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WORSHIP AND THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE ACHIEVEMENT

John Pittard

Gwen Bradford has plausibly argued that one attains achievement only if one does something one finds difficult. It is also plausible that one must attain achievement to be worthy of “agential” praise, praise that is appropriately directed to someone on the basis of things that redound to their credit. These claims pose a challenge to classical theists who direct agential praise to God, since classical theism arguably entails that none of God’s actions are difficult for God. I consider responses to this challenge and commend a view according to which God’s loving character is not necessitated by God’s nature but is a contingent and difficult achievement. I argue that this view can still satisfy the explanatory ambitions of natural theology.

Some qualities of a person that we might rightly praise are not qualities that redound to the person’s credit. Suppose I praise James Earl Jones’s resonant voice. Given my assumption that Jones’s voice is due entirely to characteristics of his vocal cords for which he is not responsible, it is doubtful that my praise really qualifies as praise of Jones himself.¹ After all, it is no credit *to Jones* that factors out of his control bequeathed to him a delightfully deep and powerful voice. But even if we allow that *Jones* can properly be praised for qualities that he is not responsible for, we can still acknowledge that there is an important species of praise and admiration, which may be called *agential* praise and *agential* admiration, that is appropriately directed to a person only on the basis of things that redound to their credit.²

I will argue that the factors that make a person worthy of agential praise and admiration are all achievements of some sort. Furthermore, something qualifies as an achievement only if it is brought about by a

¹Kauppinen, “Ideals and Idols,” 31–32. Zagzebski (*Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 38) highlights a low voice as an example of a trait that might be admired but not in the same way that we admire imitable traits such as perseverance.

²This distinction is defended in Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 37–40; Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*, 39–40; and Kauppinen, “Ideals and Idols,” 31–32. (The terminology is Shoemaker’s and Kauppinen’s.) See also Susan Wolf’s distinction between superficial and deep praise/blame in *Freedom Within Reason*, 40–43.



sufficiently demanding process. One influential account of the “demandingness condition” on achievement is developed by Gwen Bradford, who argues that the condition should be understood in terms of difficulty for the agent in question.³ If this is right, then a person is agentially praiseworthy only if they have done something that is difficult for them.

These claims about agential praiseworthiness, which I will defend shortly, can be used to challenge the appropriateness of the worship of God as it is engaged in by many theists. Many theists accept a broadly classical conception of God according to which God is an essentially perfect being. This essential perfection is understood to entail omnipotence and omnibenevolence, among other perfections. Arguably, this classical conception implies that God’s life is entirely free from difficulty and struggle. Given the perfect ease of divine greatness, it would seem to follow that God does nothing that is *demanding* for God and that the divine life is therefore devoid of achievement. Despite this apparent implication, attending to the worship practices of theists suggests that God is praised partly for God’s achievements.

My aim in this paper is to lay bare this apparent tension between classical theism and the character of many theists’ worship, and to evaluate various responses available to the theist. After considering three responses that I do *not* favor, I commend a view according to which God’s loving character as manifested in steadfast love of sinful creatures is not necessitated by God’s nature but is a contingent and difficult achievement. A significant objection to this proposal is that a God who achieves contingently and only with difficulty is not the sort of being that can serve as the necessary ground of reality that helps to render the world intelligible. But I will argue that such a God can still secure the world’s intelligibility and satisfy the explanatory ambitions of natural theology.

1. Agential Praiseworthiness and Demandingness

In this section, I begin by arguing that the only thing that contributes to a person’s agential praiseworthiness is his or her achievements. Furthermore, since achievements must be demanding for the agent, a person is agentially praiseworthy only if she has accomplished something that is demanding for her.

At a first pass, we may understand *praise* as an expression of one’s admiration for something or someone (at least when praise is sincere). Someone is praiseworthy, then, just in case they are worthy of admiration. Following Linda Zagzebski and others, I understand admiration as an emotion that, when fitting, is directed toward some object on account of its excellence.⁴ According to Zagzebski, it is important to distinguish

³Bradford, *Achievement*.

⁴Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 33–34. See also Silva, “A Conceptual Analysis of Glory,” 563. According to Zagzebski, when someone feels admiration toward some object, the object appears admirable or excellent to the person. So, the feeling of admiration at least disposes someone to judge that the admired thing is in fact excellent.

between two basic kinds of admiration that we may have for a person, one which is properly responsive to “acquired excellences” and another that is responsive to a person’s “natural” or “native” excellences. Zagzebski argues that admiration of acquired excellence and admiration of natural excellence differ in how they feel, in their opposite emotions (contempt and pity, respectively) and in their motivating tendencies (with admiration of acquired excellence tending to motivate emulation, unlike the latter).⁵

It seems to me that Zagzebski is right to distinguish between two basic kinds of admiration that we can have for a person, which I am here calling agential and non-agential admiration (following Shoemaker and Kauppinen). But I think it is not quite accurate to hold that these species of admiration are distinguished by whether the grounds of admiration are acquired or natural excellences. Suppose that Brianne, a person of average intelligence, is given the opportunity to take an experimental drug that allegedly boosts intelligence and that, as she is assured, has no adverse side effects. On a whim, Brianne agrees to take the drug and immediately after taking it she begins to exhibit cognitive abilities without human precedent. Brianne’s newly acquired intelligence is not *natural*. But neither does her intelligence redound to her credit, given that she did nothing to cultivate or earn it. And it seems clear that the admiration that is appropriately elicited by Brianne’s intelligence is of the same basic type as the non-agential admiration we show toward native traits. So the distinction between agential and non-agential praiseworthiness is not perspicuously characterized in terms of the distinction between acquired and natural excellences.

Nonetheless, I think Zagzebski is right to hold that a purely natural excellence cannot ground agential praiseworthiness. The reason why Jones’s voice does not make him a fitting object of agential admiration is, it seems, that he bears no responsibility for his voice. Arguably, for Jones to bear the relevant sort of responsibility for some excellent trait, it would have to be the case that one or more of his free actions was at least a partial cause of the trait in question. Since none of Jones’s purely natural traits were caused by his free actions, Jones is not responsible for any such traits. And since he lacks responsibility for purely natural traits, they cannot make him worthy of agential praise and admiration.

Doubts may be raised about the reasoning just rehearsed. In particular, some will challenge the assumption that Jones bears the relevant sort of responsibility for some trait only if he helped to cause it through his free actions. Arguably, when it is evident that someone has outstanding moral character, it is appropriate for us to agentially admire them. And this is appropriate even if we cannot tell whether any of their free actions helped to cause or influence their moral character. If we can see that such a person is due agential praise and admiration even though we cannot see that they

⁵Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 37–40.

have helped to shape their character, then it would seem that being agentially praiseworthy for one's character does not require that one has freely shaped one's character. To buttress this objection, one could invoke a theory of responsibility that helps to explain why, even though Jones does not bear responsibility for his voice, someone could bear responsibility for a moral character they did not help to shape. For example, according to David Shoemaker, volitional and non-volitional attitudes are properly "attributable" to an agent (where attributability is a form of responsibility) so long as those attitudes express the "privileged subset of their psyche" that comprises their "deep self"; and such attributable attitudes can make the agent worthy of agential admiration (or disdain) even if their free actions have not caused or shaped those attitudes.⁶ Taking on this view, we could say that Jones lacks responsibility for the character of his voice because it is neither something he has causally influenced nor part of his deep self.

