

What Socrates Should Have Said

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Abstract

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In this thesis, William Alston's influential defense of divine command theory is critically evaluated. It is argued that Alston, in positing evaluative particularism, undermines his defense because moral particularism, a rival theory of moral obligation, follows from evaluative particularism. Furthermore, the moral particularist need not deny that God has moral obligations.

Even if evaluative particularism did not entail moral particularism, it fails to make God's commands non-arbitrary, contrary to Alston's claims. On divine command theory, God does not make commands for moral reasons, which is a fundamental principle of moral agency, necessary for any moral action to be non-arbitrary. Also, the divine nature does not uniquely pick out particular good actions to be obligatory.

It is also objected that Alston's evaluative particularism posits a God which is either conceptually incoherent or non-existent, demonstrated by an evidential argument from evil given in the paper.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this thesis, I will critically evaluate William Alston's defense of divine command theory in his essays, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists" and "What Euthyphro Should Have Said." I will argue that Alston's strategy for dealing with problems generated by divine command theory runs into serious objections.

First, it will be shown that the evaluative particularism that Alston employs in his theory actually leaves no conceptual space for divine commands to be constitutive of moral obligation. The argument for this point will proceed by showing that Mark Linville's rival account of moral obligation, moral particularism, forecloses on the possibility of holding that God's commands constitute human moral obligations, and that Alston's evaluative particularism entails Linville's moral particularism. Thus, if Alston's evaluative particularism entails Linville's moral particularism and Linville's moral particularism eliminates the possibility of divine commands constituting moral obligations, then Alston's evaluative particularism must similarly foreclose on this possibility.

Second, Linville's moral particularism will be used to challenge a claim crucial to Alston's divine command theory; namely, moral obligations do not apply to God. Drawing upon Linville's contention that moral obligations derive from the dignity of persons, an account of a basis upon which even God has moral obligations will be developed and defended.

Third, Alston is precluded from saying that God makes commands based on moral reasons, because such reasons also would suffice to ground moral obligation and thus obviate the need for the commands that are essential to divine command theory. Having moral reasons for moral commands is, however, required for commands to be non-arbitrary. God's not having

reasons for his commands undermines God's status as a moral agent and thus compromises the possibility of ascribing goodness to God.

Fourth, although evaluative particularism may block the suggestion that God could have commanded moral atrocities and thereby made them morally obligatory, it leaves God's selection of which good acts to be obligatory as completely arbitrary. The divine nature underdetermines which morally good actions will be commanded; so, which ones end up obligatory is merely a matter of fiat.

Finally, an evidential argument from evil will be offered that, if successful, puts further pressure on Alston's divine command theory by providing evidence against a crucial part of it, the existence of an essentially perfectly good God. Though this argument does not constitute a conclusive defense of the evidential argument from evil, it does add to a cumulative case against the plausibility of Alston's divine command theory.

Chapter 2: Reconstructing Alston

2.1 Alston's General Strategy

In his two essays “Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists” and “What Euthyphro Should Have Said”, William Alston considers how Divine Command Theorists may deal with problems arising from the following Euthyphro-like Dilemma: is something morally obligatory because God commands it, or does he command it because it is morally obligatory?¹ Alston's aim is modest. He does not set out to advance a version of divine command theory that is definitively true; rather, he proposes only to make divine command theory coherent and plausible.²

The form of divine command theory Alston bases his suggestions on is that put forth by Robert Adams in “Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again.”³ On this view, Alston notes, “divine commands are constitutive of the moral status of actions.”⁴ So, because this theory is about the constitution of moral obligation, or what ontologically grounds moral obligation, it is said to be immune to the criticism that people do not mean that God commanded something when saying that it is morally obligatory.

Alston makes two points about this formulation. First, he is not using the phrase *moral obligation* in a distinctive or technical way. It is simply another way of saying what someone ought to do. Second, although Alston allows for the possibility that God may command specific people to do specific things and thereby impose specific moral obligations on them, the theory is

¹ William Alston, “What Euthyphro Should Have Said.” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 283.

² Ibid.

³ Robert Adams, “Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. 7, No. 1, (1979): 66-79.

⁴ Alston, “Euthyphro”, 284.

to be understood as maintaining that God makes general commands that are constitutive of general moral obligations, from which specific moral obligations derive.⁵

Accepting divine command theory is to accept the first option presented in the Euthyphro-like Dilemma. We have a moral obligation to perform an action because God commands it. In defending the plausibility of this view, Alston focuses on two-interrelated difficulties it faces.⁶ First, accepting divine command theory makes God's commands and morality arbitrary. God's commands are arbitrary because God's having any moral reason for making them is precluded by the theory itself. "God can't command us to do A because that is what is morally right; for it doesn't become morally right until he commands it."⁷ Because God's commands are arbitrary, God could easily command things we take to be wicked, such as genocide, and thereby make atrocities morally obligatory.

The second difficulty he considers is that this, "horn leaves us without any adequate way of construing the goodness of God."⁸ The idea here is that God's commands are constitutive of moral status, such as goodness, so to assert that God is morally good amounts to the puzzling claim that God is good because he obeys his own commands. Even if it would make sense to assert such a thing, Alston claims this is not the kind of goodness that we have in mind when saying God is good.⁹

Alston claims that these two objections are interrelated in that if we can adequately answer the second objection, then the first objection is automatically solved, "For if God is good in the right way, especially if God is essentially good, then there will be nothing arbitrary about

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 285.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

his commands; indeed, it will be metaphysically necessary that he issue those commands for the best.”¹⁰

The general strategy should be, according to Alston, to make a distinction between how the moral status of human actions is constituted and how divine goodness is construed. In other words, moral value applies to God in one way, and to humans and other creatures in another, so that the value-constituting nature of divine commands does not apply to God.¹¹

2.2 Distinguishing Divine and Human Morality

How might divine and human morality be distinguished? One way of making this distinction would be to take the metaphysical status of God as creator and sustainer of humans to be the sole basis of God’s moral authority. Alston objects, however, that besides the problems that arise from basing God’s moral authority solely on status and power, there is more continuity between divine and human goodness than this way of construing divine command theory recognizes.¹² As he says, “what makes it good for us to love is not wholly different from what makes it good for God to love.”¹³

The approach Alston decides instead to take to avoid the theoretical assertion that God’s commands are constitutive of God’s moral obligations is to deny that God has moral obligations altogether. But how might this be done? Alston initially looks to Kant for a possible argument for the conclusion that God does not have moral obligations. According to Kant, an objective moral law, or command of reason, constrains the imperfect will of humans. A command of reason is formulated as an imperative and expressed as an ought to a will that does not

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 286.

¹³ Ibid.

necessarily perform an action that is “presented as a good thing to do.”¹⁴ God’s perfectly good will would still be subject to a command of reason in that what it says is good would still be good for God, but God is not constrained by such a law of reason because God necessarily acts in accord with it.¹⁵ No imperatives apply to God, so it is inappropriate to say that God ought to do anything. Alston reconstructs Kant’s argument formally as follows:

1. An ought judgment has the force of an imperative.
2. An imperative can be (properly, meaningfully,...) addressed only to one who does not necessarily conform to what it demands (enjoins,...).
3. God necessarily conforms to what would be commanded by moral imperatives (necessarily does what it is good to do).
4. Therefore moral imperatives cannot be addressed to God.
5. Therefore ought judgments have no application to God.¹⁶

Alston admits that this argument is problematic. It amounts to what he calls an “inappropriateness argument.” To show why it is problematic, Alston asks that we consider the following example. An assistant professor in his philosophy department never misses classes and works very hard academically. In this case it would be very strange for Alston, as the head of the department, to stop the professor in the hall one day and tell him he ought to show up to his classes.¹⁷ Even though this would be an inappropriate thing to do, it does not necessarily mean that the professor has no obligation to show up for the classes he is teaching. The inappropriateness is about the use of a particular type of communication at a particular time.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ William Alston, “Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists.” in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by William Alston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989):261.

