GOODNESS

3.6

'WHAT EUTHYPHRO SHOULD HAVE SAID'

William P. Alston

I must confess that my title is just a 'come-on'. I am not going to discuss the specific Euthyphro problem, whether an act is pious because it is loved by the gods or is loved by the gods because it is pious. I shall rather be discussing the divine-command-ethics analogue of this question, at a first approximation, whether God commands us to love one another because that is right (our moral obligation, what we ought to do morally) or whether that is right because God commands us to do it. Hence I shall not really be trying to determine what Euthyphro should have said. What I shall do is to consider what view of God and human morality a divine command theorist should adopt if she is to be in the best position to deal with this dilemma. I lack at least the time to establish those views; I shall have to content myself with exhibiting them as not unreasonable, plausible and coherent, and with showing how they enable the divine command theorist to deal with certain difficulties involved in the above dilemma.

When I embarked on this project I had little real sympathy for divine command theory. The subject interested me because of the way in which thinking about the problems involved forces us to come to grips with basic questions about the nature of God and our relations with him. However, in the course of the enterprise I have warmed to the topic, and now I think there might really be something to a divine command ethics. At least the considerations I shall be presenting have led to a much more positive assessment of its viability than I had previously.

William P. Alston, 'What Euthyphro Should Have Said' (not previously published).

The form of divine command theory I shall be discussing is the one presented in Robert Adams's latest paper on the subject,'Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again'.[1] 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'.[2] Hence such a view is immune to the objection that many persons, at least, don't mean 'is contrary to a command of God' by 'is morally wrong' just as the view that water is H_2O is immune to the objection that many people do not mean 'H_2O' 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 or a view as to that on which moral obligation *supervenes*. I shall understand 'constitutive' to range over all these variants. Thus I can state the version to be considered in the following simple form:

1. Divine commands are constitutive of moral obligation.

Let me say a further word as to how (1), or the range of theories it encapsulates, is to be understood, though I shall only have time to scratch the surface. First, there is a variety of terms that could be, and have been, used to specify what it is that 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' as simply an alternative formulation for 'S morally ought to do A'. I shall often omit the qualifier 'morally' when the context makes it clear what is intended. Second, 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 (as in the Ten Commandments) 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 we shall have our 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.

Now let's return to the Euthyphro-like dilemma. Both horns have often been thought to be unacceptable for the theist; so that the dilemma is not just an objection to divine command ethics, but an allegedly fatal difficulty for any

theism. It is the first horn, of course, to which divine command theory drives us. (We ought to do A because God commands us to.) But just what is supposed to be unacceptable about saying that we are obliged to love one another because God commands us to? I am going to focus on two closely interrelated difficulties that seem to me the thorniest.

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 gratuitously inflict pain on each other we would thereby be obliged to do so. The theory requires that divine commands be arbitrary because it blocks off any moral reason for them. God can't command us to do A because that it is what is morally right; for it doesn't become morally right until he commands it.

B. This horn 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, realising the fullness of being and all that; but it forecloses any conception of God as morally good, 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 any sense to think of God as obeying commands that he has given himself, that is not at all what we are looking for in thinking of God as supremely morally good. We aren't just thinking that God practises what he preaches, whatever that might be.

These objections are intimately interrelated. If we could answer the second by showing how the theory leaves room for an acceptable account of the goodness of God, we could answer the first. For if God is good in the right way, especially if God is essentially good, then there will be nothing arbitrary about his commands; indeed it will be metaphysically necessary that he issue those commands for the best.

In the most general terms it is clear what the divine command theorist's strategy should be. He must fence in the area constituted by divine commands so that the divine nature and activity fall outside that area. That will leave him free to construe divine goodness in some other way, so that the divine goodness can be a basis for God issuing commands to us in one way rather than another. The simplest way of doing this is to restrict (1) so that it applies only to human, or, more liberally, creaturely, obligation. Then something else can constitute moral rightness for divine actions. 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 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, there seems to be more commonality than this position allows between divine and human goodness. When we are enjoined to love one another as our Father in heaven loves us, it seems to be presupposed that, even though our love can be at best but a pale imitation of divine love, what makes it good for us to love is not wholly different from what makes it good for God to love.[3]

However (1) implies that divine moral goodness is a matter of obeying divine commands only if moral obligation attaches to God; and I take it that the divine command theorist's best move is to deny just this. If the kind(s) 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 it will have to leave a suitable kind of moral status open for God. I shall now elaborate this suggestion.

