THE DIVINE FRIENDSHIP THEORY OF MORAL MOTIVATION

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Abstract. One task of moral theory is to answer the question, “Why be moral?” This paper describes a particular theistic theory’s account of moral motivation, which I call the Divine Friendship Theory. I illustrate its plausibility and promise by showing how well the theory does along two dimensions along which an answer to the why-be-moral question can fare better or worse, namely, being psychologically realistic and supporting recognizably moral actions and attitudes. Of the answer to the why-be-moral question. Given that the Divine Friendship Theory does well on each dimension, it deserves serious consideration.

In ancient western philosophy the “why be moral” question arises in the familiar, agenda-setting passage of Republic Book II. There Glaucon claims that “the life of the unjust person is much better than the life of a just one,” aiming to expose the daylight between the moral life and the life people are reasonable to be motivated to have
In modern moral philosophy, the question takes the form, “What reason is there to be moral?” (Gibbard 1990, 4).\(^1\)

The why-be-moral question is not just a philosopher’s invention. In his 1912 paper, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” H.A. Prichard writes:

If we reflect on our own mental history or on the history of the subject, we feel no doubt about the nature of the demand which originates the subject. Anyone who, stimulated by education, has come to feel the force of the various obligations in life, at some time comes to feel the irksomeness of carrying them out, and to recognize the sacrifice of interest involved; and, if thoughtful, he inevitably puts to himself the question, ‘Is there really a reason why I should act in the ways I have hitherto thought I ought to act?’ (Prichard 1912, 21)

According to Prichard, personal reflection puts pressure on moral theory to answer the why-be-moral question, not simply philosophical posturing. Of course, as a moral sense theorist, Prichard ends up denying that the question maintains its legitimacy when applied to particular moral obligations completely described (ibid, 27-28); but in absence of a moral epistemology where judgments about our moral obligations are “underivative and immediate,” the question remains in need of an answer.

Answering the why-be-moral question in a satisfying way proves notoriously difficult. According to Prichard, any answer to the why-be-moral question is doomed to fail. He argues that the more successful a reason is in explaining psychological motivation
to be moral, the less successfully it recommends actions and attitudes we recognize as part of morality; but the more a reason recommends recognizably moral actions and attitudes, the less able it is to explain how someone not already committed to being moral would come to be psychologically motivated to be moral. T.M. Scanlon calls this problem Prichard’s Dilemma.

Scanlon and others have followed Prichard in maintaining that psychological realism and moral recognizability are criteria for satisfactory answers that lie at opposite ends of a spectrum. That is, answers to the why-be-moral question can be satisfactory with respect to one of these considerations or another, but not both. My aims in this paper are twofold: first, I propose that this underlying assumption is incorrect, and second, I illustrate how one particular theistic answer to the why-be-moral question is psychologically realistic without this deterring from its motivating recognizably moral actions and attitudes.

The theory of moral motivation that generates this uniquely structured answer is the Divine Friendship Theory. On this theory, friendship with God is the final end of the moral life, such that being moral amounts to doing things which are conducive to such friendship; simultaneously, friendship with God satisfies the desires that humans find themselves with in the course of ordinary life, whether the desire is for community or pleasure or honor or riches. Thus, there is a plurality of reasons to be recognizably moral—a reason for each person that is psychologically realistically motivating for her.
And rather than it being a happy coincidence that there is this plurality of reasons, it is necessarily so given the kinds of creatures God has made us and the fact that God is the good—the ultimate satisfier of desires for a plurality of things that are good because God makes them so.

In section 1 I revisit Prichard’s text and argue that it does not set up a true dilemma. Rather, it provides us with two independent dimensions along which answers can be more or less satisfactory. Section 2 outlines the Divine Friendship Theory of moral motivation, then explains just how it manages to register on both the psychological realism dimension and moral recognizability dimension. This further upends the common assumption that the better an account fares with respect to one of these considerations, the worse it will fare with respect to the other. Section 3 offers a brief survey of prominent existing accounts of moral motivation, as a point of comparison, each of which yields an answer to the why-be-moral question that does well with respect to one of the dimensions at the expense of the other dimension. In section 4 I consider whether a path to a holistically satisfying answer is in fact open to nontheistic competitor theories with slight modifications, and whether Divine Friendship Theory sheds light on that path.

1 Prichard’s Dilemma

Let’s begin by looking at Prichard’s original argument. While it overreaches in its original form, it does offer a helpful principle for evaluating answers to the why-be-
moral question (though not the principle which Scanlon and others have supposed it offers).

1.1 Prichard’s Argument

Prichard articulates the argument below in the first pages of “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”:

1. Any answer to the why-be-moral question appeals to either (a) the agent’s own good or (b) the intrinsic goodness of moral action.

2. A satisfying answer will both have psychologically realistic motivating force and preserve a recognizable conception of what morality requires.

3. Answers of form (a) are psychologically realistic in their motivating force but collapse the moral into the prudential or self-interest and so fail to preserve a recognizable conception of what morality requires. (First horn)

4. Answers of form (b) preserve a recognizable conception of what morality requires but lack psychologically realistic account of the motivational force the reason has for a person not already committed to being moral. (Second horn)

5. There is no satisfying answer to the why-be-moral question. (Prichard 1912, 21-23)
Prichard eventually attempts to pull back the veil and reveal that attempting to answer the why-be-moral question is meaningless (hence moral philosophy, in its obsession with this question, rests on a mistake). In his estimation, the skeptic who poses the question is not missing some reason not hitherto recognized, but rather a perceptual experience no philosophy can – a sense of moral obligation (ibid. 27; Johnson 2007, 134). I don’t think we should follow Prichard to this conclusion, but his argument is suggestive.²

Premise 2, serving as the argument’s fulcrum, makes the statement I think deserves our attention. Prichard there identifies what we want out of an answer to the why-be-moral question. To take his dilemma seriously, we must accept that a satisfactory answer to the why-be-moral question must direct us to actions and attitudes that are recognizably moral, and it must have some psychological grip on ordinary folks. How does Prichard arrive at these as conditions on satisfactoriness of an answer—and more importantly, should we agree with him? I will argue below that we should.

