

## **Divine Desire Theory and Obligation**

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Thanks largely to the work of Robert Adams and Philip Quinn, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of interest in divine command theory as a viable position in normative theory and meta-ethics. More recently, however, there has been some dissatisfaction with divine command theory even among those philosophers who claim that normative properties are grounded in God, and as a result alternative views have begun to emerge, most notably divine intention theory (Murphy, Quinn) and divine motivation theory (Zagzebski). My goal here is to outline a distinct theory, divine desire theory, and suggest that, even if it is not clearly superior to these extant views, it is at least worthy of serious consideration.<sup>1</sup>

As far as this paper is concerned, the discussion will be limited just to the deontic status of actions (obligatory, permissible, forbidden), and so no attempt will be made to also account for axiological properties such as goodness or evil. In order to get oriented to the range of deontological views in this area, consider the following three rough characterizations:

*Divine Command Theory*: Deontological properties are metaphysically grounded in God's relevant commands.<sup>2</sup>

*Divine Intention Theory*: Deontological properties are metaphysically grounded in God's relevant intentions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Divine desire theory is not a new theory; indeed something like this view has been gestured at in the literature for some time but never developed at length. See, e.g., Brody 1981 and Wierenga 1983: 390.

<sup>2</sup> See Quinn 1978 and Adams 1979, 1999, 2002.

*Divine Desire Theory*: Deontological properties are metaphysically grounded in God's relevant desires.

For divine command theory, God's mental states give rise to his commands, but it is the commands themselves which determine the deontic status of actions. The other two views acknowledge that God's commands play an important *epistemic* role in communicating how human beings are to behave, but it is certain prior mental states themselves, intentions in the one case and desires in the other, which are the metaphysical basis for deontic properties.<sup>4</sup>

Does anything hang on the outcome of the debate between advocates of these three views? While a proper treatment of this question would require a paper in its own right, it seems apparent that a great deal does depend on this outcome. Both divine intention and divine desire theory avoid certain serious objections to divine command theory,<sup>5</sup> and elsewhere I have argued that grounding obligations in divine intentions is also seriously problematic.<sup>6</sup> Thus divine desire theory may be the most promising place to look of these three views if the theist wants to claim that God is the basis for deontic properties.

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<sup>3</sup> See Murphy 1998 and Quinn 2000, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Given space limitations, I have omitted discussion of divine motivation theory here. For what I consider to be the central difficulty with the view, see my 2007a.

<sup>5</sup> Divine intention theorists such as Murphy and Quinn have been especially critical of divine command theory in recent years, and I have nothing to offer here in addition to their objections. Rather, I want to only make one important point, namely that their central objections – such as Murphy's trilemma or his 'objectionable contingency' charge – give us good reason to reject divine command theory, but *not* to favor divine intention theory over divine desire theory. In other words, advocates of divine desire theory can readily help themselves to these objections. This includes what I consider to be the simplest and most intuitively compelling concern of all, namely that "it is at the deepest level God's will, and not his commands, *which merely express his will*, that determines the deontological status of actions" (Quinn 1990: 293, emphasis mine.)

For Murphy's trilemma, see Murphy 2002a, 2002b: 82-92, and 2004 and the discussion in Almeida 2004 and Wainwright 2005: 89. For the objectionable contingency charge, see Murphy 1998: 4-7.

<sup>6</sup> See Miller 2007c.

Given limitations of space, however, my concern here is not with carrying out a comparative evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with these three positions. Rather, I first simply outline divine desire theory in section one, and then attempt to respond to what will likely be some of the leading objections in section two.

One final note, though, before we begin. This paper is a contribution to an intramural debate among philosophers who accept, if only for the sake of argument, that two central claims are true – a theistic God exists, and such a God is the metaphysical ground of deontic properties. Thus divine desire theory, like the other leading theories mentioned above, should have no appeal to anyone who does not accept one or both of these assumptions.

## **1. Divine Desire Theory**

Imagine that you are considering whether you are required to perform action A in circumstances C. You have been contemplating this for some time, and really cannot decide whether A is obligatory or not. A friend of yours, Smith, knows about your plight and offers to help. He considers all the reasons for and against your A-ing in C that he can think of, and ultimately wants you to indeed perform A. Does Smith's desire for you to A in C serve as any kind of metaphysical basis for your being obligated to A in C? Clearly not. For, among other things, Smith might not be aware of stronger additional reasons for not performing A in C. And the reasons he *is* aware of might not count in favor of A-ing to nearly the degree that Smith thinks they do.

So let us replace your friend Smith with a virtuous human being, someone like Gandhi or Mother Teresa. And now suppose that this person again contemplates the merits of your A-ing in the relevant circumstances, and wants you to A in C. Does the

fact that this person is virtuous suffice to allow her desire to ground an obligation for you to A in C? Again, clearly not. For while this person might assess the reasons she is aware of correctly, she is still a fallible human being, and may be unaware of a host of additional considerations against your A-ing in C. Given these epistemic limitations, it is hard to take seriously the idea that her desires could be the final metaphysical word about your obligations in C.