I do not think that excellence of moral character provides a convincing counterexample to the view that a person is agentially praiseworthy only on the basis of factors that he or she has helped to cause or influence through free actions. First, while it is reasonable to agentially admire someone with good moral character even if we cannot *confirm* that they have freely influenced their character, this may reflect the fact that it is normally reasonable to assume that a person has influenced their moral character through free actions. Second, even if someone was naturally endowed with an excellent moral character, our knowledge of this person's moral character would almost certainly depend on this person having expressed their character through free actions. So the factor that makes this person worthy of agential praise and admiration may not be their excellent character alone, but the particular expression of that character through free action.⁷ And this latter factor, unlike the moral character alone, is something that the person has freely helped to cause.

To discern whether moral character that one has not helped to shape is sufficient grounds for agential praise, consider the following example. Suppose that a hundred years in the future, after stunning advances in brain-mapping and cloning technologies, Dr. Victoria Frankenstein has succeeded in producing in her lab human clones that begin their lives as mature and normally functioning adults. These lab-grown adults come ready-made with a rich set of initial beliefs, desires, cognitive abilities, values, and so on, allowing them to converse and act normally from their first moment of conscious experience. The first person Victoria created, named Teresa, was designed to have morally excellent dispositions. And indeed, after spending some time in the world acting of her own accord, Teresa manifested a truly outstanding character just as expected. Victoria went on to produce several more copies of Teresa, each made according to the exact

⁶*Responsibility from the Margins*, 47–48; 58–63.

⁷Kauppinen, "Ideals and Idols," 32.

same specifications. The next nine copies, Teresa-2 through Teresa-10, all displayed sterling moral character in their upstanding actions.

Now consider Teresa-11, the newest iteration who has just now been awakened into conscious experience. We can know, it seems, that Teresa-11 has an excellent moral character, since we've seen how the other Teresas with the very same attitudes and dispositions have acted. But does Teresa-11's stellar character make her worthy of agential praise and admiration, even at the very outset of her conscious life? Shoemaker's account of "attributability responsibility" suggests that Teresa-11 *is* worthy of agential praise and admiration since the attitudes that express her deep self are of the right type. But intuitively, Teresa-11 is not worthy of agential praise because she has not (yet) *done* anything to *earn* it.⁸ To be sure, we might still admire and praise the kind of character that we know Teresa-11 has. But this seems to be a non-agential form of admiration: Teresa-11's character may be wonderful; Teresa-11 may have the sort of character we want in our leaders and friends; but given that Teresa-11 did nothing to shape this character and has not manifested this character in action, Teresa-11 is not worthy of agential praise.

If this is right, then it seems that agential praiseworthiness depends on what an agent *does* (and, presumably, on what an agent *freely* does). Agential praiseworthiness could therefore be said to require having good accomplishments, assuming we understand "accomplishments" broadly to include both what one freely does and also the outcomes or products of one's free actions.

While agential praiseworthiness requires having good accomplishments, not every agent who accomplishes something good is agentially praiseworthy. First, if I accomplish something good by accident, then I am not rightly admired for the accomplishment in question. I am rightly praised for accomplishing something only if I do so by means of a competence to produce the sort of accomplishment in question.⁹

Second, and more important for my purposes, a person is worthy of agential admiration only if they accomplish something that is sufficiently demanding. To illustrate, compare two real-life examples. Several years ago, I was walking in Baltimore with a colleague to get dinner. In a cross-walk along our path was an open manhole. My colleague, immersed in conversation, did not notice the dark abyss directly before him or the thin line of caution tape meant to warn us. Without intervention he would have tumbled into the hole. Thankfully, I saw the hazard and warned him just in time to avert disaster. I joked that I had just saved his life, and we went on to have a pleasant evening and thought no more of the incident. Let's stipulate that I *did* save his life: if I had given him no verbal warning, he would have tumbled into some deep tunnel under downtown Baltimore

⁸Some will favor a subtly different diagnosis and say that Teresa-11's character does not make her worthy of agential praise because her character has a source outside of herself. I will consider this view, suggested to me by Mark Murphy, at the end of this section.

⁹Bradford, *Achievement*, chap. 3.

and would have been no more. And let's stipulate that my action of warning him was genuinely free. From the fact that I am responsible for saving my colleague's life, does it follow that I am worthy of praise and admiration? Hardly. While my action was certainly good, it was not difficult or costly to perform. Nor was it difficult to develop the moral character that made intervening in such a situation easy and automatic. This particular lifesaving act was too easy to make me worthy of praise and admiration.

In contrast with my unremarkable intervention, consider the heroism displayed by Wesley Autrey on a New York City subway platform in January of 2007. Autrey, then a fifty-year-old construction worker, was on the subway platform with his young daughters. A twenty-two-year-old student also waiting on the platform suffered from a serious seizure and fell onto the tracks below. Soon thereafter, the subway train began to approach the station at a speed that would not permit it to stop in time to avoid hitting the seizing man on the tracks. Autrey felt compelled to act but knew that there was not time to move the young man off the tracks. He surmised that there might be room for both himself and the young man to lie in the shallow trough between the rails of the tracks, allowing the subway train to pass overhead. Acting quickly, he asked a stranger to watch his girls, jumped down into the tracks below, and positioned the young man in the trough between the rails. Autrey lay on top of the man, to hold him still and pin him in place. The driver of the train saw the men, but before the train finally came to a stop, five subway cars had passed over the two men. With a clearance of mere inches, both men survived and eventually left the scene without suffering serious harm.

Autrey's heroic act received significant international attention. If feelings of admiration could be quantified, I suspect that Autrey was one of the most admired persons in the world during the days following this incident. It's obvious why: Autrey's selfless action came with an incredibly high expected cost to himself and his family, with little to no apparent personal benefit. It is *extremely difficult* to act on behalf of a stranger when the personal risk is so high. Because rescuing the stranger was so demanding, few normal human beings would be willing to act similarly.

It seems, then, that an accomplishment redounds to an agent's credit and contributes to agential praiseworthiness only if it is competently caused by means of some sufficiently demanding process. This result closely corresponds to Bradford's recent account of the nature of those accomplishments that we identify as meaningful *achievements* of an agent. According to Bradford, the product of an agent's activity constitutes a genuine achievement when it is competently caused and sufficiently demanding for the agent in the relevant way. Taking this view of achievement on board, the discussion thus far suggests that the factors that ground agential praiseworthiness are all achievements of some sort. In saying this, I am not suggesting that a person's degree of agential praiseworthiness is simply his or her degree of achievement. Some achievements might matter more than others for agential praiseworthiness. Vicious or selfish

achievements might diminish a person's agential praiseworthiness. My suggestion is merely that anything that redounds to an agent's credit and that makes the agent an appropriate object of agential praise or admiration is some sort of achievement.¹⁰

Supposing that this is right, how are we to understand the demandingness condition that must be satisfied in order for some accomplishment to count as a genuine achievement? According to Bradford, the demandingness condition should be understood in terms of agent-relative *difficulty*, where difficulty is to be understood in terms of the amount of (sufficiently intense) *effort* that the task requires.