Let's consider the family of moral terms that most centrally includes 'ought', 'duty' and 'obligation'. As I have already made explicit, I am taking the divine command theorist to suppose that it is facts expressible in such terms that are constituted by divine commands. Now if it is impossible for God to have duties or obligations, if it cannot ever be true that God ought to do something or other, then divine commands can be constitutive of these sorts of moral facts, for human beings and perhaps other creatures, while leaving other sorts of facts that are constitutive of divine moral goodness to be otherwise constituted. What reasons are there to suppose this to be so?

[. . .]

An easy way out would be to let Kant provide our argument.

> [I]f 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 through 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.[4]

It will come as no surprise to you to learn that I feel that Kant is on the right track here. But his argument leaves something to be desired. A sufficiently canny opponent would not give him the assumption that 'ought' expresses an imperative for something with the force of an imperative. Given that assumption the conclusion follows right away, for surely nothing like an imperative can be addressed to a holy will. But the opponent holds that even if nothing with imperative force can be appropriately addressed to God, it still remains true that God ought to do certain things rather than others. Hence the opponent is not prepared to admit that 'God ought to do A' is just some kind of imperative. In fact, once we spell out Kant's argument it turns out to be a variant of the inappropriateness argument we have already rejected. (Imperatives cannot appropriately be addressed to God. Therefore it cannot be true that God ought to do so-and-so.) So more needs to be said.

Let's grant that 'ought' is not merely used to express imperatives, and that there are objective facts of the form 'S ought to do A'. To determine whether there are any such facts where S is God, we have to be more explicit as to just what sort of facts these are. Let's put the problem this way. In thinking of God as perfectly good, with respect to his actions as well as otherwise, we are thinking that it is a good thing, indeed a supremely good thing, that God acts as he does. What is at issue is that, in addition to its being a good thing that he acts as he does, it is also true that this is the way in which he ought to act. What does the latter add to the former? If it adds nothing there can be no objection to speaking of how God ought to act. But there is clearly a difference. It would be a good thing if I were to learn Sanskrit, for it would represent an actualisation of one of my (beneficient) potentialities. But I have no obligation to learn Sanskrit, nor is it true that I ought to do so. So what is missing here?

Without suggesting that this is the whole story, one thing that is required for the truth of an 'ought' statement is this. There are general principles, laws, or rules that lay down conditions under which an action of a certain sort is required, permitted, or forbidden. Call them 'practical rules (principles)'. Practical principles are in force, in a non-degenerate way, with respect to a given population of agents only when there is at least a possibility of their playing a governing or regulative function; and this means only when there is a possibility of agents in that population violating them. Given that possibility, behavior can be guided, monitored, controlled, corrected, criticised,

praised, blamed, punished, or rewarded on the basis of the principles. There will be social mechanisms for inculcating and enforcing the rules, positive and negative sanctions that encourage compliance and discourage violation. Psychologically, the principles will be internalised in higher level control mechanisms that monitor behaviour and behavioural 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 superego 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, 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.

