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DIVINE COMMANDS AND THE SOCIAL NATURE OF OBLIGATION

Robert Merrihew Adams

Divine command metaethics is one of those theories according to which the nature of obligation is grounded in personal or social relationships. In this paper I first try to show how facts about human relationships can fill some of the role that facts of obligation are supposed to play, specifically with regard to moral motivation and guilt. Then I note certain problems that arise for social theories of obligation, and argue that they can be dealt with more adequately by an expansion of our vision of the social dimension of ethics to include God as the most important participant in our system of personal relationships.

Divine command metaethics is a type of social theory of the nature of obligation. This statement makes two important points. (1) Divine command metaethics is not about the nature of all ethical properties and facts but only about the nature of those that we may call "the obligation family" of ethical properties and facts, those expressed by such terms as 'right', 'wrong', 'ought', and 'duty'. Other sorts of ethical properties and facts are not less important to Christian ethics, and theological theories may be offered about their nature too; but such theories may be expected to involve other features of God rather than his commands. For instance, we might theorize that the objectively disgusting is what disgusts God. The present paper is exclusively about divine command theories, however; and ethical properties not belonging to the obligation family will be mentioned without any inquiry being made into their nature.

(2) Divine command metaethics is one of those theories according to which the nature of obligation is *social* (in a broad sense of 'social' that encompasses intimate personal relationships as well as "impersonal," institutional relationships with larger groups). The central idea in divine command metaethics is the expansion of our vision of the social dimension of ethics to include God as the most important participant in our system of personal relationships. In this paper I will first try to show how facts about human relationships can fill some of the role that facts of obligation are supposed to play, specifically with regard to moral motivation (in section 1) and guilt (in section 2). Then (in section 3) I will note certain problems that arise for social theories of obligation, and argue that they can be dealt with more adequately by a divine command theory.



This paper presupposes a view, for which I have argued elsewhere, about the relation between conceptual analysis and theories of the nature of moral properties. On this view, what analysis of the concept of wrongness can tell us “is not sufficient to determine what wrongness is. What it can tell us . . . is that wrongness will be the property of actions (if there is one) that best fills” a certain role.¹ Moreover the identity of that property with wrongness will be necessary, though not discoverable by conceptual analysis. I have little to add here to my defense of this conception of the relation of metaethical theories to conceptual analysis. What I hope to illuminate is rather the roles that wrongness, and other members of the obligation family of ethical properties, are supposed to fill, and the reasons for thinking (as I do) that those roles are best filled by properties involving a relation to the commands of a loving God.

Section 1: How Social Requirements Motivate

It is essential to the point of any conception of obligation that obligations motivate—that having an obligation to do *x* is generally regarded as a reason for doing *x*. One problem about the nature of obligation is to understand this motivation.

This will not be much of a problem if we assume that one is obliged only to do things that one expects to have good results. Then the goodness of the results provides a reason, and one’s desires for such good consequences a motive, for doing what one is obliged to do. Unfortunately, those who (like me) are not utilitarians cannot assume that obligations will always be so happily attuned to the value of expected results. We think we are sometimes obliged to tell the truth and to keep promises, for example, when we do not expect the consequences to be good. What would motivate us to do such a thing?

Even non-utilitarian moralists may not be satisfied with the reply that the conscientious agent has good enough reason for her action simply in the fact that it is right. This seems too abstract. John Rawls (certainly no utilitarian) writes,

The doctrine of the purely conscientious act is irrational. This doctrine holds . . . that the highest moral motive is the desire to do what is right and just simply because it is right and just, no other description being appropriate. . . . But on this interpretation the sense of right lacks any apparent reason; it resembles a preference for tea rather than coffee.²

If we are to see the fact of having an obligation as itself a reason for action, we need a richer, less abstract understanding of the nature of obligation, in which we might find something to motivate us.

According to social theories of the nature of obligation, having an obligation to do something consists in being required (in a certain way, under certain

circumstances), by another person or a group of persons, to do it. This opens more than one possibility for understanding obligations as reasons for action. One reason or motive for complying with a social requirement, of course, is that we fear punishment or retaliation for non-compliance. This is undoubtedly a real factor, which helps to keep morality (and other benign, and not so benign, social institutions) afloat. But here we are primarily interested in what *other* motives there may be for compliance.