1.2 Psychological Realism

Start with psychologically realistic motivational force: a good answer must explain the practical reason-giving force of morality, rather than simply taking it for granted, or denying that morality has any motivational force. Prichard’s text indicates that we should be concerned that the answer serves as a psychologically plausible motivator because of how the why-be-moral question gets raised in ordinary life: there comes a
time when a person who is reflective and educated comes to question the authority of what she’s considered moral duty, and an answer is supposed to address this person in such a way that she could be motivated by it to act morally.

On a common way of understanding this point in the literature, a person will question the authority of morality when moral obligations come into conflict with considerations that seem to favor her own personal good. To illustrate:

**Sara:** A university student, Sara, has always believed she is morally obligated to not deceive others. But she finds herself one day in a situation where she stands to benefit personally from deceiving her professor; if she calls in sick for a class, she can skip and go to see her all-time favorite band on its reunion tour just a few hours away, and also not be taken down a grade for her absence. Sara might reasonably question why the moral requirement trumps the nonmoral reason to skip and go to the concert.

The trouble with the conflict interpretation is that it is not sufficiently ecumenical. It does not show the why-be-moral question to be live and applicable to all first-order normative moral theories, since it assumes that such conflicts between moral and nonmoral reasons are inevitable. Some moral theories do not allow for this—notably, versions of eudaimonism on which moral action just is action productive of an individual’s and community’s flourishing. As Wedgewood puts it, “non-moral reasons never really conflict with moral requirements at all… there is a reason for you to take a
course of action if and only if that course of action contributes to your well-being to a sufficient degree; secondly, no course of action that involves failing to conform to a moral requirement can contribute to your well-being to a sufficient degree,” (Wedgewood 2013, 48). But eudaimonism is an explicit target of Prichard’s argument. So the conflict interpretation cannot be the right.

A more plausible interpretation is this. In the course of reflection, a person might question the authority of morality because she doesn’t understand why moral considerations should have a decisive, overriding force in her reasoning and decision-making. There are lots of standards and ends to which a person might appeal in the course of identifying her reasons for action or attitudes. For instance, friendship is an end that gives people reasons to show partiality to their friends. Then there are reasons generated by morality, that one comes to think of as one among many sources of normative support for a decision. Why does morality generate overriding reasons, she may ask. Without any account of the source of morality, or what makes morality so important, it makes sense for Sara to ask why it is worth organizing one’s life around this system of norms; just saying that the norms are moral doesn’t seem enough.5

Another case illustrates how the why-be-moral question might arise even in the absence of conflict between moral and nonmoral reasons:

**Jameel and Jordan:** Jameel starts reflecting on the moral duties he has taken such care to discharge in the past, and can see nothing in the morality system especially
compelling, such that it demands his allegiance or his orienting his life around it.

He decides that organizing his life around his romantic partner Jordan is worthwhile, however; and it just so happens that Jordan follows moral norms assiduously and cares a great deal that others do too, so Jameel ends up having reasons to do what is in fact moral without conceding that he has reason to be moral, per se.

In this case, we can grant the eudaimonist that Jameel’s wellbeing is tied up with morality such that Jameel never has nonmoral reasons that contravene his moral reasons. And yet, the eudaimonist acknowledges that Jameel’s attitude towards morality seems reasonable. It is the moral philosopher’s job to explain to Jameel exactly how being moral, on the correct conception, is conducive to his wellbeing. Only then is it psychologically realistic to expect Jameel to treat moral reasons as overriding reasons. Further, Jameel is no psychopath. He is the sort of sincere questioner to whom moral philosophy could give a good answer (pace Prichard).

1.3 Moral Recognizability

The second condition on an answer’s being satisfactory is moral recognizability. Here Prichard expresses the need for an answer to conserve our commonsense views of what counts as a moral principle, what morality requires of us, and so on. The motivation to be moral shouldn’t be something that would turn moral motivation into merely pragmatic, self-interested motivation. We can read Prichard’s charge against utilitarians
and eudaimonists whom he accuses of collapsing morality into the self-interested prudential, as a charge of changing the subject. Morality is supposed to be about how we regard and treat others (at least in part) and how other-regarding reasons should constrain our choices. If the reason to be moral reduces to a reason to act in one’s own self interest, it is hard to see this as a reason to be moral, where morality includes other regarding and even altruistic attitudes and actions. What we need is a reason for actions and attitudes recognizable as morally right when this comes apart from self interest (e.g. when my interest in impressing my colleagues would be thwarted by arriving to a meeting late because I was assisting an injured stranger I came across on my way to work).

It would be objectionable for an answer to the why-be-moral question to solely appeal to one’s own self-interest since much of commonsense morality cannot be chalked up to requirements to preserve oneself. Commonsense morality pulls us beyond self-interest. Consider what would happen if we coaxed Sara into being motivated to keep acting honestly and responsibly, but the rationale we gave her was that she would benefit most from this. That is, to the extent that an answer to the why-be-moral question requires a revisionist conception of morality, it is unsatisfying. So I take it we should accept Prichard’s premise 2.