¹⁷ Ibid., 258.

Because Kant's argument is of the same nature, it involves the speech act of an imperative, a critic would simply deny the first premise, and say that ought judgments state facts about obligation rather than functioning as imperatives.¹⁸ So, although Alston thinks Kant's argument is on the right track, it leaves something to be desired.¹⁹

Continuing his search for grounds to deny that God has moral obligations, Alston distinguishes between an action's being morally good and its being morally required.²⁰ For this distinction to obtain, the latter has to add something to the former. He claims that if the latter adds nothing to the former, then he has no basis for objecting to the claim that God has moral obligations, but clearly the two can be distinguished. For Alston, the truth of an 'ought' statement requires there to be practical rules or principles in place which govern behavior, but these rules can only be in place in a governing capacity when there is the possibility of their being violated.²¹ So, what is added when moving from something's being morally good to its being morally required is the existence of practical principles that govern behavior.²² If this is true, then God does not have moral obligations, because God is essentially morally perfect, and thus he can never violate practical principles. This view is very similar to Kant's, but instead of making use of the inappropriateness of imperatives being directed towards God, it rests on what distinguishes truth claims about goodness from truth claims about obligation.

In support of his view, Alston considers various examples in which rules are in place. We only make rules in cases where there is a good chance people will act in ways we want to prevent.²³ In football, there are rules about not leaving the boundaries of the playing field, but

¹⁸ Ibid., 261.

¹⁹ Alston, "Euthyphro.", 287.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 288.

²³ Ibid., 288.

not about trying to win the game. In the case of culinary etiquette, there are rules about which utensils to use, but not ones that state you should eat the food. So, the assumption is, moral obligation results from a type of rule about what we should do morally, and rules can be in force only when they govern people who may violate them.

If God had moral obligations, then the only thing that would make them true, over and above the goodness of the actions, would be that God necessarily does these things. Such rules would then only have a descriptive function concerning God, not a regulative role.²⁴

Alston here considers an objection to his account of moral obligation from Eleonore Stump.²⁵ According to Stump, if God broke a promise, he would be doing something he ought not do. This illustrates that moral obligation does plausibly apply to God. Alston's reply is that if God told a lie, then it would show that God can act in ways that violate practical principles, so they are in force to govern his behavior, and he does have moral obligations. However, since God is essentially perfectly good, this is impossible, so Stump's argument relies on counter-possibilities, and has no application to God in reality.

But why should moral goodness and moral obligation be distinguished? According to Alston, it is possible for an action to be good, or even the best thing for someone to do, yet that action remain non-obligatory.²⁶ For example, Alston considers a case in which he could see to it that children in a Siberian village receive piano lessons. Even though this would be a morally good thing for him to do, it is not plausible to suggest that he does in fact have a moral obligation to do this. Supererogation is thus a real phenomenon.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 289.

²⁶ Ibid., 295.

Another line of argument involves pointing out that there can be many mutually exclusive actions that are equally good. Since ought implies can and one cannot perform all of these mutually exclusive good actions, it follows that goodness is not sufficient for moral obligation. Alston provides the examples of finishing the writing of his paper, going skiing, and finishing the reading of a novel as actions that are mutually inconsistent because of time constraints, but that are good actions to perform.²⁷ Because Alston cannot do all these good things at the same time, it cannot be true that the goodness of an action implies that the action is morally obligatory.

Alston says concerning God's goodness that, "God can still be called good by virtue of his lovingness, justice and mercy, qualities that are moral virtues in a being subject to the moral ought."²⁸ Although God does not have moral obligations, he still possesses qualities that are taken to be morally good in any being that possesses them, whether divine or human. It will now be specified what makes such qualities good according to Alston.

2. 3 Evaluative Particularism

Alston applies his account of moral obligation to the Euthyphro-like Dilemma mentioned above. God's commands are constitutive of moral obligation. God does not have moral obligations. So, God's goodness does not derive from his obeying his own commands.

What this means for Alston is the following:

Since divine command theory does not rule out a satisfactory construal of the moral goodness of God, it enables us to escape the arbitrariness objection also. So far from being arbitrary, God's commands to us are an expression of his perfect goodness. Since

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

he is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible that God should command us to act in ways that are not for the best.²⁹

This is not the end of the account. Alston is aware that leaving the account here may mean that the divine command theorist in fact espouses the second option, and thus gets impaled with the second horn of the dilemma.³⁰ This is because it may seem that what is being asserted is that God commands certain things because they are good, and the facts about what make something good are independent of God. This, according to Alston, is repellant to the theist, because it is inconsistent with the sovereignty of God.³¹

In responding to this worry, Alston begins by observing that the second horn of the dilemma is stated in Platonic terms, “If it is an objective fact that X is good, this is because there are objectively true general principles that specify the conditions under which something is good (the features on which goodness supervenes) and X satisfies (enough of) these conditions.”³² On this Platonic account, the ultimate standard of goodness consists of general principles, the satisfaction of which makes something morally good. Alston, however, wants to claim that God himself can be taken as the ultimate standard of moral goodness.³³

On this view, features such as lovingness are good, not because of any ultimate general principles that specify the necessary and sufficient conditions of goodness, but because lovingness is a feature of God.³⁴ This is not to deny that there are general principles, such as “lovingness is good”, but only to note that such principles are not ultimate. General principles

²⁹ Ibid., 290.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 291.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 292.

are true only insofar as they properly pick out features of God when saying that a feature is morally good.³⁵

To illustrate his point, Alston discusses examples of the two categories he distinguishes. For Alston, there are Platonic predicates and particularistic predicates.³⁶ Mathematical concepts such as triangles are traditionally taken to fit into the former category. A triangle is a shape that satisfies certain general conditions such as having three sides and the angles adding up to 180 degrees. However, there are examples of the latter category. A dog's inclusion in a certain biological classification is taken to be a case of resemblance to other members, and this applies also to what he calls terms of family resemblance, such as "religion" or "game" where the latter terms exhibit such variety of form that they cannot be captured by a general statement of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Alston's most extended example of this sort of particularistic concept is that of measurement, and specifically, what determines the length of a meter.³⁷ What determines the length of a meter, according to Alston, is a particular meter-stick that people agreed would be the standard. So, when it is said that something is a meter, it is so because it conforms to the length of a particular paradigm, namely, the original meter-stick.

As the paradigm that determines what is good, God does not consult, nor is he judged by adherence to, general Platonic principles. Whatever God does will necessarily be for the best, because he is essentially good as the standard of goodness. Alston further claims that God is not just good, he is good in virtue of having qualities such as lovingness, mercy, justice, etc.³⁸ On

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

this view, those qualities are good in virtue of being qualities of God, but God is good because of them.

Alston considers two objections to his ‘valuational particularism.’³⁹ The first is that it seems arbitrary to just pick an individual and say this person is the standard of goodness without reference to general principles. Alston’s first response is that this is simply an expression of Platonism. As Alston thinks he has shown earlier, there really are particularistic predicates, such as cases of measurement, family resemblance terms, or biological classifications. Some things just work this way, and goodness is one of them. His second reply to this objection is that whether we are discussing Platonic or particularistic predicates, both ultimately bottom out in the sense that there is nothing further to justify the general principle or the paradigmatic example past a certain point. One may object that general principles are self-evidently true, but, Alston claims, the divine command theorist may simply reply that it seems self-evidently true that God is the standard of goodness.

