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UNDERSTANDING DIVINE AUTHORITY

Christopher Dodsworth

At least since Robert Adams's "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness" in 1973, there has been a renewed interest in divine command theory (DCT), with many variations currently on offer. Despite these recent developments, Mark Murphy has argued that DCT still faces the fundamental problem of explaining the nature and ground of God's authority. In response to this problem, Murphy has recently offered an alternative explanation of divine authority based on the idea of consenting to obey God's commands. I argue that although Murphy's innovative account fails as he presents it, it can be made to work.

I. Introduction

Divine command theories (DCT) of morality have, in the last forty or so years—at least since the publication of Robert Adams's landmark "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness" in 1973—experienced renewed interest and development. Various forms of divine command theory have emerged: some, like Adams's, are *metaethical* theories, identifying or grounding the moral properties of rightness and wrongness in some way with or upon God's commands. Others are *normative* theories which claim that obeying God's commands is, like the categorical imperative for Kant, the supreme moral principle. Regardless of form, however, all divine command theories face a common problem: why is God authoritative? Why should God's commands be obeyed?

This problem most obviously afflicts the normative theories, but the metaethical versions of DCT suffer from it, too. For suppose it is true that moral wrongness is identical with or somehow supervenes upon being forbidden by God. A person can still ask *why* she ought not do what is morally wrong; and this leads to the question why she ought to obey God's commands.

In a recent book, Mark Murphy identifies this objection to DCT as "the problem of divine authority" and sets forth a very interesting solution to it. On his view,

we humans are not born under God's authority, but each of us is *bound to submit to the divine rule* and to make God authoritative over him or her. Each



of us builds up God's kingdom by taking his or her place in it as a divine subject.¹

Murphy thinks that God does not *essentially* have authority over any of us in the sense that his commands do not, of their very nature, morally obligate us, any more than commands I might issue to the President of the United States would obligate him. However, a person can give God authority (and thereby make God's commands authoritative) by submitting to divine rule.

To understand how his view works, an analogy is helpful. Consider what happens when a person joins the army. *Prior* to his joining, the dictates of the drill sergeant are meaningless for him: after all, he doesn't fall under the sergeant's jurisdiction. In joining the army, however, he gives the sergeant authority over him. Likewise, a person could choose to submit to divine rule and so make God's commands authoritative.

There are some crucial differences between these cases, however. First, a military commander does not have complete authority over those under his command. In the case of divine rule, however, Murphy thinks that this authority must be total: one's submission to God "involves a thoroughgoing willingness to surrender one's decision-making to God."² Second, regardless of how much authority a drill sergeant might have, his dictates will never rise to the level of morality. (One may indeed be morally obligated to do what he says, but that will not be true simply in virtue of his command.) Such is not the case with God's authority; in DCT, God's commands are supposed to be the source of our moral obligations.³ Third, one is not (at least in the United States) required to join the military. In the divine case, however, Murphy argues that a person is in some sense "bound" to submit to this authority: he thinks that there are decisive (i.e., all things considered) reasons for submitting to God such that a person would be, at the very least, guilty of practical irrationality for failing to submit; sometimes he makes the stronger claim that she would be *morally* guilty for not submitting to God.⁴ While this account of divine authority certainly diverges from the standard view (in which God's authority is decidedly not dependent upon one's voluntary submission to God), if Murphy can make good on the claim that a person is morally guilty for failing to submit to God, then there will be less pressure to demonstrate

¹Mark Murphy, *An Essay on Divine Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 152, my emphasis.

²*Ibid.*, 169.

³As mentioned earlier, depending upon what kind of DCT a person holds, God's commands play different roles. At a minimum, God's commands are morally obligating; but in metaethical divine command theories, for example, they are also tied up with the very nature of right and wrong. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will be concerned only with the simple question of why God's commands are morally obligating. In answering this question, one needn't even presuppose that God's commands are the *only* source of a person's moral obligations.

⁴For the former claim, see Murphy, *Essay*, 175; for the latter, 183. I discuss these passages later in the paper.

that God's commands naturally have authority, for the person who submits to God's will thereby explicitly gives God such authority.