The alternative explanation that I wish to pursue in this section is that *valuing one's social bonds* gives one, under certain conditions, a reason to do what is required of one by one's associates or one's community (and thus to fulfill obligations, understood as social requirements). This hypothesis is not to be understood in a teleological sense. No doubt the desire to obtain or maintain a certain kind of relationship does often contribute to the motivation for complying with social requirements, but that is not all there is to social bonds as a motive. The pattern of motivation to which I wish to call attention is one in which I value the relationship which I see myself as actually having, and my complying is an *expression* of my valuing and respecting the relationship. It is one in which I act primarily *out of* a valuing of the relationship, rather than with the obtaining or maintaining of the relationship as an *end*.³

There are at least four aspects of the relational situation that matter motivationally with regard to compliance with social requirements. (1) It matters that the demand is actually made. It is a question here of what other people do in fact (reasonably or rightly) require of me, not just of what they could reasonably require. The demand need not take the form of an explicit command or legislation; it may be an expectation more subtly communicated; but the demand must actually be made.

It is much more fashionable in ethical theory to treat moral motivation as depending on judgments about what an ideal community or authority *would* demand under certain counterfactual conditions. However, I am very skeptical of all these conditional accounts, for two reasons. First (the metaphysical reason), I doubt that the relevant counterfactuals are true, partly because they seem to be about free responses that are never actually made.⁴ In the second place (the more distinctively moral or motivational reason), I do not think I care very much about whether these counterfactual conditionals are true. This is not to deny that I care about some things that are closely connected with them; it is just to say that the counterfactuals themselves are motivationally weak.

By contrast, actual demands made on us in relationships that we value are undeniably real and motivationally strong. Most actual conscientiousness rests at least partly on people's sense of such demands. Our awareness of this source of moral motivation is reflected in appeals to "be a good citizen"—or, when in a foreign country, to "remember that you are a guest."

The actual making of the demand is important, not only to the strength, but also to the character, of the motive. Not every good reason for doing something makes it intelligible that I should feel that I *have* to do it. This is one of the ways in which having even the best of reasons for doing something does not as such amount to having an obligation to do it. But the perception that something is demanded of me by other people, in a relationship that I value, does help to make it intelligible that I should feel that I have to do it.

(2) It also matters motivationally how the individual who is subject to the demand is related, and feels related, to those persons who are making the demand. Let us assume, for purposes of this discussion, that the demand is made by a community. The individual may be a member of the community, or a guest in the community; but it is essential that there be some relation, and indeed some favorably valued relation. The relation may arise through the individual's action—commonly through a history of acts of loyalty and caring within the relationship; occasionally through the action, beloved of social contract theorists, of voluntarily joining the community or consenting explicitly to its institutions and principles. But the community's attitude toward the individual is at least as important. Does the community value the individual? Is its attitude toward her supportive and respectful? It is well known that these questions have in fact a great influence on moral motivation. An individual who feels neglected, despised, abused by the community will be alienated, and will be much less inclined to comply conscientiously with society's demands. I do not mean to say that the alienated person should be exempt from blame for immoral or "anti-social" behavior, but that often such behavior should be seen, not mainly as a falling away from impersonal standards of right action, but as part of a conflict with society in which society was the first offender.

Where community prevails, rather than alienation, the sense of belonging is not to be sharply distinguished from the inclination to comply with the reasonable requirements of the community. A "community" is a group of people who live their lives to some extent—possibly a very limited extent—in common. To see myself as "belonging" to a community is to see the institution or other members of the group as "having something to say about" how I live and act—perhaps not about every department of my life, and only to a reasonable extent about any department of it, but it is part of the terms of the relationship that their demands on certain subjects are expected to have some weight with me. And valuing such a relationship—loving it or respecting it—implies some willingness to submit to reasonable demands of the community. One is willing to comply, not as a means of satisfying a desire *to* belong, but as an expression of one's sense that one *does* belong, and one's endorsement of that relationship.

(3) It also matters what are the attributes of the demander. To put it crudely and simply, one will have more reason to comply with demands made by an

individual or group that one admires than by one that one holds a mean opinion of.⁵ If the demander is particularly impressive or admirable in any way—one will see more reason to comply than if the demander seems ill-informed, foolish, or in some other way contemptible.