The second objection Alston considers is that such an account of goodness requires that in order to have moral knowledge, we must have knowledge about God, including that God exists, or has a certain nature.⁴⁰ Alston rightly points out that this epistemological implication does not actually follow from the theory. The divine command theorist is free to say that God has constructed humans in such a way that we may make correct moral judgements without having knowledge of the God who ontologically grounds goodness or moral obligation. It may be the case that the theist is in a better position than the non-theist to make moral judgements on this view, but it does not follow that non-theists will necessarily be incorrect in their particular moral

³⁹ Ibid., 293.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

judgments. The analogy given here is that we may say many correct things about water without knowing what its particular chemical composition is.⁴¹

Another point on particularism Alston makes is that our ‘valuational development’ often derives from exposure to particular cases in which certain qualities are displayed in art, literature, music, and morality, and we come to judge later cases in reference to such paradigmatic examples. In such cases, particularism, rather than Platonism, is at play. This may not have ontological implications, but Alston suggests that such a realization of the important role paradigms play in life may help to allay initial resistance towards his idea.

The final hurdle for divine command theory Alston considers is the following: “God is himself the supreme standard of goodness. Why then are divine commands needed to provide an objective grounding for human morality? Why doesn’t the nature of God suffice for that?”⁴²

Alston answers this question by appealing to a distinction already made; namely, the distinction between goodness and moral obligation.⁴³ The existence of supererogation and mutually exclusive good actions show, according to Alston, that goodness is insufficient for moral obligation.

So, both because of the possibility of supererogation, i.e. that there are good actions that go beyond moral obligation, and because of the incompatibility of various good actions, God’s nature as the standard of goodness cannot serve by itself as the basis of moral obligation. Something has to be added to goodness that distinguishes obligation from goodness. What makes claims about moral obligation true, in addition to goodness, is that God has commanded us to perform or refrain from certain types of action.

⁴¹ Ibid., 294.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 295.

Chapter 3: Linville's Alternative Account of Moral Obligation

3.1 Duties of Justice and Beneficence

Remember that Alston argues that the divine nature does not suffice as the standard of moral obligation because moral goodness and moral obligation are distinct concepts. Something must be added to moral goodness in order for moral obligations to obtain. In this section, Mark Linville's alternative account of moral obligation will be presented that makes the divine nature sufficient for moral obligation.

Linville objects that Alston's defense of divine command theory fails to take into account the difference between duties of beneficence and duties of justice, and the morally obligatory nature of a general duty to beneficence.⁴⁴ Duties of beneficence include things such as giving aid to others, and duties of justice include avoiding various harms, such as lying or committing adultery. Linville follows Kant's distinction that the former are "wide" duties and the latter are "narrow" duties.⁴⁵

Duties of beneficence are said to be "wide" because, although there is a general duty to aid others, there is a certain degree of latitude we have in choosing how to fulfill this duty. One may aid others by baking them cookies, teaching them to play a musical instrument, being their friend, or in innumerable other ways. Furthermore, although one may not be obligated to perform any specific act of beneficence, if one decides that they will never show beneficence to others, then one will have failed to do something they ought to have done.⁴⁶

In the case of duties of justice, however, such latitude is absent. Things that would unjustifiably harm someone else are absolutely prohibited. It is not the case that one may

⁴⁴ Mark Linville, "Moral Particularism." In *God & Morality Four Views*, edited by R. Keith Loftin (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2012): 155.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 156.

legitimately choose to unjustifiably harm someone in one way rather than another. For example, in choosing to murder someone rather than to frame them for murder, one has done what ought not be done in either case.

3.2 Moral Particularism

Partly motivated by these inadequacies with Alston's approach, Linville offers his own theory of moral obligation, called "moral particularism." Linville appeals to Christ's command to love one another unconditionally to further motivate his account. Linville asks the question, "is love commanded because it is obligatory for us to love one another, or is it obligatory because it is commanded? Alston's view implies the latter. But the former seems more plausible, as there seem to be deeper reasons for love..."⁴⁷ The deeper reason, for Linville, is that persons have unconditional or categorical value. Linville claims, "If this much is true, then the commandment to love looks to a prior source of moral obligation, namely, the dignity of persons. If persons have dignity, then we have moral obligations that are decidedly *not* constituted by divine commands."⁴⁸

The value of persons, for Linville, although intrinsic, is derivative.⁴⁹ Persons are intrinsically morally valuable, but we derive our personhood from being created in the image of God, who is a person. Linville follows Alston here in assuming that the features of God are those features that are good-making or valuable. Linville's innovation is claiming that personhood is valuable because it is a feature of God, and our personhood grants us rights that impose moral obligations on others to respect these rights. In this way, God's commands are unnecessary for

⁴⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

moral obligation. Rather than moral obligations deriving from an “extrinsic” source, they derive from our intrinsic personhood.

Examining how Linville’s discussion of duties of beneficence and justice fits in with his moral particularism will help to further illuminate the theory. Contra Alston, the supererogation and inconsistency arguments are unsuccessful from precluding a divine nature theory of moral obligation. Alston does seem successful in showing that the moral goodness of an action is insufficient for that action being morally obligatory. The problem, however, is that moral obligation can be grounded in the divine nature in a way that is immune to Alston’s arguments.

Linville’s moral particularism, as was briefly mentioned already, takes advantage of the fact that evaluative particularism makes the properties God possesses morally valuable. God possesses personhood, so this property is morally valuable. Since humans are persons, they are intrinsically and categorically valuable. Resolving to never aid any human, or treating humans unjustly, is failing to treat that which is categorically valuable as such. Such actions ought not be done. In this way, Linville has constructed a divine nature theory of moral obligation that is immune to Alston’s supererogation and inconsistency arguments. Linville’s theory shows that it is a non-sequitur to claim that the moral goodness of actions does not suffice for moral obligation, therefore the divine nature does not suffice for moral obligation.

On this theory, divine commands would not be necessary for moral obligation, but could serve an epistemological role by informing people of moral truths. Such truths may, however, in principle be accessible directly to people through reason or some other means.

3.3 Qualifying Linville’s Alternative

Even if we largely accept Linville’s proposal, it needs to be qualified a bit. On Linville’s account, there is the conceptual possibility of claiming that moral obligations obtain only

between humans, and between humans and God. Linville does not explicitly claim this, but his account leaves room for it. Creaturely persons may be taken as humans, who are the only creatures created in the image of God according to common Christian opinion. Obligations towards animals on this view may be interpreted merely as obligations toward God to be good stewards of his creation. It could perhaps be further claimed that we have an obligation to not do things such as abuse animals because this may make us more likely to be abusive towards human beings or because cruelty is not part of the divine nature and thus we would be de-personalizing ourselves. Of course, there is also the obvious reason that non-human animals are sometimes the property of others, and it is wrong to damage someone's property. This, however, is an unacceptable aspect of Linville's account. As will be detailed below, we have good reasons to think that we do have moral obligations towards animals for their own sakes and any plausible general account of moral obligations must accommodate this truth.