One immediate worry confronting Bradford's suggestion that demandingness be understood in terms of required effort is that there are apparent cases where an achievement is attained *effortlessly*. Consider a case discussed by Bradford of a masterful violinist who effortlessly performs a difficult piece with great virtuosity.¹¹ Suppose that few expert violinists could play the piece at that level and that the few who could match that level could do so only with great effort. It seems that the virtuoso's performance is a great achievement. But since the performance was effortless, Bradford's account seems to imply that this particular performance is *not* an achievement. Bradford responds by noting that when some performance type would by normal standards be difficult to execute, we can reasonably say of that performance type that it is an achievement. But a token instance of this performance type could still fail to qualify as a genuine achievement if it is not difficult for the specific agent doing the performance. So the violinist's effortless performance does not in fact qualify as an achievement.¹²

I think Bradford concedes more than she needs to. Any human violinist who expertly performs an advanced piece has had to spend abundant hours in focused practice, no matter how much natural talent the violinist possesses. A so-called effortless performance is not effortless when we consider not only the effort exerted during the performance, but also the effort exerted during training that made the performance possible.¹³ By taking this wider view, we can allow that an "effortless" violin performance is an achievement while still characterizing the demandingness condition in terms of agent-relative difficulty. Similarly, when someone with outstanding moral character instinctively and automatically fulfills

¹⁰This conclusion closely aligns with the view of Kauppinen, who writes that agential admiration "construes its target as leading a life characterized by praiseworthy achievements that are to a significant degree explained by their meeting a worthwhile ideal . . . and doing so to a notably higher degree than the norm or oneself" ("Ideals and Idols," 33). He further suggests that "for something to be a praiseworthy achievement, it must be a competent performance that meets or exceeds a contextually relevant, authoritative, and challenging standard without excessive opportunity cost."

¹¹Bradford, *Achievement*, 31–39.

¹²Bradford, *Achievement*, 38–39.

¹³This diachronic accounting of effort is advocated in Maslen et al., "Praiseworthiness and Motivational Enhancement," 309.

some moral duty at significant personal cost, the fact that this action is traceable to more effortful work of moral formation may explain why the easily performed action rightly prompts agential admiration.

While I will later consider an alternative account of the demandingness condition, I tentatively suggest that Bradford is right to understand the demandingness condition as requiring difficulty for the agent. This conclusion poses a worry for the view that God is worthy of agential praise and admiration. Given that agential praiseworthiness is grounded in achievements and achievements must be difficult for the agent, we should think that God is worthy of agential praise and admiration only if God has done something that is difficult for God. But it would appear that on classical theism, nothing is difficult for God, leading to the conclusion that divine achievement is an impossibility and that God is therefore not worthy of agential praise.

Before turning to this challenge for theism, I wish to consider some worries about the argument thus far, worries that provide the occasion for some helpful clarifications of my view. I do this with the caveat that I cannot pursue these worries with the thoroughness that they deserve. Given the scope of the present paper, my aim for this section is merely to render plausible the claim that agential praiseworthiness requires doing something demanding, and then to consider how the theist who accepts this conclusion should respond to the problem it raises.

I've argued that only agents who do something they find demanding are agentially praiseworthy, which is to say that only such agents are rightly praised on account of something that redounds to their credit. On its face, this thesis may seem to conflict with commonsense judgments concerning cases where it seems that agential praise is appropriate for activity that is not demanding. Consider, for example, a case where I am the recipient of a remarkable gift that makes almost no demands on the giver.¹⁴ Suppose that my billionaire uncle, who has several multi-million dollar mansions, realizes that there is one particular mansion that he has not visited in many years and that he does not intend to use in the foreseeable future. He decides to get rid of the mansion but thinks that recouping its financial value would hardly be worth the hassle involved in selling the property. On a whim he decides to give the mansion to one of his nieces and nephews and chooses me—more or less at random—to be the recipient. He orders one of his assistants to contact me and arrange the transfer, and my hitherto tenuous financial situation changes overnight. Even if I know that the cost of giving the mansion away was negligible from my uncle's perspective, it seems that I ought to show and feel genuine gratitude toward him. And I would urge that I owe him, as my benefactor, a kind of regard and respect that aims to agentially admire and praise my uncle whenever

¹⁴Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this sort of case, which is also briefly discussed in Senor, "Defending Divine Freedom," 186. My final formulation of this case makes use of some suggestions of a different anonymous referee.

such admiration and praise is fitting. It could be, then, that my uncle's gift should prompt me to agentially admire him even though in giving me the gift he did nothing demanding.

While this last concession may initially appear to be incompatible with my view, it is not. Agential admiration should be distinguished from gratitude and also from a related kind of respect that disposes one to agentially admire when such admiration is fitting. Though it may be appropriate to respond to this gift by seeking to see the good in my uncle and agentially admiring him if there is anything that plausibly agentially admirable about him, his giving me the mansion is not in itself agentially admirable. Because giving the mansion made no real demands on my uncle, the action does not make him agentially praiseworthy.

A final objection allows that *creatures* may have to engage in difficult action to merit agential praise, but holds that this is not true of God since God's natural excellences do not trace to any outside source.¹⁵ The objection can be articulated as follows. When you easily and naturally accomplish something good (and when the ease of that accomplishment cannot be attributed to traits or skills that were themselves difficult to achieve), then the accomplishment should be "credited" primarily to your nature and other factors outside of your control rather than to *you* per se. And since your nature in turn is shaped by causes and substances that came before you, responsibility for actions that come naturally to you lies with one or more sources outside of yourself. To the extent that *you* want to be credited with some good accomplishment, you must, through the exertion of your will, accomplish something that goes beyond what is to be expected in light of your nature. And such exertion is difficult. Thus, the reason why agential praiseworthiness requires you to do something difficult is that unless you go beyond your natural proclivities, your accomplishments can be credited to a source outside of yourself. But *God's* nature is not due to any source outside of God. Unlike creatures, then, the excellence inherent in God's nature redounds to God's credit. God does not need to go beyond what is "easy" and "natural" in order to merit agential praise.

I cannot treat this interesting and important objection with adequate depth here. But here, in brief, is why I do not find it persuasive. As Wes Morriston has argued, the fact that someone does not have control over her essential nature suffices to explain why she should not be given credit for her essential nature; and even a necessary and uncaused being does not control its essential nature.¹⁶ Morriston does concede that the proponent of divine simplicity may have a principled basis for affirming that God's natural excellences redound to God's credit. Classical accounts of

¹⁵I'm thankful to Mark Murphy for pressing this objection. A related view concerning free will holds that while humans are not free if they are determined by their nature, God may still act freely when determined by God's nature since this nature is not due to any source outside of God. For a contemporary defense of this view, see Timpe, "The Best Thing in Life is Free."

¹⁶Morriston, "Is God Free? Reply to Wierenga."

divine simplicity hold that, unlike any creature, God is identical to God's nature. Given this identity, it would seem that an excellence appropriately credited to God's nature is also appropriately credited to God. I am not convinced by this appeal to simplicity, since the relevant notion of divine simplicity appears to me to be unacceptably problematic. I think that we should affirm that God's knowledge of contingent facts and God's love of contingent creatures are at least partly grounded in properties that are both intrinsic to God and contingent.¹⁷ And since none of the intrinsic properties of God's nature are contingent, God is not identical to God's nature.