1.4 Having It Both Ways
Premise 1, I am going to argue, is false. Contemporary theorists have assumed something like premise 1—that you can offer a theory of motivation that is psychologically realistic or that gives us recognizable moral content but not both. But the way Prichard puts it is implausibly strong: all answers “of necessity” fall into only one of the two categories of appealing to a person’s own interests or the intrinsic goodness of moral action, and so they falter with respect to one or the other of the conditions on a satisfying answer to the why-be-moral question. Obviously, a straightforward appeal to self-interest will fail the moral recognizability criterion if there is nothing more to the theory, as we saw in the case of Sara. A straightforward and simple appeal to the intrinsic goodness of the moral will fail on the psychological realism criterion, as in Jameel’s case. But Prichard, Scanlon following him, and others take for granted that there is a single dimension along which an answer can fall, and the poles at each end are psychological realism and moral recognizability, respectively.7

We can challenge this assumption. An answer can fall into a third category in one of several ways. First, the theory of motivation might appeal to some nonmoral, nonprudential domain of normative reasons which ground a justifying reason and psychologically realistic motivation to be moral, rather than intrinsic goodness of moral action. For example, someone who is especially attracted to what is beautiful might have a motivating, aesthetic reason to act heroically to save someone because of the beauty of the story it would make part of that person’s life. So long as the aesthetic
reason does not bottom out in a prudential reason (some sort of reason to satisfy one’s desires to create beauty), but has normative pull on its own, it could generate reasons to have moral attitudes and perform moral actions so long as they exhibit the sort of beauty one has aesthetic reasons to promote.

Second, an answer might give us recognizable moral content and, given some picture of human psychology, in fact be a motivating reason for most people by luck or chance. Suppose, for example, humans evolve to feel disgust at the sight of death, especially of their own conspecifics. Then by luck, we will all have the sort of psychology that gives us motivation to avoid inducing or allowing human death. If morality requires that we avoid inducing or allowing death, then it will turn out we luckily have the motivations we need by nature to act morally in this regard.

Third, possibly each and every person has a psychologically realistic reason to be moral, though these reasons differ for different people. A long disjunct could countenances all the reasons that would in fact promote doing the recognizably moral thing in any situation. In any case, I do not see a way of justifying and blocking these possibilities without begging the question.

So, here is what we should learn from Prichard:

**Evaluation Criterion:** A is a good answer to the why-be-moral question to the extent that is both psychological realistic and morally recognizable.
In the next section I’ll sketch the major claims of the Divine Friendship Theory and in the section following that, I’ll show how it supplies a good answer to the why-be-moral question according to Evaluation Criterion.

2 Divine Friendship

The Divine Friendship Theory emerges from ideas in writings of Thomas Aquinas together with an insight about the nature of friendship that translates to human-divine friendship. The benefit of starting with Aquinas’s views is that they partly constitute a worldview already accepted by many non-philosophers (and some philosophers). If this worldview can yield a good theory of moral motivation, so much the better for it.

The theory requires us to accept a couple of claims about human flourishing, human psychology, and God. Below I’ll take each starting point in turn. Then I flesh out the picture of what divine-human friendship looks like. By the end of the section we will be in a position to see how the theory yields a satisfying answer to the why-be-moral question.

2.1 Eudaimonism

Regarding human flourishing, the view is first of all eudaimonist. The best thing for humans to be and do is whatever is conducive to their flourishing—their eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is a kind of life; it is constituted by enjoying goods, whether those goods are activities or products of those activities. For instance,
arguably a component of a flourishing human life is friendship, and so a human who flourishes will engage in the activities of or enjoy the products of friendship.

Second, the view is pluralist about flourishing: there is a plurality of goods that, when enjoyed, constitute human flourishing. Intimate relationships are a good, pleasure is a good, aesthetic experience and play and intellectual activity, and so on. These goods are distinct and do not reduce to some further thing (like pleasure, as a 19th century utilitarian might contend). The goods that make up a flourishing human life are variegated, and good activities may not use all of the same skills or capacities.

2.2 Psychology of Desire

Now onto the first psychological claim of the view: humans find human goods desirable. We desire pleasure, family, friendship, community, aesthetic experience, play, transcendent experience, health, and so on. Perhaps not each and every human finds each and every human good worth pursuing; nor is it likely there is one of these goods that every human finds some one good worth pursuing and organizing her life around pursuing. Perhaps Anne aspires to become a great footballer and pursues play; Bijou loves her family and pursues intimate relationships with them; Carolina is drawn to music and wants to spend her life creating meaningful aesthetic experiences with it. But Carolina doesn’t
care much for sports or physical play, and Bijou has no time for music; Anne is a loner off the football pitch.

There need not be a one-size-fits-all claim about human desire on this view. But if we were to survey humans across cultures, ages, geographic locations, we would expect to find that for every human being, there is at least one good constitutive of human flourishing that psychologically appeals to that person as worth their pursuit, or enjoyable.¹¹

The second psychological claim is that humans have their own reason and will.¹² These two features enable us to choose freely our own ends. We take a view on what is worthwhile or valuable and can act in accordance with our evaluative judgments to bring about, achieve, or enjoy what we take to be worthwhile. We thus exercise control over our ends and the shape our flourishing takes in a way (it seems to Aquinas) other creatures cannot.

