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THE PRIMACY OF GOD'S WILL IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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In this paper I argue that some form of theological voluntarism ought to be the ethical theory of choice for Christian moral philosophers. The audience I hope my argument will convince consists of Christians of a fairly traditional cast of mind, and so my assumptions are things I take to be widely shared in conservative Christian communities. They will not be shared by all communities of moral inquiry. Those who do not share them may be persuaded that they cohere well with theological voluntarism; they are not likely to be convinced of its truth by my argument. It should therefore be read as a contribution to a debate within a distinctively Christian tradition of moral reflection and as an attempt to promote progress internal to that tradition. It does not aim to convince the adherents of rival traditions that are not Christian.

The argument has two parts. The first part is an attempt to build a cumulative case for a divine command conception of Christian morality. The case has three elements. None of them by itself is decisive; together they have considerable force. The first element in the case appeals to a conception of the divine nature that is not restricted to Christian theism. I argue that a particularly strong form of the doctrine of divine sovereignty can be used to furnish theists of all sorts with a positive theoretical reason for divine command ethics. The second element in the case appeals to narratives from the Hebrew Bible that have some authority for Jews, Christians and Muslims. I argue that the cases often described as the immoralities of the patriarchs have in Christian tradition been interpreted in a way that provides Christians with a positive historical reason for divine command ethics. And the third element in the case appeals to the Gospel accounts of the command to followers of Jesus to love their neighbors. I argue that these accounts should, for reasons that Kierkegaard made clear, be interpreted so as to provide a positive moral reason for divine command ethics. As I see it, then, divine command ethics rests securely on a tripod whose legs come from philosophical

theology, scriptural interpretation and Gospel morality. But I make no claim that mine is a complete cumulative case for a divine command conception of Christian morality. There are, no doubt, other considerations Christians can mobilize that will also furnish positive reasons for divine command ethics. The three elements of my case do, however, illustrate the range of factors that converge in support of theological voluntarism.

Such considerations as these do, I think, suffice to show that a divine command conception of morality is a serious contender for the allegiance of Christian moral philosophers. But there are rivals also in contention within the arena of Christian ethical thought. So the second part of my argument is an effort to show that theological voluntarism is superior to the rival contender that currently enjoys the greatest popularity among Christian philosophers. It is a virtue theory of Aristotelian provenance. Of course it would be silly to maintain that there is no place in Christian ethics for virtues, but I shall argue that they should not have pride of place in Christian moral philosophy. They should instead be confined to a subordinate role. Making human virtue primary in ethics is an inversion of the Christian order in which God's will is primary and the human response to it is secondary. Seen from within a Christian perspective, virtue looks very different from what it appears to be when observed from the point of view of pagan Aristotelianism. So incorporating parts of Aristotle's ethical legacy into Christian moral philosophy will inevitably involve radical transformation in order to enforce the required theoretical subordination.

The first three sections of the paper will be devoted to the three elements of my cumulative case for divine command ethics. The final section will concentrate on showing that the rivalry with virtue theory is best brought to an end by assigning the virtues to a secondary and derivative place in the architecture of Christian moral theory. One disclaimer is needed before the argument begins. This paper does nothing by way of offering a defense of the divine command conception against various philosophical objections. It is not that I regard the task of constructing such a defense as unimportant. On the contrary, I think it is sufficiently important that I have made it a central project in my previous work on divine command morality.[1] And others who have made major contributions to the recent revival of divine command ethics in the philosophical world have also done much to show that it can be successfully defended against objections.[2] But I think the time has come in the campaign to refurbish divine command morality when a purely defensive strategy no longer promises to yield the greatest benefits. It seems to me that the time is now ripe for supporters of the divine command conception to make the positive case on its behalf to the community of Christian philosophers. It is the chief aim of this paper to do part of what needs to be done on this score if the case is to succeed in persuading that community.

Divine Sovereignty

There are a number of reasons for including a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty in one's philosophical theology. Two of the most important among them pertain to creation and providence. Theists customarily wish to insist on a sharp distinction between God and the world, between the creator and the created realm. According to traditional accounts of creation and conservation, each contingent thing depends on God's power for its existence whenever it exists. God, by contrast, depends on nothing external to himself for his existence. So God has complete sovereignty over contingent existence. Theists usually also wish to maintain that we may trust God's eschatological promises without reservation. Even if God does not control the finest details of history because he has chosen to create a world in which there is microphysical chance or libertarian freedom, he has the power to insure that the cosmos will serve his purposes for it and its inhabitants in the long run. So God also has extensive sovereignty over contingent events. Considerations of theoretical unity of a familiar sort then make it attractive to extend the scope of divine sovereignty from the contingent to the necessary and from the realm of fact into the realm of value.

How far can such extensions be pushed? In recent philosophical theology, there have been speculative attempts to push them very far indeed. Thomas Morris has advanced the metaphysical thesis "that God is absolute creator of necessary as well as contingent reality, and thus that literally all things do depend on him."[3] As Morris sees it, in order to be absolute creator "God must be responsible for the necessary truth of all propositions with this modality as well as for their mere existence as abstract objects."[4] If this view is tenable, Morris notes, "moral truths can be objective, unalterable, and necessary, and yet still dependent on God."[5] Thus, for example, even if it is necessarily true that such things as murder, theft and adultery are morally wrong, the absolute creationist holds that God is somehow responsible for the necessary truth of the proposition that murder, theft and adultery are wrong. But is this view tenable? In order to answer this question, we need to look at the details of the accounts the friends of absolute creation propose of the relation of dependence that is supposed to hold between God and such propositions.

As far as I can tell, it is Michael Loux who has provided the best worked out theory of how necessary truths might depend upon God. It is based on the idea that there is an asymmetrical relation of dependence between certain divine beliefs and facts being necessarily as they are. Taking notions of believing and entertaining as primitives, Loux defines a concept of strong belief as follows: a person S strongly believes that p if and only if S believes that p and does not entertain that not-p. Since God is omniscient, divine beliefs correlate perfectly with truth and divine strong beliefs correlate perfectly with

necessary truth. But there is more than mere correlation here; there is also metaphysical dependency.