I do not think that Murphy can make good on this claim, though; or more precisely, I do not think that he *does* make good on it; in the final section of this paper, I sketch out a way in which his argument can work. First, however, five questions about Murphy's account are important: what is it to submit to God's authority; why is this submission binding; what decisive reasons are there for submitting; how do these reasons make submission *morally* obligatory; and do they require *complete* submission to God? I will outline Murphy's answers to each of these, paying special attention to the last three. Although I think it is certainly *reasonable* to submit to God's authority, I'll argue that Murphy does not show that a person has *decisive* reasons for submission, much less morally obligating ones. I will then argue that a Christian who loves God does have a morally decisive reason for submitting to God's will.

II. "Consent in the Acceptance Sense"

Murphy understands submission to divine authority in terms of what he calls "consent in the acceptance sense."⁵ In doing so, he explicitly rejects understanding submission in terms of promising. He follows Scanlon in rejecting social practice accounts of promising, and he also rejects Scanlon's view, in which "what is essential to the wrongness of promise-breaking is its involving the inviting of others' reliance upon one" and then failing to deliver that on which they're relying.⁶ As Murphy insightfully notes, Scanlon's account will perhaps work for most instances of promising among humans, but an omniscient God could not suffer the harm of having his expectations not met since he would know whether someone would keep a promise.⁷

Instead, "consent in the acceptance sense" consists in adopting a practical stance of obedience with respect to another person's dictates (e.g., commands). In doing so, you give that person authority over you. Why would a person do that? Murphy argues that many of the practical principles on which we act are largely indeterminate, needing to be rendered more specific before we can act on them. Here is one of his examples: "one ought not drink to excess." How is a person to determine what counts as excessive? One way of so doing would be to let someone else (say, his spouse!) specify limits. There are of course other ways (principled and not) of choosing such limits; the point is just that letting someone else specify them is one of those ways. And with a specification in hand, it is then possible to act on this principle.

⁵Ibid., 160.

⁶Ibid., 155. For Scanlon's view, see *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 295.

⁷To be fair, open theists, who deny God's omniscience, could disagree with Murphy on this point.

Murphy further argues that once a person chooses a way of specifying the principle, she now has a reason to act on that determination:

Decisions made by rational agents stand until there is adequate reason to re-visit them, where by 'adequate reason' I mean considerations that were not appropriately considered in the deliberation that led to the initial decision.⁸

Assuming that a person has appropriately weighed relevant considerations, not to act on his considered judgment would undermine the point of deliberation.

It follows that if a person has chosen to "render a determination" of a principle by following another's dictates on the matter, he has a reason to act as that person says, at least as regards the principle in question. For our purposes, what is of interest is submission to God. As described above, Murphy argues that submission to God should be complete: a person who submits to divine authority allows God to have a say in all aspects of his life. Once a person decides to let God have this say, then God has authority over him. Crucially, this consent generates a new kind of reason for acting as God dictates because the divine commands *themselves* (partially) constitute reasons for acting as they say.⁹ There are thus two kinds of reasons at issue: reasons for consenting to God's authority in the first place, and divine commands, which are themselves reasons for performing the commanded action.

Given this sketch of Murphy's position, we now have answers to the first two questions I posed: submission to God's authority consists in choosing to accept his dictates about how to act. This submission is binding in the sense that once a person has chosen to accept his dictates, she would be open to rational criticism for failing to act on this decision. If she has decisive reasons for submitting to God's authority, then divine commands provide decisive reasons for action. And if she has *morally* decisive reasons for submitting, divine commands provide morally decisive reasons for action.

III. Consent in the Acceptance Sense: A Closer Look

Before inquiring into the reasons a person might have for submitting entirely to divine rule, it is worth pausing to look at consent in the acceptance sense more closely. I will raise four worries about this strategy. While none are dispositive, they indicate that more work needs to be done. As we saw, Murphy motivates consent by appeal to the fact that practical principles are often indeterminate. "Don't drink to excess" is one; another is "one ought to do one's share with respect to the promotion of the common good of one's political community."¹⁰ Still another is "help your friends with their projects"; and we can imagine many more. To act on these, a

⁸Murphy, *Essay*, 164.

⁹I explain what is meant by *partially constitute* in section III below. See Murphy, *Essay*, 11.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 162.

person needs to know what counts as excess, or doing her share, or when and how much she ought to aid her friends. And having someone answer these questions for her (i.e., submitting to another's authority on these matters) is, of course, one way of solving the problem.¹¹

The problem of principle indeterminacy is hardly new, of course; the Kantian literature is rife with articles about the related issue of the nature and specificity of maxims.¹² In this vein, it is worth noting that although these principles must indeed be rendered more determinate, this hardly stops people from acting on them. When should I help my friend? I have no further specification of this principle that covers all, or even a majority, of possible situations, and I don't need one: I decide on a case-by-case basis, relying in part on my moral intuitions. Indeed, I assume that this strategy is the one that nearly all of us follow.