If I had time I would point out a number of ways in which these connections show themselves. Since time is short I will make only the following point. In games and other forms of social intercourse we bother to lay down rules and requirements only where we think there is a significant chance of people acting in ways other than those we wish to encourage. In football there is a rule against a potential pass receiver stepping out of bounds and then returning to catch a pass; but there is no rule requiring players to try to win. A general failure to try to win would be destructive of the purposes of the game, but we feel that there is not enough of a chance of that to make it worthwhile to legislate against it. Rules of etiquette govern the utensils with which a given operation of eating is performed, but no rule of etiquette lays it down that food is to be placed in the mouth. And it is only where there are rules in force that we are inclined to speak of what participants ought to do. One should use a knife to cut meat; but not 'one should put one's food in one's mouth'.[5]

Instead of arguing, as I have just been doing, that a regulative role of practical principles is presupposed in the use of 'ought', I could, as Kant does, exploit the fact that practical principles themselves, and more specifically the sub-class 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.[6] Under what conditions does the general moral 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, guiding the conduct of those agents. Where it is necessary that S will act in manner 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, a factual statement that S will (necessarily) act in this way. 'Law' or 'principles' have here a descriptive rather that a regulative role. That is, the closest we can get to a moral law

requiring God to love others is the modal factual statement that God necessarily loves whatever others there are.

Eleonore Stump has urged, in conversation, that if God should break a promise then he would be doing something he ought not to do; and 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 example assumes that breaking a promise on the part of God would be that), this would show that he does have tendencies to act in contravention of moral principles and so 'ought' would be applicable to him because of that. In other words, 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 what about 'right' and 'wrong'? Is it correct to say that God acts rightly even if we can't say that he acts as he ought? A. C. Ewing, in the passage referred to in note 4, endorses that position. Nothing in this paper hangs on how we decide that issue, 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, 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 specific way) and hence does not carry the force of 'required', 'bound', 'culpable if not', that is distinctive of 'ought' and 'obligation'. I am not inclined to agree, but it is of no moment for the present problem.

If this suffices to make plausible the view that terms of the 'ought' family apply only where there is at least the possibility of contravention, and that is all I am aspiring to here, we can apply the point to our Euthyphro problem. The divine command theorist can answer the two objections under consideration as follows. Divine commands are constitutive of facts of the form 'S morally ought to do A'. Since no such facts apply to God, we don't have to think of the goodness of God, or any aspect thereof, as consisting of his compliance with his own commands, as consisting in his doing what He ought to do as determined by his commands. If we want to say that moral goodness can be attributed to a being only if that being is subject to the moral ought, his moral obligations and the like, then we won't say that God is, strictly speaking, morally good. But God can still be called good by virtue of his lovingness, justice and mercy, qualities that are moral virtues in a being subject to the moral ought. In the language of supervenience, part of God's goodness is supervenient on characteristics that are the foundation of moral goodness in a being with contrary tendencies. Since I can't see that anything of substance hangs on it, I will continue to speak of God's moral goodness, remembering that this will be different from human moral goodness, apart from differences in degree, in the ways we have been emphasis-

ing, even when supervenient on what are generically the same action tendencies.[7]

Since divine command theory does not rule out a satisfactory construal of the moral goodness of God, it enables us to escape the arbitrariness objection also. So far from being arbitrary, God's commands to us are an expression of his perfect goodness. Since 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? The answer to this depends on how it is best to handle subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents. But whatever our logic of conditionals it is not a substantive difficulty just because there is no possibility of the truth of the antecedent.

To help nail down this 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 adequate 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 do A is that the addressee 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. Since the addressees have a moral obligation to do A only by virtue of the fact that the command to do A is addressed to them by God, this is not a fact, obtaining independently of the command, that God could take as a reason for issuing the command. I have already indicated that I don't want to get into an argument over the boundaries of 'moral', and so I won't contest this point, even though I think that the term 'moral reason' is correctly applied to facts of other sorts, for example, that an act would be a repaying of a kindness or that it is a good thing to behave in a certain way. But however we decide to use the term 'moral', the fact remains that God can have an adequate reason for issuing the commands he issues, namely, that it is best for us to behave as he commands us to behave. In other words, his commands can be constitutive of moral obligation for us, even though there are objective facts about what is good or best that obtain independently of divine commands.