> God is not in the relevant strong belief states because the facts are necessarily as they are. On the contrary, the facts are necessarily as they are because God has the relevant strong beliefs. So it is the case that 2 + 2 = 4 because God believes that 2 + 2 = 4; and it is necessarily the case that 2 + 2 = 4 because God strongly believes that 2 + 2 = 4.[6]

And, of course, this idea can easily be extended to the moral realm. It is the case that murder, theft and adultery are wrong, on this view, because God believes that murder, theft and adultery are wrong; and if it is necessarily the case that murder, theft and adultery are wrong, this is so because God strongly believes that murder, theft and adultery are wrong.

Loux apparently means his account to be quite general, for he makes an explicit exception only for the case of free action. Thus he goes on to tell us that "if we turn to the realm of contingent facts (other than those consisting in rational agents freely performing actions), then, on the account I have given, it is most natural to suppose that the facts stand as they do because God has the beliefs God does."[7] It is an advantage of this way of thinking, he observes, that it furnishes a way to capture the dependence of the contingent on its divine creator and conserver. Similarly, it might be alleged by absolute creationists to be a merit of the claim that necessary facts are necessarily as they are because God has the relevant strong beliefs that it captures the dependence of the necessary on its divine absolute creator.

Unfortunately, however there are more exceptional cases than Loux acknowledges. Microphysical indeterminacy in the contingent realm is likely to be one sort of exception, but there are also theologically significant exceptions in the necessary realm. According to a leading theistic tradition, it is a necessary truth that God exists. Applied to this case, Loux's theory tells us that it is the case that God exists because God believes that God exists and that it is necessarily the case that God exists because God strongly believes that God exists. This is surely not correct and, indeed, seems to have the order of dependence backwards. God's beliefs neither produce nor explain his own existence. We cannot use Pirandello's slogan, 'Right you are if you think you are!', as a principle for bootstrapping God into existence from his own beliefs. Similarly, it is a necessary truth that God is omniscient. So, according to the theory, it is the case that God is omniscient because God believes that God is omniscient, and it is necessarily the case that God is omniscient because God strongly believes that God is omniscient. Again, the actual order of dependence appears to be just the reverse of what the theory claims. I take it that these and similar theological examples suffice to refute Loux's version of the absolute creationist claim that God is responsible for the necessary truth of all propositions with this modality. A little less absolutism is, I think, called for here.

I am not sure exactly how to restrict the scope of the absolute creationist thesis in order to lend it maximal plausibility, though I have set forth one suggestion elsewhere.[8] However, in the present context it is not necessary to solve this problem. We can, I believe, avoid it by narrowing our focus of attention from global questions about truth in general to local questions about moral truth, and we can then ask how the kinds of considerations that motivate Morris and Loux should be applied within the moral realm. At the vert least, I suggest, they would lead one to hold that moral truth depends in some way on divine beliefs. A principle about wrongness proposed by Wierenga can be adapted to illustrate this idea.[9] The modified principle is this: For every agent x, state of affairs S, and time t, (i) it is wrong that x bring about S at t if and only if God believes that x ought not to bring about S at t, and (ii) if it is wrong that x bring about S at t, then by believing that x ought not to bring about S at t God brings it about that it is wrong that x bring about S at t. Less formally but more generally, the idea is that moral facts are as they are because God has the beliefs he does about what creaturely moral agents ought and ought not to do and necessary moral facts, if there are any, are necessarily as they are because God has the strong beliefs he does about what creaturely moral agents ought and ought not to do. This idea gets support from the doctrine of divine sovereignty because it extends God's sovereignty to cover the entire moral realm. I conclude from this that the doctrine of divine sovereignty provides a positive reason for a theoretical conception of this general kind.

So far I have been following the lead of Morris and Loux and discussing the dependence of morality on God in terms of divine doxastic states rather than divine volitional states. So it might be thought that the view I claim is supported by the doctrine of divine sovereignty is unconnected with theological voluntarism. My next task is therefore to elucidate the connections between them. There are several ways to do this; which of them is best will depend on other theological considerations.

If the doctrine of divine simplicity is true, intellect and will are not distinct in God, and so divine believings and divine willings are identical. If, for ease of exposition, we elide divine willings of a certain sort and divine commands, then to refer to a divine belief that an agent ought not to bring about a state of affairs at a time and to refer to a divine command that this agent not bring about that state of affairs at the time in question is to refer twice to just one thing. Divine strong beliefs will be identical with divine commands that are invariant across all possible worlds, which might be thought of as divine strong commands. Hence, to the extent that a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty is a positive reason for making moral truth dependent on divine beliefs across the board, it is also a positive reason for making such truth dependent on divine commands across the board. Wierenga's principle about wrongness, a modified version of which I set forth above, reads as follows: "For every

agent x, state of affairs S, and time t (i) it is wrong that x bring about S at t if and only if God forbids that x bring about S at t, and (ii) if it is wrong that x bring about S at t, then by forbidding that x bring about S at t God brings it about that it is wrong that x bring about S at t." If the doctrine of divine simplicity is true, this principle and my modification of it are alternative formulations of what amounts to a single claim, and so whatever is a positive reason for one of them is also a positive reason for the other.[10]