Murphy considers this possibility and argues that we have reason to prefer rendering a principle more specific to proceeding on a case-by-case basis. The reason is that "acting on a moral requirement in a principled way necessitates a certain *pattern* of compliance, one that conforms to canons of consistency in action."¹³ Those who apply an indeterminate principle on a case-by-case basis fail to act on it in a principled or consistent way. For the sake of argument, let's grant this point. Unfortunately, it's not clear that Murphy's proposal adequately addresses it. Allowing someone else to tell you how to act on an indeterminate principle is not the same as rendering that principle determinate. It is true that, in doing so, you achieve a certain kind of consistency: you consistently do what someone else tells you to do. This consistency, however, is not the kind sought, for the person telling you what to do may not herself be consistent in following the principle. Recall the husband who decides to let his wife set his drinking limits. She could do so by choosing a reasonable blood alcohol level. But what if she decided to cut him off "whenever he looked like he was getting tipsy"? That criterion may be no more objective than his own judgment, and so he hasn't (necessarily) gained anything in terms of consistency by deferring to the judgment of his wife.¹⁴

There is an obvious reply available to Murphy. While this criticism might be telling in cases of submission to human agents, it obviously would not apply in the divine case. God, as a perfect practical reasoner, would always be consistent in following a principle. However, it is worth

¹¹It solves the problem assuming that the person chosen is capable of rendering the practical principles more determinate. Since Murphy's real goal is to argue for submission to God (who presumably *is* up to this task), this isn't an issue for him.

¹²To list just a couple of the more famous: Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. chaps. 7 and 10.

¹³Murphy, *Essay*, 162.

¹⁴There may still be good reasons for him to defer to his wife, of course (and in section V I discuss such a reason); my point here is just that consistency in following a principle may not one of them. As an anonymous referee has pointed out, his wife may well be better placed than he to know when he's tipsy!

noting that even the following of God's dictates does not actually constitute a determination of a principle. Only if God explicitly provided a determinate principle would a person have a determination. Thus, although he would be assured of consistently following an indeterminate principle by following God's dictates with respect to it, he wouldn't (necessarily) understand why God's dictates are consistent.

A second reason for not rejecting the case-by-case approach that most of us take is that, in many cases, it's not clear what principle needs a more precise rendering. This is so for at least three reasons. First, I may not even be aware of the principle on which I act.¹⁵ Second, there may be multiple principles, all of which describe my action equally well.¹⁶ And finally, there may not even *be* such a principle, except at a very high level. I submit that most non-philosophers (and probably even most philosophers) generally don't see themselves as acting on any more than a few very high-level principles, such as ones forbidding harm and ones requiring aid to others.¹⁷ It's not that we have a plethora of principles all needing "determination"; it's that we have a very few and then apply them on a rough case-by-case basis as we move along in life. Consider the following principles: "A person should give money to charity"; "A person should volunteer at her church"; and "Professors should put an adequate amount of time and effort into grading papers and preparing for class." These are all principles that accurately describe some of my obligations, principles which (obviously) need further specification. But that I should do these things—all of which are imperfect duties—seems also to be dictated by very general principles of generosity and justice. I may not, in fact, consciously act on any of the more specific principles I mentioned.

Murphy could rightly respond that, in our efforts to determine our imperfect duties, we must attempt to formulate some mid-level principles that, when rendered determinate, give us answers to these questions. But how should we formulate them? I suspect that it is by doing the sort of case-by-case analysis of issues that Murphy eschews that we build up our moral intuitions and thereby place ourselves in a position to formulate further, more specific moral principles. So the case-by-case approach cannot be entirely discarded.

Even if the foregoing is wrong, however, there is yet a deeper problem. Murphy's initial motivation for submitting to authority—either human or divine—is to make it possible to act on indeterminate moral principles. And as mentioned earlier, submitting to divine authority may seem

¹⁵See, for example, Talbot Brewer, "Maxims and Virtues," *The Philosophical Review* 111.4 (October 2002): 539–572; and Richard McCarty, "Maxims in Kant's Practical Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.1 (January 2006): 65–83.