Take the common concern people have for their pets. The reason we come to value dogs, for example, is not primarily because of a perceived obligation to be good stewards of God's creation, but because we see that they are capable of feeling pain and pleasure, happiness and sadness, etc. Dogs, like many other animals, have rich sensory and emotional experiences, and it is more plausible that we have obligations towards them because of these reasons than merely because of obligations to God or humans, including ourselves. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that we do have an obligation to treat non-human animals (and humans!) well in part because they are God's creation, or because hurting them will make us more callous towards humans, or because they are sometimes related to other humans in special ways. We may in fact have moral obligations to treat non-human animals well in part because of these reasons. It is, nonetheless, implausible to hold that these are the exclusive reasons for our moral obligations to

non-human animals. It is implausible because, as detailed above, it flies in the face of many of our settled moral intuitions concerning animals, and any theory of moral obligation is implausible that rules out having certain moral obligations for the primary reasons we come to believe we have those moral obligations.

It would not seem too difficult to explain this obligation on moral particularism. Even though humans have richer experiences and may more closely resemble the divine nature because of this, non-human animals still possess elements tied to personhood in their ability to have rich emotional and sensory experiences. It will not do to try to undermine such experiences because they are lower than those of humans for two reasons.

First, the capacities of humans would not be equal to those of God, but humans are still categorically valuable. There is difference between God and humans, but not a difference that rules out humans being morally valuable. The same can be said about the difference between non-human animals and humans. Animals have different experiences and capacities than humans, but not different enough to non-arbitrarily deny them intrinsic moral worth. Non-human animals can do basic, crude forms of reasoning, they experience pain, pleasure, fear, excitement, and are capable of loyalty and reciprocity. For examples of reciprocity, consider cases in which cats bring dead animals to their owners, or dogs bring their owners toys. They are not rocks or water or plants, which would be examples of things different enough to preclude moral worth. If difference does not matter in terms of humans being different from God, then why should it matter in the case of non-human animals being different from humans?

Second, it is not even clear that humans are the most intelligent lifeforms in the universe. Science allows for the possibility of forms of life on other planets, and it could turn out to be the case that there are non-human animals far superior to humans in intellectual, as well as emotional

and sensory capacities. Would it be legitimate in such a case for these advanced beings to then deny that they have obligations towards humans because of their superiority? No, because beings with rich emotional, sensory, intellectual, or other capacities are intrinsically valuable. Since they are intrinsically valuable, they are to be categorically respected.

3.4 The Implications of Linville's Theory

What are the implications of Linville's moral particularism for divine command theory as defended by Alston? Linville argues that because moral obligations derive from the intrinsic, categorical value of persons, it is unnecessary to claim that divine commands are constitutive of moral obligations. Even if it is unnecessary to posit such a role for divine commands, is it still reasonable to do so? Could Alston simply concede that moral particularism is plausible, but assert that divine command theory is just as plausible, and is thus a competing theory?

To answer this, we must answer another question. Are there duties other than duties of justice and beneficence as described above? Moral particularism accounts for duties of beneficence and duties of justice. In resolving to never aid someone, one is treating beings that are categorically valuable without the categorical respect they are due. This is also true in the case of unjustifiably harming someone, for example. It would seem then, that, if these categories of types of duties are exhaustive, then there would be no conceptual space left for divine commands to be constitutive of moral obligation. What the divine command theorist would have to do is show that there are other categories of duty that the categorical value of sentient beings cannot account for, while divine commands can. It is not at all clear, however, that the two categories mentioned are not exhaustive.

It is important to note that the divine command theorist would have to meet the challenge given above of finding other categories of duty that moral particularism cannot account for, but

that divine commands can. If the qualities that God possesses are morally valuable, then personhood is morally valuable. Human beings are persons, so they are morally valuable. This moral value imposes obligations on others to treat them as valuable. In this way, if evaluative particularism is true, then so is moral particularism.

One may object that the claim that evaluative particularism entails moral particularism is too strong, or that the inference made is too quick. A reason for this may be that it has to be further specified that persons having intrinsic moral value is constitutive of moral obligation. This specification is absent in evaluative particularism. If this objection is correct, it would still be the case that moral particularism is more parsimonious than divine command theory, because evaluative particularism already provides the framework that constitutes moral obligation on moral particularism. All that has to be specified is that the value of persons constitutes moral obligation. On divine command theory, however, further, unnecessary elements are posited in addition to evaluative particularism; namely, divine commands. As in the former objection, the only way that divine command theory would be a rival on equal footing with moral particularism is if there are moral obligations that are better explained by divine commands than by the value of persons.

One may object that if Alston's account of moral obligation as requiring practical rules to be in place is plausible, then Linville's theory of moral obligation may still be rejected in favor of divine command theory. The idea is that Linville's theory does not allow for such an account of moral obligation. This is not clearly the case. It can reasonably be suggested that Linville's moral particularism is consistent with such an account of moral obligation, even if it is not necessarily tied to it. The practical rule that one ought not treat persons as less than categorically

valuable could simply be a general principle that derives from the divine nature. Such a practical rule need not be a divine command.

Chapter 4: Does God Have Moral Obligations?

4.1 The Implications of Moral Particularism for God's Obligations

A final implication of moral particularism that needs to be explored is whether or not one is required to say that God has no moral obligations on this theory. If sentient beings are truly categorically valuable, and thus to be categorically respected, must it be the case that God has no moral obligations towards them? Must Alston's claim that moral obligations require the existence of practical rules, that in turn require the possibility of violation, still hold on moral particularism? This section makes the case that moral particularism is not necessarily committed to denying that God has moral obligations.

To show this, we will supplement Linville's moral particularism with Linda Zagzebski's account of moral obligation and then show that this way of detailing the parameters for the existence of moral obligation is consistent with divine and human obligations having the same metaphysical source.

In considering the possibility that God and humans both have moral obligations, but God's obligations are construed differently, Alston contends that we can give no content to what such divine obligations could look like.⁵⁰ Linda Zagzebski, however, provides an account of the form such obligations could take. First, she gives a general definition of what we normally mean by obligation: "What we mean by 'obligation', I believe, is essentially this: There is no other option compatible with moral goodness." Having thus explained the nature of obligation, she notes that her explanation can account for the distinctive force we take obligations to have. "The

⁵⁰ Alston, "Some Suggestions.", 256.

“force” of obligation,” she notes, “lies in the perception of the lack of alternatives compatible with goodness. That is why an obligation is whatever is correctly expressed as a ‘must.’”⁵¹

Two definitions of moral obligation have been presented. On Alston’s proposal, moral obligations are distinct from moral goodness in that they only exist when practical rules are in place that govern behavior. In the case of God, he has no moral obligations, because in order for practical rules to be in force there has to be the possibility of their violation. God, being essentially perfectly good, can never deviate from such rules, so they are not in force with respect to him. Thus, God has no moral obligations. In the case of humans, divine commands are constitutive of moral obligation. On Zagzebski’s definition, what is added when moving from goodness to moral obligation is simply that moral obligations exist when there is no alternative course of action consistent with moral goodness. Zagzebski’s definition implies that both humans and God have moral obligations.

Zagzebski definition of moral obligation fits well with Linville’s theory of the metaphysical source of moral obligation, because on moral particularism it is true that moral obligations obtain when there is no alternative consistent with goodness. The only cases in which actions are inconsistent with goodness are cases in which duties are violated, such as resolving to never aid anyone or treating someone unjustly. In every case in which a morally bad action is performed, it can be said that a sentient being has not been categorically respected. Being inconsistent with moral goodness and having a moral obligation to refrain from an action are thus coextensive.

⁵¹ Linda Zagzebski, “More Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists.” In *Perspectives on the Philosophy of William Alston*, edited by Heather D. Battaly and Michael P. Lynch (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005): 187.