(4) Finally, it matters motivationally how the demandee evaluates the demand itself.⁶ It must be possible to perform such an evaluation without relying on fully developed obligation concepts, if the character of the evaluation is to shed light, without circularity, as I hope, on the nature of obligation. This requirement can be satisfied, at least in part. You can start evaluating things simply on the basis of how you value them. Is the demand one which appeals to you, or one which disgusts or revolts you? Is it one which seems to be conducive to the things that you prize most, admire most, and so forth? You could ask that about your particular compliance, or you could ask it about general compliance, if that is what is being demanded. And what is the wider social significance of the demand? Is it an expression of a project or social movement that seems good or bad to you? No obligation concepts at all are employed in these questions; yet the answers to them both will and should affect the extent to which a social requirement gives you a reason for action. More serious problems for a social theory of the nature of obligation may indeed arise from reflection on such evaluation; but consideration of them is reserved for section 3.

Section 2: Guilt and Relationship

The nature of obligations cannot be understood apart from the reactions that people have and are expected to have to the breach of an obligation; and central to these reactions is the notion of guilt. This is one of the main differences between obligations and other sorts of reasons for action. If I fail to do what I had the most reason to do, I am not necessarily guilty, and there is apt to be nothing offensive about my reacting quite light-heartedly to the lapse. But if I fail to do what I have an obligation to do, then (other things being equal) I am guilty, and a light-hearted reaction would normally be offensive.

The word 'guilt' is not properly the name of a feeling, but of an objective moral condition which may rightly be recognized by others even if it is not recognized by the guilty person. However, feelings of guilt, and other reactions to guilt, may reasonably be taken as a source of understanding of the objective fact of guilt to which they point. We do not have the concept of guilt merely to signify in a general way the state of having done something wrong. Such an abstract conception of guilt fails to make intelligible, for example, the fact that guilt can be expiated, discharged, or forgiven. It also results in a rather tight and empty circle in understanding, inasmuch as a major part of what distinguishes wrongness (as a member of the obligation family of properties) from other sorts

of badness is precisely its connection with guilt.

It is true that one is not guilty, however unfortunate the outcome, for anything that was not in some way wrong. But there are two other aspects of guilt that are responsible for much of its human significance. One is the harm one has caused to other people by one's (wrong) action. It is wrong to drive carelessly, for example, and no less wrong when one is lucky than when an accident results. But the burden of guilt one incurs is surely heavier when one's carelessness causes the death of another person than when no damage is done. Many moralists are uncomfortable with this fact; but even if we were to define 'guilt' one-sidedly as meaning only the state of having done something wrong, the other, more complicated fact of having caused great harm through one's wrongdoing remains, and is a fact that we care about in a special way which is reflected in our actual, intuitive use of the word 'guilt'.

Harm caused to other people is not a feature of all guilt, however. One can be guilty for a violation of other people's rights that in fact harmed no one. And even if harm has been caused, it is not a serious aggravation of guilt if it does not fall heavily on some individual person or on some important project. If one is responsible for a traffic accident, for example, it would be bizarre to feel seriously guilty about a three-minute delay caused thereby to each passing motorist, even if the number of people inconvenienced is large enough for the aggregate delay to amount to a considerable cost by the standards appropriate to a traffic engineer.

A more pervasive feature of guilt is alienation from other people, or (at a minimum) a strain on one's relations with others. If I am guilty, I am out of harmony with people. Typically there is someone who is, or might well be, understandably angry at me. This feature is central to the role of guilt in human life. It is connected with such practices as punishing and apologizing. And it makes intelligible the fact that guilt can be (at least largely) removed by forgiveness.

Suppose I have done something that has offended a friend, resulting in estrangement. I think I was wrong to do it; I feel guilty. But if there is a reconciliation and my friend forgives me, I will feel released from the guilt. Indeed, I will *be* released from the guilt. The view that in such a case the guilt consists largely in an alienation produced by the wrong act is supported by the fact that the ending of the alienation ends the guilt.

This point is confirmed by reflection on an alternative scenario. Suppose I am not reconciled with my friend, but come to believe that the estrangement, though painful to him, has on the whole been good for him. Will this release me from the guilt? It will ease the burden, but not entirely remove it. In fact, I think it will not release me from guilt as completely as my friend's forgiveness (even combined with the belief that the estrangement has been bad for him) would.