¹⁶For example: "a person should help her friends with their projects" and "a person should help others in instances where their livelihoods are concerned" could both describe a case where I drive my friend to an important job interview. On which am I acting?

¹⁷I don't deny that there are more specific principles that could be taken as guiding a person's actions; I just think that, except for ethicists, we don't formulate them.

particularly attractive because God is a perfect practical reasoner. Unfortunately, this reason for submission to God's authority will not work because divine commands themselves are often indeterminate. The Decalogue provides a perfect example: what counts as honoring your parents? Does the commandment against killing apply even to self-defense, or to just war? Jesus' most famous commandment is also notoriously problematic: what is it to love your neighbor as yourself? Far from resolving moral quandaries, divine commands seem to produce new ones.¹⁸

This criticism, too, is not devastating. Murphy can plausibly reply that sacred scripture is not our only source of divine commands. He can also appeal to the Tradition of the Christian Church and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ This response also gains strength from the problems of principle identification described above in my second objection. When I volunteer at church, for example, on what principle am I acting? A general imperfect duty of aid? The neighbor-love commandment? A more specific duty arising from group participation? If the Church teaches that a person ought to give 10% of her time, talent, and money to the Church, however, it doesn't really matter; whatever principle or principles ground the duty, the duty itself is clear.²⁰

Although this response on Murphy's behalf goes some way to meeting the criticism, it is not without its own problems. For how does the Church arrive at her moral judgments, except through reasoning? Her reasoning (or at least her conclusions) is, to be sure, aided by grace; but the point is that the Church does not have a repository of perfectly determinate principles ready at hand. Instead, she has to engage in precisely the same kind of reasoning that the submission model is supposed to avoid (or we are forced to conclude that all the ink spilt by moral theologians is pointless). If the point of submitting to authority is to preempt altogether the need for anyone to render a determination of a principle, any appeal to Church authority fails.

My last worry is of a different sort than the first three. Consent in the acceptance sense, as Murphy defines it, consists in taking "a practical stance toward some party's dictates on which one accepts another party as the

¹⁸To be fair, it is true that God's commands in Scripture are sometimes highly specific, and even when they are not, they can sometimes be seen as rendering some very general principle a bit more specific. As I say below, this criticism is not devastating, and there is some merit to Murphy's argument.

¹⁹I note that since he is Catholic, Murphy might also appeal specifically to the Catholic belief about the Church's teaching authority in matters of faith and morals, which authority is secured by the Holy Spirit. However, for our purposes, this more specific appeal is not needed. First, all Christians recognize the aid provided to us by the Holy Spirit for discerning the will of God. And second, the Traditions of the Christian Church (not just the Roman Church) also provide aid in understanding God's commands. In what follows, references to the Church should therefore be understood as referring to the Christian Church as a whole and not specifically to the Roman Church or to any particular denomination.

²⁰It might be said that the duty of tithing as described above is still unclear. *How* should a person give 10 percent of her time and talent? It could be that there are many acceptable ways of so giving, and it is simply open to the person to choose.

appropriate specifier of how one is to act on that practical principle."²¹ Importantly, once a person does so, he is supposed to have (as I described above) a new reason for acting, which reason just is the dictate itself. My worry, in a line, is that consent in the acceptance sense, so described, is unable to generate this new reason for acting because it cannot produce the right sort of accountability relationship between the person who consents and the other party. And being able to hold the consenting party accountable, I claim, is a crucial part of having practical authority. Additionally, I will argue that there is another worry about the strength of the reasons that consent in the acceptance sense can generate.

To begin, we first need to look closely at Murphy's understanding of practical authority. In developing his account, he follows Raz.²² On Murphy's view, "to be genuinely practically authoritative is to be such that one's dictates are appropriately related to the reasons for action that others have."²³ This relation is one of control: "one is practically authoritative over another in a certain domain only if one's dictates control to some extent the reasons for action that others have in that domain."²⁴ More specifically, to be authoritative, one's commands must themselves *partially constitute* the reasons for action another has. By partially constitute, Murphy means that the command itself must be part of the reason for acting that the person has.²⁵ To illustrate, he asks us to imagine a small political community created by a fair, explicit social contract which requires obeying the representative body on public matters. Suppose that this body decrees that everyone should drive on the right side of the road. Since everyone has consented (via social contract) to obey the representative body, this decree partially constitutes a reason that everyone now has for so driving. The decree only partially constitutes the reason since the *complete* reason that each person *P* has also includes the following: *P*'s being required to fulfill his promises; *P*'s having promised to obey the representative body in public matters; and the issue of which side of the road on which to drive being a public matter.