For the remainder of the discussion, I will take it for granted that God is worthy of agential praise and admiration only if God has done something that is demanding for God. So, on the supposition that nothing is demanding for God, God is not worthy of agential praise and admiration. Would such a conclusion really be problematic for the theist? If the theist denied divine achievement and held that God is not agentially praiseworthy, would this put pressure on core theistic beliefs or praxis? In the next section, I suggest that many theists at least appear to praise God for God's achievements, holding God to be agentially praiseworthy. If this is right, then the worship practices of many theists stand in apparent tension with the broadly classical conception of God that many theists affirm.

2. Theistic Worship and Agential Praise

In this section, I suggest that many theists worship God in ways that seem to imply or presuppose that God is a fitting object of agential praise and admiration, the kind of praise and admiration that I've suggested is properly based on an agent's achievements. Or, if the notion of admiration is perhaps too mundane to convey the relevant attitude that theists direct toward God, it at least seems that theists direct toward God an attitude that is in continuity with agential admiration in the way it is responsive to God's alleged achievements.¹⁸

Those we admire as heroes are typically individuals that have faced significant difficulty in working to achieve some good cause. Is our admiration of human heroes in continuity with attitudes that theists direct toward God? Is it common for theists to view God as an ultimate hero who engages in demanding activity on our behalf? To answer this question, one might begin by looking at the hymns, poems, and declarations that feature in religious worship. I have not, I concede, conducted any sort of systematic assessment of worship liturgies in various theistic religions. So, my reflections are primarily based on my own experience of Christian worship in various contexts.

¹⁷See Hasker, "Is Divine Simplicity as Mistake?"

¹⁸Ines Schindler uses "adoration" to designate that attitude that is characteristic of worship and that is in continuity with admiration. See Schindler et al., "Admiration and Adoration."

Many of the hymns and liturgical utterances featured in Christian worship praise God for God's actions. As one Christian hymn begins, "To God be the glory—great things he has done!" This echoes numerous passages from scripture that praise God for deeds of incredible power and also incredible generosity. Psalm 66, for example, exclaims, "Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the river on foot."¹⁹ But the fact that believers focus on the great things God has done does not clearly imply that believers understand these acts to be *achievements*. Perhaps God's acts are an appropriate focus in worship principally because these acts manifest God's glorious and perfect nature. Just as witnessing a tornado or large migration of birds might elicit awe in us without our attributing any *achievement* to some agent, reflecting on God's actions may help to elicit proper awe at God's essential properties. Praise focused on God's works does not clearly imply that those works redound to God's *credit*.²⁰ Someone's great works can also ground *non-agential* praise and admiration.

Unfortunately, hymns and psalms typically do not articulate the grounds of God's praiseworthiness in a manner that would allow us to confidently discern whether God is taken to be the object of agential praise or merely of non-agential awe. Nonetheless, it does seem that many passages from scripture and songs featured in communal worship presuppose that God does things that are demanding and that rightly ground agential praise. The appropriateness of the praise in these hymns and passages would seem to be threatened by an affirmation that God's deeds are easy for God. Consider, for example, these words from "How Deep the Father's Love for Us," a song written by Stuart Townend in 1995 that still features regularly in the worship of many Christian congregations: "How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure. How great the pain of searing loss—the Father turns His face away, as wounds which mar the Chosen One bring many sons to glory." These lyrics portray God's love for humankind as a demanding love that leads God the Father to endure "the pain of searing loss" as God saves us through Christ's redemptive death.

A number of biblical passages support this idea that God's care and love are demanding. Among these are passages that describe the pain of forsakenness that God endures when those who are chosen and loved by God prove disloyal. Consider, for example, this passage from Isaiah 63: "I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us—yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, 'Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me'; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he

¹⁹Psalm 66:5–6 (New Revised Standard Version).

²⁰Howard-Snyder, "The Puzzle of Prayers of Thanksgiving."

too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them."²¹ Here, God is described as sharing in the "distress" of God's chosen people, and as being "grieved" when they proved unfaithful. Elsewhere in Isaiah and in other prophets, God is described as being "burdened" and "wearied" by the sins of God's people.²² In the book of Genesis, it says that when God saw the "wickedness of humankind," it "grieved him to his heart."²³ Such passages suggest that God's covenantal faithfulness and care for creation involve significant personal cost.

In noting how certain biblical passages and songs suggest a God whose love is costly and difficult, I am not claiming that those who earnestly recite such passages or sing such hymns are thereby committed to the idea that God's love of creatures is demanding for God. Believers frequently utter things about God that are not meant literally. The point is rather that when worship is shaped by passages and songs that seem to imply that divine love is a significant achievement, the affective attitude likely to be elicited is one of agential admiration or something akin to it. And the appropriateness of this attitude is questionable given a classical conception of God as essentially omnipotent and essentially omnibenevolent. Such a conception would seem to rule out the possibility that anything is demanding for God, thereby ruling out the possibility of divine achievement.

I now consider how theists might respond to this apparent tension between classical theism and worship practices that suggest a God who is worthy of agential praise. All of the responses I will consider are ones that take for granted that God is agentially praiseworthy only if God has achieved something and has therefore done something that is sufficiently demanding for God. The first two responses agree that God lacks any achievements that could ground agential praiseworthiness but differ on whether we should attempt to eschew agential admiration and agential praise in our worship of God. The second two responses affirm divine achievement but differ on whether or not such achievement is effortful.

3. *Unsatisfactory Responses*

3.1. *Deny Divine Achievement, Reform Worship Attitudes*

The first theistic response I will consider denies divine achievement and recommends that we avoid directing agential admiration and praise toward God. On this view, God's great deeds, even if freely performed, do not redound to God's credit since none of them were the least bit

²¹Isaiah 63:7–10 (New International Version).

²²Isaiah 43:24 (New International Version). See also Isaiah 65:2 and Hosea 11, among several other examples.

²³Genesis 6:5–6 (New Revised Standard Version).

demanding. Since God is not worthy of agential praise, we should desist from agential admiration and praise in our practices of worship.

The claim that we should not agentially admire and praise God does *not* imply that we should cease worshipping God. Even if God's nature forecloses the possibility of divine achievement, God is still perfect in wisdom, patience, love, justice, and so on. Just as a lover may glory in the natural beauty of their beloved, a worshipper may experience rapturous *non-agential* admiration of God's (unachieved) perfection.²⁴ And even if God's beneficence does not redound to God's credit (since it costs God nothing), it still seems that we should be immensely grateful to God. (Recall the example of the billionaire uncle in Section 1.) One could also justifiably delight in the experience of God's love, keenly sense one's absolute dependence on God, and (non-agentially) admire the loving character of God that serves as the *telos* we should strive to approach. Surely the sincere expression of such attitudes can constitute genuine worship even if one lacks agential admiration for God. So, the present view does not recommend that we cease worship but only that we cleanse it of inappropriate agential admiration and praise.