Suppose, finally, that we replace the desires of a human being with the desires of God, where God is the familiar omnipotent, omniscience, and omnibenevolent theistic deity. God now contemplates what he takes to be the reasons for and against your A-ing in C, and on the basis of his evaluation of what those reasons indicate and their comparative strengths, he comes to desire that you freely A in C. Indeed, of all the actions you could perform in C, this is the *only* action which he desires that you perform. Could *this* desire that you A in C ground an obligation for you to do so?

There are several reasons for thinking that it could. For one thing, there can be no question about the reasons involved in forming the desire. Being omniscient, God would not be ignorant of any relevant factual considerations, and being perfect, he would assign them their valences and their weights in a way which is consistent with his nature. From there he could determine what action of yours they favor overall.

Furthermore, God is the creator of the universe, including the free creatures in it, and has strong desires about their behavior in various circumstances. It is reasonable to think of those desires as grounding his expectations for the behavior of his creatures, expectations which are often not met but which in God's mind are *supposed* to be met. In other words, if God desires that his free creatures not kill other innocent human beings,

then they are supposed to not do so, and failure to meet this expectation will likely foster God's disappointment in the creatures. This desire, then, looks like it would be the basis for a standard of behavior for those creatures when it comes to killing, and violation of that standard would be wrong.

There is a close analogy here to parents and their children. A mother might desire that her son clean his room, and because of this she tells him to do so before he can play video games. This desire has created an expectation in the mother's mind as to her son's behavior. The child might ask why he has to do it, at which point the mother's most immediate answer might just be – because I want you to. If the child persists, the mother might go on to elaborate some of the reasons for why she formed the desire – because people are coming over to look at buying the house, or because we are having a party tonight, or because it is a mess, etc. This is where the analogy can become misleading, as we might then think that the mother's expression of her desire serves a merely epistemic function of communicating to the child the good reasons for cleaning his room, reasons which would have continued to exist even if the mother were not around. As we will see in section two, however, when it comes to God, his desires play a far more robust role of serving as the actual metaphysical ground for obligations, rather than just as the epistemic intermediaries for what we have most reason to do.<sup>7</sup>

Looking to divine desires as the ground for deontic properties also begins to appear more promising once we note the lack of plausible alternative divine mental states from which to choose. Cognitive mental states such as beliefs seem ill-suited to the job since they have the wrong direction of fit to the world; they aim to fit the world, and are true when their intentional object is the case. But this picture would have God's beliefs

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Tim Bayne for pointing out the potentially misleading nature of the analogy.

being formed as a result of deontological properties which exist either apart from God altogether, or which depend on some other facet of God such as his desires. In either case, God's beliefs would not be the immediate ground of those properties. Instead of cognitive mental states, then, we can look to God's intentions. But as I have already suggested, this alternative is not promising either.<sup>8</sup>

Thus we have some initial, albeit far from conclusive reasons to say that God's desires could ground an obligation for a human being to A in C. Or so, at least, is the claim of divine desire theory (hereafter 'DDT'). More generally, DDT is committed to the following claim about obligation:

- (O) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is obligatory if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God desires that S freely A in C. Furthermore, what directly grounds S's obligation to A in C is this desire.<sup>9</sup>

Suppose, for example, that it is obligatory for me as I walk past a shallow pond to rush in and save a drowning child. Then according to (O), what grounds this obligation is God's desire towards my saving the child. Indeed we can suppose that given the circumstances, he is also averse towards my doing anything else that I could freely do at that moment, although strictly speaking according to (O) that aversion does not serve as the basis for the obligation.

It is important to note that (O) is not intended as a thesis specifically about *moral* obligations, although the paper will draw heavily on examples of obligations which are clearly moral. Part of my hesitancy about restricting (O) just to moral obligation is that I do not know of any precise way of delimiting moral from non-moral obligations, and the

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<sup>8</sup> See my 2007c. Another option would be divine emotions, and this is the strategy that advocates of divine motivation theory adopt (Zagzebski 2004). A more detailed discussion would certainly have to consider this approach as well, but given limitations of space I leave that discussion to my 2007a.

<sup>9</sup> Note that (O) is stated in terms of God's desire that an agent perform a particular action, and not in terms of God's desire that *it be morally obligatory that* the agent perform the action. For reasons in favor of rejecting the latter option, see Murphy 1998: 10-16.

same is true of moral versus non-moral reasons. Hence I want to leave it open as to the kinds of reasons and desires that God might have; in some cases, he might form a desire that I perform an action on the basis of purely prudential reasons (such as his desire that I call the hospital when I am having a heart attack), while in other cases he might form a desire that I act in a certain way based solely on moral considerations (such as his desire that I save the drowning child). But I have nothing to offer in order to restrict the reasons, desires, and obligations in (O) in some meaningful way only to the moral domain.

