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## Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists

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### I

The basic idea behind a divine command theory of ethics is that what I morally ought or ought not to do is determined by what God commands me to do or avoid. This, of course, gets spelled out in different ways by different theorists. In this paper I shall not try to establish a divine command theory in any form, or even argue directly for such a theory, but I shall make some suggestions as to the way in which the theory can be made as strong as possible. More specifically I shall (1) consider how the theory could be made invulnerable to two familiar objections and (2) consider what form the theory should take so as not to fall victim to a Euthyphro-like dilemma. This will involve determining what views of God and human morality we must take in order to enjoy these immunities.

The sort of divine command theory from which I begin is the one presented in Robert M. Adams's paper, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again."<sup>1</sup> This is not a view as to what words like 'right' and 'ought' *mean*. Nor is it a view as to what our *concepts* of moral obligation, rightness and wrongness, amount to. It is rather the claim that divine commands are constitutive of the moral status of actions. As Adams puts it, "ethical wrongness *is* (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God."<sup>2</sup> Hence the view is immune to the objection that many persons don't mean 'is contrary to a command of God' by 'is morally wrong'; just as the view that water *is* H<sub>2</sub>O is immune to the objec-

tion that many people do not mean 'H<sub>2</sub>O' by 'water'. I intend my discussion to be applicable to any version of this "objective constitution" sort. It could just as well be an "ultimate *criterion* of moral obligation" view<sup>3</sup> or a view as to that on which moral obligation *supervenes*. I will understand 'constitutive' to range over all these variants. Thus I can state the basic idea in the following way.

### 1. Divine commands are constitutive of moral obligation.

There is, of course, a variety of terms that could be used to specify what divine commands are held to constitute. These include 'right', 'wrong', 'ought', 'obligation', and 'duty'. For reasons that will emerge in the course of the paper, I prefer to concentrate on '(morally) ought'. I have used the term 'moral *obligation*' in 1, because it makes possible a more succinct formulation, but whenever in the sequel I speak of moral obligation I do not, unless the reader is warned to the contrary, mean to be trading on any maximally distinctive features of the meaning of that term. I will rather be understanding 'S has a moral obligation to do A' simply as an alternative formulation for 'S morally ought to do A'. I shall often omit the qualifier 'morally' where the context makes it clear what is intended.

Should we think of each particular obligation of a particular agent in a particular situation as constituted by a separate divine command, or should we think of general divine commands, like the Ten Commandments, as constituting general obligations, from which particular obligations follow? No doubt, God does command particular people to do particular things in particular situations; but this is presumably the exception rather than the rule. Therefore in this paper I will have my eye on the idea that general divine commands are constitutive of general obligations or, if you like, of the truth or validity of general principles of obligation.

## II

Now for my Euthyphro-like dilemma. The original dilemma in the *Euthyphro* had to do with whether an act is pious because it is loved by the gods or is loved by the gods because it is pious. The analogue that is most directly relevant to a divine command ethics is the following. Is it that:

2. We ought to, e.g., love one another because God commands us to do so.

or is it that:

3. God commands us to love one another because that is what we ought to do.

The divine command theorist apparently embraces the first horn and rejects the second. Of course, the dilemma is often thought to pose a fatal problem for theists generally and not just for divine command theorists. For it is commonly supposed that both horns are unacceptable, and that, since the theist must choose one or the other, this implies the unacceptability of theism. However I shall be contending that both horns, suitably interpreted, are quite acceptable, and that if the divine command theorist follows my suggestions he can grasp both horns as I interpret them.

The two classic objections to divine command ethics (to the acceptance of the first horn of the dilemma) that I shall be considering are the following.

A. This makes divine commands, and hence, morality, arbitrary. Anything that God should decide to command would *thereby* be obligatory. If God should command us to inflict pain on each other gratuitously we would thereby be obliged to do so. More specifically, the theory renders divine commands arbitrary because it blocks off any moral reason for them. 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.

B. It leaves us without any adequate way of construing the goodness of God. No doubt, it leaves us free to take God to be *metaphysically* good, realizing the fullness of being and all that; but it forecloses any conception of God as *morally* good, as exemplifying the sort of goodness that is cashed out in being loving, just, and merciful. For since the standards of moral goodness are set by divine commands, to say that God is morally good is just to say that He obeys His own commands. And even if it makes sense to think of God as obeying commands that He has given Himself, that is not at all what we have in mind in thinking of God as morally good. We aren't just thinking that God practices what He preaches, whatever that may be.

These objections are intimately interrelated. If we could answer the second by showing how the theory leaves room for an acceptable account of divine goodness, we could answer the first. For if God is good in the right way, there will be nothing arbitrary about His commands. On the contrary His goodness will ensure that He issues those commands for the best. Hence I will initially concentrate on the second objection.