Further, this reason is *decisive*: "if one party is genuinely practically authoritative over another in a certain domain, then—in the absence of defeating conditions—that party's dictates provide that other with a decisive reason to perform the commanded act."²⁶ For a reason to do *A* to be

²¹Murphy, *Essay*, 160.

²²See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

²³Murphy, *Essay*, 10.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵This is another way of saying that the command itself generates a new reason for acting.

²⁶Murphy, *Essay*, 14. On Raz's view, a command is both a first-order reason to act and also a protected reason (a second-order reason to ignore reasons not to comply with the command). Though he follows Raz in developing his account of authority, Murphy rejects the claim that authoritative reasons must be protected ones; citing Nagel, he points out that a command might be so strong that it simply squashes any competing considerations. As Murphy puts it, such a command "does not *need* protection. It can take care of itself" (14). In

decisive, Murphy says, is for that reason to make it *ultima facie* reasonable to do *A*.

The idea that a genuinely authoritative command must partially constitute the commanded person's reason for action rules out other cases of control over a person's reasons as being instances of authority. Imagine, for example, someone who knows better than you do about your reasons for acting. In that case, she can tell you what you should do, but her telling is not practically authoritative; all she is doing is informing you about what reasons *already* exist. As Murphy (following Raz) puts it, what she has is not *practical* authority but merely *theoretical* authority.²⁷ To put it another way, she has a kind of epistemic superiority since she knows better than you about the balance of reasons. Her privileged epistemic position, however, does not give her practical authority.²⁸

A threat is another familiar case of control without authority. If you threaten to harm me unless I do as you say, you thereby give me a reason to act (you have some control over my reasons for acting), but that reason is not an instance of practical authority; it is, instead, simply that I have reason to avoid harm.

Crucially, what Murphy's analysis of practical authority leaves out is the concept of accountability. If person *A* has authority over person *B*, then *A* also has a special standing to complain, and perhaps to seek reparation, or to punish, or both, if *B* fails to obey what *A* commands.²⁹ That accountability is essential, and that it is fundamentally lacking in Murphy's account, is brought out in the following example.

Suppose that I am in the habit of watching the weather report every morning when I wake up, and as it happens, the meteorologist finds it amusing to issue detailed recommendations on how to dress, given her weather forecast. Rather unsurprisingly, I hold the following principle: "always dress in a way appropriate for the weather." This principle is, of course, underdetermined. And one way of rendering it determinate is to consent to dress however the meteorologist says.³⁰ As Murphy presents his view, my decision (once made) to consent to her sartorial suggestions gives me a reason to do as she says—a reason that is grounded in the authority she now possesses in virtue of my consent. Moreover, it is a

saying that authoritative reasons are decisive, absent defeating conditions, Murphy does not explore what might count as defeating conditions in any detail. Below, however, I argue that in some cases of consent in the acceptance sense, the decisive character of authoritative dictates doesn't amount to much, and that this poses an additional problem for Murphy's view.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 15.

²⁸On this point, see Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6.

²⁹Without the concept of accountability, and a connection to guilt, what's left is that violations of authority are properly matters for shame or embarrassment for one's irrationality. (In this regard, see Robert Adams: "the role, and therefore the nature, of moral obligation cannot be understood apart from its relation to guilt" (*Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 238).)

³⁰My thanks to Elizabeth Anderson for suggesting this example to me in conversation.

decisive reason, one that either rules out or squashes competing reasons. But that is absurd. The mere fact that I have decided to do what she says *does not give her any authority whatsoever over my clothing decisions*. My decision to do what she says is a purely first-personal one. While it does indeed give me a reason to do what she says, that reason is, ultimately, that I should be consistent with my decision; and the need to be consistent doesn't at all entail that she has any authority over me, much less that I am morally obligated to do what she says.³¹ One way of seeing this point is to notice that she has no special standing to demand that I do what she says, even if she knows that I have decided to follow her recommendations. For if I departed from them, the most she could do is to complain that I am being irrational and inconsistent by not sticking to my decisions. But that, of course, is something that anyone can say, not just her. Likewise, if consent to God's commands consisted only in adopting a particular stance towards them, then if I fail to live up to that stance, the most that anyone—including God—could do would be to point out my inconsistency. The mere adoption of a practical stance, then, is insufficient to ground an authority relationship (moral or otherwise).