Clearly, (O) will need some additional explication. Let us take the central concepts in turn:

*Reasons.* The reasons in question are *motivating reasons*, or considerations in the light of which an agent deliberates, decides, and intentionally acts.<sup>10</sup> From the first person perspective, motivating reasons are taken by an agent to be *good* reasons for action, and by the agent's own lights they can serve to justify not only the performance of an action, but also the formation of the mental states deemed necessary for so acting. On my view, and following a common theme in the recent literature, a person's motivating reasons are to be found in the contents of intentional mental states had by him or her. By 'mental states' I mean pairs of mental attitudes and contents such as my belief that *p*, your desire that *q*, and her wish that *r*. Believing, desiring, wishing, and the like are mental attitudes directed at intentional mental contents, in this case *p*, *q*, and *r*. So on this view, an agent's motivating reasons are not his beliefs, desires, wishes, or mental states more generally, but rather the *contents* of at least some of those mental states, which are intentional mental representations of putative facts in the world, representations which are typically

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<sup>10</sup> For a similar characterization, see Dancy 2000: 1 and Setiya 2003: 346-347.

propositional in form.<sup>11</sup> So if I believe that there is widespread starvation in Iceland, one of my motivating reasons for donating to famine relief in Iceland can be the propositional content of that belief, namely *there is widespread starvation in Iceland*, even if this belief is *false* and there is in fact almost no starvation in Iceland.

Arguing for this view would take us too far afield, and fortunately others have already done so persuasively.<sup>12</sup> So let us assume that something like this rough picture of motivating reasons is true in the human case. Now it is always a danger to extrapolate from facts about human psychology to putative facts about God's mind; indeed it is not even clear that God forms mental states or acts for reasons in any way resembling our doing so. However, since all the rival views to DDT mentioned at the start of this paper also freely appeal to claims about God's psychological life, DDT at least will not be any worse off in this respect. So returning to (O), the assumption is that some if not all of God's desires are formed for reasons.<sup>13</sup> Suppose, for example, that God strongly desires that I not torture a dog. Some of his motivating reasons could be the contents of divine beliefs, such as *that action would cause pain to the dog* or *there are many other free actions he could perform that do not involve torture*. Other reasons might be the objects of prior divine desires, such as *that there be less pain in the world* or *that animals not suffer*. And still other motivating reasons could be the contents of divine emotions, such as *that action is not loveable* or *that action is cruel*.

It is worth considering in a bit more detail what is involved in the reasons God uses in forming a desire about a particular action I might perform. These reasons have

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<sup>11</sup> 'Typically' because there may be intentional mental states with non-propositional intentional objects. Searle, for example, thinks that this is true for states of love. See his 1983: 6-7 and 2001: 36.

<sup>12</sup> I develop the view at length in Miller 2007b. See also Dancy 2000, Setiya 2003, and Davis 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Zagzebski has argued that some of God's desires might not be based on reasons. See her 2004: 267-268.



three main properties: they are factual considerations, they have valences, and they have weights. First, given God's omniscience, he would know all the factual considerations relevant to my action, such as exactly how much pain would be caused to the dog if I tortured it. These facts may themselves be non-normative,<sup>14</sup> but on the basis of his character, God would assign a *valence* to each fact such that it is either a reason *for* the action, a reason *against* the action, or a fact that is neutral with respect to the action. Finally and again on the basis of his character, he would assign different *weights* or degrees of importance to different considerations. The consideration *that the action would cause the dog to suffer* would be a fact with a far more negative valence, presumably, than the fact *that the action would cause my character to become more vicious*. So when formed on the basis of reasons, a divine desire about a particular human action will always appropriately reflect all the factual considerations God deems to be relevant, as well as the valences and weights he assigns to those facts.

*Desires.* As we have seen, according to DDT what grounds an obligation for a human being to act in a certain way is a particular divine *desire* formed on the basis of the relevant reasons. For our purposes here, we can just treat 'desires' in (O) as the folk psychological states with a world-to-mind direction of fit which are to be understood narrowly as being distinct from intentions, wishes, and emotions.<sup>15</sup>

A question that naturally arises about (O) is what we should make of the possibility that, for a particular agent and a given set of circumstances, God has multiple desires directed at different free actions. Perhaps God desires that I volunteer at a church,

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<sup>14</sup> But they need not be. The fact *that causing this amount of pain to the dog is bad*, is a fact with moral content.

<sup>15</sup> It has become customary in the action theory literature to distinguish between wide and narrow conceptions of desire. For more, see Smith 1994 and Schueler 1995.

but perhaps he also desires that in those same circumstances I make a donation to charity. If such a state of affairs is possible, (O) is in trouble, since then I would have multiple obligations which are impossible for me to fulfill simultaneously in the circumstances, and so performing either of these actions, or any other for that matter, would be wrong.<sup>16</sup>

In response, I want to suggest that when it comes to the divine desires which ground a human being's obligations, it is plausible to think that God forms only *one* such desire about a certain action for me to perform in circumstances C, provided that he is not indifferent towards any of the actions I could freely carry out in C.<sup>17</sup> To see this, I first assume that the following principle is true:

(R) Only God's desires concerning free human actions which are formed on the basis of his assessment of *all* (rather than just *some*) of the relevant reasons for action in the circumstances can ground deontic properties pertaining to those actions.<sup>18</sup> For instance, if God's desire that S freely A in C grounds his obligation to do so, then that desire is based on God's assessment of all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C.