2.3 God’s Goodness and Our Good

The theistic claims the theory needs are simple and enjoy popularity in the Western Medieval theology and philosophy. First, God is the good. Now there are two senses in which this is true. One is that God causes all goods. Everything in earthly life that is good has the property of goodness because God has made it so. But in the more fundamental sense (from a normative point of view), God is identical to the good—if we want a reference for “the Good,” the kind of absolute
and ultimate good Plato thought philosophy would allow us to know, that referent is God (Adams 1999). God leaves behind an impression of God’s own goodness in God’s creation. Put another way, each and every earthly good has its goodness because of God, and God ultimately embodies in the most perfect way every kind of goodness. Thus, if something is worthwhile, desirable, then it is either identical to God (though conceptually distinguishable from God), part of God (if you reject very strict simplicity), or owes to God its goodness as effect to caus. This theistic claim finds its way across the texts of thinkers as diverse as Aquinas, Scotus, Al Ghazali, Robert Adams, and Linda Zagzebski (Aquinas 1926, MacDonald 1991, Stump and Kretzmann 1991, Adams 1999, Zagzebski 2004).

The second claim, another popular idea in Medieval thought, goes like this: an intimate relationship with God, best thought of as friendship, is the end of every human life. Aquinas says, “God is the final end of humans and all other things... for the human and other rational creatures bring about their final end by knowing and loving God,” (ST I-II 1.8). Elsewhere he characterizes charity as “a certain friendship of humans with God,” and charity is the chief theological virtue (ST II-II 23.1). The significance of friendship with God admittedly falls out of focus in contemporary theistic ethics, where resemblance and godlikeness often figure more centrally (e.g. Adams 1999, Zagzebski 2004). Thomists, though, follow Aquinas in averring that divine friendship is the best we can hope for, the

Importantly, on Aquinas’s view, the sort of relationship creatures enjoy with God when they attain this end differs significantly based on the sorts of natural abilities the creatures have. Aquinas holds that God creates the universe, and in it a variety of kinds of beings, each with a different nature. All creatures have a final end—the best achievement and highest good possible for beings of their kind. He says that in one sense, all creatures have the same final end, namely union with God (ST I-II 1.8). In another sense, the final ends of creatures differ by kind; they differ by the kind of union possible for them given the sorts of things they are and capacities they naturally have (ibid).

God endows humans with our own reason and will—abilities other kinds of creatures (it is supposed) do not have. So, the kind of union humans can have with God is very different from the kind that other creatures can have in virtue of these features. It is not ideal, for instance, for God to unilaterally will that we be in God’s presence forever, without our consent or assent. It would not be fitting for that to be our perfected state, because a key facet of our humanity, our volition, would be bypassed rather than swept up in that state. Human beings enjoy wide latitude in the kinds of ends they may set for themselves, and they continue to enjoy latitude in their final, flourishing state in the sense that, what
God wills for human beings ultimately is to be united with them through, not in spite of, our reason and will.

God wills for human beings to be united with him by *mutual knowledge*. The kind of knowledge of God that serves as the human final end is second-personal (Benton 2020). In fact, union with God for beings with reason and will (humans) requires the sorts of things we might expect to see in perfect union amongst beings with reason and will in earthly life—namely, in close human friendship. Unlike our symbiotic relationships with other creatures that align themselves with us by doing what is in fact good for us but unknowingly or unintentionally, beings with reason and will must intentionally and voluntarily align themselves with each other to experience union.

### 2.4 The Shape of Divine Friendship

Aquinas describes the kind of charity that qualifies as genuine friendship between creatures like us as (a) love, (b) mutual well-wishing, (c) based on communication of some good. In divine human friendship, God and humans wish the good for each other and God communicates God’s happiness to us as God’s friends (ST II-II 23.1).

Another part of the Thomistic kind of view of divine friendship that will make the Divine Friendship Theory of moral motivation work is that conditions for entering a divine friendship differ from conditions for *culminating* that
friendship, just as conditions for entering a human friendship differ from the conditions for being, say, a best friend.

Imagine I initiate friendship with a coworker by buying her a coffee, not knowing that she only drinks decaf tea, not coffee. Later, we go to lunch, and she reserves a table outside in the summer heat. Luckily, I am delighted, for I prefer the warm blanket of humid, summer air to the steely cold of air-conditioned indoors. We are making good faith efforts to draw near to each other and finding out what that takes. Sometimes we take steps in the right direction by accident, as when my friend reserves the outdoor table, and other times we learn how better to draw near to one another by making mistakes and finding out what in fact the other person wills and desires, as when I buy my friend coffee. All along, we are displaying mutual good will. We want to want what the other wants, in the abstract anyway. We are just unsure what concretely the other person wants. And that’s pretty much all it takes to initiate a friendship.

So too in divine friendship. We cannot know what God in fact wills, Aquinas points out (ST I-II 19.1). What we can know, given that God is the good, is that whatever God wills, God wills the good and does not will the bad. What we take to be the good, we ought to will, and what we take to be the bad, we ought to nil. Sometimes we will pursue things that are de re good, but not know it. And like the friend who reserves the outdoor table we stumble into closer friendship. God sets
this low bar for entering divine friendship because God is aware of the effects of
sin and evil on our cognitive grasp of what is in fact good or bad, and in God’s
grace, still wants to give us a chance to reach our final end of union with God.

Of course, that final end, complete divine friendship, will eventually look as
different as my bourgeoning friendship with my coworker from my relationship
with my best friend from childhood. Think of Homer’s claim that nothing is
better than when a man and woman live together being of one mind (Odyssey
6.184). This kind of friendship forms around a shared vision of the truth and the
good. As C.S. Lewis puts it, borrowing from Emerson, these friends answer in the
affirmative to the questions, “Do you see the same truth?” and “Do you care
about the same truth?” (Lewis 1988, 66). Even though we can form friendships
while being unknowingly at odds with respect to what we care about or believe,
seeing or caring about just one of the same things and disagreeing about a range
of other things, mature friendships display a unified, shared evaluative outlook. I
need to say more about acquiring such a shared outlook before we are ready to
see how the Divine Friendship Theory supplies an answer to the why-be-moral
question.