If, as I tend to think, the doctrine of divine simplicity is not true, things are a bit more complicated. But intellect and will are nevertheless tightly integrated in God, and so divine normative believings and divine willings are perfectly correlated. Though I think it would smack of presumption to claim to know much about the internal mechanisms of the divine cognitive and conative apparatuses and their interactions, several simple models of the relations of divine beliefs and the divine commands I am assimilating to certain divine willings to moral truths can easily be constructed. One might suppose that moral truths are causally overdetermined and that perfectly correlated divine beliefs and divine commands operate independently to bring it about that moral propositions are true. Alternatively, one might assign causal priority either to the divine will or to the divine intellect. In the former case, divine volitions would bring about divine beliefs, which would, in turn, bring about the truth of moral propositions. By transitivity, divine volitions would bring about the truth of moral propositions, and so they would be remote causes of moral status. In the latter case, divine beliefs would bring about divine volitions and hence divine commands, which would in turn, bring about the truth of moral propositions. Thus divine commands would be proximate causes of moral status. I favor the third of these ways of thinking in the present context because it seems to me to have a slight edge over the other two in terms of intuitive naturalness or plausibility. On this view, to the extent that a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty is a positive reason for making moral truth dependent on divine beliefs, which are remote causes of moral truth, it is also a positive reason for making moral truth dependent on divine commands, which are effects of divine beliefs and proximate causes of moral truth. Moral truth, one might say, is the product of commands in perfect conformity with divine normative beliefs; it is thus the product of a "supremely rational will."[11]

Quite recently William P. Alston has argued that the most plausible form of divine command ethics will be one in which moral obligation, but not moral goodness, is dependent on God's will.[12] If that is right, then considerations of theoretical unity will allow us to extend the scope of divine sovereignty into the moral realm but may not permit us to extend it so far that it covers the entire moral realm. Whether the latter extension can be made will depend on further considerations such as the plausibility of Alston's suggestion that God himself is the supreme criterion of moral goodness and whether, if this

is true, God is sovereign over moral goodness in a sense analogous to that in which he is sovereign over moral obligation because it depends on his will. The upshot, I think, is that there is a positive reason to suppose that divine sovereignty has, at the very least, a large territory to rule in the realm of value. But its claim to rule the entire realm may have to be scaled back or qualified just as Loux's extravagant claims have to be cut back in the theological realm.

The Immoralities of the Patriarchs

Speculative theistic metaphysics is not the only source of support for the divine command conception to be found within Christian traditions. Another is scripture itself. When we turn our attention to its narratives of God's dealings with his human creatures, we discover a picture of a deity who commands extensively. And in a prominent medieval tradition of interpreting scriptural stories about divine commands we find independent positive reasons for favoring an account of morality in which the primacy of God's will is acknowledged.

In medieval discussions it is sometimes disconcerting to see a philosophical question answered by appeal to the authority of scripture. For the most part, philosophers in our era would not make such appeals, but there is a good deal to be said for the practice, particularly in moral philosophy. The Hebrew Bible is authoritative for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I think this authority operates in two ways. First, scriptural narratives propose paradigms of moral good and evil. They thereby help train the theist's faculty of moral discrimination and even contribute to the constitution of theistic moral concepts. Second, within theistic traditions canonical scriptures are cognitive authorities because they are supposed to contain divine revelation. Of course interpreting scripture has always been a delicate task, and hermeneutical controversies are both abundant and persistent. But plausible interpretations must within these traditions be granted evidential force just because scripture is at least a source and, on some views, is the only independent and ultimate source of sound doctrine about God. There can be no serious doubt that the Hebrew Bible portrays God as a commander. He is to be obeyed.

The Pentateuch records divine commands laying down the law about all sorts of things, including but not restricted to matters such as homicide that are clearly moral. Both Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21, which recount the revelation of the Decalogue, picture God as instructing his people about what they are to do and not to do by commanding them. He reveals his will and does not merely transmit information. So it is natural enough to assume that the authority of the Decalogue depends upon the fact that it is an expression of the divine will. Even if one doubts some of the details

of these narratives because one thinks, for example, that God would not bother to regulate diet or ritual to quite the extent they say he does, it can hardly be denied that the conception of God the stories embody is that of a lawgiver. This conception surely invites development along just the lines proposed by divine command theories of morality. But, though such a development coheres very well with the narratives, they do not force the conclusion that God is the source of moral obligation. They can be interpreted so as to portray God as merely promulgating to his people moral laws that hold independent of his will if there are good reasons to suppose that such laws exist. After all, if there were such laws, a perfectly good God would will that his people obey them. And divine commands governing such things as ritual could be thought of as imposing religious rather than moral obligations.

There are, however, scriptural stories that can serve as a basis for a direct argument to the conclusion that God is the source of moral obligation. These are the incidents sometimes described as the immoralities of the patriarchs. They are cases in which God commands something that appears to be immoral and, indeed, to violate a prohibition he himself lays down in the Decalogue. Three such cases come up again and again in traditional Christian discussions. The first is the divine command to Abraham, recorded in Genesis 22:1-2, to sacrifice Isaac, his son. The second is the divine command reported in Exodus 11:2, which was interpreted as a command that the Israelites plunder the Egyptians. And the third is the divine command to the prophet Hosea, stated first in Hosea 1:2 and repeated in Hosea 3:1, to have sexual relations with an adulteress. According to these stories, God has apparently commanded homicide, theft and adultery (or at least fornication) in particular cases in a way that is contrary to the general prohibitions of the Decalogue. Such cases were bound to attract comments. How are we to interpret them?

The commentators I am going to discuss take scripture for literal truth; they assume that God actually did command as he is said to have done by the stories. They also suppose that these commands were binding on those to whom they were directed. In *The City of God*, Augustine uses the case of Abraham to make the point that the divine law prohibiting killing allows exceptions "when God authorizes killing by a general law or when He gives an explicit commission to an individual for a limited time." Abraham, he says, "was not only free from the guilt of criminal cruelty, but even commended for his piety, when he consented to sacrifice his son, not, indeed, with criminal intent but in obedience to God."[13] And in his *Questions on the Heptateuch*, Augustine disposes of the Exodus case with the remark that "the Israelites did not engage in theft, but, with God commanding this, they performed an office."[14] It is clear that Augustine thinks Abraham did what he should do in consenting to kill Isaac and the Israelites did what they should do in plundering the Egyptians because these things had been commanded by God. He also thinks that these things, which would have been wrong in the absence

of those commands, were not wrong given their presence. So Augustine holds that divine commands addressed to particular individuals or groups determine the moral status of actions they perform out of obedience.

