fulfill them whereas others do not. The former would be imperfect obligations; the latter would be perfect obligations. A simple example would be the distinction between an obligation to pay one's mortgage versus an obligation to donate money to charity. Although both involve the donation of money, the former can only be fulfilled by a narrowly circumscribed set of acts; whereas the latter can be fulfilled in a number of ways.[11]

Using a combination of set theory and action theory, the distinction can be rendered more rigorous and perspicuous. This, in fact, is what Rainbolt does in the article references above and I want to make use of this approach here. Turning to action theory first, we can say that an act-token is an exemplification of an act-type or set of act-types. For instance, my eating a slice of pizza as I'm writing this article is an act-token that exemplifies act-types such as "obtaining nourishment", "breaking my diet" and so on.[12] Every act-token has a moral status which is dependent on the act-types it exemplifies. These moral statuses range from the obligatory, to the supererogatory, to the merely permissible, to the forbidden. Moral decision-making turns on selecting act-tokens with appropriate moral statuses from a set of feasible act-tokens. This is where set theory becomes relevant. When defining the distinction between the perfectly obligatory and the imperfectly obligatory, we can make use of the idea of there being a feasible set of act-tokens. The idea is that imperfect obligations are distinguished from perfect obligations on the basis of the number of morally acceptable act-tokens in the feasible set. As follows:[13]

Obligatory: An act token of Type $T_1 \ldots T_n$ is obligatory if and only if the following conditions are met: (i) there is a non-empty set S which is the set of

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[10] Rainbolt, G. "Perfect and Imperfect Obligations" (2000) 98 Philosophical Studies . I ignore the other definitions because I'm giving content to a particular thesis that I will use in an argument. I am not tracking ordinary philosophical usage of this terminology. If what I say is to be criticised, it should be on the basis of the argument itself, not the failure to track usage.

[11] Rainbolt (n 10) p. 234

[12] Rainbolt uses a slightly different variation of the pizza-eating example in his article. See (n 10) p. 236

[13] See Rainbolt (n 10) pp. 242-243 for these definitions. The definitions are formulated after Rainbolt dismisses non-scalar accounts of the distinction between perfect and imperfect obligations.

act-tokens of Type T such that all the members of S are morally permitted; (ii) there is a non-empty set A, the set of all subsets of S such that doing the act-tokens in any one of the sets in A is morally good and (iii) failing to do all of the act-tokens in at least one of the sets is morally wrong.

Perfectly Obligatory: An act token of Type T..Tn is perfectly obligatory if the set A contains only one member.

Imperfectly obligatory: An act token of Type T..Tn is imperfectly obligatory if the set A contains more than one member.

This is technical, perhaps more technical than is strictly necessary here, but the idea that there are sets of act-tokens with determinable moral statuses can be used to great effect in re-analysing Gwiazda's three examples of threshold obligations. My initial interpretation of these examples maintained that they each involved a scenario in which a general background obligation was transformed into a more concrete course of action by a content in which a threshold was crossed. This interpretation deliberately echoed the perfect/imperfect obligation distinction. In other words, under my interpretation, the three examples each involve a scenario in which an imperfect obligation is transformed into a perfect obligation as a result of a threshold being crossed. In set-theoretical terms, this implies that the number of members of the set A is reduced to one once the value of some parameter (or set of parameters) crosses a thresholds.

The claim here is that Gwiazda's threshold obligation concept is dependent upon the perfect/imperfect obligation concept. Thresholds are relevant to our conceptions of our obligations only because they reduce the number of acceptable act-tokens in the feasible set and they do so in such a way that the moral latitude previously afforded to the agent is severely limited. Note that this interpretation can be expanded to cover the transition from supererogatory to obligatory acts as well. Formally, an act can be said to be superogatory if it belongs to a set each of whose members is merely permissible (i.e. can be done or not done), and some of whose members are morally good (or praiseworthy). An act of this sort could be transformed into an obligation if the members of the feasible set are altered in such a way that the merely permissible acts are either removed completely or replaced by forbidden acts, thus forcing one to perform the morally good act. This, I would argue, is what happens in the Malicious Martian and Good Samaritan cases.