4.2 Benefits of Zagzebski's Definition

There are two main benefits of supplementing moral particularism with Zagzebski's definition of moral obligation. The first benefit is that because Zagzebski's definition fits so well with the theory, an alternative is not required. There is no overly compelling reason why Alston's definition of moral obligation would have to be accepted in place of Zagzebski's. It is not at all clear that Alston's definition brings anything superior to the discussion.

Alston, however, thinks his definition of moral obligation is superior to Zagzebski's, noting, "the crucial point is that there is a concept that is captured by my account of obligation, a concept that is of crucial importance in human morality. And what is expressed by that concept binds and constrains us in a way that we cannot think of as applying to God."⁵² The concept that he thinks is important in human morality is presumably the regulative, lawlike nature of obligation. So, his claim is that the idea that moral obligations serve a regulatory, lawlike role is one that we experience in moral practice.

What appears to be behind Alston's claim that moral obligation is lawlike and regulative is the "force" of moral obligation. In Alston's words, they bind and constrain us in ways that would be inappropriate to apply to an absolutely sovereign being. Because moral obligations have the force of dictating how we ought to behave, they are best explained as laws that govern our behavior. As we already noted, Zagzebski's account explains this force. The force comes from the perception of a lack of any alternative consistent with moral goodness. So, this alternative account of moral obligation accounts for the force of moral obligation that is important to human morality. What this means is that the moral particularist need not accept

⁵²William Alston, "Response to Zagzebski." In *Perspectives on the Philosophy of William Alston*, edited by Heather D. Battaly and Michael P. Lynch (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005): 204.

Alston's definition of moral obligation over Zagzebski's because of any superior accounting it may have of moral experience.

A second benefit of Zagzebski's definition will be more controversial, but worth pointing out. This benefit is that it does not deny that God has moral obligations. Intuitions will vary on this point. Theists concerned with elevating the sovereignty of God as highly as possible may prefer Alston's definition of moral obligation, because it prevents God from being bound to humans by moral obligation. People with a more humanistic view, however, may think Zagzebski's definition is preferable because Alston's view, to them, does not treat humans as categorically valuable.

On Alston's view, since God has no moral obligations, he has no moral obligations to the sentient beings he creates. Objecting to this implication of Alston's position, Evan Fales observes:

Surely, if God creates sentient creatures, then God has certain moral obligations toward them. It won't do to say, as Alston...that God, though unobligated, always necessarily does what is right because of his essential goodness. That ensures that God does right by his creatures, but it doesn't capture the fact that in creating sentient creatures he establishes, *inter alia*, a duty of care for them.⁵³

To support Fales' case, let us make an analogy between God and his creation, and a parent and a child. If someone brings a child into the world, we would say that the parent has an obligation to care for their child by providing food, water, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, and love. In bringing this sentient being into the world by means of a free choice, the parent is morally responsible for the well-being of the child. In a similar way, it would seem

⁵³ Evan Fales, "A Naturalist Moral Realism Response." In *God & Morality Four Views*, edited by R. Keith Loftin (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2012): 159.

plausible to say that God, who freely chooses to bring sentient beings into the world, has a moral obligation to do such things as prevent undue suffering and promote the flourishing of these beings.

Alston would likely object that the difference between God and a human parent is that God cannot fail to promote the flourishing of his creatures, whereas human parents can fail to promote the flourishing of their children. This would miss the point of the argument. The point is that it seems wrong to some people to say that God would not have moral obligations to creatures he freely chose to bring into existence.

For some of those who disagree with Alston, denying that God has moral obligations elevates the sovereignty of God at the high cost of denigrating humans and other sentient creatures. It implies that humans and other sentient creatures are not beings who categorically have intrinsic value and rights that impose moral obligations on others. It may be objected that God is the only exception to creaturely value imposing moral obligation upon others. This does not allay the worry. If there is an exception, then the rights are not categorical. So, Alston's definition of moral obligation, while elevating the sovereignty of God, undermines the value of all other beings.

One may object that Alston's denial of God having moral obligations does not really mean that sentient beings are not categorically valuable because being valuable in this way imposes moral obligations only on all beings that may possibly have moral obligations. God cannot possibly have moral obligations, so this does not undermine the categorical value of sentient beings. Alston's opponent need not accept that the caveat given solves the problem. The problem is that if there are moral beings that do not have moral obligations towards others, then it seems those "others" are not categorically valuable. God, on Alston's account, is a moral being

without moral obligations towards sentient beings, so sentient beings do not have categorical value on Alston's definition of moral obligation. In other words, Alston's opponent does not have to accept how one who uses this defense details the implications of categorical value.

Alston's opponent may reasonably maintain that the implications of categorical value are better explained as applying to all moral beings. There are two reasons that may be given for this claim. First, since there is more than one option available, all else being equal, one is not automatically required to accept the proposed alternative. Second, for Alston's detractor, all else is not equal. There is a strong intuition that denying that God has moral obligation to sentient beings is wrong, and this intuition is supported by analogies between God and other moral agents. The free choices of moral agents to bring others into the world, for example, imposes moral obligations on these moral agents.

People who would make this kind of intuitive objection to Alston's definition of moral obligation are not saying that Alston's definition is logically inconsistent with sentient beings having categorical value. It is logically consistent to say that sentient beings have categorical value that imposes moral obligations on all beings that can have moral obligations, but God cannot have such moral obligations. The objection is that it seems to them that denying God the possibility of having moral obligations does not respect the value of sentient beings appropriately. If their intuitions are correct, then Alston's definition of moral obligation does not fit with Linville's metaphysical account of the source of moral obligations.

Zagzebski's definition of moral obligation fits nicely with moral particularism. Also, Zagzebski's definition, at least to some, more plausibly fits with moral particularism because it does not deny that God has moral obligations. For these reasons, the moral particularist need not go along with Alston in denying that God has moral obligations. Furthermore, for those who take

Alston's denial that God has moral obligations to be implausible, the moral particularist should not go along with Alston's account. For them, even though Alston's account may be coherent, it fails to be plausible.

Chapter 5: The Arbitrariness Objection

5.1 Arbitrariness Remains

Even if we assume for the sake of argument that God has no moral obligations, and that Alston has given an adequate account of God's goodness, it will be shown in this section that divine command theory still fails to escape arbitrariness. Let us consider Alston's inconsistency and supererogation arguments. Alston claims that there are certain good actions that are mutually inconsistent and thus not obligatory and there are others that are not obligatory because they are above and beyond the call of duty. Because of these observations, goodness alone cannot suffice for moral obligation. Alston claims that God's commands are the element that, in addition to goodness, makes an action obligatory.

Does the addition of God's commands really give an adequate account of moral obligation? Alston claims that if an adequate account of God's goodness can be given, this automatically solves the arbitrariness objection, because God's commands will necessarily be for the best. There are two ways, usually, of discussing the arbitrariness objection. Often, it is pointed out that if actions are obligatory because God commands them, then God can command something atrocious, such as genocide and it would be obligatory. It is also pointed out that if divine command theory is true, then God commands without moral reasons. The two are related in that, if God can command without moral reasons, then he could just as easily command that we perform genocide as we refrain from it, and it would be obligatory. This is the classic way of rightly rejecting the crude version of divine command theory.

Alston's attempted solution to the problem makes God essentially perfectly good, so God could never command genocide. This terrible consequence of divine command theory is prevented successfully, assuming the success of Alston's account of goodness by means of

evaluative particularism. Let us ask this question, however: What prevents giving all our money to the poor from being obligatory rather than a less stringent obligation to charity? The answer is that God's command to do less stringent acts of charity prevents the more stringent action from being morally obligatory. Why should we take this to be non-arbitrary? Alston's answer is that God's commands are not arbitrary, because the commands of an essentially perfectly good being are necessarily 'for the best.' There is a crucial problem with this argument.