This general line on the immoralities of the patriarchs crops up over and over again in the works of Augustine's medieval successors. In his *On Precept and Dispensation*, Bernard says this:

> *You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal*, and the remaining precepts of that table, precepts which are such that, although they admit no human dispensation absolutely, and neither was it permitted nor will it be permitted to any human being to give release to something from those precepts in any way, yet God has given release from those which he wished, when he wished, whether when he ordered that the Egyptians be plundered by the Hebrews, or when he ordered the Prophet to have intercourse with a woman who was a fornicator. Certainly would nothing but a grievous act of theft be ascribed to the one, and nothing but the turpitude of a shameful act done in the heat of passion, to the other, if the authority of the commander should not have excused each act.[15]

So Bernard takes the Exodus case and the case of Hosea to show that God's authority is such that by his commands, he and only he dispenses people from the obligation to obey the precepts of the second table of the Decalogue. Plundering the Egyptians and having intercourse with a woman who was a fornicator, which would have been wrong in the absence of the divine commands to the Hebrews and Hosea, respectively, because they violate the precepts of the Decalogue, were in fact not wrong because God commanded them. Like Augustine, Bernard holds that divine commands make all the difference in the moral status of these actions.

The connection of these cases to a full-fledged divine command ethics is made quite explicit in the work of Andreas de Novo Castro, a fourteenth century philosopher who is judged by Janine M. Idziak to have conducted "the lengthiest and most sophisticated defense of the position."[16] He claims that there are actions which, "known per se by the law of nature and by the dictate of natural reason, are seen to be prohibited, as actions which are homicides, thefts, adulteries, etc.; but, with respect to the absolute power of God, it is possible that actions of this kind not be sins."[17] After citing the passage by Bernard I have quoted, which he thinks makes this evident, de Novo Castro appeals to the case of Abraham for additional confirmation. Abraham, he says, "wished to kill his son so that he would be obedient to God commanding this, and he would not have sinned in this if God should not have withdrawn the command."[18] For de Novo Castro, God's absolute power is such that acts such as homicides, thefts and adulteries, which are seen to be prohibited and so sins when known per se by means of natural law and natural reason, would not be sins if they were commanded by God as some in fact have been. He shares with Augustine and Bernard the view that divine commands can and do determine the moral status of actions.

What may be unexpected is that Aquinas too shares this view. He devotes an article of the *Summa Theologiae* to the question of whether the precepts of the Decalogue are dispensable, and in it he pronounces a verdict on our three cases. Not surprisingly, Aquinas maintains that those precepts "admit of no dispensation whatever," and so he disagrees with Bernard on this point.[19] But when he treats our three cases in the course of responding to an objection, he agrees with Bernard in exonerating the patriarchs. How does he manage to pull off this trick? The paragraph deserves to be quoted in full:

> Consequently when the children of Israel, by God's command, took away the spoils of the Egyptians, this was not theft; since it was due to them by the sentence of God.—Likewise when Abraham consented to slay his son, he did not consent to murder, because his son was due to be slain by the command of God, Who is Lord of life and death: for He it is Who inflicts the punishment of death on all men, both godly and ungodly, on account of the sin of our first parent, and if a man be the executor of that sentence by Divine authority, he will be no murderer any more than God would be.—Again Osee, by taking unto himself a wife of fornications, or an adulterous woman, was not guilty either of adultery or of fornication: because he took unto himself one who was his by command of God, Who is the author of the institution of marriage.[20]

The main ideas in this passage are simple enough. Because God commanded the Israelites to plunder the Egyptians, what the Israelites took was due to them and not to the Egyptians. Since theft involves taking what is not one's due, the plunder of the Egyptians was no theft. Hence the Israelites needed no dispensation from the prohibition on theft because their action did not come within its scope. Similarly, because God, who is Lord of life and death, commanded Abraham to slay Isaac, Isaac was due to receive the punishment of death all humans deserve in consequence of original sin. Since murder involves slaying someone who is not due to be slain, the slaying of Isaac would have been no murder, and so Abraham did not consent to murder and needed no dispensation from the prohibition on murder. And because God, who is the Author of marriage, commanded Hosea to take the adulteress as his wife, she was his wife and so he was guilty of neither adultery nor fornication in having intercourse with her.

Aquinas and de Novo Castro differ in some respects about what the divine commands do in our three cases. De Novo Castro seems to think that God's command to Abraham brings it about that the slaying of Isaac would not be wrong while remaining a murder. By contrast, Aquinas clearly supposes that God's command to Abraham brings it about that the slaying of Isaac would be neither wrong nor a murder. But this disagreement should not blind us to the fact that they are of one mind in thinking that divine commands make a moral difference in all three cases. Both hold that the slaying of Isaac by Abraham, which would be wrong in the absence of the divine command to Abraham because of the Decalogue's prohibition, will not be wrong in the

presence of that command if Abraham carries it out. And they think similar things about the plundering of the Egyptians by the Israelites and Hosea having intercourse with the adulteress. We might sum up the agreement by saying that what the divine commands do in all three cases is to make obligatory patriarchal actions that would have been wrong in their absence. And because divine commands make this kind of moral difference in virtue of something necessarily restricted to God alone such as absolute power or lordship over life and death, human commands could not make a moral difference of this sort.