In claiming that the concept of accountability is fundamentally related to the concept of authority, and especially authority that produces moral obligations, I am explicitly following Darwall.³² To be fair, Murphy might deny that there is any conceptual connection between practical authority and accountability.³³ In other words, he might claim that my consent to dress as the meteorologist says does indeed give her authority, even if she has no special standing to demand that I comply with her dictates.

That there is a conceptual connection between authority and accountability is a major burden of Darwall's book, one that is far beyond the scope of this paper. However, that connection is not hard to motivate. Take, for example, the (paradigmatic case of) authority a sergeant has to order about her troops. If they fail to follow her orders, she can have them disciplined. Something similar is true of the divine case: according to the traditional conception of God's authority, God can—justly—hold

³¹Here I am following Murphy in his claim that decisions stand until there is reason to revisit them. See Murphy, *Essay*, 7.

³²Darwall argues that the reason created by a valid authoritative demand is what he calls second-personal. The second-person standpoint, which takes its name from the grammatical second person, "is the perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another's actions and will" (3). Examples include "orders, requests, claims, reproaches, complaints, demands, promises, contracts, givings of consent, [and] commands," among others (8). The key feature of a (valid) second-personal reason is that "it is grounded in authority relations that an addresser takes to hold between him and his addressee" (4). I point this out to show that both Darwall and Murphy are talking about precisely the same speech-acts (see Murphy, *Essay*, 12). That is, Darwall's second-personal reasons just are the reasons that Murphy thinks are partially constituted by authoritative commands, except that Darwall explicitly includes the concept of accountability and the related concepts of blame and guilt. A major burden of Darwall's book is to show that these authority relations presuppose accountability by both parties to each other.

³³I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

us accountable and punish us for failing to obey his commands. If God's standing to do these things is not generated by a person's consent (as Murphy might claim), by what is it generated? It is not clear that Murphy's view has the resources to answer this question.

Another point is in order. Recall that the reasons for acting constituted by the meteorologist's suggestions are, on Murphy's view, supposed to be decisive. Imagine—to extend the example—that the meteorologist, upon overhearing that I have consented to dress as she says, decides to have some fun. On a hot, muggy summer day she orders up a wool hat and winter parka (or perhaps she suggests a bright pink shirt—just the color I despise). Clearly, this will not do, and so I decline her suggestion. Now suppose she complains that I am being inconsistent: I can simply reply that I've decided to stop following her dictates. I have, that is, unilaterally ended her sartorial authority (and notice that it would be absurd for her to complain that I have done so). If that's all it takes to end her authority, though, then if she indeed had authority, it certainly didn't amount to much. To put the point another way, if I can escape the reason that her dictates give me simply on the grounds that I don't like them, one might wonder in what sense they are truly decisive.

The reason that I can end her authority so easily is that my reasons for granting it in the first place were very weak. But this means that the strength of her authority (that is, the strength of authority that arises from consent) depends upon the reasons I have for consenting. This fact is the source of a potential problem: God, Murphy argues, has authority in all domains of one's life, and God's dictates are always decisive, with no defeating conditions. For God to have this kind of authority, one's reasons for consent must be very strong. They would, in fact, need to preclude the possibility of withdrawing one's consent. In the next section, however, I argue that none of the reasons Murphy gives for consenting to God's will come close to the required strength.

To sum up, then: in the example of the fashion-obsessed meteorologist above, the reasons to dress as she says that are partially constituted by her commands or suggestions, in virtue of my consent, are not properly tied to accountability and are not decisive. Both of these results create a problem for Murphy's view, since on the traditional conception of divine authority, God can hold us accountable for failing to obey his commands, which give us decisive reasons for acting.

One of the reasons that Murphy's account fails is that what is needed is a certain kind of *relationship* between the commander and commandee. As Darwall would put the point, it must be the case that, in consenting to obey God's commands, I am addressing God second-personally, and that God takes up this address. Consent in the acceptance sense, however, need be nothing more than a first-personal, unilateral decision.