In the most general terms it is clear what the divine command theorist's strategy should be. He must fence in the area the moral status of which is constituted by divine commands so that the divine nature and activity fall outside that area. That will leave him free to construe divine moral goodness in some other way than conformity with God's own commands, so that this can be a basis for God's issuing commands to us in one way rather than another. The simplest way of doing this is to make 1. apply only to human (or, more generally, creaturely) obligation. Then something else can constitute divine obligation. This move should be attractive to one who supposes that what gives a divine command its morality-constituting force is solely God's metaphysical status in the scheme of things. God is our creator and sustainer, without Whose continual exercise of creative activity we would lapse into nothingness. If God's commands are morally binding on us solely because He stands in that relation to us, it follows that they are not morally binding on Himself; and so if there are any moral facts involving God they will have to be otherwise constituted. But, apart from objections to thinking of the moral authority of God exclusively in terms of power and status, this view would seem to presuppose that moral obligation is something quite different as applied to God and to human beings. For if it is the same, how could it be constituted so differently in the two cases? And if what it is for God to have an obligation is something quite different from what it is for a human being to have an obligation, how is divine obligation to be construed? I have no idea.<sup>4</sup>

Hence I shall take a more radical line and deny that obligations attach to God at all. 1. implies that divine moral goodness is a matter of obeying divine commands only if moral *obligation* attaches to God; for only in that case can divine moral goodness be a matter of God's satisfying moral obligations. If the kinds of moral

status that are engendered by divine commands are attributable only to creatures, then no puzzles can arise over the constitution of divine morality by divine commands. If this move is to work we will have to develop an account of divine moral goodness that does not involve the satisfaction of moral obligations.

But our first task is to defend the claim that moral obligation does not attach to God. Stated more generally, the position is that terms in what we might call the (morally) 'ought' family—'ought', 'required', 'permitted', 'forbidden', 'duty', 'obligation'—do not apply to God, that it is impossible for God to have duties or obligations, that it cannot ever be true that God *ought* to do something or other. How can this view be supported?

The position has been argued for from the premise that God lacks "significant moral freedom." It is assumed that terms of the "morally ought" family apply to a being only if that being has a choice between doing or failing to do what it ought to do. But if God is *essentially* perfectly good, as I shall be assuming in this paper,<sup>5</sup> it is, in the strongest way, impossible for God to fail to do what is right. Therefore it can't be correct to speak of God's duties or of what He ought to do.<sup>6</sup> I am not happy with this line of argument. Although it seems clear that my being determined from the "outside" (e.g., by causal factors that were in place before I was born) prevents my having moral obligations, it is not equally clear that we get the same consequence from a determination that springs from my own nature. Of course in my case it might be argued that my nature in turn was determined to be what it is by factors that existed before I was born. But God's nature is not determined by anything other than Himself, much less anything that existed before He did. Hence it is not at all clear that if God acts from the necessity of His own nature that prevents Him from acting freely in a way that is required for moral obligation.

The support I do want to muster is like the previous one in appealing to the essential perfect goodness of God, but it exploits that point in a different and a more direct way, by focusing on the lack of divine opposition to acting for the best rather than the lack of freedom the previous argument infers from that. If God is essentially perfectly good, then it is metaphysically impossible that God should do anything that is less than supremely good; and this in-

cludes the moral good as well as other modes of goodness. If it is morally better to be loving than to be indifferent and morally better to love everyone than to be agapistically selective, it will be metaphysically impossible for God to display indifference or partiality. I shall now argue that the lack of any possibility of God's doing other than the best prevents the application of terms in the 'ought' family to God.

The intuitive idea here is that it can be said that agents ought to do something, or that they have duties or obligations, only where there is the possibility of an opposition to what these duties require. Obligations *bind* us, *constrain* us to act in ways we otherwise might not act. They *govern* or *regulate* our behavior, *inhibit* some of our tendencies and *reinforce* others. We can say that a person ought to do *A* only where there is, or could be, some resistance on her part to doing *A*. But how to support this intuition?

For one thing, we can point to the conditions under which it is appropriate to use these terms. To the extent that we think there is no possibility of *S*'s failing to do *A* we don't tell him that he ought to do *A*, or speak of *S*'s duty or obligation to do *A*. If an assistant professor in my department not infrequently failed to show up for his classes, it would be quite in order for me, as chairman of the department, to call him into my office and remind him of his obligation to meet his classes regularly. Even if he has so much as given signs of a strong temptation to play hooky, the sermon might have a point. But suppose that he has in fact unfailingly taught his classes and, furthermore, has conscientiously performed all his academic duties, even engaging in acts of supererogation. And, given that, suppose I were to remark to him, when passing in the hall one day, "You ought to meet your classes regularly." That remark would naturally evoke intense puzzlement. "What are you talking about? When haven't I met my classes?" The utter naturalness of that response does strongly suggest that the possibility of deviation is a necessary condition of the applicability of terms in the 'ought' family. The oddness of saying that God ought to love His creatures is just the above writ large. The absurdity is compounded by thinking of God saying to Himself, in stentorian Kantian tones, "Thou ought to exercise providence over Thy creation."