It is worth noting that agreement with Augustine, Bernard, Aquinas and de Novo Castro about these cases and others like them need not be restricted to those Christians who share their belief that there actually were such divine commands as the scriptural stories say there were. Some may choose to think of cases like these as merely possible but concur with the tradition of interpretation I have been describing in believing that divine commands would make a moral difference of the sort our medieval authorities thought they did in fact make. I think there would be enough agreement about some such cases among reflective Christians who considered them carefully to make it fair to claim that Christian moral intuitions about scriptural cases support the conclusion that God is a source of moral obligation. Moreover, it is only a contingent fact that there are at most a few such cases. The properties such as absolute power or lordship over life and death in virtue of which divine commands are authoritative would remain unchanged if such commands were more numerous or even universal. So it is hard to resist the conclusion that any act of homicide, plunder or intercourse with a person other than one's spouse would be obligatory if it were divinely commanded. Most, if not all, such acts are not obligatory because God refrains from commanding anyone to perform them. Hence the moral intuitions that lie behind the tradition of scriptural interpretation I have been discussing also support the stronger conclusion that whether any action is obligatory or not depends on whether God commands it or refrains from doing so. Reflection on scripture and how it has been interpreted in an impressive tradition of Christian thought furnishes another positive reason for thinking that divine commands are both necessary and sufficient to impose moral obligations.

Commanded Love

It is a striking feature of the ethics of love set forth in the Gospels that love is the subject of a command. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus states it in response to a question from a lawyer about which commandment of the law is the greatest. He says:

> You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well.[21]

Mark 12:29-31 tells of Jesus giving essentially the same answer to a question by a scribe, and Luke 10:27-28 speaks of a lawyer giving this answer to a question from Jesus and being told by Jesus that he has answered correctly. And in his last discourse, recorded in John's Gospel, Jesus tells his followers that "the command I give you is this, that you love one another."[22] So the authors of those books concur in thinking that Jesus expressed, or approved others expressing, the ethical demand that we love one another in the form of a command.

It might be thought that this manner of expression is inessential to a Christian ethics of love of neighbor, arising merely from the fact that Jesus is portrayed as propounding the ethics of love in the course of discussion with lawyers or scribes who are concerned about his views on questions of law. Because the questions being discussed are legalistic in nature, it might be said, it is not surprising that Jesus uses or approves legalistic rhetoric involving talk of commands in the specific context of answering them. By itself, the fact that a Christian ethics of love can be put in terms of commands does not imply that it must be formulated or is best articulated in such terms. To be sure, Jesus commands love not only when addressing Pharisees who are hostile to him but also when addressing followers who are committed to him. But I suppose that even this consideration need not be regarded as decisive in the absence of a reason for thinking that the particular sort of love Jesus wants people to have must, at least in the first instance, be commanded. Is there such a reason?

I think there is. To a first approximation, it is that the love of neighbor of which Jesus speaks is unnatural for humans in their present condition. It does not spontaneously engage their affections, and so training, self-discipline and, perhaps, even divine assistance are required to make its achievement a real possibility. For most of us most of the time, love of neighbor is not an attractive goal, and, if it were optional, we would not pursue it. It must therefore be an obligatory love with the feel of something that represents a curb or check on our natural desires and predilections. Because the divine command conception holds that all obligations depend on God's will, such an obligatory love is properly represented as subject to being commanded by a divine lawgiver. It is, then, no accident that the love of neighbor the Gospels propose to us is a commanded love.

In my opinion, no Christian thinker has seen with greater clarity than Kierkegaard just how radical the demands of love of neighbor are. In *Works of Love*, he addresses the reader in his own name, presenting, as the subtitle indicates, some Christian reflections in the form of discourses. The discourse

on Matthew 22:39, which was quoted above, draws a sharp contrast between erotic love and friendship, on the one hand, and Christian love of neighbor, on the other. Both erotic love and friendship play favorites; the practical love of neighbor Christians are commanded to display by performing works of love does not. Kierkegaard says:

> The object of both erotic love and friendship has therefore also the favorite's name, *the beloved*, *the friend*, who is loved in distinction from the rest of the world. On the other hand, the Christian teaching is to love one's neighbor, to love all mankind, all men, even enemies, and not to make exceptions, neither in favoritism nor in aversion.[23]

One's neighbor is, in short, everyone. Since the command tells us that the neighbor is to be loved as we love ourselves, everyone without exception ought to be regarded as just as near to us as we are to ourselves according to Kierkegaard. In terms of this spatial metaphor, what is wrong with selfish self-love is that one is nearer to oneself than to anyone else. Erotic love and friendship represent only a partial break with selfish self-love because they are exclusive. The beloved or the friend is nearer to oneself than those who are not bonded to one by such relationships of partiality. Kierkegaard endeavors to drive the point home by putting it in terms that smack of paradox. His claim is this:

> If there are only two people, the other person is the neighbor. If there are millions, everyone of these is one's neighbor, that is, again, one who is closer than *the friend* and *the beloved*, inasmuch as these, as objects of partiality, lie so close to one's self-love.[24]

The air of paradox is generated by the thought that the friend or the beloved is also one's neighbor, for this seems to have the consequence that one and the same person is nearer to us under one description than she or he is under another. But the point Kierkegaard is trying to make is not paradoxical at all, though it may seem shocking. I take it to be that the obligation to love imposed by the command places absolutely every human, including one's beloved, one's friend and one's very self, at the same distance from one as one's worst enemy or millions of people with whom one has had no contact. And so it is an obligation that extends to all alike, excludes no one and does not even permit distinctions among persons rooted in differential preferences. It is, perhaps, easy to imagine God loving all his human creatures in this undiscriminating way. It is much more difficult to see how it could be either desirable or feasible for humans to respond to one another in this fashion. But if Kierkegaard is right, this is exactly what the command to love the neighbor bids us to do.

The offense to common sense would be mitigated but not altogether removed if the scope of the obligation to love were narrowed. One might, for example, construe the command quoted above from the last discourse

of Jesus as imposing an obligation to love that does not extend beyond those who are his followers. But even the first disciples of Jesus were a mixed bag; the members of the household of faith today are a very motley crew indeed. It would not square with the natural inclinations or predilections of the Christians of any era to love one another equally and without distinction. Not all Christians are alike in erotic attractiveness; nor are they all equal with respect to the charms of virtuous character. So a nondiscriminatory love of all alike is bound to go against the grain of our natural affections and their partialities.