This suggests that alienation is not only a constituent, but a more important constituent of guilt, in this type of case, than the harm caused to the other person.

This should not surprise us if we reflect on the way in which we acquired the concept, and the sense, of guilt. In our first experience of guilt its principal significance was an action or attitude of ours that ruptured or strained our relationship with a parent. There did not have to be a failure of benevolence or a violation of a rule; perhaps we were even too young to understand rules. It was enough that something we did or expressed offended the parent, and seemed to threaten the relationship. This is the original context in which the obligation cluster of moral concepts and sentiments arise. We do not begin with a set of moral principles but with a relationship, actual in part and in part desired, which is immensely valued for its own sake. Everything that attacks or opposes that relationship seems to us bad.

Of course this starkly simple mentality is pre-moral. We do not really have obligation concepts until we can make some sort of distinction, among the things we do that strain relationships, between those in which we are at fault or wrong and those in which we are innocent or right (not to mention those in which we are partly wrong and partly right). We begin to grasp such a distinction as we learn such facts as the following: Not every demand or expectation laid on us by other people constitutes an obligation, but only demands made in certain ways in certain kinds of relationship (for instance, commands of one's parents and teachers), and expectations that arise in certain ways (for instance, from promises). An unexpressed wish is not a command. One is not guilty for anything one has not really done. The fact that somebody is angry does not necessarily imply that an obligation has been violated.

This development is compatible, however, with regarding obligations as a species of social requirement, and guilt as consisting largely in alienation from those who have required of us what we did not do. I believe it is not childish, but perceptive and correct, to persist in this way of thinking about obligation and guilt. This is a controversial position. It is generally agreed that learning about guilt begins in the way that I have indicated, and that the value we place on good relationships, not only with parents but also with peers, is crucial to moral development. But many moralists hold that in the highest stages of the moral life (perhaps not reached by many adults) the center of moral motivation is transplanted from the messy soil of concrete relationships to the pure realm of moral principles; and a corresponding development is envisaged for the sense of guilt. Thus John Rawls traces the development of the sense of justice from a "morality of authority" through a "morality of association" to a "morality of principles"; corresponding to these three stages, he speaks of "feelings of (authority) guilt," "feelings of (association) guilt," and "feeling of (principle) guilt"—only the last of these counting as "feelings of guilt in the strict sense."⁷

It is certainly possible to come to value—even to love—an ethical principle for its own sake, and this provides a motive for conforming to it. I doubt that this is ever the most powerful of ethical motives; but what I would emphasize here is that this way of relating to ethical principles has more to do with ideals than with obligations. To love truthfulness is one thing; to feel that one *has* to tell the truth is something else. Similarly, it seems to me that there is something wrong-headed about the idea of “principle guilt.”

To be sure, there are *feelings* of guilt for the violation of a rule, where no person is seen as offended. But these are typically remnants of a morality of authority, and most plausibly understood as rooted in an internalization of childhood perceptions of requirements imposed by parents or other authority figures. They are part of a heteronomous, not an autonomous, reaction. The fact that the rule is seen as imposed on me, as something that I *have to* obey, is the ghost of my conception of it as sponsored by a person or persons who will be (understandably) offended if it is violated.

Feelings of “principle guilt,” as Rawls conceives of them, are not like that. They are autonomous and based on one’s valuing the rules, seeing them as expressing one’s nature as a rational agent in a society of free and equal members. It is this non-compulsive, rational reaction to the breach of a personally valued principle that seems to me not to be a recognition of guilt, but of something different.

Suppose I have done something that is simply contrary to some principle that I believe in. It is not that I have done significant harm to anyone, or alienated myself from anyone. The situation does not call for apologies or reactions to anticipated or possible or appropriate anger, because there is no one (let’s suppose not even God) who might be understandably angry with me about it. It does not seem either natural or appropriate for me to feel *guilty* in such a situation. Maybe someone is entitled to think less of me for the deed. Perhaps I will see less value in my own life on account of it. I may in this way be alienated from myself, though not from anyone else. But these are reasons for feeling ashamed or degraded, rather than for feeling guilty.⁸ Guilt is not necessarily worse than degradation, but they are different. And I think a main point of difference between them is that, in typical cases, guilt involves alienation from someone else who required or expected of us what we were obligated to do and have not done.