Now suppose one of my free actions, such as donating to charity, is favored more so by the balance of reasons than any other of my potential actions in C. And suppose that God as a result desires that I freely make the donation, thereby rendering it obligatory. It follows from (O) that my volunteering at a church in the same circumstances would only be obligatory as well if it were grounded in God's desire that I do so. But given (R), such a desire would have to be based on God's assessment of the very same reasons used in forming the first desire. And so why would God also form this all-things considered

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<sup>16</sup> Note that this example is not intended to be a special case which we might be tempted on independent grounds to understand as a moral dilemma (such as Sophie's choice or Abraham's sacrifice). If it were a special case, then perhaps such a consequence of (O) would not be troublesome. But the example is intended to be an ordinary case in which we would never think that all of the actions would be wrong. For a related concern, see Murphy 1998: 17.

<sup>17</sup> This claim is compatible with God's forming multiple desires pertaining to which actions to *not* perform in C. It is also a claim about *unconditional* desires, and so is compatible with God's forming multiple conditional desires pertaining to the same agent and circumstances, i.e., that the agent perform certain acts as opposed to others if he happens to not perform the action that God unconditionally desires for him to do.

<sup>18</sup> The deontic properties here are intended to only be *ultima facie* rather than *prima facie* properties. We shall take up this distinction at greater length in the next section.

desire that I volunteer, since by hypothesis making the donation is the action in C that is *best* supported by the reasons? In other words, why would God also want me to do something in C which is such that, were I to do it, I would be objectively irrational for doing so?<sup>19</sup>

*Freely.* It is plausible to think that given God's omnipotence, for any state of affairs not involving free actions, if God desires that it obtain, then it will obtain. Indeed, such a claim is likely to be necessarily true. But clearly if *all* of God's desires were like this, then there would never be noncompliance with any obligations, which is absurd. Hence by specifying that God desires that S *freely* A in C, thesis (O) implies that God's desire will only be satisfied in the event of this particular creature's exercising his or her own free will in choosing A.

*Grounds.* Thus far little has been said about the sense in which divine desires might 'ground' deontological properties. This is intentional, as there are a number of proposals one could make, and advocates of DDT can plausibly develop the view in a variety of directions. More specifically, we can distinguish at least four different proposals:

Meaning Equivalence: The best conceptual analysis of 'A is obligatory for me' is 'God desires that I A.'

Casual Grounding: God desires that I A is a causally necessary and sufficient condition for A's being obligatory for me.

Identity: Its being obligatory for me to do A is identical to God's desiring that I A.

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<sup>19</sup> Note that two actions could be favored to the *same* extent by the relevant reasons, and more so than any other actions I could do in C. But this does not militate in favor of God's forming two desires; rather, he could for instance just form the desire that I *either* freely make a donation in C or freely volunteer at a church in C.

Non-Reductive Constitution: A's being obligatory for me is constituted by but not identical to God's desiring that I A. There is an asymmetrical dependency relation between the two.<sup>20 21</sup>

It is important to note that merely postulating a bi-conditional between obligation and divine desires (as is done in the first sentence of (O)) is not sufficient for rendering DDT a distinctive position, as nothing would thereby be indicated about the dependence relation between the two. Indeed, an advocate of divine *command* theory could accept this claim and still hold that what actually ground obligations are divine commands not divine desires. Hence a fully developed version of DDT also needs an account of the grounding relation between the relevant divine desires and deontological properties, and relations of causal dependence, identity, or non-reductive constitution are likely going to be the most popular options. Meaning equivalence proposals, on the other hand, since they are not making metaphysical but rather just conceptual claims, are not directly relevant to the concerns of this paper.

Finally, (O) specifies that God's desire "directly" grounds S's obligation. This is intended to block the possibility that God's desire that S freely A in C might cause the formation of something else, such as an intention or belief, which itself is the immediate and direct ground of S's obligation in C.<sup>22</sup>

Let us end this section by further developing DDT to include forbidden and permissible actions as well:

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<sup>20</sup> Simply calling this relation a supervenience relation would not be sufficient to properly distinguish the view since identity is also a supervenience relation. For this point in the context of discussing divine command theory, see Almeida 2004.

<sup>21</sup> These four characterizations are just intended to be crude initial statements of the proposals. For similar surveys of such options for both divine command and divine intention theories, see Wierenga 1983, Quinn 2000: 54-55, and Murphy 2002b: chapter four.

<sup>22</sup> In order to simplify the presentation, I have omitted other properties of this grounding relation, such as totality, exclusivity, activity, and necessity. For discussion of these properties, see Quinn 2000: 55.