Some advocates of this first response may think that denying that God is worthy of agential praise (as I have defined it) comes at little to no cost.²⁵ After all, many excellences found in creatures are not properly predicated of God. Consider, for example, superior gymnastic ability. Because gymnastic ability requires that one be a physical being of finite size, such ability is what Scotus calls an "impure perfection," which is a perfection that can be exhibited only by beings that are limited or imperfect in some way. Only "pure" perfections that do not presuppose any limitation or imperfection are properly attributed to God.²⁶ If agential praiseworthiness requires doing something demanding, and if (as seems plausible) a being must be limited or imperfect in some way to find a task demanding, then it would turn out that agential praiseworthiness is an impure perfection. As such, it may be claimed that there is nothing particularly troubling or noteworthy about the conclusion that God is not agentially praiseworthy. We already knew that God does not share in those excellences that are by nature particular to finite beings.

In my estimation, the response just sketched underestimates the philosophical and religious significance of denying that God is worthy of agential praise. In the human context, those heroes who earn our deepest admiration do so not principally because they have done something physically or mentally impressive, but rather because they have resolutely and

²⁴Thomas Senor suggests that even if God is not due agential or "moral" praise, God is due "metaphysical praise" on account of God's good and perfect nature ("Defending Divine Freedom," 185). On this point I agree. But Senor also suggests that when theists praise God, they intend to give God metaphysical rather than moral praise. This strikes me as doubtful, for reasons offered earlier.

²⁵Thanks to Mark Murphy and a referee for suggesting this sort of view.

²⁶Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* 1.3.1 (p. 24 in *Philosophical Writings*).

competently pursued some worthy aim even when this pursuit is difficult. By exerting the effort to overcome adversity and resistance, heroes exercise their will in an excellent way. Indeed, it is plausible that, as Bradford maintains, to exercise one's will in a manner that is excellent *qua* exercise of the will is to engage in difficult activity.²⁷ If that is right, then God's inability to face difficulty would mean that God cannot excellently exercise God's will. God would therefore lack a characteristic that any nondivine being must possess in order to be worthy of our deepest admiration.

This result stands in tension with the common theistic idea that praise of human beings should be constrained or transmuted into praise of God (since all good things come from God and since only God is truly worthy). On the present view, only *finite* creatures can exercise their will in the excellent way that is required to be praiseworthy on account of something that redounds to one's credit. There is, then, an important kind of admiration that is not properly amplified when we turn our eyes heavenward.

This first response can therefore be seen as warranting a kind of *theistic humanism*, since it implies that human greatness is not entirely eclipsed or trivialized when juxtaposed with divine excellence. While some may welcome this as a profoundly life-affirming result, it is difficult to square such a view with the mentality that is typical among the traditional adherents of the Abrahamic faiths. The remaining responses all attempt to justify the traditional view that in every fundamental dimension of evaluation, highest praise and honors should be given to God.

3.2. *Deny Divine Achievement, Preserve Worship Attitudes*

The second response allows that God lacks the sort of achievement that agential praiseworthiness requires, but nonetheless supports directing agential praise to God. Such praise may be defended on broadly practical or moral grounds. For example, it might be urged that proper obedience to God requires such praise. In support of this, theists may point to scriptures or authoritative liturgies that seem to authorize praising God for God's achievements. Even if the picture of God implied by such praise is ultimately to be rejected on metaphysical grounds, using such a picture in worship may nonetheless be salutary. For example, such a picture may inspire and motivate us in our own moral struggle, as we consider how the difficulties we face are nothing compared to the difficulties that we envision God overcoming on our behalf.

I will not attempt to explore the merits of such a position here. What I will say is that thinking of God in classical terms while also praising God for God's achievements may simply not be feasible for those who are convinced on philosophical grounds that an essentially omnipotent and omnibenevolent God cannot be worthy of agential praise. Theists who are convinced of this may have no choice but to either worship without

²⁷This is what I interpret Bradford to mean when she suggests that "engaging in difficult activity *just is* the excellent exercise of the will" (*Achievement*, 121).

offering (sincere) agential praise or to find some philosophically respectable way of making sense of the notion of divine achievement. I now consider attempts to make sense of this notion.

3.3. *Affirm Divine Achievement, Deny that it is Effortful*

If achievement is understood to require engagement in effortful activity, then the notion of divine achievement may appear especially problematic. Surely, it may be thought, no task could strain God or test the limits of God's energy, in which case no task could be effortful for God.²⁸ In this subsection, I consider whether God could meet the demandingness condition on achievement without engaging in effortful activity. The most promising way of making sense of this possibility is to hold that non-effortful accomplishments can meet the demandingness condition if they require the agent to accept significant personal cost.²⁹ Call this the *costliness view* of demandingness. The costliness view stands opposed to the *effort view* according to which expending effort is a necessary condition for achievement.

If the costliness account is correct, God's effortless but costly accomplishments could qualify as achievements and make God worthy of agential praise. What personal costs might God accept? A natural suggestion is that by creating and loving imperfect and sinful creatures like ourselves, God bears the pains of betrayal, the sadness at seeing loved creatures oppress and be oppressed, and other costs that naturally come with patiently and steadfastly loving sinful human beings. Christian theologians may add that God, through Christ, underwent both physical and spiritual suffering to redeem us from sin. But even those who do not accept Christianity may affirm that God's love for creatures is a costly one that leads God to compromise the divine well-being on our behalf. According to the present proposal, while it was not *difficult* for God to love us and bear these costs—at least not "difficult" in a sense that implies effortfulness—God's loving us redounds to God's credit because it involves suffering.

This proposal, along with the proposal I commend in the next section, is incompatible with a strong view of divine impassibility that altogether rules out divine suffering. So while the present proposal is less revisionary than the one I will soon defend, it arguably does require departing to some degree from traditional classical theism.³⁰ In my estimation, giving

²⁸Interestingly, Bradford seems to think that divine effort is not problematic, suggesting that the divine action of creation might be the closest thing to infinitely intense effort (*Achievement*, 140). But by Bradford's own account, effortfulness depends not only on the nature and scope of the activity, but also on the capacities of the agent. And God's infinite and unsurpassable capacities render the notion of divine effort problematic.

²⁹For some support for this view, see Maslen et al., "Praiseworthiness and Motivational Enhancement."

³⁰I say "arguably" in part because of complications presented by Christology. Christian scholastics affirm that Christ suffered, and since Christ is God the Son, God has suffered. But it is only *qua* human that God suffered, and not *qua* divine. The divine nature remains

up a strong notion of divine impassibility is not a high price to pay, even if one is committed to the explanatory project of natural theology. God must exist necessarily and *a se* to explain contingent reality, but there is ample room to question whether such a being must be utterly invulnerable to outside harm. Nor is it clear that such invulnerability is required for perfection. While I cannot here give the topic of impassibility the attention it deserves, my own view is that a strong conception of impassibility is questionable for reasons that are independent of the issue of divine achievement.