If what I have been saying is correct, a divine command theorist can avoid being impaled on the first horn of the dilemma, at least so far as the dangers of that horn stem from the two difficulties we have been discussing. But perhaps he has escaped the first horn only to be impaled on the second. We evaded our two objections by taking divine goodness, including the goodness of divine actions and action tendencies, not to be constituted by conformity to divine commands, but rather to be a fact logically prior to any divine commanding activity. And the same considerations that led to this position will equally constrain us to take divine goodness to be independent of all divine volition or voluntary activity. For if God's being good is a matter of God's carrying out what he wills for whatever divine willings, then the arbitrariness objection applies in full force; and divine goodness becomes trivialised as 'God carries

out his volitions, whatever they are'. 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 neighbours because that is what we ought to do', but with a closely analogous form, 'God commands us to love our neighbour because it is good that we should do so'. And that possesses the sort of feature deemed repellent to theism just as much as the first form, namely, 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 is generally stated, and 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 X satisfies (enough of) these conditions. To go back to the Euthyphro:

> Soc. 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 principles; any particular example of goodness has that status only because it conforms to the general 'Idea'. And the general principles, or the fact(s) that make them true, are thought to have the kind of being attributed by Plato to the Ideas; hence they have a reality independent of God. Or else desperate and, I believe, unsuccessful attempts are made to show that they can play the role just specified even though their ontological locus is somehow the mind of God.

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 is supervenient) not because of the Platonic existence of a general principle or fact to the effect that lovingness is good, 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, for example, lovingness is good. For 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.

It may be useful to distinguish (a) 'Platonic' predicates, the criterion for the application of which is a general 'essence' or 'Idea' that can be specified in purely general terms, and (b) 'particularistic' predicates, the criterion for the application of which makes essential reference to one or more individuals. Geometrical terms like 'triangle' have traditionally been taken as paradigms of the former. There seem to be rather different sub-classes of the latter type. It is plausible to suggest, for example, 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. The same sort of thing can be suggested with respect to 'family resemblance' terms like 'game' or 'religion'. A sub-type 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 concretely existing individual. Similarly, on my present suggestion, what most ultimately makes an act of love a good thing is not its conformity to some general principle but its conformity to, or imitation of, 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. God is not good, *qua* bare particular or undifferentiated thisness. God is good by virtue of being loving, just, merciful and so on. 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 further to appreciate the difference of this view from the more usual valuations of objectivism if we contrast the ways in which these views will understand God's supremely 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 for the best. No preliminary stage of checking the relevant principles is required.

[. . .]

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 concepts that work that way. My suggestion is that goodness is one of those concepts, and it is no objection to this suggestion to aver that no concept can work in that way.

Here is another way of responding 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?' will, sooner or later, cite certain good-making characteristics. We can then ask why we should suppose that good supervenes on those characteristics. In answer either a general principle or an individual paradigm is cited. But 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 another 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. I would invite one who finds the invocation of God as the supreme standard arbitrary, to explain why it is more arbitrary than the invocation of a supreme general principle. Perhaps it is because it seems self-evident to him that the principle is true. But it seems self-evident to some that God is the supreme standard. And just as my opponent will explain the lack of self-evidence to some people of this general principle by saying that they have not considered it sufficiently, in an impartial frame of mind or whatever, so the theistic particularist will maintain that those who don't 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 judgements. But it does not imply that explicit

knowledge of God is the only sound basis for such judgements. The particularist is free to recognise that God, being the source of our being and governor of the universe as well as the standard of value, has so constructed us and our environment that we are led to form sound value judgements 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.

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 come to recognise and appreciate good-making properties more often 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 judgements on newly encountered works without being able to formulate general principles on which we are relying. Our effective internalisation 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, self-sacrifice and so on, 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 ultimately makes certain things good. They are clearly distinguishable matters. But I do suggest that a full realisation of how much we rely on paradigms in developing and shaping our capacities to recognise goodness will render us disposed to take seriously the suggestion that the supreme standard of goodness is an individual paradigm.

