GOD AND MORAL OBLIGATION By C. Stephen Evans. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. vi+193. Hard Cover $99.00, ISBN 978–0–199–69668–0.

In *God and Moral Obligation,* C. Stephen Evans takes up the relationship between morality and God by mounting an argument for a Divine Command Theory (DCT). DCT is "an attempt to explain what moral obligation is" (115). Evans's DCT can, in its most minimal form, be succinctly stated as what he calls the "modal status thesis": "God's commands provide a necessary condition for an act to have the kind of moral status that make [sic] the act morally obligatory" (35). Moral obligation, as with obligation generally, is, Evans contends, primarily a social phenomenon (3–4); a DCT "sees the relationship of creature to creator as a distinctive kind of social relationship which carries with it certain obligations," just as does the relationship of parent to child (64). The positive case for DCT is based on its ability to account elegantly (28) for the peculiar features—or as J. L. Mackie calls it the "queerness" (7)—notable in ordinary belief and language about moral obligations: their binary and verdict-like character (12–13), their implication of moral responsibility and their grounding praise or blame (14), their providing a decisive reason for acting and concomitant ability to end deliberation (13–14), their universal scope (14–15), in short, their law-like character (16). These features—all aspects of what he calls the "Anscombe intuition"— Evans persuasively argues throughout the book, strongly resist being either denied or naturalized (7–8).

Because Evans conceives of DCT as an explanation only of moral obligation, he thinks that DCT is fully compatible with many or even most realist moral theories. Indeed he devotes chapter three to arguing that a DCT will require various accounts of moral truth not provided by DCT itself: an account of the good, which he thinks a natural law theory can provide, and a theory of human perfection such as he thinks is offered by a virtue ethic.

Despite God's place in his account of moral obligation, Evans repeatedly and forcefully insists

that non-believers can have knowledge of moral obligations through direct experience of those obligations (112–117), for example through conscience (41–43) or societal norms (40). He points out that one can have justified true belief about what one has direct experience of without fully understanding or accounting for the object of one's experience, and DCT posits an ontological not epistemological dependence between obligation and God (20, 116–117).

Because non-believers can know moral obligation, and because such obligations cannot—he argues—be adequately accounted for aside from a DCT, which demands a commanding God to ground any actual obligations, Evans believes that DCT offers a compelling foundation for an argument for the existence of God to one who rejects moral skepticism (154–157).

While I would be hard pressed to disagree with Evans's masterful arguments that moral obligation is both real and objective and that it makes precious little sense in a "Russellian world" (153), I have serious difficulty accepting his arguments for DCT.

Although DCT is, on Evans's account, ready to coexist peacefully with other realist ethical systems, it is a peace that comes at a not insignificant cost to those systems. Natural law (NL) theory, for example, must cease to make any claims to being able to arrive at genuine moral obligation and must content itself with the considerably more modest role of being a theory of the good (62, 150). Evans asserts that it seems "something important is left out by the natural law theorist who does not bring God's commands into the story…. God's commands add an important dimension to the moral character of what he commands. Even if it is true that we would have good reasons to do the actions God commands us to do even if God did not give those commands, it is also true that we acquire powerful new reasons for performing (or not performing) various acts when God issues commands …. The defender of a DCT just insists that [the reasons for performing an act furnished by a NL theory] do not capture everything that is required for an act to be a *moral obligation*" (69). He makes a similar

point in reference to C. Korsgaard's Kantian ethics; after allowing that it may be a necessary truth that humans have an objective value that ought to be acknowledged, he says, “This does not mean that God's command does no work, of course, since God's command to love they [sic] neighbor as oneself [sic] adds a new moral quality to this way of acting, giving it the status of a duty we owe to God, even though that way of acting would be intrinsically good even apart from the command” (144).