However, it may, quite reasonably, be contended that these con-

siderations have to do only with the conditions of appropriateness for certain kinds of illocutionary acts and not at all with the truth conditions of ought judgments. Even if there would be no point in my *exhorting* or *enjoining* my colleague to meet his classes, the fact remains that it is his duty to do so, that he ought to do so, however little possibility there is of failure. Similarly, it may be claimed that although it is inappropriate for us to issue moral *injunctions* or *commands* to God, it is still *true* that God, like any rational agent, *ought* to love other rational agents and treat them with justice. This is just one example of the general point that it may be inappropriate to say something, or to say it with a certain illocutionary force that is, nevertheless, perfectly true. It is inappropriate and puzzling for me to say that I *know* that I feel sleepy, rather than just reporting that I feel sleepy, just because we all take it for granted that a normal person in a normal condition knows what his feelings are at a given moment. This inappropriateness has been taken, e.g., by Wittgenstein as a reason for denying that 'know' has any application in these cases.<sup>7</sup> But it seems clear to me that the inappropriateness of saying that I know I feel sleepy is simply due to the overwhelming obviousness of the fact that I know it if it is the case, and that this inappropriateness has no tendency to show that I don't or can't know such things. An analogous interpretation of the oddity of 'ought' judgments in the absence of presumption of the possibility of deviation, at least for the human cases, is strongly suggested by the following consideration. A natural way to mark out these cases is to say that they are cases in which there is no reason to think that the person is at all tempted to fail in her duties or obligations, to fail to do what she ought to do. But this presupposes that the person *has* duties and obligations, even though there is no point in reminding her of the fact.<sup>8</sup>

I am prepared to accept this objection to the inappropriateness argument and even to find the conclusion false as well, at least in its application to human beings. Utter dependability, of the sort of which we are capable, does not cancel obligations but merely insures their fulfillment. But, I claim, an essentially perfectly good God is another matter. However, we will have to find some other way of supporting that claim. The mere fact that it is out of order for anyone to tell God what He ought to do is not sufficient.

At this point I will turn to the most distinguished of my predecessors in holding this thesis, Immanuel Kant.<sup>9</sup> In the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* he writes.

if the will is not of itself in complete accord with reason (the actual case of men), then the actions which are recognized as objectively necessary are subjectively contingent, and the determination of such a will according to objective laws is constraint.

The conception of an objective principle, so far as it constrains a will, is a command (of reason), and the formula of this command is called an *imperative*.

All imperatives are expressed by an "ought" and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will which is not in its subjective constitution necessarily determined by this law. This relation is that of constraint. Imperatives say that it would be good to do or to refrain from doing something, but they say it to a will which does not always do something simply because it is presented as a good thing to do.

A perfectly good will, therefore, would be equally subject to objective laws (of the good), but it could not be conceived as constrained by them to act in accord with them, because, according to its own subjective constitution, it can be determined to act only though the conception of the good. Thus no imperatives hold for the divine will or, more generally, for a holy will. The "ought" is here out of place, for the volition of itself is necessarily in unison with the law. Therefore imperatives are only formulas expressing the relation of objective laws of volition in general to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, e.g., the human will.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that despite differences in terminology, and deeper differences in the background ethical and metaphysical scheme, Kant is espousing at least something very close to the thesis currently under discussion. "The 'ought' is here out of place, for the volition of itself is necessarily in unison with the law." Just because God acts for the good by the necessity of His nature ("only though the conception of the good"), He cannot "be conceived as constrained . . . to act in accord with them" (objective laws of volition). But it is not clear that Kant has anything significant to add by way of support. Such support as is proffered is based on the claim that "All imperatives are expressed by an 'ought'." (Actually the argument needs the



converse of this, that every 'ought' judgment is, or perhaps has the force of, an imperative. Consider it done.) Without pausing to go into the question of what Kant means by 'imperative' let's just take the most obvious alternative, viz., that he means 'imperative'. In that case his argument could be spelled out 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.

But this is just a version of the inappropriateness argument already considered and is subject to the same objection. Even if imperatives are not appropriately addressed to God, it still might be true that God ought to do so-and-so. This objection applies to the above argument by denying the first premise. It is a mistake to think that an ought judgment always or necessarily has the force of an imperative. One could make an ought judgment just to state a fact about someone's obligations.

What now? At this point I will confess that I do not have a knockdown argument for my thesis. In fact I doubt that there is a more fundamental and more obvious feature of moral obligation from which the feature in question, the possibility of deviation, can be derived. All I can hope to do is to indicate the way in which this feature is crucial to obligation. Since I am only concerned to recommend the thesis to the divine command theorist as his best hope of avoiding a horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, all I need do, in any case, is to exhibit the plausibility of the thesis.

Let's look at the matter in the following way. In suggesting that God is perfectly good, morally as well as otherwise, even though He is not subject to obligations, we are presupposing a fundamental distinction between value or goodness, including moral goodness, on the one hand, and the likes of duty, obligation, and ought, on the other. This not only involves the obvious point that the concept of the moral goodness of *agents* and *motives* is a different concept from the concept of an obligation to perform an action. It also

includes the claim that the moral goodness of an action must be distinguished from its moral obligatoriness. The fact that it would be, morally, a good thing for me to do *A* must not be confused with the fact that I morally ought to do *A*, that it is morally *required* of me, that I am morally blameworthy in case I fail to do it. All that is needed to nail down this distinction is the phenomenon of supererogation, a widely though not universally accepted phenomenon. Let's say that it would morally be a good thing for me to see to it that the children of some remote Siberian village have an opportunity to take piano lessons. Nevertheless, so I claim, I have no obligations, moral or otherwise, to do so; I am not morally blameworthy for not doing it. (If you think I am morally blameworthy for not doing this, pick your favorite example of a morally good but not obligatory action.) Note that Kant, in the passage quoted above, is also presupposing such a distinction. He thinks of "objective laws of the good" as specifying what it would be (morally) good to do, and as such they are applicable even to a holy will. But these "laws" determine obligations only when addressed "to a will which does not always do something simply because it is presented as a good thing to do."