2.5 Sharing Evaluative Outlooks

We have a lot to learn about divine friendship from the neo-Aristotelian model of
virtue friendship between humans, even if human friendship cannot do the work
needed to answer the why-be-moral question in a satisfying way vis a vis moral recognizability. In chapter 7 of *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Talbot Brewer paints a picture of friendships of virtue as chiefly characterized by coming to *share a perspective* from which the variety of goods in human life are increasingly visible to both parties. This perspective is something almost any human seeking a good life could come to share. Brewer explains that in virtue friendship, each friend helps deepen the other’s understanding of what is valuable, brings to light new textures and dimensions of goodness in the world to the other.

For example, Jameel and Jordan may both appreciate the value of play, but while Jameel enjoys board games, Jordan spends his spare time at the skate park. Through engaging in these activities together, the unique form of play and its value in both skateboarding and board-game playing is disclosed to Jordan and Jameel. By seeing the activity through the other’s eyes, so to speak, each person can appreciate its value. On Brewer’s view, friends of virtue access goods already there, goods they each might appreciate in some more abstract way initially. But their discovery of those goods and attendant appreciation comes, necessarily, through the opening and sharing of an “evaluative outlook” (Brewer 2009, 240).

Of course, there is some sharing of evaluative outlooks in almost all forms of friendship (except between narcissists). Yet what is remarkable about friendships of virtue, according to neo-Aristotelians, is the way the friends pull each other
into an ever increasingly universally affirmable outlook. “As we kindle and deepen human relationships of this ubiquitous sort, our evaluative outlooks are reshaped so as increasingly to be affirmable as good form all relevant social perspectives... Virtue, then, emerges as a concomitant of an exceedingly valuable kind of human relationship that is not possible in its absence,” (ibid). When each person in the friendship cares about genuine human goods, and not merely her own self-interest, and they form the habit of becoming more and more open to new human goods in their various forms, the hope is that the friends will arrive at an evaluative outlook that any human could share.

We can see the way this would go in a friendship between a human and divine person. A human who enters a relationship with God—Sara, let’s say—has an interest in coming to share a vision of what God values just as she might have reason to share a vision of what her human partner Abram values. To get closer to God, she will need to see eye to eye with God on matters that matter. God on this view is loving toward all God has made, nonhuman and human alike. God’s perspective involves seeing the value of all creatures in virtue of the ways in which they resemble God as the good in manners appropriate to their kids. Further, God creates certain creatures with capacities for generative love and reason, with the ability and discretion to forge genuinely new practices and ways of life (within a sphere of permissibility) which are good in novel ways.
Growing in friendship with God will require a human person to come to appreciate other creatures and relationships with them, because her divine friend cares greatly about these others, desires their good and union with them. The evaluative outlook God and Sara come to share will have at least that as content any human could share.

2.6 The Divine Friendship Theory’s Answer

The Divine Friendship Theory offers an answer to the why-be-moral question that is both psychologically realistic and morally recognizable. I have highlighted the claims about God and the claims about human desire, reason, will, and happiness that enable it to do so.

First, because God is the good, the cause of all human goods, and all goods are best satisfied by union with God, we know that any human good a person might organize their lives around will be achieved best in the context of a friendship with God. If Sara seeks honor, Jameel cares about community and family, and Jordan is motivated by fairness or by enjoyment of play, all will find something fulfilling in a life of growing in friendship with God, since God can offer the best of honor, community, family, fairness, and play. The reasons to be in friendship with God are psychologically realistic for each and every human person.
Second, God wills creaturely goods, and that all creatures be united with God in ways that are suitable given their natural abilities. Humans, being endowed with reason and will, should thus be united with God in friendship that involves a shaping and sharing of evaluative outlooks. Our final end therefore consists in a divine friendship where both humans and God come to be committed and responsive to the same values and goods, and to will what the other wills. This will require humans to will the good of all creatures and God’s union with them, since that is what God wills. Divine friendship thus generates and preserves recognizably moral concern because of the fact of omnibenevolence and the fact of omnisubjectivity.

Third, we can go beyond very basic recognizably moral content on this view. God appreciates the perspective of every rational being and is motivated to take into account specific features of what humans value, both individually and as communities. God wants humans to use their reason to set standards for normative evaluation of human actions and attributes, and there is a surprising degree of latitude within what God generally wants for creatures of the humankind to do and be so that there are a plurality of acceptable standards humans can settle on (Aquinas calls this “determination,” Summa Contra Gentiles III.1.4). We enjoy wide latitude in the kinds of ends we can set for ourselves, even though we all, qua human, have a final end fixed by God’s will that we be united
with God. So, the variety of textures and shapes of morally acceptable ways of life will also take on value for God as God comes to share the perspective of the humans building up those ways of life.

Importantly, since the good is unified on the theistic picture here (the good is God), this restricts the fact of reasonable pluralism. The ways of life that reasonable people would not reject in fact will converge because there is a state of the world in which the realization of what they have reason to value is compossible—namely, the state of beatitude.

3 Evaluating Alternatives

We are now positioned to think about how the Divine Friendship Theory’s answer measures up against other answers to the why-be-moral question using Evaluative Criterion. In a brief survey here I aim to show that, plausibly, its answer is at least as satisfactory on the moral recognizability and psychological realism dimensions as other going answers and hence deserves our serious attention.