Is the costliness view plausible? Can an action satisfy the demandingness condition on achievement merely on account of the (willingly accepted) personal costs, even if the action is effortless? Or does achievement require effort? In answering these questions, it is crucial to distinguish the effort view, which I've defined as the weak claim that effort is required for achievement, from stronger views in the vicinity. The effort view does *not* say that required effort is the *only* determinant of demandingness. Nor does it say that an agent's praiseworthiness for some good achievement is solely a function of the expended effort. Even if effort is required for achievement and agential praiseworthiness, the relation between expended effort and agential praiseworthiness may not be entirely straightforward. Maslen et al. consider a case where John is developing a new treatment for a deadly virus, and where he can either do all of the calculations by hand (which would require enormous effort and risk failure due to miscalculation) or by using a highly reliable computing tool (which would require much less effort).³¹ If John chooses the effortful approach, he shows a lack of proper commitment to the success of his project. Thus, he would be less agentially praiseworthy even if his more effortful but risky approach succeeds. Such an example shows that effort is not the only determinant of agential praiseworthiness. But this conclusion is compatible with the effort view.

Because the effort view does not rule out other determinants of demandingness and agential praiseworthiness, we would not be able to definitively rule against the effort view (and in favor of the costliness view) merely because we identified cases where agential praiseworthiness is sensitive to changes in accepted costs but not to changes in expended

impassible. (See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part III, Question 16, articles 4–5.) Someone who aims to preserve classical Christian views on divine impassibility by confining God's suffering to Christ's humanity should also, it seems, confine God's achievement to Christ's humanity: God achieves (and is worthy of agential praise) *qua* human, but not *qua* divine. Whether such a position stands in problematic tension with practices of Christian worship is not a question I will take up here.

³¹"Praiseworthiness and Motivational Enhancement," 316. While Maslen et al. seem to think that the effort view is false, I do not think they succeed in showing this. They argue that praiseworthiness depends on the strength of one's "costly commitment," and suggest that effort is significant merely because expending effort is costly. But all of the examples that they appeal to seem to involve significant effort at some stage in the process producing to the achievement in question.

effort. Nonetheless, if there are such cases, they might give us *some* reason to favor the costliness view. Suppose we had reason to think that costliness and effort are not *both* fundamental determinants of agential praiseworthiness, but that one of the following is true: (i) effort is significant only because expending effort is costly; or (ii) costliness is significant only because making costly decisions often requires significant effort. In this case, an example where agential praiseworthiness is sensitive to changes in costliness but not to changes in effort might speak strongly in favor of the costliness view.

A referee for this paper suggests that the Wesley Autrey case (from Section 1) may furnish us with one such example, proposing that we compare the original case with a modified version where Autrey has a bit more time to rescue the student but must first roll some heavy object out of the way to reach him. As the referee notes, Autrey hardly seems more admirable in the modified case, despite the greater degree of effort. This seems to suggest that praiseworthiness is tracking costliness rather than effort, since the total cost does not change significantly in the modified version of the case.

In response, I think that the intuitive verdicts in these Autrey cases can be explained in terms of comparative effort. Part of the explanation is that the *physical* effort required for some achievement arguably contributes to praiseworthiness only to the extent that it makes it harder to exercise the *will* in the manner that is required for the achievement.³² It is *effortful willing* that is required for agential praiseworthiness. Of course, when an action or activity is physically demanding, this frequently makes it harder to summon the will to do the action or to persist in the activity. Indeed, deciding to engage in physically demanding activity can be difficult even when we know that it is in our best interest, and even when we know we will enjoy doing it.³³ But increasing the physical effort required for some action, even by a significant amount, will not always make it materially more difficult to choose to do the action. And this seems to be the case in the modified Autrey case. Nearly anyone would decide to roll a heavy object some small distance if doing so would save someone's life. Developing the character that makes such a decision automatic is not difficult. So if Autrey had to roll a heavy object aside before jumping down into the tracks, this would not make a material difference to how much willpower and moral effort would be required to decide to rescue the student (or to develop the character that disposes one to carry out such a rescue).

While the Autrey examples are inconclusive, there are other cases that support the view that effort is independently significant. Compare the following two scenarios involving Julius, who desires to receive training in

³²For relevant discussion, see Massin on "first-order efforts," which are "strivings against physical resistance," and "second-order efforts" which are "strivings against aversion to (the unpleasantness of) first-order efforts" ("Towards a Definition of Efforts," 247).

³³Chappell, "Willpower Satisficing," 254. Chappell's paper provides a number of interesting examples and considerations that serve to support the effort view over the costliness view.

an esoteric martial art form. In Scenario 1, an expert teacher of the martial art says she will take Julius as a student if and only if Julius agrees to have his hands forcibly held in ice water for three minutes.³⁴ Should Julius agree, his hands will not be released until the three minutes have passed, no matter how vigorously Julius protests or struggles. As it happens, Julius has had his hands trapped in ice water for three minutes in the not-too-distant past. He knows that the experience will not produce permanent damage but will be very painful. He nonetheless agrees to the procedure. In Scenario 2, the required procedure is slightly different. Julius's hands will be forcibly held in the ice water for two minutes. After two minutes, Julius's hands will be released and he will be free to withdraw them from the ice water at any time. But Julius knows that he will be accepted as a student if and only if he does not remove his hands from the ice water until a full additional minute has passed. (As before, Julius knows from experience what it is like to have his hands submerged in ice water for three minutes.) Julius agrees to the procedure, and when his hands are released, he manages to keep them submerged for the full additional minute, despite having an incredibly strong urge to withdraw his hands from the frigid water.

In both scenarios, Julius displays admirable resolve. It is not easy to agree to something that one knows through experience to be quite painful. Nonetheless, it seems that Julius is more to be admired in Scenario 2. And the reason for this, I suggest, is that we expect it to be harder to maintain resolve when presently experiencing the pain of the ice water than to agree (during a moment of calm reflection) to endure that pain at a future moment. Scenario 2 is more demanding in the manner that bears on agential praiseworthiness even though the willingly accepted costs are the same. This suggests that it is mistaken to think that demandingness is fundamentally about costliness *rather* than required effort.

Unfortunately, showing that effort is an independent determinant of demandingness and/or agential praiseworthiness does not conclusively establish the effort view. Even if effort contributes independently to agential praiseworthiness, costliness may also contribute independently, and perhaps costliness alone can suffice for agentially praiseworthy achievement. To settle the matter more definitively, it seems that we should consider a case where an agent willingly accepts personal cost to produce some good outcome, but where producing the outcome requires absolutely no effort (even when we consider past acts of character formation). It is not easy to identify such cases in real life, however. In normal human experience, it requires effort to choose a costly action (or to develop the kind of character that allows one to "easily" make a good but costly choice).

But consider an unusual sort of case where making a costly decision for sake of some good outcome is not at all effortful (even when we take into account the process of character formation). Suppose Winnie is in some

³⁴This is inspired by Bradford's "Pain Contest" example (*Achievement*, 107).

situation where she knows that pressing some button will save the life of a stranger who has fallen onto the tracks in front of an approaching train, but she also knows that pressing the button has a 20% chance of resulting in her own death. (Perhaps the button will divert the train onto one of the several presently unused tracks, one of which Winnie is standing on with no option of quick escape.) There is no other way to rescue the stranger, and no other lives are at stake. Suppose further that, as a side effect of some medication, Winnie is experiencing a temporary numbing of her normal emotions that prevents her from feeling any more concerned about her own well-being than the well-being of any arbitrary stranger.³⁵ Winnie understands that pressing the button has a high expected cost for herself but that it is also by far the best choice from the perspective of total expected well-being. She knows that in normal times, she would find it very difficult to put herself at risk for the sake of saving a stranger. At present, however, she lacks any of the normal emotional responses that might move her to depart from what she judges to be impartially best. Without any feeling of fear, struggle, or resistance, Winnie nonchalantly presses the button.