Section 3: The Supreme Demander

Much can be understood about the nature of obligation in terms of human social relationships, as I have been trying to show. We even have a use for a notion of “an obligation” that can be understood purely sociologically, and therefore “naturalistically,” in terms of a description of social practices such as

commanding, promising, punishing, and apologizing, without any attempt to evaluate these practices as good or bad. This is a pre-moral notion in at least two ways.

(1) It is not the notion of an obligation that is “overriding” in the way that fully moral obligation is. An obligation, in this sense, must give most participants in the social system *some reason* to do what it obliges them to do; but it need not override other considerations. So no understanding is presupposed here of the nature of such an overriding.

(2) More fundamentally, the purely sociological notion is not the notion of a morally valid or binding obligation. It is just the notion of *an* obligation or duty, in the sense in which we can agree that Adolf Eichmann had *a* duty to arrange for the transportation of Jews to extermination camps. Certainly this was not a morally valid or binding duty at all, but it was in some sense *a* duty. It played a part in a system of social relationships such that there were superiors who, understandably (though immorally), would be angry if he did not do it, and in relation to who he would feel uncomfortable if he did not do it, even if they did not know of this omission. Obligations in this pre-moral sense can be good or bad; they can even be morally repugnant, as Eichmann’s was.

The nature of obligation in the pre-moral sense does not need a divine command theory to explain it. That is a good thing, because divine command metaethics itself presupposes a pre-moral, sociological conception of obligation. It is the very core of a divine command theory to think of the divine/human relationship on the model of a social relationship in which authority, commands, obedience, loyalty, and belonging play a part. But we cannot really have these things without both the reality and the concept of an obligation, in some sense. A command imposes an obligation, or is the sort of thing that could impose an obligation. And one who obeys a command sees herself as fulfilling an obligation arising out of the command. There must therefore be some sort of obligation whose nature cannot without circularity be explained in terms of anyone’s commands. What divine command metaethics is meant to explain is the nature of obligation, not in the minimal, pre-moral sense, but in a stronger, fully moral sense.

The earlier sections of this paper were meant to show something of the importance of interpersonal or social relationships for the nature of obligation in even a fully moral sense. The idea of trying to understand all obligation, including moral obligation, as constituted by some sort of social requirement has its attractions. As the Eichmann case makes clear, however, any acceptable account of the nature of moral obligation in terms of social requirements must incorporate some way of *evaluating* the requirements; and it may be doubted whether a descriptive sociological theory has the resources for the evaluation that is needed. In section 1 I described some ways in which, without appealing to any criterion of obligation as such, an individual can evaluate, and would naturally be expected

to evaluate, demands made on her by other people, or by her community. That sort of evaluation is subjective, however. Its subjectivity does not keep it from being important to the motivational significance of obligation. But a definition of moral obligation in terms of social requirements that “pass” that kind of evaluation would not ascribe to moral obligation the objectivity or interpersonal validity that it is supposed to have.

The need for a standard by which to evaluate them is not the only disadvantage of human social requirements as a basis for understanding the nature of moral obligation. They also fail to cover the whole territory of moral obligation. We find that there are situations in which we would say, at least retrospectively, that none of the existing human communities demanded as much as they should have, or that there was something that really ought to have been required that was not demanded by any community, or perhaps even by any human individual, in the situation.

Moral obligation seems therefore to need a source or standard that is superior to human social requirements. Can it be found? And can it have (at least a lot of) the significance of obligations that are rooted in social requirements? In particular, how much can it have of the motivational significance of social requirements (as discussed in section 1 above)? And will it enable us to see moral guilt as something more robust than “principle guilt,” and as removed by forgiveness (as discussed in section 2)? These advantages are not possessed by all the supreme sources of obligation that have been proposed in metaethical theories. I have already argued, for example, that the hypothetical deliverances of an “ideal observer” lack the motivational force of actual social demands.

Where could we find a supreme source or standard of moral obligation which has these advantages? The attempt has certainly been made to find it, after all, in a human society, in some way both actual and ideal, to which we can be seen as belonging. Emile Durkheim’s lectures on *Moral Education* present a great sociologist’s fascinating development of this idea. But it seems pretty clear that no actual human society is going to come close to filling this bill. To put it crudely and simply, no actual human society is good enough for that.