Now for the final hurdle; not the last hurdle with which the divine command theorist will ever be confronted, I fear, but the last one to be considered in this paper. According to the position I have been developing for the divine command theorist, God is himself the supreme standard of goodness. Why then are divine commands needed to provide an objective grounding for human morality? Why doesn't the nature of God suffice for that? Why can't we say that what I ought to do is determined by what would be the closest or most appropriate imitation of the divine nature for a creature with my nature and in my circumstances? To put it crudely, why isn't the answer to 'What ought I do about this?' sufficiently given by 'Do what God would do if God were a human being in this situation'. In fact, Christians are specially well placed to employ this 'crude' form of the view, since we hold that God is, or has been, a human being; hence we can say that what I ought to do in this situation is determined by what Christ would have done even if what I ought

to do is only some approximation thereto. It is clear, in any event, that one who takes God to be the supreme standard of value must hold that our actions, our characters, or anything else in the world are good to the extent that they imitate or approximate the being of God in whatever way is appropriate to their position in creation. Since we are already in possession of these resources, why don't they suffice to give us the basis of morality? Why do we need to invoke divine commandments for this purpose? No doubt, divine commands would still have a role to play – to communicate to us what we ought to do when we might otherwise be ignorant of this, to impress this on our minds, to render it unmistakably clothed with divine majesty, and so on. But divine commands would not be needed to play a constitutive role.

We have already developed the chief tool needed for an answer to this difficulty, namely, the basic distinction between goodness and obligation, on which our account of divine goodness was based. If the divine command theorist embraces the positions I have been developing for him he will have to acknowledge that the goodness, including moral goodness, of actions, persons, traits of character, or anything else, is most basically constituted by its degree of conformity to the divine being. That is all that is required to make it a good thing that I develop my talents, or lend aid to those in need. But what about obligation, duty, or the moral ought? By virtue of what do I have an obligation to develop my talents or act in a loving manner, even admitting that this would be a good thing for me to do? By virtue of what am I required or bound to act in these ways? By virtue of what would I be culpable, guilty, blameworthy, reprehensible for failing so to act? If and only if some basis for all this is needed over and above the goodness of these modes of behaviour, can one who recognises God as the supreme standard of goodness take divine commands to be constitutive of moral obligation. And so our crucial question becomes: is it possible for A to be a good, even the best, thing for me to do, without my being obligated or required to do it, without my being culpable or blameworthy for failing to do it?

When we consider this question in its full generality we only need ask it to see that the answer is in the affirmative. First, though not directly germane to this issue, it is worth reminding ourselves that it can be good thing for a state of affairs to be realised without my having an obligation to do what I can to bring it about. It is, no doubt, a good thing that the children of a certain small Siberian village should have piano lessons, but surely I have no obligation to see to this. However, the specific question with which we are confronted is whether the fact that it would be a good thing for me to do A entails that it is my obligation to do A, that I morally ought to do A; and again the answer is obviously negative. Most obviously, various incompatible lines of action can all be good ones for me to pursue, but I can hardly be obligated to pursue them all. This afternoon it would be a good thing for me to finish this paper, to go out cross-country skiing, and to finish a novel I am reading; but time does not permit me to do more than one. Since ought implies can, it cannot be true that

I ought to do everything it would be good for me to do. But even apart from competition between incompatible goods we get the same conclusion. It would be a very good thing for me to spend the afternoon practising the cello, both because it would be enjoyable and because it would be a development of my talents and would contribute toward putting me in a better position to give pleasure to others. But, assuming I have made no promises or assumed no obligations on the subject, I am clearly not obligated to do this; nor, apart from any special restrictions on the term 'obligation', is it true that I ought to do it. This last example is representative of a large class of 'optional' or 'gratuitous' desiderata that I am free to pursue or not as I choose, without any blame or guilt attaching to either choice.