- (F) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is forbidden if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God desires that S refrain from freely A-ing in C. Furthermore, what directly grounds S's obligation to refrain from A-ing in C is this desire.
- (P) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is permissible if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God neither desires that S freely A in C nor desires that S refrain from freely A-ing in C.

Here the permissible is treated as exclusive of both the obligatory and the forbidden, rather than just as the set of those actions which are not forbidden. If an action is one about which God is indifferent, neither desiring that I perform it nor that I refrain from performing it, then according to (P) it is merely permissible.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Objections to Divine Desire Theory

According to DDT, our obligations to behave in certain ways are grounded in what God desires that we do in those circumstances. Such a claim is likely to give rise to a number of objections, some of which I hope to head off in this section. In doing so, we can also further refine the theory in the process.

*Prima Facie Obligations.* The first objection claims that DDT does not have a way of distinguishing between *prima facie* and *ultima facie* obligations. (O), even if correct, seems to be an account of the latter, and yet we ordinarily would think that I still had a *prima facie* obligation to keep my promise to meet my friend for lunch even if I broke that promise in order to take a stranger to the hospital in an emergency.

Borrowing a move from Mark Murphy, the advocate of DDT can account for *prima facie* obligations in the following way (Murphy 1998, 20). The desires in (O) are formed based on the reasons that God considers relevant to the circumstances as a whole,

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<sup>23</sup> Whether there actually *are* any such actions is, in my view, rather doubtful when we turn to the putative obligations of specific theistic religions such as Christianity. We shall return to this issue in the next section when examining supererogation.

and so let us instead consider a different set of divine desires which are based just on a proper subset of these circumstances. Thus in the above example, God can consider the circumstances apart from anything having to do with the stranger in need of medical assistance, and so in this case God might desire that I meet my friend for lunch. This desire, based only on a selective set of circumstances, would directly ground a *prima facie* obligation to keep the promise.

*Independent Moral Obligations.* A familiar complaint one finds in the literature on divine command theory can also be used against DDT. According to this worry, either God's commands are based on reasons or they are not. If they are not, then they are arbitrary. If instead they are based on reasons, then those reasons would appeal to an external morality apart from God, and so God would not be the basis of morality after all. Either way, so the objection goes, the divine command theorist is in trouble.<sup>24</sup>

I doubt that this is a real problem for divine command theory, and the corresponding version of the dilemma certainly need not be one for DDT. We have already seen how according to DDT, the desires which ground obligations are those based on reasons, and so the resultant obligations will not be arbitrary. But neither need such reasons appeal to an external morality. Admittedly, a specific desire about what action a particular person freely performs might be based in part on an inference from a more general obligation applying to all people. But this more general obligation will in turn be grounded in a prior desire God has concerning how people behave in those circumstances, a desire which itself is based on its own set of reasons. What one will not find, according to DDT, is a divine desire based on an obligation which itself is not

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<sup>24</sup> For discussion, see Wierenga 1983: 400-401, Sullivan 1993, and Timmons 2002: 29, among many others.

grounded in some prior divine desire. Instead, all obligations will be ultimately based on a host of different kinds of reasons such as, to use our previous example, reasons with only descriptive content like:

*The stranger will live with Miller's help.  
Miller has made a promise.*

as well as reasons with normative content such as:

*The stranger's surviving would be a good thing.  
Miller's helping would be valuable.*

Recall that DDT is only a theory of the grounding of deontological properties. Like most versions of divine intention and divine command theory, it will have to appeal to a separate account of axiological and characterological properties.<sup>25</sup> But at no point does it need to appeal to deontological properties which are not ultimately grounded in divine desires.

*God's Irrelevance.* This discussion of reasons for God's desires leads immediately to a more serious worry that DDT makes God ultimately irrelevant as the source of deontological properties. The divine desires grounding obligation, according to DDT, are supposed to be based upon all the relevant reasons pertaining to the circumstances and the people involved. But then it seems as if we are ultimately basing obligation on what there is most reason to do, and it is not clear whether God and his desires really have a significant grounding role to play in the theory.<sup>26</sup>

A quick response simply notes that, even if this objection is sound, it also applies equally well against the rival positions to DDT. Divine intention theory, for instance,

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<sup>25</sup> For divine intention theory as only a deontological theory, see Murphy 1998 and Quinn 2000. For divine command theory as only a deontological theory, see Adams 1999. For a similar point in response to this objection, see Wainwright 2005: 117.

<sup>26</sup> For related discussion of this objection, see Wierenga 1983: 396-397.

maintains that obligation is grounded in certain divine intentions which are based on reasons. Similarly, proponents of divine command theory acknowledge that God's commands are expressions of divine mental states which are formed for reasons. So at least the advocate of DDT can take comfort in the fact that her view is no *worse* off when it comes to this objection than are the leading contenders in this discussion.