Where else would we look for an ideal source of moral obligation? My proposal is that we look to the set of ideas on which Durkheim quite openly and frankly modeled his secular, sociological account of morality—that is, the theistic ideas. Durkheim, following in the steps of Comte, was turning theistic ethics inside out, as it were, to get his conception of society as the source of moral obligation. I suggest that we turn the idea right side out again, and think of God as the source. More precisely, my view is that commands or requirements⁹ actually issued or imposed by a loving God are the supreme standard of moral obligation. I will argue that they have much of the significance of social requirements as a source of obligation.

The pivotal role of God's forgiveness in the ethical life of theists underlines the advantages of divine command metaethics for the understanding of *guilt*. If the supreme standard of ethical obligation is what is required by God, then a violation of it is an offense against a person and not just against a principle, and results in something that has the full relational significance of guilt, and not just of disgrace or degradation. This relational significance enriches the possibilities for dealing with guilt—most notably by helping us to understand ethical guilt as something that can be removed by forgiveness.

Moreover, divine commands have the *motivational* significance of actual social requirements. I will point out four motivational features of divine command metaethics and of the divine commander corresponding (but in a different order) to the four motivational features of human social requirements discussed in section 1 above.

(1) One thing that matters to the motivational force of divine commands is how God is related to us. It matters that he is our creator. It matters that he loves us.¹⁰ It matters that God has entered into covenant with us; it matters that there is a history of relationship between God and the individual and between God and the religious community—and that the divine commands play a significant role in this history, and are related to divine purposes that we see being worked out in this history and having a certain importance for our lives. It matters that all of these things about the relationship are such that, seeing them, we have reason to value the relationship, rather than to be alienated from it.

(2) It matters what God's attributes are. God is supremely knowledgeable and wise—he is omniscient, after all; and that is very important motivationally. It makes a difference if you think of commands as coming from someone who completely understands both us and our situation.

It matters not only that God is loving but also that he is just.¹¹ 'Just' is to be understood here in a sense that is quite naturalistic and largely procedural. We are applying to God a concept that has its original home in courts of law. Without any appeal to a standard of fully moral obligation we can recognize certain truths about justice: A just judge punishes people, if at all, only for things that they have actually done. Merit and demerit have some relevance to the way it is just to treat people. The just judge is interested in getting out, and acting in accordance with, the truth.¹²

Another important attribute of God is that he is beautiful or wonderful. This is a point at which Durkheim understood religious ethics rather well, and tried to exploit it for his purposes. "The good," he wrote, "is society . . . insofar as it is a reality richer than our own, to which we cannot attach ourselves without a resulting enrichment of our nature."¹³ The religious root of this idea is obvious and requires no further comment, except to say that Durkheim is quite right in thinking that the richness, for us, of the being from which requirements proceed

is a powerful motivating factor.

(3) It matters, for the motivation strength of divine command metaethics, what it is that is demanded of us. And it matters how what is demanded relates to our valuing. It matters motivationally, for example, that we do not believe that God demands cruelty for its own sake. Here again in thinking of our valuing we do not have to presuppose a full panoply of obligation concepts. It is enough if in some sense we love kindness and feel revolted or disgusted at cruelty. God's requirements function as an objective standard of obligation; but our subjective valuing are important to the way in which the divine requirements fulfill this function.

It is undoubtedly important that in theistic ethics the divine legislation is generally seen as upholding the binding character of a large proportion of the "obligations" defined by human institutions and practices. The divine/human relationship is not simply a superior alternative to human society as a source of obligation. Rather, God is seen as the chief member of a more comprehensive social system or "family," which is reflected, though imperfectly, in actual human relationships. Thus the motivational significance of divine and human requirements is to a large extent integrated.

(4) Finally, it matters that the requirements are actually imposed by God. Critics have argued that this does not really matter in divine command metaethics as I have expounded it. They suggest that all the work is being done by the stipulation that it is the demands of a *loving* God that bind—that really nothing would be lost if we just said that our overriding, fully moral obligation is constituted by what *would* be commanded by a loving God, whether there is one or not. I want to say why I think that that is not an adequate substitute.