Given this distinction, it is clear that '*S* morally ought to do *A*' adds something to 'It would be a morally good thing for *S* to do *A*'. I am taking it as obvious that the latter is a necessary condition for the former. This being the case, there can be a distinction between them only if the former goes beyond the latter in some way. And what way is that? By posing this issue we can see the strength of our thesis. It provides an intuitively plausible way of specifying at least part of what there is to an obligation to do *A* other than its being a good thing to do *A*. Let's spell this out a bit, continuing to think of the distinction, among the things it would be good for me to do, between those I am obliged to do and those I am not.

One thing required for my having an obligation to do *A*, e.g., to support my family, is that there are general principles, laws, or rules that lay down conditions under which that action is required (and that those conditions are satisfied in my case). Call them "practical rules (principles)." Practical principles are in force, in a non-degenerate way, with respect to a given population of agents only if there is at least a possibility of their playing a governing or regulative function; and this is possible only where there is a possibility

of agents in that population violating them. Given that possibility, behavior can be guided, monitored, controlled, corrected, criticized, praised, blamed, punished, or rewarded on the basis of the principles. There will be social mechanisms or inculcating and enforcing the rules, positive and negative sanctions that encourage compliance and discourage violation. Psychologically, the principles will be internalized in higher level control mechanisms that monitor behavior and behavioral tendencies and bring motivational forces to bear in the direction of compliance and away from violation. There can be something like the Freudian distinction of id, ego, and super-ego within each agent in the population. I take it that terms like 'ought', 'duty', and 'obligation' acquire a use only against this kind of background, and that their application presupposes that practical principles are playing, or at least can play, a regulative role, socially and/or psychologically. And this is at least an essential part of what is added when we move from saying that it would be a good thing for *S* to do *A* to saying that *S ought* to do *A*.

Instead of arguing, as I have just been doing, that a regulative role of practical principles is presupposed by *particular ought judgments*, I could, as Kant does, exploit the fact that practical principles themselves, and more specifically the subclass that can be called moral principles, are naturally expressed in terms of 'ought', and argue more directly for the inapplicability of *moral principles* to God.<sup>11</sup> Under what conditions does the principle that "one ought to take account of the needs of others" apply to an agent, as well as the evaluative principle that it is a good thing for one to take account of the needs of others. For reasons of the sort we have been giving, it seems that such a principle has force, relative to an agent or group of agents, only where it has, or can have, a role in governing, directing, and guiding the conduct of those agents. Where it is necessary that *S* will do *A*, what sense is there in supposing that the general principle "one ought to do *A*" has any application to *S*? Here there is no foothold for the 'ought'; there is nothing to make the ought principle true rather than or in addition to the evaluative statement plus the specification of what *S* will necessarily do. That is, the closest we can get to a moral law requiring God to love others is the conjunction of the evaluative statement that it is a good thing for God to love others, plus the statement that God necessarily does so.

Note that these very general considerations as to what it takes for ought statements to be applicable are not limited to the moral ought, but equally apply to, e.g., legal, institutional, and prudential oughts, obligations, etc. It is my legal duty to do *A* only if there is a law in force in my society that, applied to my case, lays on me a requirement to do *A*. And laws are in force only if there is at least a possibility that they will be disobeyed; otherwise they have no governing or constraining work to do, i.e., no work to do. I should also make it explicit that I am not purporting to deal in this essay with what makes the difference between moral and nonmoral obligations, duties, oughts, goodness, etc. I am simply assuming that there is such a difference and that we have a secure enough working grasp of it to make this discussion possible. Let me also underline the obvious point that I have not claimed to give a complete account of what it takes for practical principles, whether moral, legal, institutional, or whatever, to be in force *de jure* as well as *de facto*, so as to engender real obligations. The account of this will, of course, be different for, as an example, legal and moral obligations. It is the claim of the divine command theorist that moral obligations are engendered by and only by practical principles issued as divine commands. I am not concerned to determine what can be said for this claim. My concern with the divine command theory in this essay extends only to considering what it would take for the theory to answer certain objections. And so I am concerned with only part of what is required for ought statements to apply to *S*, the part that has to do with the possibility of deviation from what the ought statement requires.

What about 'right' and 'wrong'? Can we say that God acts *rightly* in loving His creatures even if we can't say that He is acting as He *ought*? A. C. Ewing, in the passage referred to in note 10, endorses that position. Nothing in this paper hangs on this, but I am inclined to think that as 'right' is most centrally used in moral contexts, it is tied to terms of the 'ought' family and borrows its distinctive force from them. In asking what is the right thing for me to do in this situation, I am, I think, typically asking what I ought to do in this situation. Ewing and others hold the view that 'right' in moral contexts means something like 'fitting' or 'appropriate' (in a certain way) and hence does not carry the force of 'required', 'bound', and 'culpable if not' that is distinctive of 'ought' and 'obligation'. I am disinclined to agree, but I can avoid the problem here.