3.1 Neo-Aristotelianism

Consider first the neo-Aristotelian answer to the question. On a view like Brewer’s, ubiquitous and valuable human relationships— character friendships— have the power to reshape “our evaluative outlooks... so as increasingly to be
affirmable as good from all relevant social perspectives,” (2009, 240). The content of evaluative outlook one arrives at in a character friendship has recognizably moral content because it displays “universal self-affirmability,” that is, “it affirms all possible embodiments of the same outlook, whether in its possessor or in others,” (ibid 244). Since a primary feature of morality is the ability of moral actions and attitudes to be affirmed universally, from any reasonable person’s point of view, it looks as though the neo-Aristotelian answer is quite satisfactory with respect to moral recognizability.

If the ideal of character friendship were attainable, it would provide a powerful answer to the why-be-moral question along both the moral recognizability and psychological realism dimensions. The empirical claim needed is that each and every human desires to be part of a character friendship of the sort Brewer describes. If it turned out that what is required for good friendship is the development of this broad outlook whereby one comes to affirm all instances of human goods, wherever one finds them, then by dint of having psychologically realistic reason to have good friendships, everyone would have a psychologically realistic reason to be and do what is recognizably moral.

Both neo-Aristotelians and Kantians have attempted to leverage the psychological fact that humans actually all value some form of relationship like friendship to generate a theory of moral motivation. Brewer argues that
Aristotelian virtue friendship is a constituent of flourishing, so we all have reason to want this for ourselves. And virtue friendship requires that each party acquires an outlook on what is good and worthwhile that can be shared by any person regardless of their personal history, tradition, culture, and so on (ideally). That is, the evaluative outlook is (nearly) universal.

But some have pointed out that it is not obvious how the evaluative perspective arrived at through human character friendship will be universal enough to look like morality’s universal point of view. True, affirming all human lives as good and human goods in all their forms would keep one from violating recognizable moral norms, such as stealing, cheating, murdering, lying. Character friendship pulls us into an increasingly moral outlook on life. Insofar as we all have reason to have such friendship, we all have reason to have a recognizably moral outlook with respect to these actions. But objectors wonder why we should bet on all forms of human goods and ways of life being compatibly affirmable from one outlook.

Bernard Williams describes perfect Aristotelian communities as possibly offering rival pictures of the good life, with thick evaluative concepts that do not translate for those outside the community. Culturally specific conceptions of the good life emerge and compete; there is not convergence of ethical knowledge as there is supposed to be convergence of scientific knowledge (Williams 1986).
Brewer, too, accepts this limitation on the neo-Aristotelian view. What undergirds the confidence that each thickly conceived human good can be appreciated from an increasingly universal viewpoint?

For instance, we might worry that a devout Catholic seeking to appreciate all human goods available to her might not, at the end of the day, be able to affirm the value of the Buddhist practice of yoga and seeking a state of nirvana. Without the ability to value the Buddhist practices properly, the Catholic person may fail to be motivated to respect that practice, give others space and resources to engage in that practice; in the extreme case she may even actively seek to displace Buddhists and replace their sacred places with houses of Catholic worship. Evaluative outlooks shared in real communities of human beings tend to be used as justification to exert totalizing influence, rather than to pull us towards acceptance and openness to new forms of human flourishing.

The ideal of friendship proposed by the neo-Aristotelian is certainly attractive, but it is doubtful whether the form of friendship that would generate more than bare bones moral prohibitions is attainable by human communities. And that is because, psychologically, there is no guarantee that we will end up affirming every human good and flourishing life in any form it might take just because we form good human friendships. Our embeddedness in our own communities, personal histories, and traditions limits the extent we can step
outside of our own ethical points of view. At least, so say Williams and others. This is just one respect in which one might want more out of a neo-Aristotelian answer to the why-be-moral question. I will return to this at the end when considering whether secular views can make use of the Divine Friendship Theory strategy.

3.2 Kantianism

Turn now to neo-Kantian answers to the why-be-moral question. Perhaps the most compelling version also draws on the importance of human relationships, but relationships which should be more promising in terms of their guarantee of generating recognizably moral concerns. Scanlon argues that relationships of mutual recognition are in fact valued by most humans (1998, 154). So reasons to do what preserves relationships of mutual recognition are reasons that will be psychologically realistic for most people. Scanlon argues that things people in fact substantively value—friendship, familial ties, and so on—either depend on relationships of mutual recognition or do not in fact trump the value of relationships of mutual recognition when weighed properly from a reasonable point of view. He thinks we can thus make a piecemeal argument from every value people in fact organize their lives around to the reasons to value of relationships of mutual recognition.
At the same time, relationships of mutual recognition are just relationships that require moral other-regarding actions and attitudes. They are the relationships constituted by living together on terms reasonable others would not reasonably reject. And recognizable moral norms just are those norms that reasonable others would not reasonably reject. Therefore, so long as we have psychologically realistic reason to maintain relationships of mutual recognition, we have psychologically realistic reasons to be moral.

Standard objections to this theory include the idea that it makes contingent whether there are reasons to treat nonhuman animals that are not “reasonable persons” in recognizably moral ways. A nonhuman animal or species must have a trustee that cares about them in order for there to be reasons that a reasonable person would reject certain ways of treating them. But it does seem that care for the animals and even the environment more broadly is part of the recognizable content of morality. Further, as Scanlon admits, self-regarding activities and actions not having to do with what we owe each other or could reject, such as some forms of sexual engagement, falls out of the picture as it is not part of the content of what reasonable people could reasonably reject (171-173).