Kierkegaard is acutely aware of this partiality. He insists that "in erotic love and friendship the two love one another in virtue of differences or in virtue of likenesses which are grounded in differences (as when two friends love one another on the basis of likeness in customs, character, occupation, education, *etc.*, consequently on the basis of the likeness by which they are different from other men or in which they are like each other as different from other men)."[25] He is also sensitive to the fact that the dependence of erotic love and friendship on the characteristics of the beloved and the friend make them vulnerable to changes in their objects. If the beloved loses the traits in virtue of which she or he was erotically attractive, then erotic love dies. If the friend who was prized for having a virtuous character turns vicious, then the friendship is not likely to survive unless one is corrupted and turns vicious too. But love of neighbor is invulnerable to alterations in its object. Kierkegaard puts the point this way:

> To be sure, you can also continue to love your beloved and your friend no matter how they treat you, but you cannot truthfully continue to call them beloved and friend when they, sorry to say, have really changed. No change, however, can take your neighbor from you, for it is not your neighbor who holds you fast—it is your love which holds your neighbor fast. If your love for your neighbor remains unchanged, then your neighbor also remains unchanged just by being.[26]

If there is to be such a love that alters not where it alteration finds, it cannot depend on mutable features of the neighbor or ways in which they engage our spontaneous and natural affections. According to Kierkegaard, it will have the requisite independence only if it is a duty, for only then can it be motivated by a sense of duty instead of by changeable affections or preferences. "In this way," he says "the 'You shall' makes love free in blessed independence; such a love stands and does not fall with variations in the object of love; it stands and falls with eternity's law, but therefore it never falls."[27] Only if love of the neighbor is required of us will our response to that unvarying demand remain stable in the face of changes in the neighbor and our natural reactions to them.

There are, then, two reasons for supposing that Christian love of neighbor has to be a matter of duty or obligation. The first is that only a dutiful love

can be sufficiently extensive in scope to embrace everyone without distinction. Erotic love and friendship are always discriminating and so exclusive. The second reason is that only a dutiful love can be invulnerable to alterations in its objects. Erotic love and friendship are apt to change when the valued features of their objects alter. "In love and friendship preference is the middle term," Kierkegaard says; "in love to one's neighbor God is the middle term."[28] In Christian love of neighbor God is the middle term in two ways. First, love of neighbor arises from loving God above all else and then loving his human creatures, including oneself, in the steadfast and nondiscriminating way in which he loves them. And, second, it is God's will, made known to us by Jesus, that we humans love one another in this manner. As Christians see it, Jesus is at least the Son of God who reveals the will of his Father by commanding love of the neighbor. Christians who also accept the astonishing claim that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate seem to be committed to the view that the obligation to love the neighbor as oneself is a duty imposed by a direct divine command.

I think this commanded love is foundational for Christian ethics; it is what sets Christian ethics apart from all its rivals. There is nothing like it in the pagan ethics of antiquity or in the secular moralities of the modern era. The command is apt to give offense, and even Christians in their present condition find it difficult to acknowledge its full force. "Only acknowledge it," Kierkegaard exhorts his readers, "or if it is disturbing to you to have it put in this way, I will admit that many times it has thrust me back and that I am yet very far from the illusion that I fulfill this command, which to flesh and blood is offense, and to wisdom foolishness."[29] In our lucid moments all of us would have to agree with Kierkegaard on this point and admit that we fall far short of perfect obedience to the command that we love everyone as we love ourselves. But I concur with Kierkegaard in considering it important to highlight rather than downplay the stringency of the duty to love the neighbor even if in consequence some people are thrust back or offended. Loving everyone as we love ourselves is, I want to insist, obligatory in Christian ethics, and it has this status, as the Gospels show us, because God has commanded this all-inclusive love. So I find in what is most distinctive about the Christian ethics of the Gospels another reason for Christians to favor a divine command conception of moral obligation. It seems to me that Christians who take the Gospels seriously would be in no position to deny that they teach us that we have been commanded by God to love the neighbor and so are obliged to do our best to fulfill the command perfectly.

This completes my argument in three parts for the conclusion that a divine command conception of morality has in its own right a serious claim to be regarded as a good way to understand Christian ethics because it acknowledges the primacy of God's will in the moral realm. The strength of my case rests in part on the diversity of sources within Christian tradition

to which it appeals. Considerations from speculative philosophical theology, Christian commentary on incidents portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, and the distinctively Christian ethical demands set forth by Jesus in the Gospels converge in supporting theological voluntarism. But it is a conception that has had rivals within the history of Christian moral thought, and so something must be said about how it stacks up against its competitors. I therefore conclude with a sketch of how the rivalry with currently fashionable virtue theories might be brought to an end by incorporating what is of lasting value from such theories into divine command morality.

Divine Commands and Aristotle's Virtues

Virtue ethics has undergone something of a renaissance in recent philosophical discussion. Virtue theorists agree in tracing their roots back to Aristotle, but he is a philosopher who can be used to serve many purposes. It is important to realize that not all philosophers who acknowledge having benefitted from studying him have learned the same lessons. On the contemporary scene, Aristotle is being appropriated by the adherents of at least two deeply divergent projects of moral inquiry.

One is wholly secular and is attracted by Aristotle's optimistic paganism. Martha Nussbaum represents this sort of interest in reviving Aristotle. She remarks that Aristotle "holds that human beings are naturally drawn toward virtue rather than vice, love more than repudiation—and that, given sufficient education, material support, and personal effort, most people will be able to make good and reasonable lives *for themselves*" (my emphasis).[30] On this view, the attractive prospect Aristotle's thought offers us is that, if fortune favors them, human beings can, operating on their own steam, so to speak, flourish and so be happy over the course of an earthly lifetime. And these achievements are independent of religion. Noting that Aristotle does not place piety on his list of virtues, Nussbaum conjectures that "this probably indicates his interest in separating practical reason from religious authority, and in keeping reason, rather than such authorities, in control of the most important matters."[31] Practical reason operating apart from religious influences offers humans their best shot at working out for themselves good lives.