Would this costly act of rescue, made effortless by an abnormally deadened emotional state, make Winnie worthy of agential praise and admiration? While the answer may not be entirely obvious, it seems to me that the answer is “no.” Because Winnie’s action made no demands on her willpower, and because her emotional detachment was not itself something achieved through effortful action, it seems that her actions in this case do not make her a fitting object of agential admiration. To the extent that it is doubtful that Winnie’s effortless action is agentially praiseworthy, we have reason to favor the effort view over the costliness view.

4. *Affirming Divine Achievement as Effortful and Contingent*

The last response I consider, and the one I commend, affirms divine achievement while holding that achievement must be effortful. As I will explain, a proponent of this account should arguably hold that God’s having achieved something, and thus God’s being worthy of agential praise, is a contingent matter.

What is effort, and how is it measured? One natural position holds that someone expends effort when they devote their “internal” physical or mental resources to some task, and that quantity of effort depends on the percentage of resources one has dedicated to the task.³⁶ Given the assumption that God’s powers are infinite and without limit, this view of effort

³⁵This case is adapted from an example briefly discussed by Chappell, “Willpower Satisficing,” 259.

³⁶This view is defended by Von Kriegstein, “Effort and Achievement.” The motivation for measuring effort by the *percentage* of dedicated resources rather than by the absolute amount is straightforward: picking up a grocery bag with the milk might require great effort from a toddler but little effort from an adult even if the same absolute quantity of physical resources is applied.

poses obvious problems for any attempt to claim that some *finite* divine accomplishment qualifies as a divine achievement. For example, knowing all of the facts about a finite universe would in no way tax God's unlimited cognitive capacities. Perhaps some infinite accomplishment (divine self-understanding?) could engage a high percentage of God's resources. Even this is uncertain, however. Presumably God knows an infinite number of mathematical truths; but this infinite knowledge does not exhaust God's cognitive capacities.

I do not think we need to pursue the question of whether God might use a significant percentage of God's internal resources, since I do not think that this "resource usage" account of effort is correct (at least not as an account of the sense of effort that is relevant to achievement). The resource usage account does not account for the sense of struggle and striving against internally felt resistance that is characteristic of admirable effort.³⁷ To see the problem, imagine first that I am controlling a robotic arm. Using a keyboard, I can control how the arm moves and also how much force is applied in the motion of the arm. Obviously, no one would say that when I command the arm to move with maximum possible force, I do something effortful. But now imagine that the situation is similar with *my own* arm. I have direct control over its movement and the force with which it moves, but when I move my arm with maximum force this does not involve any sense of struggle or striving: I simply will a motion and force percentage (up to 100%) and the right sort of movement happens. In this situation, which seems metaphysically possible, it seems that I could *effortlessly* move my arm while deploying *all* of the physical resources available for that motion. The resource usage account does not allow for such a possibility.

Now suppose that someone adjusts my neural circuitry so that, to the extent that I move my arm with force, I experience the "aversive phenomenology" that (as Maslen et al. note) is typical of effort.³⁸ But due to a pernicious "wiring job," I feel a strong sense of struggle and resistance even when I am only using a fraction of my potential strength. In this case, it seems that moving my arm could be effortful even if in doing so I invest only a modest portion of the total physical resources available for the movement of my arm.

These considerations point us to a different conception of effort. I suggest that expending effort involves exercising the will to overcome a counter-motivating, *felt* resistance to one's activity.³⁹ In the giving of effort, the will is at its most active: it is not simply "carried along" by reasons,

³⁷For similar but more developed arguments against the resource usage account, see Massin, "Towards a Definition of Efforts," 248–250.

³⁸"Praiseworthiness and Motivational Enhancement," 308.

³⁹This suggestion broadly aligns with the "force-based account" of effort defended in Massin, "Towards a Definition of Efforts." Proponents of such an account typically say that effort essentially involves "the force intentionally exerted by the agent, and the *resistive force* exerted in return by that on which he acts" (244).

desires, and/or habits, but acts in opposition to a countermotivational force. In some cases, expending effort may involve aligning the will with reason and against some opposing desire. In other cases, expending effort might involve aligning one's will with one desire in opposition to some other (perhaps more acutely felt) desire. Acting in opposition to physical resistance is effortful in the relevant sense only to the degree that this physical resistance produces an internally felt, countermotivational resistance to so acting.

If we take on board this *internal struggle* account of effort, then God has exerted effort only if at some point God acted against some "part" of God that resisted this action. Might God face such an internal struggle even when doing something that is rationally *required*? Arguably not. God is, presumably, perfect in rationality. And it seems that a perfectly rational being does not *struggle* to do what is rational. While that reasoning may not be conclusive, it is more plausible to hold that if God struggles to make a certain choice, then that choice is rationally permissible but not rationally required. In this case, the resistance that God feels in acting would not be from some desire to act irrationally but could stem from an acutely felt desire that favors some alternative course of action that would also be rational.

Thus far, I've only described very abstractly how we might make sense of divine effort. I'd like to put flesh on this abstract possibility by offering the following sketch of the decision situation of the "primordial God," that is, God at a stage before deciding what type of universe to create (if any).⁴⁰ The sketch is one that I take to be plausible, even if my credence for it does not rise to the level of belief. The primordial God, I suggest, could see that the course of action that would be best overall would involve creating a world that includes creatures who bear significant responsibility for one another, and who are therefore free not only to bless but also to harm one another in significant ways.⁴¹ The primordial God could also see that this overall best course of action would involve God steadfastly loving these creatures, patiently guiding them toward ways of righteousness, and persistently forgiving them even when they openly rebel against God. Perhaps the primordial God could also see that the best overall plan would require God to establish solidarity with God's creatures by somehow sharing in the deep pain and despair experienced by creatures who are victims of serious evil.⁴² In addition to seeing that this sort of plan would be best overall, I suggest that the primordial God could also see

⁴⁰I take the label "primordial God" from Forrest, *Developmental Theism*. My proposal in this section is broadly in line with Forrest's proposal in his book.

⁴¹In talking about the best overall "course of action" or "plan," or in talking about what is "best overall," I do not mean to imply that there is a best possible world. Even if there is no best possible world, there will be a best possible plan, at least on *some* coarse-grained ways of partitioning the space of plans. Of course, if there is no best possible world, then there will be many (presumably infinite) worlds that are compatible with the best possible plan.

⁴²Swinburne, "The Probability of the Resurrection."

that this plan would *not* be the course of action that would be best for God personally. Because the best plan overall would almost certainly involve significant divine suffering, the primordial God could see that the course of action that would be best *for God* would be to refrain from creating creatures with significant responsibility for one another.