Another objection to the neo-Kantian contractualist theory of moral motivation is that it cannot countenance psychologically realistic reasons for everyone to be moral (Rieder 2015). Finally, Scanlon has to adopt something he
terms “parametric universalism” because what people have reason to want, and so what is valuable for them, "depends on the conditions in which they are placed, and among these conditions are facts about what most people around them want, believe, and expect," (341). Thus the content of morality is variable in different societal contexts and there is no promise of convergence.

I do not intend any of the above as knockdown arguments against these secular theories. Rather, it is instructive to think about the ways even the most appealing of theories can fall short with respect to one or another of the dimensions of satisfactoriness of an answer to the why-be-moral question. The neo-Kantian and neo-Aristotelian answers share a very basic structure: (1) look at what most or all humans in fact value, (2) from this, infer that most or all humans have reason to value a special kind of relationship with others, and (3) show that the special kind of relationship requires actions, feelings, and thoughts that are part and parcel of commonsense morality. The Divine Friendship Theory of moral motivation works in much the same way. The main difference is that the relationship everyone or most have reason to value is divine friendship. The question we must ask in closing is whether, in principle, secular theories could take on board some of the features of the Divine Friendship Theory to avoid objections that beleaguer them.

4 What We Can Learn from Divine Friendship Theory
The Divine Friendship Theory of moral motivation illustrates that an answer to the why-be-moral question can be both psychologically realistic and morally recognizable. The trick, it seems, is in forging the right connection between the goods people in fact desire and value, on the one hand, and the good that converges and is good for all creatures great and small. The previous section pointed out some of the objections raised against prominent secular theories of moral motivation. Can these theories take on board anything akin to divine friendship to fend off such objections?

4.1 Convergence

One of the ways Divine Friendship Theory preserves recognizable moral content in its answer to the why-be-moral question is by positing something that sets a limit on the normative standards a community or friends in pursuit of the good might set for themselves. God’s will sets this limit, for the end of the localized, historical community and its members is an end beyond their shared life together. It is shared life with God. And that is a shared life that all other human communities and creatures have to be able to coexist alongside, at the least, participate in, at the best. God does want to share a perspective with particular human communities. But God is the creator of all human beings, and so God cannot come to endorse an evaluative outlook on which some humans flourish while others languish, as in the Homeric community, or some humans’ good
consists in self-aggrandizement over and above the rest as in the Nietzschean community (Ez. 33:11, “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live,”).

Suppose a neo-Aristotelian insisted that, despite our lack of epistemic access to which character friendships actually have this perspective, it is humanly possible to be in a friendship that generates an evaluative outlook which will be universally affirmable from any community. The remaining question would be whether there is psychologically realistic reason to prefer being in that sort of community or friendship as opposed to other character friendships. The neo-Aristotelian might posit some natural and ubiquitous desire for truth as a ground for this, and that only this character friendship provides access to certain truths all humans seek to know. While this has the downside of not being housed in an existing tradition and worldview articulated and adopted rather widely, in comparison to Aquinas’s view, it nonetheless seems like a fruitful way to take on board a helpful aspect of the Divine Friendship Theory.

4.2 Nonhuman and Nonrational Creatures

The Divine Friendship Theory also seems to have an advantage over the substantive constructivist view because the outlook humans and God come to share is the outlook that is shareable by the creator of all beings, not just rational
ones. But might a neo-Kantian expand its criteria for reasonable rejection, or posit an anthropology whereby all reasonable beings care about all living creatures? Again, this avenue seems open but perhaps ad hoc or unmotivated by other features of the theory. If neo-Kantians can work out a view on which we have grounds for constraining our actions and attitudes based on what nonreasonable creatures would reject, while retaining the Kantian core views about the supreme value of rationality in a person, this would be promising (while solving other problems for Kantian normative ethics as well!).

Finally, could a neo-Kantian contractualist claim that it is not just probable, but necessary, that what most people in fact value is something that gives them a reason to be in relationships of mutual recognition? I am not hopeful that she can substantiate such a claim. Many neo-Kantians have tried to make such transcendental arguments about the value of humanity without much uptake from those not already committed to the Kantian project (Korsgaard 1996). But perhaps a neo-Kantian argument involving the hope in God could bridge this apparent gap.

This brings us to a question about other theistic theories of moral motivation: Is any view that brings God into the picture going to be able to give an answer to the why-be-moral question that is satisfactory both with respect to both moral recognizability and psychological realism? One test case for this is
Robert Adams’s quasi-Kantian view. Adams draws on Kant’s notion that we need to believe in God as someone who imposes “moral order in the universe,” in order to be rational in thinking of our moral ends as attainable—to justify to ourselves being moral (Adams 1995, 75). Adams argues forcefully that we do indeed “have a moral need to believe in more particular possibilities of moral ends, as proximate objects of moral faith,” (my emphasis, ibid. 82). On this view, the motivation for being moral rests on a faith that it is possible to achieve the goods, individual and common, which we aim to bring about. Moreover, we need motivation to be moral in a deep-rooted way and not only to comply outwardly with moral norms; that is, we need motivation to be morally virtuous (ibid. 83). Hope in God as a purveyor of moral order can supply the basis for faith that our moral ends are achievable and many of our endeavors worth undertaking.