My reasons on this point parallel my reasons for not being satisfied with an ideal, non-actual human authority as a source of moral obligation. First of all, I do not believe in the counterfactuals. I do not believe that there is a unique set of commands that would be issued by any loving God. There are some things that a loving God might command and might not command. In particular, among the things that I believe actually to be valid moral demands, there are some that I think might have been arranged differently by a God who would still be loving, and who would still satisfy the additional requirements of the metaethical theory. For example, a loving God could have commanded different principles regarding euthanasia from those that I believe are actually in force.¹⁴

In the second place, even aside from any doubts about whether these counterfactuals about loving Gods are true, it seems to me that they are motivationally weak. They do not have anything like the motivational or reason-generating power of the belief that something actually is demanded of me by my loving creator and heavenly father. The latter belief is therefore one that metaethics cannot easily afford to exchange for the belief that such and such *would* have

been demanded of me by a loving God.

Can the nature of moral obligation be adequately understood in terms of social requirements? Yes, if our system of social relationships includes God.¹⁵

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NOTES

1. R.M. Adams, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 7 (1979): 74. All my papers cited here are reprinted, some with additional notes, in my *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 477f. This passage is quoted, with approval, in James Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 116. What I have said thus far about utilitarian and nonutilitarian reasons for fulfilling an obligation largely follows Wallace's (much fuller) line of argument.

3. Motives that we act "out of" are interestingly and persuasively distinguished from teleological motives in Michael Stocker's paper, "Values and Purposes: The Limits of Teleology and the Ends of Friendship," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 78 (1981): 747-765.

4. Grounds for doubting the truth of such counterfactuals about free responses are given in my paper, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (1977): 109-117.

5. Cf. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 465: It is favorable to "the development of the morality of authority" that the parents "be worthy objects of [the child's] admiration."

6. Cf. James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (op. cit.), p. 114: "If person A *reasonably* asks something of person B, then the reasonableness of the request gives B a *reason for complying*, quite apart from B's plans and goals. This reason for complying can be overridden by other considerations, but it is itself a consideration to be taken into account." I am much indebted to Wallace on the whole subject of the reason-giving force of social requirements, but I think that reasonableness is only one dimension of the evaluation that is needed here.

7. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (op. cit.), chs. 70-72, pp. 465, 470, and 474f. Rawls is influenced by Piaget and other developmental psychologists. One of them, heavily influenced, in turn, by Rawls, is Lawrence Kohlberg, the author of a widely discussed attempt to provide empirical support for the claim that something very like the progression that Rawls postulates is a part of normal human development. Concerning this it is interesting to note that whereas Rawls in 1971 identified "the morality of principles" with the last of Kohlberg's six stages (Rawls, op. cit., p. 462n.), Kohlberg has recently written that "We no longer claim that our empirical work has succeeded in defining the nature of a sixth and highest stage of moral judgment. The existence and nature of such a stage is, at this moment, a matter of theoretical and philosophical speculation and further empirical data collection" [Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, Volume II: *The Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 215; see also pp. 270-74]. It should also be noted that Kohlberg's stages are primarily stages of *reasoning* about justice; his research does not so directly address the issues on which I am focusing here, of the social or relational

grounding of moral motivation and the sense of guilt. But this is not the place for the sort of thorough discussion that Kohlberg deserves.

8. It is significant that insofar as my reaction arises from my personally valuing a principle, or seeing it as expressing my nature, it does not seem to matter very much whether the principle is moral or aesthetic or intellectual. I could be degraded in my own eyes by doing something I regard as aesthetically or intellectually unworthy of me.

9. The possibility of speaking of divine "requirements" here, rather than always of "commands," may serve to suggest the diversity of ways (by no means limited to explicit injunctions in sacred texts) in which God's demands may be communicated.

10. In earlier papers I have made the point that the nature of moral obligation can be understood in terms of the commands only of a *loving* God. See Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., editors, *Religion and Morality* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1973), pp. 318-47; and "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," (op. cit.).

11. This point is rightly emphasized by Alasdair MacIntyre in "Which god ought we to obey and why?" *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (October 1986). It was wrongly neglected in my previous papers on divine command metaethics.

12. Abraham's argument with God about the fate of Sodom, in which he asks, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice?" (Genesis 18:25) can be understood in terms of just such principles as these about justice. The Hebrew word for 'justice' here (*mishpat*) comes from the same root as the word for 'judge', and signifies what a judge does when he is doing his job.

13. Emile Durkheim, *L'education morale* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1925), p. 110.

14. I have discussed this issue more fully in "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," in C. F. Delaney, editor, *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 121f.

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