If we know that God's commands are for the best, then we do have reason to behave in accord with them. The fact that we have reason to act in accord with God's commands, however, does not mean that God's commands are not arbitrary. Alston points out that God does not need to consult general principles, he merely acts and what he does is necessarily for the best, including giving certain commands. Does he command certain things because they are for the best, or are they for the best because he commands them?

If God commands something because it is for the best, then what makes it for the best suffices for moral obligation. If it is for the best because God commands it, then God commands without moral reasons, and is thus arbitrary in commanding. Alston may want to say that God commands it because it is for the best, but what makes it for the best is God's nature. Moreover, because God's nature is insufficient for moral obligation, divine commands are also needed. It has been shown, however, that the divine nature suffices for moral obligation, so Alston cannot take this horn of the dilemma. Any commands God makes would be non-arbitrary, but only serve an epistemological role rather than constituting moral obligation. In order to salvage DCT, Alston would have to say that something is for the best because God commands it. This, however, precludes moral reasons being behind such commands. Moral reasons are necessary for a moral command to be non-arbitrary, so DCT is not saved from the arbitrariness objection.

In response to my objection that God's commands must be made on the basis of moral reasons to be non-arbitrary, Alston may say that this is merely an expression of Platonic predilections. It was pointed out earlier that Alston claims the arbitrariness objection is stated in Platonic terms. Alston then seeks to give a particularistic account of moral goodness in place of Platonic general principles. Claiming that God needs moral reasons for his actions is to claim that he needs to appeal to general Platonic principles and is thus a rejection of his account. This, however, is not the case.

Consider Linville's moral particularism. On moral particularism, God can have moral reasons for his actions and commands without these reasons deriving from abstract, Platonic principles. Instead, God's moral reasons would be based on general moral principles that are derivative from God's nature or self. God, in his omniscience, knows which actions, including commands, are consistent with his own nature, which would give God moral reasons for his actions from which to perform them. Because God can have moral reasons for his actions on both Platonism and particularism, it cannot be said that requiring such reasons for commands to be non-arbitrary is merely an expression of Platonic biases.

Why suppose that moral reasons are necessary in order to make divine commands non-arbitrary? The idea behind the arbitrariness objection is that having moral reasons for moral commands is a fundamental principle of moral agency. This is a fact both Platonism and particularism would have to leave room for to be reasonable, as well as any other possible moral theory. Moral agents have moral reasons for their moral actions, so if God does not have moral reasons for divine commands, then God is not a moral agent. If God is not a moral agent, then it is not clear that he could serve as the standard of moral goodness. This point will arise again and be explored in more detail in section 6.

5.2 Zagzebski's Attempted Solution to the Gap

Linda Zagzebski has discovered a similar problem that Alston's account has with the arbitrariness objection. She observes,

...if the divine nature is compatible with alternative commands, arbitrariness creeps in. Why command X rather than Y if both X and Y are compatible with the divine nature? So even if God has reasons that rule out certain commands such as cruelty, God lacks a sufficient reason for the particular commands he makes.⁵⁴

According to this objection, even if God's nature gives God a reason to refrain from commanding evil actions, this does not of itself give God sufficient reason to choose between various actions consistent with his nature. As she further says, "This forces us to face the more serious question of whether divine commands are under-determined by the divine goodness. This, I think, is the weakest aspect of DC theory and it needs to be faced squarely."⁵⁵

Because of this continuing arbitrariness problem, Zagzebski points out that "There is a gap between divine nature and divine commands that needs to be filled."⁵⁶ She then attempts to fill this gap for the divine command theorist. Her solution is to try and find something good about God other than the divine nature, "in virtue of which God commands one thing rather than another equally compatible with the divine nature."⁵⁷

What Zagzebski takes to be good about God other than the divine nature is God's personality. She proposes that, "the DC theorist should say that motives and the acts they cause which are such that alternative motives/acts are compatible with the divine nature arises from the

⁵⁴ Zagzebski, 191.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 193.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 196.

personality of God. This move permits them to be neither necessary nor arbitrary.”⁵⁸ The actions are not necessary, because personalities do not entail things. But how can appealing to God’s personality make God’s commands non-arbitrary? Zagzebski raises this question, but admits she does not have a clear answer: “Then how can personalities include constituents that are not arbitrary? That is a question I cannot answer. I believe it leads into the mystery of the uniqueness of persons and the unresolved problem of free will.”⁵⁹

Zagzebski thinks that the goodness of persons “is partly constituted by their difference from everything else in the universe, including every other person.”⁶⁰ The mystery seems to come in when determining how this makes God good in a way that makes God’s commands non-arbitrary. It cannot be the case that God’s nature makes God’s personality good in such a way, because this would only push back the arbitrariness objection a step, but not ultimately answer it. Zagzebski is not entitled to make this claim, and to her credit, does not, because she takes God himself, rather than the divine nature, as the ultimate paradigm.⁶¹

It is not at all clear that the appeal to God’s personhood can save divine command theory from the arbitrariness objection. Zagzebski herself admits that she cannot answer how it does. She gestures in the direction of appealing to God’s personhood to solve the problem but leaves us caught in mystery. Appealing to a mysterious account is not sufficient for avoiding the arbitrariness objection, so it seems that the Euthyphro-like dilemma for divine command theories of moral obligation is not a false dilemma after all, barring future considerations.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 197.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

5.3 What's the Problem with Arbitrariness?

One may accept that it is problematic for God generally to not act on moral reasons, because this undermines his moral agency. But, it may be asked, in the case of requiring particular morally good actions, why is this a problem? A distinction may be made between those actions that are arbitrary because they are irrational, and those that are arbitrary because they are non-rational. Arbitrariness that is due to irrationality is problematic, but arbitrariness due to non-rationality is not clearly so. An example is putting one's shoes on in the morning. This is a non-rational action because there is no good reason to start with one shoe rather than another, but we are not being irrational because of this.

Analogously, it may be maintained that in the case of commanding which morally good actions will be morally required, God may not be acting on moral reasons, but this is only non-rationally arbitrary, not irrationally so. The problem with this analogy is that if someone requires you to put one shoe on rather than another, without any reason, then this seems positively irrational, not merely non-rational. In the same way, if God requires one morally good action over another, this is not merely non-rational, but irrational. In cases where various actions are all morally good, there is legitimate moral choice. If this ability to choose is curbed by fiat, then it has irrationally been curbed.

Chapter 6: Evaluative Particularism and an Evidential Argument from Evil

6.1 Zagzebski's Parallel Argument Objection

Until now, Alston's evaluative particularism has not been called into question. It was even relied on to show that if evaluative particularism is true, then moral particularism is true, where the latter theory leaves no conceptual space for divine command theory. In this section, however, an important problem which evaluative particularism generates will be introduced. Considering an objection Linda Zagzebski makes to Alston's denial of God's having moral obligations will be helpful to set the stage.

Zagzebski concedes that the divine command theorist may still try to deny that God has moral obligations but must not use Alston's argument that denies that terms of the moral "ought" family can be applied to an essentially morally perfect being. The reason for this is that parallel arguments can be made that deny that other moral attributes, such as moral praiseworthiness, can be applied to God.

The idea is that an essentially morally perfect being cannot choose between good and bad actions, but must necessarily perform good actions, so such a being does not have morally significant freedom. Since only beings with morally significant freedom can be morally praised for their actions, God cannot be morally praiseworthy. The problem with Alston's approach, according to this objection, "is that it rules out too much."⁶²

Zagzebski's parallel argument objection is misguided, because Alston's denial that God has moral obligations is not the problem she has caught wind of. What is actually problematic is the concept of an essentially morally perfect being. To realize this, one need only ask whether

⁶² Zagzebski, 189.

the same issues would arise if the type of argument Alston made about God not having moral obligations was never made. The answer is yes.