However it may be said that I have achieved this result by restricting myself to nonmoral goods; and that if we consider the specifically moral goodness of actions, we will see that an action cannot be morally good, or at least cannot be morally the best thing for me to do in a given situation, without its being true that I morally ought to do it. To evaluate this claim we will first have to consider what is involved in an action's being morally good. One possibility is that an action can be called morally good when it is something I morally ought to do. In that case my opponent's claim would have to be accepted, but only because obligation is already built into that from which it is alleged to follow. And the question of what is required to make it true that I morally ought to do A would remain unanswered. Second, a widely accepted view is that an action is morally good if it is done from a morally good motive. Or, third, an action might be said to be morally good if it is desirable, commendable, satisfactory that it should be done, from 'the moral point of view', from the standpoint of the ends that the institution of morality is designed to achieve, whether this be social harmony, the maximisation of human welfare, the enlargement of human sympathies, or whatever. Suppose we take the notion in either this second or third way. Then I think we can see that an action can be morally a good thing for me to do, even the best thing for me to do, without my being bound or required to do it, without my rightly incurring reproach or blame in case I don't. All that is needed to establish this is the phenomenon of supererogation. If there are actions that it is good morally, even supremely good morally, for agents to perform, and that go beyond anything that could reasonably be considered their duty, obligation, or moral requirement, then the case is closed. And surely there are such. It would be a supremely fine and noble thing for me to sell all that I have and give it to the poor (assuming that this is done in a prudent way so that most of it does not wind up in the hands of dishonest bureaucrats taking their rake-off), or to throw up my comfortable way of life and use my time and energy to care for the destitute in Calcutta; but surely I am not required or obligated to do this; it is not true that I morally ought to do it. (I am not saying that I could not be morally obligated to take one of these lines of actions; if I had promised to do so, or if God had commanded me to do so, I would be obligated. I am saying rather that the

mere fact that it would be a supremely good thing, morally, for me to act in this way is not enough by itself to entail that I have an obligation to do it.) Thus it is one thing for it to be a good or the best thing, even morally, for me to do A, and another thing for me to be obligated or required to do A.

Thus there is a question about the basis of moral obligation, over and above the question about the basis of goodness that is answered by reference to the divine being. Of course there is such a question only if there are objective facts of moral requiredness that are constituted in some way or other. And this may be, and has been, denied. Our sense of its being absolutely incumbent on us to act in certain ways – however we feel about it, whatever our preferences, whatever the bearing on our welfare – may be deemed to be merely a not wholly fortunate internalisation of parental voices, or a projection of hostile impulses, or the result of diabolically clever social exploitation. But in this paper we are proceeding on the assumption of the objectivity of value and obligation. And given that assumption, what we have just indicated is that there is a constitutive job left for divine commands in the moral sphere, namely, the constitution of our moral obligations, what we ought to do morally. This role is there to be filled even if goodness, including moral goodness, is constituted independently.

To be sure, I have not shown, or even argued, that divine commands are or can be constitutive of moral obligation. I have merely aspired to set out in this paper a way of construing God, morality and value that leaves open the possibility that divine commands should do so. To go beyond that is a task for another occasion.[8]

NOTES

1. Robert Adams, 'Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (1979), pp. 71–9.
2. Adams, 'Divine Command Metaethics', p. 76.
3. It would be even more unproductive 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 overlap too. Furthermore, even if there were no overlap in content it would still remain a further question whether that by virtue of which X is morally good is the same for God and man.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), pp. 29–31. For a couple of other 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 & Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 14.
5. I could greatly extend the range of these examples by pointing out that we apply neither rules nor terms of the ought-family to matters outside our voluntary control. There is no rule in football forbidding a player to fly through the air with the ball, nor is there a rule of etiquette requiring a diner to secrete gastric juices. And here too the absence of 'ought' goes along with the absence of rules. But it might be thought that in these cases this is to be explained by the absence of freedom rather than by the absence

of contrary tendencies, and hence these cases do not unambiguously support my present thesis.

6. 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'.
7. This point is well developed in Thomas V. Morris, 'Duty and Divine Goodness,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 21, no. 3 (July, 1984).
8. This paper has profited greatly from discussions with Robert Adams, Jonathan Bennett, Norman Kretzmann, John Robertson, Eleonore Stump, and Stewart Thau.