I suggest that the primordial God could have had an acutely felt desire to refrain from creating creatures with significant responsibility, since this would require divine suffering, and that refraining from creating such creatures was a rationally permissible option. If so, then it is plausible that God had to overcome significant internal resistance in willing to create and redeem such creatures. The divine activity of creating and loving creatures would therefore require significant effort and would constitute an achievement that redounds to God's credit.⁴³

One might ask how it could be rational for God to refrain from carrying out the overall best plan. An initial answer is that partiality toward one's own interests may be rationally permissible, so that it is not always the case that one has decisive reason to do what is best from an impartial standpoint. Alternatively, even if rationality requires impartiality toward all beings that will at some point exist, rationality may not require impartial consideration of subjects who presently exist and merely possible subjects who will exist only if one chooses to act in their interest.⁴⁴ At the primordial stage, God is weighing the interests of an existing being (God) against the interests of a population of creatures that may or may not be granted existence. If neither of these defenses of rational partiality are promising, then we could perhaps reframe the account sketched above as a decision between two plans whose values are incommensurable.

Even if partiality can be rational, leaving God with rational options, choosing the selfless plan would be difficult only if God acutely feels the cost of sacrificing God's own well-being. And one might wonder why God should have such a self-concerned motivational structure. Surely God does not have an arbitrary motivational structure, but rather has a *good* motivational structure. But why would it be good for God to have independent motivation to promote God's own well-being, motivation that does not entirely derive from a concern for total well-being? There are

⁴³A person might protest that if not creating was just as rational and reasonable as creating, then God should not be more agentially praiseworthy for creating. But there is no reason to think that alternative choices that are rationally permissible are equally agentially praiseworthy. Imagine that I am choosing between three options for how to spend my weekend nights one summer: watching all five seasons of *The Wire*, writing a well-crafted novella, or volunteering at a homeless shelter. Suppose these are all rationally permissible choices. (If it helps, imagine I know that watching *The Wire*, in addition to being immensely enjoyable, helps cultivate refined moral sensibilities.) Even so, it seems clear that watching all of *The Wire* is less agentially praiseworthy than success in either of the other two endeavors. (And difficulty probably has something to do with why!) So equally rational actions can differ in agential praiseworthiness.

⁴⁴For a helpful discussion of relevant normative issues, see McMahan, "Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives."

multiple answers that have some plausibility. First, having a robust “self” may require having a self-concerned motivational structure. If concern for my well-being does not have greater motivating force than concern for any other person’s well-being, then it is questionable whether I fully and properly identify with my future self. And maybe it is good that God have a robust kind of selfhood. Second, it may be good to have a motivational structure that shows partiality to beings that exist or are certain to exist. At the primordial stage, the only such being is God. Finally, perhaps a motivational structure that is partial toward divine well-being is fitting because of God’s superiority and holiness. God may perhaps willingly choose to care about potential creatures, but perhaps it is fitting for God’s *natural* concern to be for the glorious and necessarily existing divine being.

Suppose I am right that divine achievement consists in God’s deciding to create and sacrificially love creatures even though God was neither rationally required nor naturally disposed to do so. In this case, it would seem that God is only contingently a being who achieves and who is worthy of agential praise. For if neither reason nor God’s natural desires decisively favor the decision to create and love creatures, what could necessitate such a decision?⁴⁵ The view that God only contingently achieves stands in tension with traditional perfect being theology, which holds that God is *essentially* a perfect and unsurpassably great being. If God is *contingently* agentially praiseworthy, then presumably God is greater than God might have been, and unsurpassable greatness is not an *essential* property of God. While God might be unsurpassably great, this status would be a contingent achievement rather than a necessary entailment of God’s nature. Thus, the position I commend likely requires abandoning standard perfect being theology.

This result is less costly than it might seem since a proponent of the position I am defending can still affirm that God has a perfect and unsurpassably great *nature*. Having a perfect nature presumably entails many of the traditional divine attributes such as necessary and independent existence, omnipotence, omniscience, perfect rationality, and freedom. But there is good reason to think that a perfect nature cannot guarantee agential praiseworthiness. If a divine action was guaranteed by whatever inclinations God has by nature, then it is hard to see how this action could require effortful exertion of the divine will. For God to engage in effortful activity of the sort that is required for agential praiseworthiness, God must through an exercise of free will act in *opposition* to sufficiently strong inclinations and/or desires. Unlike other of God’s great-making properties, agential praiseworthiness cannot be fully grounded in the divine nature.

Several philosophers have reached a similar conclusion by a somewhat different argumentative route, one that is focused on the requirements

⁴⁵Murphy (“Is an Absolutely Perfect Being *Morally* Perfect?”) argues that as a perfectly rational and free being, God’s actions cannot be necessitated in contexts where God has multiple rationally permissible options.

for freedom rather than the requirements for achievement.⁴⁶ These philosophers deny the coherence of a God who is *essentially* morally perfect and worthy of moral praise (where moral praiseworthiness can roughly be understood as agential praiseworthiness on account of a morally commendable achievement). They argue along the following lines: if God is essentially morally perfect and worthy of moral praise, then God is necessitated by nature to do what is morally best; if God is necessitated by nature to do what is morally best, then God does not *freely* perform morally good actions; if God does not freely perform morally good actions, then God is not worthy of moral praise. While this challenge to essential moral praiseworthiness that is focused on the requirements for freedom is closely related to the challenge to agential praiseworthiness focused on the requirements for achievement, the two problems are ultimately distinct. This is because accounts of divine freedom may not help us to make sense of divine *effort*. For example, a compatibilist account of freedom like a “reasons responsiveness” account might explain how actions necessitated by the divine nature could be free, but such an account would not explain why any of God’s actions would be effortful.⁴⁷ Alternatively, a bare libertarian account of divine freedom may not by itself provide the resources for an account of divine achievement. The mere fact that God chooses among genuine alternative possibilities does not explain why any of God’s choices would be effortful.

I close by considering one worry about the religious acceptability of the view I have defended in this section. Suppose we accept the view I’ve defended and hold that agential praiseworthiness is at best a contingent property of God. Do we have any philosophical reason to think that, conditional on God being contingently worthy of agential praise, God is *unsurpassably* worthy of agential praise? Arguably not. Even if there is some course of action that is possible for God and that if taken would make God worthy of unsurpassable agential praise, it’s reasonable to think that there are other possible options that are intermediate between this most praiseworthy course of action and one that is purely self-interested and non-praiseworthy.⁴⁸ If so, then we cannot rule out on philosophical grounds the possibility that God has attempted to balance self-interest with interest in the good of creatures in some way that is less than maximally praiseworthy.

Is this concession religiously problematic? I don’t think so. First, whether or not God is unsurpassably praiseworthy, theists may still recognize ways that God’s love is highly demanding and offer heartfelt and

⁴⁶For example, see Guleserian, “Can Moral Perfection Be an Essential Attribute?”; Sennett, “Is God Essentially God?”; Howard-Snyder, “Divine Freedom.”

⁴⁷For an example of a reasons-responsiveness account, see Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*.

⁴⁸Whether a maximally praiseworthy course of action is possible is an important question that I cannot enter into here. The worry I am discussing here remains in force even if we take for granted that maximal praiseworthiness is metaphysically possible for God.

passionate agential praise in response. Second, if scripture or another authoritative source teaches that God is unsurpassably worthy of praise, then theists can affirm God's unsurpassable praiseworthiness on the basis of this authority. The view of divine achievement that I have defended does not give us reason to think that God is unsurpassably great, but neither does it rule this possibility out.⁴⁹

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