Mark Linville realizes that the conception of God as essentially perfectly good may be problematic. He notes,

moral goodness requires moral agency, and such agency, in turn, requires libertarian freedom. But on Alston's view it is metaphysically impossible for God to do anything other than what is good. And so, God lacks significant moral freedom and, with that, *moral* goodness. According to this objection, the term *necessary moral goodness* is oxymoronic.⁶³

Linville offers two possible responses to this objection. The first response would be to embrace the implication that God is not literally morally good. To say that God is good is to speak analogically. God behaves as we would expect a perfectly morally good agent to, so we call him good. Linville does not say this, but this view, if tied together with Alston's defense of divine command theory, would be self-defeating. This is because if God is the standard of moral goodness, then it cannot be true that God is not actually morally good. The two claims are inconsistent.

An analogy will help to understand the distinction between God being literally good and analogically, or figuratively good. Non-human animals do things such as take care of their young that, if done by human beings, are morally praiseworthy. The reason we deem such actions morally praiseworthy in humans but not in non-human animals is that non-human animals are not moral agents. They cannot act on moral reasons, they merely act by instinct, or very

⁶³ Linville, 153.

rudimentary reasoning and emotions. If God is not literally morally good, then God is not a moral agent, much like non-human animals.

Why suppose that it is inconsistent to say that God is the standard of moral goodness but is not morally good himself? One may object to my claim by pointing out that abstract objects in Platonism, on some interpretations, are not self-predicating. For example, is the form of beauty itself beautiful? There is a key difference between abstract objects and God. God is a person, and persons have moral characters. So, God has a moral character. God's moral character will serve as the standard by which the characters of other people are to be measured against. If it is denied that God actually has a moral character, then it is not clear that we can even call God a person. Going down this path will not work for theists of an Alstonian stripe, since such theism includes the belief that God is a personal being.

A second possible response is to claim that "a necessarily good being may have a range of significant moral freedom."⁶⁴ According to this view, there are things that are good but that are not required by God's nature. God may choose to make promises, create the world, reveal himself to someone, etc. and these are acts of grace, not acts that God has to perform. Essentially, this response is to claim that choosing various good actions to perform is sufficient for moral agency, and thus for moral goodness. Linville calls this the divine analogue of supererogation.

Does Linville's "divine supererogation" argument save the concept of God as an essentially perfectly good being from problems? I will argue below that even if it protects this concept of God from incoherence, it undermines our ability to claim that such a being exists.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 154.

6.2 The Argument from Evil

Linville's defense of the morally significant freedom of God, construed as essentially perfectly good, provides material for an evidential argument from evil. The argument is as follows:

1. It is not metaphysically necessary that humans only perform morally good actions.
2. If an essentially perfectly good God exists, then it would be metaphysically necessary that humans only perform morally good actions, because God would create them this way.
3. Therefore, an essentially perfectly good God does not exist.

Premise 1 is only likely to be called into question by those who are unusually skeptical. Premise 2, however, may seem controversial. Why suppose that it is correct? One reason to suppose this is that Linville's defense of an essentially perfectly good God's morally significant freedom undermines two important types of theodicy.

Paul Draper discusses the common view that:

God is justified in giving humans freedom because a world in which humans freely perform both right and wrong actions is (provided that the balance of right over wrong actions or of morally good humans over morally bad humans is sufficiently favorable) better than a world in which immorality is prevented by withholding freedom from humans.⁶⁵

As Draper notes that there are two ways to construe this type of view; namely, that freedom is valuable, "either because morally right actions that are freely performed are more valuable than right actions that are not freely performed or because, following Hick, moral virtue

⁶⁵ Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists." In *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*. 2nd edition, edited by Michael L. Peterson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017): 564.

that is acquired by freely performing right actions is more valuable than moral virtue that is not freely acquired...”⁶⁶

The word freedom is being used in the libertarian sense that entails that one’s free actions are not causally determined. This is the type of freedom that is taken to be morally significant freedom by those who would use such defenses. Those who would hold to some variety of determinism would be susceptible to arguments like the one given here. Determinism would not require that the particular good action chosen be uncaused, so God could just make us always do particular good things. If the definition of morally significant freedom can be altered in the way Linville proposes, then it seems that neither the former free will theodicy, nor Hick’s soul-making theodicy, successfully justifies God in permitting moral evil in the world. These points will now be argued for in detail.

6.3 Criticizing Two Theodicies

First, if morally right actions that are freely performed are more valuable than those that are not freely performed, then this does not preclude it from being the case that God could have created humans such that it is metaphysically necessary that they only perform morally good actions. If it can be metaphysically necessary that God only performs morally good actions, yet God still retains morally significant freedom, then why can this not also be so in the case of humans? Why can humans not also have morally significant freedom, yet be metaphysically unable to perform morally bad actions?

If it were metaphysically impossible for humans to perform any actions that are morally bad, then so much human and non-human animal suffering would have been prevented across the course of the human species that it staggers the imagination. Murder, thievery, rape,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

genocide, child abuse, economic exploitation, cruelty to non-human animals, and many other horrors would have been prevented. If God is essentially perfectly good, then he would have created humans like himself in this respect to prevent all this evil. Indeed, in positing that God is essentially perfectly good, and has morally significant freedom, all moral evil becomes pointless evil. The definition of pointless evil assumed here is that of William Rowe; namely, an evil such that, “God (if he exists) could have prevented without thereby losing an outweighing good or having to permit an evil equally bad or worse.”⁶⁷ On this first theodicy, that claims the value of morally right actions is greater if performed freely, no outweighing good is lost on Linville’s defense. Also, there would be no equally bad or worse moral evils permitted if humans were essentially morally perfect, because no moral evils would exist.⁶⁸ Furthermore, it would seem incredibly implausible to argue that equally bad or worse natural evils would be permitted by this move. Essentially morally perfect humans would in fact work hard to prevent natural evils as far as possible, because the suffering of others, including non-human animals, would serve as strong motivation to action.

Much the same can be said concerning Hick’s soul-making theodicy. Hick thinks that if the world was a “permanent hedonistic paradise,”⁶⁹ then God’s purpose of building the character of his creation would be thwarted. If humans did not have the chance to freely choose to do morally good actions, then this would undermine their ability to become the right kind of persons. However, if humans are created at the start as the right kind of persons, then this objection loses any force it may have. One may object that this character is arrived at cheaply, so it by definition cannot be essentially morally perfect. This objection, if successful, would also

⁶⁷ William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. 4th edition (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2007): 120.

⁶⁸ This claim does not assume that the only moral agents other than God are humans. The same arguments given concerning God creating humans as essentially perfectly good would also apply to other created moral agents.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

undermine the character of God as well. If humans being granted essentially morally perfect character undermines such character, then why does it not undermine God's character, since he also did not have to go through the wringer to acquire his character? To distinguish how it applies to humans and not to God would seem to be a case of special pleading. This is also the problem with maintaining that God can be essentially morally perfect and possess morally significant freedom; yet, this is not possible for human beings. To make this distinction seems arbitrary, amounting to special pleading.