This unique contribution of the divine command, this set of “powerful new reasons for performing an act,” that makes a good act be obligatory lies at the heart of DCT and so deserves a word. In laying out the initial case for DCT, Evans persuasively argues that one of the most interesting properties of moral obligation is its ability to provide a reason for acting that is endowed with an overriding character: “moral obligations are reasons that trump other kinds of reasons (or at least ought to do so)” (14). He then argues that DCT is uniquely able to explain this overriding character: “If God has created humans such that their final goal is to enjoy a relationship with himself, then establishing and maintaining such a relationship is supremely important to humans. If moral obligations are constitutive of this relation, much as other kinds of obligation are constitutive of other kinds of social relations, then those obligations take on an overriding importance…” (30). Passing in silence over the fact that an “ought” founded on such reasons as Evans here provides looks an awful lot like a supernatural version of the “Aristotelian ought” aimed at the individual's flourishing that Evans rejects as ultimately selfish and insufficient to establish moral obligation (11, 70), such reasons for acting as maintaining a relationship with God are clearly only able to explain the overriding character of moral obligation for those who are aware of those reasons. If the fact that such a decisive reason is inaccessible to a pure NL theory proves that such a NL theory cannot reach genuine moral obligation, it seems it must equally prove that non-believers—so long as they remain non-believers—are unable to know the decisive normative force peculiar to moral obligation. By seeking to explain moral

obligation's unique phenomenological character directly in his ontological account, Evans seems to have breached the nice distinction between epistemological and ontological groundings of obligation that he had exploited to allow that non-believers could have knowledge of moral obligation.

A second difficulty related to the place of the NL under DCT can be seen in Evans's treatment of the "prior obligations objection," namely that a DCT cannot be an account of moral obligation because it presupposes at least the obligation that one ought to obey God (99–101). Evans's primary defense against this is to admit that there are "moral truths," "normative facts," independent of any divine command, but that these truths are not obligations (99–100). It is true that "one ought to obey God" but it is not because this normative fact is true that God has authority. Rather the statement is true just because God does have moral authority, just as for Kant it is true to say that "one ought to obey the categorical imperative," but only because the categorical imperative "does in fact possess genuine moral authority," not vice versa (100). This seems the equivalent of saying that divine authority is a sort of moral primitive, a genuine first principle. The difficulty is that Evans does not seem to think that divine authority actually is a moral primitive. Rather, he thinks something must be offered to "explain or justify" this authority—"For a DCT to be plausible there must be some reasonable answer to the question, 'Why should a human being obey the commands of God?'" (64)—and he offers deductive arguments to establish this divine authority starting from the "principle of gratitude" (64) and the "normative principle that … God, by virtue of his creation of humans and the natural world, has a rightful claim to be the owner of that created world and everything in it, including human beings" (65). Both of these principles Evans thinks can be supplied by a NL theory: "it seems that a natural law ethic provides a plausible explanation of why the requisite normative principles hold." (64, cf. 68). It is not clear to me how an authority that is only established as authoritative through non-moral obligations or normative principles (such as he allows that a NL theory can provide) can be sufficient to ground moral

obligation, let alone give such authority a status as a sort of first principle or moral primitive.

When pressed further on this point, Evans—after first invoking a patently circular argument that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures explicitly commands us to keep all His commandments "in a 'bootstrapping' manner" (100–101)—ultimately retreats to the position that a DCT need not overcome the prior obligations objection. "One could still hold that God's commands are sufficient for moral obligation, even if not necessary. God could still create obligations … even if not all moral obligations arise in this way …" (101). But to acknowledge that moral obligations may come about aside from divine commands is to eviscerate DCT as an account of moral obligation; indeed it is to abandon the very modal status thesis which Evans presents as "essential to a DCT" (35). Further it precludes the possibility of using DCT as the foundation of a moral argument for the existence of God; for the bare fact of moral obligation does not directly lead to a commanding God if one allows that divine commands are not the solitary mechanism uniquely capable of accounting for the "queerness" of moral obligation.

While I am unconvinced that DCT as expounded in *God and Moral Obligation* succeeds as an account of moral obligation, gratitude is certainly due to Evans for providing an unquestionably erudite, substantial, and provocative contribution to an important discussion that bears deep implications for both metaethics and theodicy.

WILLIAM M. DIEM

Christendom College