The reason to be moral one might offer Sara or Jordan on this view is something like, You will need faith in morality—a real commitment to being moral—to get along in life, treating the ends you undertake as worthwhile. And this disposition of moral faith, displayed as a sort of “felt determination” or “inner force” that propels you through living morally, is needed to sustain practices that are part of the fabric of our lives, like treating others with dignity and finding meaning in our own lives (ibid., 93).
This sort of theistic answer to the why-be-moral question involves divine providence but not divine friendship. It seems to me that what makes the Divine Friendship Theory’s answer so compelling on the psychological front is that one becomes increasingly attached to a person who embodies the good or goods one already cares about. It is not only that being moral will generate the goods we want antecedently; being moral is more than a carrot. Instead, we have psychologically realistic reason to internalize the evaluative outlook associated with morality as we find ourselves drawn into a vision or perspective on value afforded by getting up close to the source of value. Thus, my hunch is that the friendship aspect of the Divine Friendship Theory can take us beyond what other theistic theories offer on this front.

4.3 Conclusion

I have argued that Prichard’s original argument is unsound but not unhelpful. For Prichard is wrong in saying that necessarily, an answer to the why-be-moral question cannot be both psychologically realistic and morally recognizable. The Divine Friendship Theory solidifies the objection, demonstrating that an answer can be quite psychologically realistic, meeting our Evaluative Criterion.

The most recent and compelling versions of constructivism and neo-Aristotelianism have in common two things: being pluralist about the sorts of values or desires that could give one reason to be moral, and maintaining that
one’s reasons to be moral develop and increase diachronically in friendship with others. The Divine Friendship theory is pluralist about values that give one psychologically realistic reasons to be moral, connects the value of being moral to friendship, but goes further in preserving an ordinary conception of morality in what it tells us there is reason to do. If I am right, then the Divine Friendship Theory provides an answer to the why-be-moral question that meets the Evaluative Criterion, and to that extent, it deserves our serious consideration.
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As Gibbard puts it, “To ponder how to live, to reason about how to live, is in effect to ask what kind of life it is rational to live,” and we can sensibly ask, “Does the rational life do without morality?” (Gibbard 1990, 4). So, as Gibbard goes on to point out, “The tie of morals to reason supports the whole of moral theory,” (ibid, 5).

For discussion of why-be-moral problem as a pseudo-problem, see Birnbacher (2015, 13-30). For an argument that the why-be-moral question is meaningless if understood as asking for reasons to be moral, see Schaber (2015, 32-41). I do take aim at these views here. Nor will I assume, with those on the other side, that it is simply intuitive that the why-be-moral question demands an answer that is motivating and nontrivial (Scanlon 1998, 150; Rieder 2015, 3).

According to some, Prichard’s way of seeing the why-be-moral problem is predicated on a mistaken view, articulated by Sidgwick, of practical reasons. On this view, practical reason provides both agent-relative reasons that are grounded in an agent’s own good and agent-neutral reasons grounded in the universal good, or the sum of values of consequences (see Brewer 2009 and Wedgewood 2013, 43-44).

For discussion of bringing together prudential and moral considerations via the concept of wellbeing, see Tiberius (2013).

See, for example, Killoren (2016) and Dasgupta (2016).

One of the reasons I will not consider nonnaturalist utilitarian theories of moral motivation in section 3 is that they have failed to escape this criticism time and again. Shamik Dasgupta (2018) puts it succinctly: “the non-naturalist proposes to explain why something like pleasure should be promoted by saying that pleasure has P. If she then says that for pleasure to have P just is for pleasure to be something we should promote, she has run a very tight circle indeed.” Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to explain the omission of utilitarian theories from this paper.

Rieder considers these two “competing desiderata” as poles, and the line between them as a spectrum along which answers lie (2015, 14). For this reason he suggests that one give a complex answer, not a single answer that purports to satisfy both desiderata at once. Yet the spectrum view gives more credit to premise 1 than I want to allow. I prefer to think of the conditions as providing two dimensions (as
opposed to Scanlon’s one dimension) along which answers can lie. Unlike a spectrum with two poles, on a two-dimensional grid, it is possible for an increase along one dimension to be accompanied by no movement or increase along the other dimension in terms of satisfactoriness.

8 Here I am thinking of Mark Schroeder’s hypotheticalism (2008).

9 There is a close cousin of Evaluation Criterion, a comparative criterion according to which an answer A is better than an answer B just in case A registers higher than B on one dimension and at least as high as B on the other dimension. It would be worth comparing Kantian and Aristotelian accounts of moral motivation using this cousin of Evaluation Criterion, but would be beyond the scope of this article. There are vexing questions about how to adjudicate between theories that made equal tradeoffs, for instance, A scoring a 7/10 on moral recognizability and 3/10 on psychological realism and B scoring 3/10 on moral recognizability and 7/10 on psychological realism. My thought is that the Divine Friendship Theory, as compared to extant accounts as they stand, would not require us to make such judgment calls because it sits somewhere around a 7/10 on both dimensions. In any case, for now, I simply present and evaluate Divine Friendship Theory on its own merits and briefly survey other accounts for point of comparison without giving decisive objections to those accounts. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point and convincing me to change strategies.

10 By no means will this be a defense of an interpretation of Aquinas.

11 Some of the work done by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen to support the Capabilities Approach already provides some evidence that this empirical claim is true (see Nussbaum 2011). The ongoing Global Flourishing Study, set to survey a quarter of a million people across 22 nations, may turn up more promising results of this sort (Johnson and VanderWeele, 2022).

12 I think it plausible that if Aquinas found himself in possession of the evidence we have of the cognition of other animals, like octopi, whales, apes, Aquinas might have been sympathetic to the idea that other creatures also enjoy friendship with God or something very like it. All that is needed for the Divine Friendship Theory to work is that humans’ rational and volitional capacities play a role in specifying what our union with God will look like, when culminated.

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