However, it would also be nice to be able to address the objection directly. And it looks like DDT can do so since the objection neglects the different respects in which God plays a central role in the view: (i) in selecting the relevant factual considerations, (ii) in establishing their valence, (iii) in fixing their strength, and (iv) in assessing them collectively. First of all, God determines which considerations are to factor into evaluations of the relevant circumstances. In our earlier example, he might deem considerations like *the stranger will live with Miller's help* and *Miller made a promise* as relevant, whereas others such as *Miller is wearing long pants* or *Miller's friend is drinking water at the restaurant* are treated as irrelevant. Such a selection process will be largely based on God's character – his loving nature, for example, could make the death of the stranger highly salient.<sup>27</sup>

We have already noted that God's character will determine the valence he assigns to the relevant considerations. Because of God's love, for instance, he might treat the consideration *the stranger will live with Miller's help* as a reason in favor of my helping, whereas his justice might treat *Miller will have to break a promise to help the stranger* as a reason again. Similarly, we also said that God assigns weights to these considerations as well. We can suppose, for instance, that the first consideration would be a very strong

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the saliency of some facts as opposed to others in practical reasoning, see Wiggins 1978 and Dancy 1988.



reason in favor of helping, whereas the second, although a reason against helping, would not be so to a similar extent.

While these points so far might show why God and his character in particular do in fact have an important role to play in DDT, they have yet to explain the importance of the *desires* formed on the basis of these reasons. Hence we come to the fourth point, namely that for DDT these desires are the conclusions reached as a result of assessing the relevant reasons. The number of reasons pertaining to the different possible free actions the agent could perform in a given set of circumstances might be vast, and we should not assume that God simply weighs together all of their valences and strengths as part of a simple overall calculation. In fact, given recent work on reasons for action, we should assume just the opposite. For some of the reasons could belong to one or more of the following kinds:

(a) Purely Justificatory Reasons. It is common to think of practical reasons as playing only one role, namely that of requiring actions. But recently there have been a number of arguments for the claim that some reasons can play a purely justificatory role such that we are not required to act on them but for which we would not be irrational if we do not follow them.<sup>28</sup> For example, altruistic reasons in favor of certain very demanding actions such as making large donations to charity may be only justificatory and not rationally requiring reasons. If there are such purely justificatory reasons, then God's arriving at desires for my behavior will be a more complex matter than just adding up the strengths of the various reasons along one scale of evaluation. Instead, for each action that I could freely perform in the circumstances, he will often have to assess both the justifying and

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<sup>28</sup> See in particular Gert 2004. Gert characterizes a justifying reason in part as "making it rationally permissible to do actions that would, without it, be irrational" (80). See also Raz 1999: 101-102.

the requiring strengths of the reasons separately, and then make a comparative evaluation.<sup>29</sup>

(b) Incommensurable Reasons. Another view of reasons has it that there is widespread incommensurability between reasons favoring many incompatible actions.<sup>30</sup> As a result, agents cannot comparatively assess these reasons, but provided they act on one of them, their action would be rationally permissible. Hence even for God the adjudication of reasons on this view cannot in principle be carried out by merely comparing their strengths.

(c) Exclusionary Reasons. These are second-order reasons which allow some or all first-order reasons to be excluded which otherwise would rationally require (or forbid) that an action be performed.<sup>31</sup> Thus there might be overwhelming first-order reasons to do something altruistic, but an exclusionary permission permits those reasons to be excluded in favor of a self-interested action. One may still perform the altruistic action, but one is not required to do so. Thus if such reasons exist, then God would have to evaluate both first- and second-order reasons before forming a desire as to my behavior in the relevant

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<sup>29</sup> If there are such purely justificatory reasons, and if there are cases in which their strength can outweigh the strength of the relevant requiring reasons, then the desires which God forms in those cases may render certain actions supererogatory rather than obligatory. This in turn would mean that I have to revise the response I give to the next objection, as I suggest there that theists should reject the claim that there are any supererogatory actions. However, at the end of that discussion, I also suggest various ways in which DDT could instead accommodate supererogation, and one of them makes use of the idea of purely justificatory reasons. I am grateful to Tim Bayne for encouraging me to clarify these issues.

<sup>30</sup> See in particular Raz 1999: 102-104. Incommensurability is used by Raz to explain what he calls the 'basic belief,' namely that "most of the time people have a variety of options such that it would accord with reason for them to choose any one of them and it would not be against reason to avoid any of them" (100). The previous proposal that there are purely justificatory reasons also attempts to explain the same belief.

<sup>31</sup> See Raz 1975. His official characterization is that an exclusionary permission may be established if "[a] person may be permitted to  $\phi$ , despite the existence of an overriding reason for not  $\phi$ -ing, if there are reasons which entitle him to disregard the reasons for not  $\phi$ -ing, or at least to disregard some of them so that those not excluded do not outweigh the reasons for  $\phi$ -ing" (163).

circumstances, and such an evaluation would not be carried out only by comparing their strengths (Raz 1975: 168).