6.4 Human Limitations

One may try to object to the claim about special pleading by attempting to draw a legitimate distinction between God and humans that prevents humans from being able to be essentially morally perfect. One possibility is to point out that the consequences of actions are morally relevant. God, being omniscient, knows what the consequences of actions will be with certainty. Humans, however, are not omniscient. Since humans are not omniscient, even if their intentions were always morally pure, they would not always know the consequences of actions with certainty. So, humans could accidentally perform actions that have bad consequences. This limitation, it may be argued, prevents humans from being essentially morally perfect.

A possible response to this is that we are already talking about counterfactuals in considering what would be the case if God had created humans differently. We may as well stipulate that God also grant humans the cognitive faculties necessary in order to perform actions that do not have consequences that make them morally bad or wrong. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that omniscience is necessary for such an ability. Even so, what would be wrong with making humans omniscient? One could also try to deny that the consequences of actions are

morally relevant, but this seems incorrect. They may not be the sole criteria that determines the moral status of actions or rules, as Utilitarians claim they are, but they do seem morally relevant.

It may further be objected that God's moral nature is uncaused, whereas the moral natures of human beings are caused. This may be why humans are unable to be essentially perfectly good. It is not at all clear that this is a feature necessary for essential moral perfection. The way we experience morality in the actual world shows us that human beings develop their moral characters over time, but to claim that this fact could not have been different in the hands of an omnipotent being is very strong indeed. God's omnipotence is generally held to enable all actions that are logically possible and consistent with God's nature.⁷⁰ The inability of humans to be morally perfect seems more like a fact constrained by biology, psychology, and one's environment, rather than logic or inconsistency with the nature of God. Indeed, even if such a moral nature is inconsistent with the physical makeup of the human species, what matters would seem to be moral agents, not a particular species existing.

6.5 Skeptical Theism

The final objection to the evidential argument from evil that will be discussed in this section of the thesis is that made by skeptical theists towards other arguments of this type. A skeptical theist would respond to premise 2 by saying that if an essentially morally perfect God exists, then humans, who are cognitively limited, cannot expect that they would know what God, an omniscient being, would or would not do.⁷¹ Seeing no good that would outweigh the evils deriving from creating humans as less than essentially morally perfect, nor an equal or greater

⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. In *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*. 5th edition, edited by Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 244.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

evil that is prevented by allowing such evils, in fact, “is just what we should expect to be true if God does exist.”⁷²

To respond to this, let us borrow William Rowe’s distinction between different kinds of theism.⁷³ Rowe defines *standard theism* as the view that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, creator of the world exists. *Restricted standard theism* is simply the acceptance of the existence of the God that standard theism posits, but nothing more. *Expanded standard theism* is standard theism plus the doctrines of a particular religion. Rowe argues that skeptical theism does not save restricted standard theism from his own evidential argument from evil.⁷⁴ On a generic theism like this, we do not have more specific theological doctrines in place that might be used to respond to the argument. Without the ability to appeal to specific religious doctrines such as God hiding himself or only revealing his reasons for allowing various evils at a later date, restricted standard theism lacks the resources to blunt the force of his evidential argument from evil. Rowe concedes, however, that the specific religious doctrines within various versions of expanded theism may shield belief in God from his evidential argument from evil. If it is warranted, Rowe’s exempting expanded theism from his argument is an exemption that would also apply to the version of the evidential argument outlined above in section 6.2; thus, it is a point worth considering in more depth. While Rowe’s charitable approach to a view he is critiquing is laudable, this may be a case where he is more charitable than is warranted.

A troubling consequence of skeptical theism is the effect it has on human moral knowledge. It would seem that this same argument could be made concerning any action or command attributed to God. For example, consider the following passage from the Bible:

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ William Rowe, “Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra.” In *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): 161.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 165.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’⁷⁵

In this passage, God is claimed to have required, via the mouth of the prophet Samuel, the indiscriminate annihilation of the Amalekites. Children, infants, non-human animals, and no doubt many innocent women and men are to be brutally murdered because of a purported past event. If skeptical theism provides an appropriate defense when applied to evidential arguments from evil, why is it not appropriately applied to passages such as these? We may see no morally sufficient reasons God may have for commanding such a massacre, but that is just what we would expect, since God is omniscient, and we are not.

The problem with applying skeptical theism to this case is there is not much, if anything, that seems morally worse than what is commanded in this passage. If we cannot say with certainty that such slaughter is morally wrong, then when can we say for sure that anything is morally wrong? In this way, skeptical theism commits one to a general moral skepticism that would call into question our ordinary ability to make morally informed decisions in conducting our lives. There may be ways to object to this, but the skeptical theist has some work to do. If skeptical theism undermines our ability to have confidence in our moral faculties in such a drastic way, it seems highly implausible.

6.6 Final Remarks on the Evidential Argument from Evil

What has been argued above is surely not the last word on the evidential argument from evil offered in this section. The literature on evidential arguments from evil is vast. It should,

⁷⁵ 1 Samuel 15:2-3, New Revised Standard Version,

however, at least suffice for it to be taken seriously by those who wish to go along with Linville's defense of an essentially morally perfect God's morally significant freedom. If the argument from evil offered is successful, then an essentially morally perfect God's existence is undermined by the world as it is. A difference between this argument and other evidential arguments from evil is that it does not seek to provide evidence that theism is false. It only seeks to provide evidence that theism *construed a certain way* is false. Perhaps a perfectly good God exists, but, if the argument is successful, an essentially morally perfect God who has morally significant freedom does not.

If God exists, and is perfectly good rather than essentially perfectly good, then it is not metaphysically necessary that God perform only morally good actions. Such a God would have morally significant freedom in the way we normally speak of it and derive his goodness from never doing what is bad, even though it is metaphysically possible that he could. If this is the way we construe the goodness of God, however, it is not clear that he could serve as the particularistic paradigm of moral goodness. It is metaphysically possible that this God could perform morally bad actions, which would seem to undermine the foundation of morality.

It may be objected that this argument, if successful, undermines the value of the portion of this thesis on Linville's moral particularism. This is mistaken, because that section was only meant to show what would be the case *if* evaluative particularism were true. If it is not true, then an important component of Alston's defense of divine command theory fails.

This evidential argument from evil does not show that Linville's defense of the coherence of the concept of an essentially perfectly good God fails. It may be the case that in some possible world there exists an essentially perfectly good God who creates essentially perfectly good beings. There is evidence, however, for concluding that this world is not our own. There is,

consequently, evidence that the type of God evaluative particularism posits does not actually exist. This counts, therefore, as evidence against evaluative particularism, even if it does not show it to be incoherent.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis has been written as a systematic, cumulative case against the success of William Alston's defense of divine command theory. First, it was argued that if evaluative particularism is true, then moral particularism, an alternative theory of moral obligation to divine command theory that leaves no conceptual space for divine commands to be constitutive of moral obligation, is also true. If this is too strong, it is still the case that moral particularism is more parsimonious than divine command theory; thus, the two are not on equal footing. Moreover, on moral particularism, it is not necessary to suppose that God has no moral obligations. Apart from considerations about moral particularism, the section on the arbitrariness objection showed that Alston's defense fails because it does not make God's commands non-arbitrary. If it is a fundamental principle of moral agency that commands require reasons behind them in order to be non-arbitrary, then divine commands are arbitrary because divine command theory does not posit such reasons. If such reasons are posited, however, they suffice for moral obligation. If it is denied that moral reasons are required for commands to be non-arbitrary, it is still the case that God's essentially perfectly good nature underdetermines which good actions will be commanded. Finally, an evidential argument from evil showed that if this world had been created by an essentially perfectly good God with morally significant freedom, then humans and other moral agents would have this same kind of freedom to choose only between good actions. This is because God would grant such freedom to avoid moral evils in our world.

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