All this is, needless to say, deeply alien to traditional Christian thought. It would insist that humans in their present condition are fallen and, if left to themselves, incapable of flourishing in this life. Such human flourishing as is possible must take place against a background of ceaseless struggle to overcome interior evil. It can never be a wholly human achievement, something people make for themselves if they are lucky. It must always be at least in part a divine gift. Nor is reason itself exempt from the infirmities of the present human condition; it too is fallen and enfeebled. A traditional

Christian is therefore likely to regard as naive any confidence in the ability of unaided human practical reason to rule well in the most important matters in our lives.

Aristotle's perspective allows him to see nothing beyond completed earthly lives, and so he must judge human flourishing and happiness in secular terms. From this point of view, it is quite reasonable to emphasize the way in which good fortune is essential for human flourishing, for the activities that, according to Aristotle, constitute a happy life are not possible in the absence of such conditions as good health and a modicum of wealth. Christianity's larger eschatological vision opens up other possibilities. Misfortune, far from ruling out ultimate happiness, may prove a blessing in disguise by furnishing to the one who suffers it an opportunity to become more intimately related to the suffering Jesus on the Cross. Providence may be giving to the wretched of the earth—those most sorely afflicted by disease and poverty—chances to imitate Christ that the comfortably situated ought to envy. Aristotle clearly would not have counted as blessed all the people Jesus did: the poor in spirit, the sorrowing, the lowly, those who hunger and thirst for holiness, the merciful, the simple-hearted, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for holiness's sake.[32] Not many such people would flourish in an ancient *polis* or, for that matter, in a modern secular polity. But Jesus promises them a great reward in heaven.

Moreover, Aristotelian friendships have just those characteristics in virtue of which a sharp contrast has to be drawn between even the best sort of friendship and genuine Christian love of the neighbor. Aristotle restricts the highest kind of friendship to good people who are equal in virtue and insists that we must rest content with only a few friends of this kind. "One cannot be a friend to many people in the sense of having friendship of the perfect type with them," Aristotle tells us, "just as one cannot be in love with many people at once (for love is a sort of excess of feeling, and it is the nature of such only to be felt towards one person); and it is not easy for many people at the same time to please the same person very greatly, or perhaps even to be good in his eyes."[33] But Christian love of neighbor, unlike both Aristotle's friendship of the perfect type and his love based on an excess of feeling, is something we are obliged to direct toward everyone. Aristotle also says this: "Now equality and likeness are friendship, and especially the likeness of those who are like in virtue; for being steadfast in themselves they hold fast to each other, and neither ask nor give base services, but (one may say) even prevent them; for it is characteristic of good men neither to go wrong themselves nor to let their friends do so."[34] But, again, Christian love of neighbor cannot be so exclusive; it must also be directed towards those who are not one's like in virtue. We are commanded to love not only our equals in virtue but also both those who are more virtuous and those who are less virtuous than we are. Aristotelian friendship between equals in virtue is, no

doubt, an admirable thing, and secular moralists are right to praise it. It is, however, a far cry from Christian love of one's neighbor and the divine love for all humans that is its paradigm.

Another contemporary project of moral inquiry that treats Aristotle as a valuable resource is a tradition in Christian ethics whose distinguished ancestry can be traced back at least as far as Aquinas. Unlike the secular retrieval of Aristotle, this project must be very selective in appropriating Aristotelian materials, for Aristotle's optimistic paganism and the grim realities of the Christian drama of sin and salvation are worlds apart, as the contrasts I have mentioned above only begin to indicate. It can learn from Aristotle and other virtue theorists provided their insights are transformed by being situated in a theoretical context that focuses moral inquiry on discerning God's will.

Divine command moralists should, I think, be prepared to engage in such selective appropriation and transformation of Aristotelian conceptions of virtue. After all, divine command theorists will not wish to deny that there are such things as moral virtues; they will, however, want to dispute characteristic Aristotelian claims about their importance and centrality in moral thinking. For Aristotle, the virtues hold pride of place in ethical theory. They are not properly understood as dispositions to produce independently defined or recognizable good actions or states of affairs; rather good actions or states of affairs are defined as those a virtuous person would voluntarily produce in the appropriate circumstances. From the point of view of the divine command theorist, Aristotle has got things backwards. The will of God, the commands that express it, and the moral laws those commands establish are primary for ethics, and so obligations to obey God's moral legislation will be the fundamental facts of morality. The virtues will have a distinctly secondary role to play; they will be construed as habits of obedience to various standing divine commands or other expressions of God's will for humans. The virtue of obedience itself will be the master moral virtue and should occupy center stage in moral theory.

Aquinas recognizes the importance of obedience to God's will for Christian ethics. When engaged in moral thinking, he is a bit of a magpie, picking up bits and pieces of lore from a variety of sources. In portraying Aquinas as a moral *bricoleur*, Jeffrey Stout notes that "his real accomplishment was to bring together into a single whole a wide assortment of fragments—Platonic, Stoic, Pauline, Jewish, Islamic, Augustinian, and Aristotelian."[35] To be sure, he tries to assemble these fragments into a coherent pattern by subsuming them under a largely Aristotelian conceptual scheme. But scheme and content do not always fit well together, as the case of obedience shows. A single question is devoted to it slightly more than half way through the second part of the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*. It is classified as a part of a part of the virtue of justice. Yet Aquinas returns a positive answer to the question of whether obedience to God is the greatest of the moral virtues.