(d) Equally Strong Opposing Reasons. In rare cases of human deliberation, ties emerge in which the available reasons equally support two incompatible courses of action. Relying on these reasons alone, the agent is paralyzed. But the agent also strongly desires that *some* action be performed, and so may form a desire to carry out one of the actions just by way of ending the stalemate. I see no reason why the same situation could not arise for God's deliberation, and so by arriving at a desire that the agent perform action A as opposed to equally well supported action B, God arrives at a decision as to how he wants the agent to behave.<sup>32</sup>

Stepping back from these specific claims about reasons for action,<sup>33</sup> the central point is this: according to DDT, God's desire that a person A in C may be the conclusion of a process of assessing a wide array of reasons for and against doing so. Precisely how that assessment is carried out will depend on the nature of the reasons in question and the makeup of God's character, but our interest is not in trying to outline this process but rather in noting the fact that by forming this desire, God brings the process of assessment to a close and reaches a final determination as to what he wants the person to do in the

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<sup>32</sup> For related discussion of ties between reasons, see Raz 1986: chapter thirteen and Bratman 2003. An alternative way in which God might handle ties between reasons is by forming a desire that S *either* freely A or freely B in the circumstances. See also the related discussion in Wierenga 1983: 390-391 and Sullivan 1994: 80 fn. 29.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to the views cited above, see also the discussion in Bratman 1987: 59, Dancy 1988, and Scanlon 1998: 32.

circumstances.<sup>34</sup> For DDT, this determination grounds his obligation to perform that particular action.<sup>35</sup>

Let me say this on behalf of the objection, though. As an *epistemic* point there is certainly something to it. Suppose I have not been told by God what he desires me to do with my lunch promise once I come across the stranger in need, and so I try to determine this based on what the reasons relevant to the circumstance seem to militate in favor of doing. Thus in this case God's desire seems to be epistemically irrelevant. But rather than being a flaw of the theory, the fact that we can potentially discover our obligations using our rational capacities for assessing reasons seems to me a mark in its favor on practical grounds, especially given that the process of assessing reasons is one we already carry out on a daily basis to begin with. To be sure, though, if DDT is correct then the best way to carry out this process when we are ignorant of God's desires is not to simply think about what the relevant considerations are by *our* lights, but rather to think about what the considerations are that would factor into this decision process by *God's* lights given his nature.

*Supererogation.* Finally we come to what is perhaps the most forceful objection to divine desire theory, namely that it does not seem to allow any room for supererogation.<sup>36</sup> Ordinary morality suggests that there are actions – jumping on a grenade, donating a

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<sup>34</sup> According to what we might call divine judgment theory, God's consideration of the relevant reasons for action results in the formation of a cognitive judgment in favor of the agent's performing a particular action in the circumstance. So instead of a desire based on reasons, what would ground the agent's obligation to act in this way would instead be God's belief based on reasons. This theory also strikes me as plausible, and indeed more plausible than the leading views in the literature. Those who find it more attractive than DDT can still also accept most of the arguments in this paper, but unfortunately a comparative assessment of the two views will have to wait for another occasion.

<sup>35</sup> For another response worth considering once it is modified to apply to DDT, see Sullivan 1993 and the discussion in Wainwright 2005: 90-91.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Adams has developed this objection against a view very similar to DDT. See his 1999: 260-261.

tremendous amount to charity, running into a burning building – which are neither forbidden nor obligatory but which seem to go beyond the merely obligatory and deserve our praise and esteem. According to the objection, God surely would desire that I freely perform such an action if I can in the relevant circumstances – after all, he would not be indifferent about the matter or desire that I not perform it. But if he does have such a desire, then according to DDT the action would be obligatory. Thus the supererogatory is really just a proper subset of the obligatory. In the remainder of this section, I propose several different strategies for responding to this worry.

(a) Denial. The first strategy is the one towards which I am most sympathetic, namely denying outright that from a theistic perspective there are any supererogatory acts. No doubt this would involve a departure from ordinary morality, but perhaps not one that theists should seriously mind.

There is both a historical and a theoretical reason for this denial. The historical reason is that the scriptures of the leading theistic religions contain numerous statements which seem incompatible with supererogation. Focusing here just on the Christian scriptures for the sake of brevity, we find statements such as this:

Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbor (Romans 13:9-10).

This claim is clearly presented as an obligation,<sup>37</sup> and yet it is hard to think of what acts could go above and beyond such a demanding standard in the way that supererogatory actions allegedly do. Similarly, we find demands such as:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

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<sup>37</sup> “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right” (James 2:8). For extensive discussion of love as a Christian obligation, see Quinn 1996, 2000: 57-59.

Do everything in love (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble (1 Peter 3: 8).

For Christian theists at least, there seems to be no obvious textual evidence that God considers certain actions to be supererogatory. Instead, given the demandingness of these claims, the New Testament authors are moved to stress the importance of forgiveness and grace since no one will ever live up to their obligations on their own, much less go beyond them.