This exhausts what I have to say in support of the view that a necessary condition of the truth of 'S ought to do A' is at least the metaphysical possibility that S does not do A. On this view, moral obligations attach to all human beings, even those so saintly as to totally lack any tendency, in the ordinary sense of that term, to do other than what it is morally good to do. And no moral obligations attach to God, assuming, as we are here, that God is essentially perfectly good. Thus divine commands can be constitutive of moral obligations for those beings who have them without its being the case that God's goodness consists in His obeying His own commands, or, indeed, consists in any relation whatsoever of God to His commands.

Eleonore Stump has urged, in conversation, that if God should break a promise He would be doing something He ought not to do, and that this implies that 'ought' does have application to God. My reply is that if God should do something that is forbidden by a valid and applicable moral principle (and the objection assumes that God's breaking a promise would have that status), this would show that it is possible for Him to act in contravention of moral principles. In that case He would not be essentially perfectly good, and so we would not have the reasons advanced in this paper for supposing that He has no moral obligations. That is, Stump's argument shows only that 'ought' would be applicable to God under certain counterfactual conditions (indeed counterpossible conditions if God is essentially perfectly good), not that 'ought' is applicable to Him as things are.

But God is represented in the Bible and elsewhere as making promises, e.g., to Noah and to Abraham, and as making covenants with Israel. But by the very concept of a promise or of a covenant it engenders obligations. It is contradictory to say "God promised Abraham to give him descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth, but God was not thereby obligated (even *prima facie*) to give Abraham that many descendants." It is equally self-contradictory to say "God entered into a covenant with Israel to establish them forever in the land of Canaan if they would keep His commandments, but God was not thereby obligated to establish them forever in the land of Canaan if they kept His commandments." So how can God fail to have obligations?

I think this argument does show that if God has no obligations it is not strictly true that He makes promises or covenants. Does

my view then imply that all these reports are false? No. We can hold that the biblical writers were speaking loosely, analogically, or metaphorically in so describing the transactions, just as they were in speaking of God "stretching out His arm" and doing so-and-so. They were choosing the closest human analogue to what God was doing in order to give us a vivid idea of God's action. It would be more strictly accurate to say that God *expressed the intention* to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth, and that He expressed the intention to establish Israel in the land of Canaan forever if they kept His commandments. Just as we can express intentions without obligating ourselves (provided we don't promise) so it is with God. The difference, of course, is that we can count on an expression of intention from God as we can on a promise from a human being, indeed can count on it much more, because of the utter stability and dependability of God's character and purposes.

### III

If there is a conceptual distinction between *S*'s satisfying moral obligations and *S*'s actions being morally good, and if the former is not a conceptually necessary condition for the latter, as the phenomenon of supererogation shows, then there is no difficulty in applying the concept of moral goodness to an agent and his actions even if the concept of moral obligation has no application to that agent. In particular, we can think of God as perfectly good, morally as well as otherwise, even if that moral goodness does not consist in the perfect satisfaction of obligations. To put some flesh on this skeleton we might think of it in the following way. By virtue of practical principles that morally require certain things of us, *we* are morally obligated to act in certain ways; speaking summarily, as the occasion dictates, let us say that we are obligated to act justly, show mercy, and care for the needs of others. Now let's remember Kant's suggestion that an 'ought' statement says "that it would be good to do or to refrain from doing something, but they say it to a will which does not always do something simply because it is presented as a good thing to do." This presupposes that the "same thing" can be said to a will of the other sort, a holy will; i.e., the "same thing,"

the same type of behavior, can be said to such a will to be a good thing. Extricating ourselves from this Kantian dramaturgy, the morally good things that we are obligated to do can perfectly well have the status for God of morally good things to do, even though He is not *obliged* to do them.<sup>12</sup> Justice, mercy, and lovingness can be moral virtues for God as well as for humans, though in His case without the extra dimension added to our virtues by the fact that exhibiting them involves satisfying our obligations. Some of God's moral goodness can be supervenient on the same behavior or tendencies on which, in us, satisfaction of moral obligations as well as moral goodness is supervenient. It can be morally good, both for God and humans, to act with loving concern for others, but only we have the privilege of being morally obliged to act in this way.<sup>13</sup>

Since we can develop a satisfactory conception of the moral goodness of God without thinking of God as having moral obligations, we can also escape the arbitrariness objection to divine command ethics. So far from being arbitrary, God's commands to us are an expression of His perfect goodness. Since He is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible that God should command us to act in ways that are not for the best. What if God should command us to sacrifice everything for the acquisition of power? (We are assuming that this is not for the best.) Would it thereby be our moral obligation? Since, on our present assumptions, it is metaphysically impossible for God to command this, the answer to the question depends on how it is best to handle subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents. But whatever our logic of subjunctive conditionals, this is not a substantive difficulty just because there is no possibility of the truth of the antecedent.