He argues that moral virtues are to be ranked in accord with the principle that the greater the thing a person contemns in order to adhere to God, the greater the virtue. Human goods that may be contemned for God's sake are, in order of increasing greatness, external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul. Among goods of the soul, the will is the highest because it is by the will that humans make use of all other goods. It follows that "properly speaking, the virtue of obedience, whereby we contemn our own will for God's sake, is more praiseworthy than the other moral virtues, which contemn other goods for the sake of God."[36] What is more, other acts of virtue have no merit in God's eyes unless they are done out of obedience to God's will. "For were one to suffer even martyrdom, or to give all one's goods to the poor," Aquinas insists, "unless one directed these things to the fulfillment of the divine will, which pertains directly to obedience, they could not be meritorious."[37] Neither would such things be meritorious if they were done without charity, he continues, but that theological virtue "cannot exist apart from obedience."[38] So obedience to God's will is not only the most praiseworthy of the moral virtues but also a necessary condition of both merit before God and charity.

It is interesting to note that Aquinas returns to the immoralities of the patriarchs in the course of a discussion of the question of whether God is to be obeyed in all things. These cases now form the basis of an objection. No one, Aquinas assumes, is bound to do anything contrary to virtue. But it seems that the divine command to Abraham to slay his innocent son and the divine command to the Jews to plunder the Egyptians are contrary to justice and that the divine command to Hosea to take to himself a woman who was an adulteress is contrary to chastity. Hence it seems that God is not to be obeyed in all things. The reply to this objection puts the case for the primacy of God's will in Christian ethics in a striking and forceful way. "God can command nothing contrary to virtue," Aquinas assures us, "since virtue and rectitude of human will consist chiefly in conformity with God's will and obedience to His command, although it be contrary to the wonted mode of virtue."[39] And he proceeds to deal with the three cases in a manner that should by now seem quite familiar. God's command to Abraham to slay his innocent son is not contrary to justice because God is the author of life and death. God's command to the Jews to plunder the Egyptians is not contrary to justice because all things really belong to God and he gives them to whom he will. And God's command to Hosea to take unto himself an adulteress is not contrary to chastity because, God being the ordainer of human generation, the right manner of sexual intercourse is that which he appoints.

I am of the opinion that Christian moral philosophers ought to join Aquinas in holding that virtue consists chiefly in conformity with God's will and obedience to his commands. As I see it, this should be the ruling idea of any

account of the virtues that claims it is part of a genuinely Christian ethics. Plausible claims about the virtues deriving from sources such as Aristotle should be incorporated into Christian ethics just to the extent that they can be made to cohere with and subordinated to this ruling idea. When this cannot be accomplished, Christian moral philosophers should reject such claims. So a Christian ethics of virtue would not be a rival of theological voluntarism but a proper part of a fully developed divine command morality. Such an account of the moral virtues may well, as the example of Aquinas suggests, overlap Aristotle's doctrine of the virtues at quite a few points. But those engaged in trying to construct such an account ought to keep clearly in mind the thought that complete coincidence with Aristotle's ethics is out of the question. There are bound to be radical disagreements with Aristotle and with his contemporary secular heirs in any moral theory that insists, as I have argued Christian ethics should, on the primacy of God's will as a norm for human conduct and character.[40]

Notes

1. Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) and "Divine Command Ethics: A Causal Theory," *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Janine M. Idziak (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).
2. See, for example, Robert M. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," reprinted in his *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), Chapter 8, and Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), Chapter 1.
3. Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), p. 163.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
6. Michael J. Loux, "Toward an Aristotelian Theory of Abstract Objects," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 11, ed. P. A. French, T. E. Uehling and H. K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 510. It is important not to confuse Loux's notion of entertaining with other concepts of entertaining that are, perhaps, more familiar. He supposes that if S believes that p then S entertains that p. There seems to be a familiar sense of entertaining in which it is the case that if S entertains that p then S believes that it is possible that not-p. But if this principle were conjoined to Loux's suppositions, a consequence would be that God believes that it is possible that $2 + 2 \neq 4$, which is plainly false.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Philip L. Quinn, "An Argument for Divine Command Ethics," *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. M. Beaty (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).
9. Wierenga's original principle, which I quote a little later, is to be found on p. 217 of his *The Nature of God.*
10. For further discussion of the bearing of the doctrine of divine simplicity on the

foundations of Christian ethics, see Norman Kretzmann, "Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality," *Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition*, ed. D. V. Stump *et. al.* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

11. William E. Mann, "Modality, Morality, and God," *Noûs* 23 (1989): 99. Mann's argument, like mine, starts from divine sovereignty, but the two arguments proceed along different paths to similar conclusions.
12. William P. Alston, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," included in his *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).
13. Augustine, *The City of God* I, 21.
14. Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch* II, 39.
15. Bernard, *On Precept and Dispensation* III, 6. I quote an unpublished translation by Janine M. Idziak.
16. Janine M. Idziak, "In Search of 'Good Positive Reasons' for an Ethics of Divine Commands: A Catalogue of Arguments," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 63.
17. Andreas de Novo Castro, *Primum Scriptum Sententiarum*, d. 48, q. 2, a. 2, concl. 2. I quote from an unpublished edition and translation by Janine M. Idziak.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 100, a. 8.
20. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3. Aquinas also discusses these three cases in *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 5; there the question is whether the natural law can be changed.
21. Matthew 22:37-40.
22. John 15:17.
23. Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, tr. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 36.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
30. Martha Nussbaum, "Recoiling from Reason," *The New York Review of Books* 36 (December 7, 1989): 40.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Matthew 5:3-10.
33. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1158a10-14.
34. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1159b2-7.
35. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 76.
36. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 104, a. 3.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 104, a. 4, ad 2.
40. Much of what I say in the first two sections of this paper is a slightly revised version of material that was included in my "The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51 (1990). Some of the material in the final section, also revised, comes from my "A Response to Hauerwas: Is Athens Revived Jerusalem Denied?," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 45 (1990).