The theoretical justification for denying supererogation from a theistic perspective goes as follows. Consider again my action A in circumstances C. Suppose, after considering all the reasons which he deems relevant to the various actions I could perform in C, God determines that my A-ing in C is the action favored by those reasons. Surely, then, God would desire that I A in C, and according to DDT, it is obligatory that I do so. But then it follows that refraining from A-ing in C is not favored by the same reasons, and so given his perfect rationality, God would never form a desire that I refrain from A-ing in C and instead perform some other action. Yet if one of these other actions that I could freely do is supposed to be supererogatory, then it follows that God would not desire that I perform it. Indeed, in failing to A in C and instead doing this other action, I would not be doing what I have most reason to do, and would be directly contravening what God desires me to do. So it seems as if my action would not be praiseworthy but rather blameworthy, which contradicts the nature of supererogatory actions. Thus, although this argument needs to be developed more fully than it can be here, there is at

least some initial reason to doubt that theists who want to ground deontological properties in God's desires should accept supererogation.<sup>38</sup>

(b) Desire and Aversion. Another approach suggests that obligatory actions would be directly grounded in two psychological states of God – both his desire that I perform the action *and* his aversion to my refraining from performing it. Supererogatory actions, on the other hand, are such that God has only the first mental state, but is not averse to my not performing the action. Thus without this aversion, he would not be inclined to criticize or punish me for not performing it, which aligns with our intuitions about such acts. (O) would then be revised as follows:

(OA) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is obligatory if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God desires that S freely A in C and God desires that S not refrain from A-ing in C. Furthermore, what directly grounds S's obligation to A in C is only both desires.

However, there might be something difficult to accept about the idea that, for instance, God would be indifferent to my not donating \$10,000 to Oxfam which would have saved a thousand children from pneumonia.

(c) Blame and Guilt. It is common to find accounts of obligation tied closely to one or more of the following notions: responsibility, punishment, guilt, or shame.<sup>39</sup> These concepts could be used to modify (O) in a variety of ways so as to open the door for supererogation, such as the following:

(OG) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is obligatory if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God desires that S freely A in C and that S feel guilt (or shame) if S does not A in C. Furthermore, what directly grounds S's obligation to A in C is this desire.

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<sup>38</sup> For discussion of secular versions of this argument, see Raz 1975: 164 and Dancy 1988: 176. Note that the same line of reasoning applies equally well to God's intentions and commands too.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Gibbard 1990: 45, Gert 1998: 16, Adams 1999: 238-241, Zagzebski 2004: 151, and Sinnott-Armstrong 2005.

Clearly, then, supererogatory acts are ones that God also desires be freely performed but for which he does not desire that the relevant agents feel guilt (or shame) if they do not perform them in the circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

(d) Purely Justificatory Reasons and Exclusionary Permissions. Using the views of reasons for action we saw in addressing the previous objection, we can arrive at an account of obligation which, for instance, respects the justificatory role of reasons:

(OE) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is obligatory if and only if, after considering all the reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God desires that S freely A in C and the reasons for S freely A-ing in C do not have much more justifying strength than requiring strength. Furthermore, what directly grounds S's obligation to A in C is this desire.

S freely A-ing in C could instead be supererogatory if God also desires that S perform it but the reasons for doing so have much more justifying strength than requiring strength.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, using the idea of exclusionary permissions, we get:

(OP) Human agent S's performing action A in circumstances C is obligatory if and only if, after considering all the first-order reasons relevant to S's freely A-ing in C, God desires that S freely A in C and there is not an exclusionary permission that makes it rationally permissible for S to not A in C. Furthermore, what directly grounds S's obligation to A in C is this desire.

Supererogatory actions could then be those where God forms the same desire but second-order reasons allow the exclusion of some or all of these first-order reasons requiring S to A.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> This proposal can be developed in two different directions. One would be to say that God's desire still grounds an obligatory action (so that supererogatory acts are also obligatory), but one whose non-performance does not merit feelings of guilt. (OG) would then need further modification to apply only to non-supererogatory obligatory actions. Another direction would be to say that God's desire does not make the action obligatory. For the distinction here between what is sometimes called strong versus weak supererogationism, see Dancy 1988: 175.

<sup>41</sup> For the relationship between justificatory reasons and supererogation, see Gert 2004: 106-109.

<sup>42</sup> For exclusionary permissions and supererogation, see Raz 1975 and Gert 2004: 106-109.



Again my preference is for the first strategy of simply denying that there are any supererogatory actions at least according to the major theistic religions, thereby eliminating the need for DDT to have to accommodate these actions from the start. Hopefully, though, one of the other strategies above (or a combination of them) has some plausibility for those who do not share this preference.

### **3. Conclusion**

I have tried to suggest that divine desire theory is an interesting and viable alternative to the leading views which attempt to ground deontological properties in God. Of them, it bears the closest similarity to divine intention theory, but replaces what I suggest elsewhere is the problematic focus on intentions with divine desires. Clearly, though, much more needs to be done in explicating and defending the view.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> This paper was written during a research leave provided by Wake Forest University, for which I am very grateful. Much thanks as well to the editors for inviting me to contribute to this volume, and to Tim Bayne for very helpful written comments.

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