To help nail down the point, let's consider another form of the arbitrariness objection, that on the divine command theory God could have no reason, or at least no moral reason, for issuing the commands He does issue. Now if it is ruled that the only thing that counts as a moral reason for issuing a command to *S* to do *A* is that *S* morally ought to do *A*, or has a moral duty or obligation to do *A*, then God cannot have a moral reason for His commands on a divine command ethics. Since *S* has a moral obligation to do *A* only in virtue of God's command to do *A*, this is not a fact, antecedent to the command, that God could take as a reason for issuing the command. But surely there can be other sorts of moral reasons

for commands and injunctions, e.g., that an act would be repaying of a kindness or that it is a morally good thing to behave in a certain way. More generally the moral goodness of doing *A*, or anything on which that moral goodness supervenes, can be a moral reason for doing *A* or for requiring someone to do *A*. Thus if the moral goodness of acts is independent of their obligatoriness, God can have moral reasons for His commands.

#### IV

Thus the divine command theorist escapes the supposedly fatal consequences of the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma. But perhaps the maneuvers by which this escape was negotiated result in impalement on the second horn. We evaded the first horn by taking God's moral goodness, including the moral goodness of divine actions, not to be constituted by conformity to moral obligations, and hence not to be constituted by conformity to divine commands, even on this ethical theory.<sup>14</sup> But doesn't that leave us exposed to the second horn? We are not confronted with that horn in the original form, "God commands us to love our neighbors because that is what we ought to do," but with a closely analogous form, "God commands us to love our neighbor because it is morally good that we should do so." And that possesses the sort of feature deemed repellent to theism just as much as the first form, viz., that it makes the goodness of states of affairs independent of the divine will, thereby subjecting God to valuational facts that are what they are independent of Him. It thereby contradicts the absolute sovereignty of God; it implies that there are realities other than Himself that do not owe their being to His creative activity. If it is true, independently of God's will, that loving communion is a supreme good, and that forgiveness is better than resentment, then God is subject to these truths. He must conform Himself to them and so is not absolutely sovereign.

One way of meeting this objection is to assimilate evaluative principles to logical truths. If evaluative principles are logically necessary, then God's "subjection" to these principles is just a special case of His "subjection" to logical truths, something that is acknowledged on almost all hands.

However I am going to suggest a more radical response. The



difficulty with this horn of the dilemma is generally stated as I just stated it, in terms of a Platonic conception of the objectivity of goodness and other normative and evaluative statuses. 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 *S* satisfies these conditions. To go back to the *Euthyphro*:

Socrates: Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all pious things to be pious. . . . Tell me what is the nature of this idea, and then I shall have a standard to which I may look, and by which I may measure actions, whether yours or those of anyone else, and then I shall be able to say that such and such an action is pious, such another impious. [6]

What is ultimate here is the truth of the general principle; any particular example of goodness has that status only because it conforms to the general "Idea."

I want to suggest, by contrast, that we can think of God Himself, the individual being, as the supreme standard of goodness. God plays the role in evaluation that is more usually assigned, by objectivists about value, to Platonic Ideas or principles. Lovingness is good (a good-making feature, that on which goodness supervenes) not because of the Platonic existence of a general principle, but because God, the supreme standard of goodness, is loving. Goodness supervenes on every feature of God, not because some general principles are true but just because they are features of God. Of course, we can have general principles, e.g., "lovingness is good." But this principle is not ultimate; it, or the general fact that makes it true, does not enjoy some Platonic ontological status; rather it is true just because the property it specifies as sufficient for goodness is a property of God.

We can distinguish (a) "Platonic" predicates, the criterion for the application of each of which is an "essence" or "Idea" that can be specified in purely general terms, and (b) "particularistic" predicates, the criterion for the application of each of which makes essential reference to one or more individuals. Geometrical terms like 'triangle' have traditionally been taken as paradigms of the former. There are rather different subclasses of the latter. It is plausible to

suggest, e.g., that biological kind terms like 'dog' are applied not on the basis of a list of defining properties but on the basis of similarity to certain standard examples. Putnam has extended this idea to natural kind terms generally. Again, there are "family resemblance" terms like 'game' or 'religion', the application of which again seems to rely on standard paradigm cases. A subtype closer to our present concern is the much discussed 'meter'. Let's say that what makes a certain length a meter is its equality to a standard meter stick kept in Paris. What makes this table a meter in length is not its conformity to a Platonic essence but its conformity to a certain existing individual.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, on the present view, what ultimately makes an act of love a good thing is not its conformity to some general principle but its conformity to, or approximation to, God, Who is both the ultimate source of the existence of things and the supreme standard by reference to which they are to be assessed.

Note that on this view we are not debarred from saying what is supremely good about God. It is not that God is good *qua* bare particular or undifferentiated thisness. God is good by virtue of being loving, just, merciful, etc. Where this view differs from its alternative is in the answer to the question, "By virtue of what are these features of God good-making features?" The answer given by this view is: "By virtue of being features of God."

It may help to appreciate the difference of this view from the more usual valuational objectivism if we contrast the ways in which these views will understand God's (perfectly good) activity. On a Platonic view God will "consult" the objective principles of goodness, whether they are "located" in His intellect or in a more authentically Platonic realm, and see to it that His actions conform thereto. On my particularist view God will simply act as He is inclined to act, will simply act in accordance with His character, and that will necessarily be the best. No preliminary stage of checking the relevant principles is required.