3.3 - The Counterargument to Gwiazda

If this interpretation of threshold obligations is correct — i.e. if thresholds are only relevant because they transform pre-existing imperfect obligations or supererogations into perfect obligations — then Gwiazda's defence of the maximal excellence account of worship is flawed. This can be seen by returning to the version of his argument that I outlined above in section 1. In the original version, premise (2) read as follows:

> (2) If the obligation to do X is a threshold obligation, then it only takes effect once a parameter (or set of parameters) exceeds a certain value (or range of values).

This definition of a threshold obligation can no longer be sustained. For one thing, according to my analysis, there are no threshold obligations per se. Instead, there are thresholds that transform the moral status of an imperfect obligation or supererogation into that of a perfect obligation. This suggests the following revision of premise (2) is in order:

> (2*) If X is an imperfect obligation or an act of supererogation, then X can be transformed into a perfect obligation when a parameter (or set of parameters) exceeds a certain value (or range of values).

The precise mechanism of this transformation was outlined above: the number of act-tokens in the feasible set is reduced by the change in the value of the parameters. This revision also forces changes to premise (1) since, in its original form, premise (1) also stated that there were such things as threshold obligations. As we now see this is incorrect. Instead, there are simply thresholds that affect the content of our obligations.

What deeper implications do these revisions of (1) and (2) have for Gwiazda's argument? Well, the primary effect is that they make the argument as a whole open to the charge of question-begging. The revised premise (2) makes the application of thresholds to the issue of worship dependent on the prior existence of an imperfect obligation (or supererogation) to worship some being. Or to put it another way, the

antecedent of the conditional expressed in (2*) needs to be proven before the consequent (which is the focus of Gwiazda's argument) becomes relevant. But, of course, the truth or otherwise of the antecedent is one of the things that is at stake in this debate, at least as I understand it. The dialectic between the likes of Bayne and Nagasawa, on the one hand, and Gwiazda, on the other, is prompted not only over uncertainty about the rational basis of an obligation to worship, but also by a more general uncertainty over the moral status of worship. Identifying rational grounds for the obligation to worship God would be one way to resolve some of this uncertainty. And so beginning this debate with the presumption that worship is a good thing, or that it is likely to be imperfectly obligatory, would be illegitimate. But this is exactly what (2*) would demand.

In addition to showing that the argument as a whole is question-begging, we can also provide a direct objection to the antecedent of (2*). This is not strictly necessary to my case against Gwiazda, but it might prove persuasive to those with similar moral views to my own and so I feel it is worth mentioning here. The objection to the antecedent of (2*) is based on a particular conception of moral agency. As others have pointed out,[14] worship is sometimes taken to involve the open-ended submission and surrender of one's will and judgment for that of another (usually God). But this kind of open-ended submission would seem to undermine genuine moral autonomy, which requires us to always reserve the right to our own judgment about what we ought to do.[15] And so, to the extent that we think moral autonomy is valuable, it would be difficult to believe that it could ever be imperfectly obligatory or morally praiseworthy to worship another being.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I think Gwiazda is correct to say that thresholds play a role in shaping the content of our obligations. However, they do not function in manner envisaged by him. A closer examination of the three examples he uses to support his argument shows that thresholds will not create obligations de novo; they will only transform acts that we already deem supererogatory or imperfectly obligatory into acts that are perfectly obligatory. In the case of the worship-debate, this means that thresholds could only be appealed to if there was pre-existing agreement to the effect

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[14] Rachels, J. "God and Moral Autonomy" in Can Ethics Provide Answers? (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), pp. 109-123 and Aikin, S. "The Problem of Worship" (2010) 25 *Think 101*

[15] In saying this, I am particularly motivated by the account of moral agency that lies at the heart of Alan Gewirth's principle of generic consistency (as defended by Deryck Beyleveld). See Beyleveld, D. The Dialectical Necessity of Morality (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

that worship was imperfectly obligatory or supererogatory. But, of course, there is no pre-existing agreement on that. As a result, Gwiazda's attempted use of thresholds in defence of the maximal excellence account of worship fails. Bayne and Nagasawa's argument can survive this particular attack. This does not in itself mean that worship could never rationally be held to be obligatory; it simply means that thresholds do not help to make this the case. That said, there are, as pointed out in the last section, some reasons for thinking that worship could undermine a core moral value: moral autonomy. Thus, the search for a rational grounding for the obligation must continue and must continue with a deeper awareness of the obstacles it faces.

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