My particularistic suggestion exhibits some instructive similarities and dissimilarities to a recent deployment by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann of the doctrine of divine simplicity in connection with the Euthyphro dilemma.<sup>16</sup> In terms of the contrast I have been drawing, they use the doctrine of simplicity to show that one can be both Platonistic and particularistic about value. They do not deny that God is perfectly good by virtue of conforming to

perfect goodness, but they avoid subjecting God to an independent reality by maintaining, in accordance with the doctrine of simplicity, that God *is* perfect goodness. Thus the supreme standard of goodness is both perfect goodness, the Platonic Idea, and God Himself. As Kretzmann once put it to me in conversation, the really staggering fact is that the Idea of the Good is a person. Since I have difficulties with the doctrine of simplicity I have felt forced to choose between Platonism and particularism; but I agree with Stump and Kretzmann that God can be perfectly good in an eminently non-arbitrary sense without being subject to some independent standard.

I will briefly consider two objections to my valuational particularism. First, it may seem that it is infected with the arbitrariness we have been concerned to avoid. Isn't it arbitrary to take some particular individual, even the supreme individual, as the *standard* of goodness, regardless of whether this individual conforms to general principles of goodness or not? To put it another way, if we want to know what is good about a certain action or human being, or if we want to know why that action or human being is good, does it throw any light on the matter to pick out some other individual being and say that the first is good because it is like the second? That is not advancing the inquiry. But this objection amounts to no more than an expression of Platonist predilections. One may as well ask: "How can it be an answer to the question 'Why is this table a meter long?' to cite its coincidence with the standard meter stick?" There just are some properties that work that way. My suggestion is that goodness is one of those properties, and it is no objection to this suggestion to aver that it is not.

Here is another response to the objection. Whether we are Platonist or particularist there will be some stopping place in the search for explanation. An answer to the question "What is good about X?" will cite certain alleged good-making characteristics. We can then ask: "By virtue of what does good supervene on those characteristics?" The answer to that might involve citing the relation of those features to other alleged good-making characteristics. But sooner or later either a general principle or an individual paradigm is cited. Whichever it is, that is the end of the line. (We can, of course, ask why we should suppose that this principle is true or that this individual is a paradigm; but that is a different inquiry.) On both views something is taken as ultimate, behind which we cannot go,

in the sense of finding some *explanation* of the fact that it is constitutive of goodness, as contrasted with a defense of the claim that it is constitutive of goodness. I would invite one who finds it arbitrary to invoke God as the supreme standard of goodness to explain why this is more arbitrary than the invocation of a supreme general principle. Perhaps the principle seems self-evidently true to him. But it will not seem so to many others; and it seems self-evident to some that God is the supreme standard. And just as my opponent will explain the opposition to his claims of self-evidence by saying that the opponents have not considered the matter sufficiently, in an impartial frame of mind or whatever, so the theistic particularist can maintain that those who do not acknowledge God as the supreme standard are insufficiently acquainted with God or have not sufficiently considered the matter.

Secondly, it may be objected that, on theistic particularism, in order to have any knowledge of what is good we would have to know quite a bit about God. But many people who know little or nothing about God know quite a bit about what is good. The answer to this is that the view does not have the alleged epistemological implications. It does have some epistemological implications. It implies that knowing about the nature of God puts us in an ideal position to make evaluative judgments. But it does not imply that explicit knowledge of God is the only sound basis for such judgments. The particularist is free to recognize that God has so constructed us and our environment that we are led to form sound value judgments under various circumstances without tracing them back to the ultimate standard. Analogously, we are so constructed and so situated as to be able to form true and useful opinions about water without getting so far as to discern its ultimate chemical or physical constitution, without knowing what makes it water.

As a final note on particularism, I should like to point out its connection with certain familiar themes, both Christian and otherwise. It is a truism of what we might call "evaluational development" (of which moral development is a species) that we more often come to recognize and appreciate good-making properties through acquaintance with specially striking exemplifications than through being explicitly instructed in general principles. We acquire standards in art, music, and literature, through becoming intimately familiar with great works in those media; with that background we

are often able to make confident judgments on newly encountered works without being able to formulate general principles on which we are relying. Our effective internalization of moral standards is more often due to our interaction with suitable role models than to reflecting on general moral maxims. The specifically Christian version of this is that we come to learn the supreme value of love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice by seeing these qualities exemplified in the life of Christ, rather than by an intellectual intuition of Platonic Forms. I do not mean to *identify* these points about our access to the good with the particularist theory as to what it is that makes certain things good. They are clearly distinguishable matters. But I do suggest that a full realization of how much we rely on paradigms in developing and shaping our capacities to recognize goodness will render us disposed to take seriously the suggestion that the supreme standard of goodness is an individual paradigm.

## V

This completes my suggestions to the divine command theorist as to how she can avoid the allegedly fatal consequences of both horns of the Euthyphro-like dilemma we have been considering. It only remains to set out explicitly the relationship between the positions I have suggested to escape each of the two horns. That relationship derives from the distinction between value and obligation, more specifically the moral forms thereof. To blunt the first horn I have suggested that we take divine commands to be constitutive only of moral obligation, only of facts of the form 'S morally ought to do A', 'S morally ought not to do B', and 'S is morally permitted to do C', leaving value and goodness, moral and otherwise, to be otherwise constituted. When we combine this point with the view that God is not subject to obligations, moral or otherwise, we find that the theory does not saddle us with an inadequate conception of divine moral goodness and hence that it does not represent the basis of human moral obligation as arbitrary. To deal with the second horn, and to fill out the view with an account of goodness and value, we take it that the supreme standard of goodness, including moral goodness, is God Himself, that particular individual, rather than some general principle or Platonic Idea. A creaturely X has

value to the extent that it imitates or approximates the divine nature in a way appropriate to its position in creation. This is the most general account of value (as contrasted with obligation) for any sort of value, including the moral goodness of persons, motives, and actions. My visiting a sick friend is a good thing to do because and only because it constitutes an imitation of the divine nature that is appropriate for me and my current situation. But that leaves untouched the question of whether I *ought* to do this, whether it is my *duty* or *obligation*, whether I am *required* or *bound* to do it, whether I would be *culpable*, *guilty*, *blameworthy*, or *reprehensible* for failing to do it. This, according to the view here developed, is a matter of whether God has commanded me to do it, or whether my doing it follows from something God has commanded.<sup>17</sup> The divine *nature*, apart from anything God has willed or done, is sufficient to determine what counts as good, including morally good. But we are *obliged*, *bound*, or *required* to do something only on the basis of a divine command.

This then is my suggestion as to how to recognize a fundamental role for divine commands in morality without being impaled on one or another horn of a Euthyphro-like dilemma. I have not shown, or even argued, that divine commands *are* constitutive of moral obligation; nor have I entered into the question of how they could be. I have merely aspired to develop a view of God, morality, and value that leaves open the possibility that they should play this role.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 1 (1979).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

3. So long as the "criterion" for the application of a term is not determined by the meaning of the term.

4. It would be even less productive to cite differences between the content of divine and human moral goodness. No doubt there are numerous and important differences. Divine virtues do not include obedience to God, temperance in eating, and refraining from coveting one's neighbor's wife. But as the last sentence in the text indicates, there is an overlap too. And even if there were no overlap in content it would still be possible that that by virtue of which X is morally good is the same for God and for humans.

5. I shall not argue for this. Indeed, it is no part of my aim in this paper to establish the positions I am recommending to the divine command

theorist. I aspire only to exhibit them as plausible, and to show how they strengthen the theory.

6. See Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), chap. 7; Thomas V. Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (July 1984).

7. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), I: 246.

8. Of course, if we adopt a non-cognitive interpretation of ought judgments, according to which their meaning is exhausted by their role in prescribing, exhorting, enjoining, etc., and according to which they are not used in the making of truth claims, then we will hold that there can be no truths about what one ought to do, independently of the appropriateness of performing acts of enjoining and the like. The applicability of the terms, in that case, hangs solely on the appropriateness of speech acts like exhorting. But our entire discussion presupposes an objectivist account of morality. Otherwise the question to which the divine command theory is an answer, viz., "In what does a moral obligation to do A consist?" would not arise.

9. There are medieval precedents, and I am indebted to Rega Wood for calling them to my attention. See William of Ockham, *Quest. in II Sent.*, qq. 15, 19; Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxon.*, IV, d. 46, q. 1, n. 1; Peter Lombard, *Sent.*, I, d. 43, c. unicum. A particularly clear formulation is found in Nathaniel Culverwell, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature*, ch. 6; reprinted in *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Janine Marie Idziak (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).

10. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), pp. 29–31. For some contemporary endorsements of this position see A. C. Ewing, *The Definition of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), p. 123; and Geoffrey J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 14.

11. This applies most directly to principles *requiring* actions, but interdictions can be expressed in terms of 'ought not', and permissions in terms of 'not ought not'.

12. I am, of course, not suggesting that the content of human and divine morality are exactly the same! I am only pointing out that the absence of divine obligations does not prevent an overlap.

13. See Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," sections III and IV, for another affirmation of this point.

14. The same considerations will lead to taking divine goodness to be independent of all divine volition. For if God's being good is a matter of His carrying out what He wills (rather than commands), the arbitrariness objection applies in full force. And divine goodness again becomes trivialized as "God carries out His volitions, whatever they are."

15. To be sure, it is arbitrary what particular stick was chosen to serve as the standard, while I am not thinking that it is arbitrary whether God or someone else is "chosen" as the supreme standard of goodness. That is a way

in which the analogy is not perfect. The example was used because of the respect in which there is an analogy, viz., the role of the individual standard in truth conditions for applications of the term.

16. "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (Oct., 1985), pp. 375-76. For a more extended presentation of the same idea see Norman Kretzmann, "Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality," in *Hamartia, The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition: Essays in Honor of John M. Crosssett*, ed. D. V. Stump, E. Stump, J. A. Arieti, and L. Gerson (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

17. I don't mean to restrict this "following" to deductive implication. It also includes, e.g., being a reasonable application of some general command issued by God.

18. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Pacific Regional Meetings of the Society of Christian Philosophers, at Cornell University, and at meetings of the Society for Philosophy of Religion. I would like to thank participants in all those sessions for many useful suggestions. Special thanks go to Robert Adams, Jonathan Bennett, Norman Kretzmann, Louis Pojman, John Robertson, Richard Swinburne, Eleonore Stump, Stewart Thau, and Linda Zagzebski.