Murphy's account of consent in the acceptance sense can be modified to accommodate this problem (and it is in the spirit of helping him that I bring it up). However, what modifications are needed is a somewhat

tricky issue (and also beyond the scope of this paper). God, of course, would always know when a person is consenting to his commands and would presumably take up second-personal address. (The divine case is thus importantly different from the case of the meteorologist.) Let us grant that a person who consents to God's authority would be sufficiently theologically sophisticated to know this much. Still, is that sufficient? It could be, but the problem of divine hiddenness lurks in the background. It is one thing to know, on theological grounds, that God hears you; it is quite another to know that God hears you because God himself tells you so. Are theological grounds alone sufficient for second-personal address? An answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but it ought to be considered.

What lesson can be drawn from these four criticisms? Murphy motivates his account of submission to authority—"consent in the acceptance sense"—by appeal to our practical need for sufficiently determinate principles on which we can consistently act. As things stand, however, submission to divine authority doesn't sufficiently address this need. Indeed, I suspect that the only way the problem of principle indeterminacy can be adequately addressed is through a full-blown account of practical reasoning. Further, whether consent to God's will can produce decisive reasons to act depends upon what reasons one has for submitting. It is to these reasons that we now turn.

IV. Reasons for Consent

The problem of principle indeterminacy notwithstanding, there may be other reasons why we ought to submit to God's will. Murphy himself offers three: an argument from good practical reasoning; an argument from gratitude; and an argument from coordination. In considering these arguments, we must ask: are these decisive reasons, and if so, are they *morally* decisive ones? Finally, are these reasons for *complete* consent to divine authority (that is, giving God complete authority over all aspects of one's life)?

The first argument is that, from a practical reasoning point of view, it makes good sense for a person to turn her deliberative burden over to God, who is an ideal practical deliberator. Given the Christian understanding of God as loving and caring for her, and as intensely interested in her good, she can trust him to make the right decisions about how she ought to act since he is capable of identifying and properly weighing all the relevant considerations. On this line of reasoning, God mainly acts in an epistemic capacity, telling a person about the balance of reasons that already obtains. Where the relevant considerations do not specify any one particular action (more than one act is permissible), God's authority is used to choose among the set of possible acts.³⁴

³⁴As discussed previously, the fact that God (or anyone) is in a superior epistemic position does not entail that he has practical authority. The argument here is that this superior epistemic position is a reason for consenting to obey God's dictates, thereby giving him authority.

Murphy considers the objection that surrendering all of one's decision making to God is simply to forgo one's agency entirely. Knowing what we do about God, though, that isn't correct. I know plenty of people who wish to surrender their will to God, but I know of none who are thereby alleviated of all decision making. There is surely a great good in exercising our own autonomy; God knows this, and he takes it into account, issuing only a limited set of commands.³⁵

However, there is a more serious problem with this argument. Consider a Christian who is unable to see why he ought to go to church every week. He knows *that* his not going is immoral in virtue of the teaching in the Decalogue. Of course, knowing about God's command (or knowing about the end result of the Church's practical reasoning on the matter) is not the same as understanding the reasoning itself. But all he needs to know is *what to do*, not (always) *why* he ought to do it. For him, submission to God's will makes sense. But what of someone more adept at practical reasoning who already understands why she should go to church every weekend? This person would have no need to submit to divine authority, at least on this matter; it gives her no epistemic advantage at all. To be sure, her will would be in line with God's, but this conformity would have nothing to do with submission to God's will.

Now, the fact that she does not need God's will to understand what she should do in some cases does not imply that general submission to God's will would not be worthwhile for her.³⁶ It is, however, worth wondering whether, on this argument, submission to divine will is what is most appropriate. There is no one, I assume, whose practical reasoning could not be improved by paying attention to what God says. But notice that paying attention is not the same thing as submission. My car mechanic knows a great deal more than I do concerning my car, and I'm better off heeding his advice than not, but I don't have to submit my will to his in the automotive domain to take advantage of his knowledge. I could, for example, generally do what he says but decide that some things are best put off until later. Perhaps, in doing so, I am mildly irrational. Mild irrationality, however, is rarely a moral failure, and I take it that we often ignore cases of mild irrationality because they're just not worth worrying about. What we want is a morally decisive reason for submitting entirely to God's will; that one can improve one's practical reasoning some of the time by so doing isn't clearly such a reason.

A variant of the argument from good practical reasoning exists. Suppose that some obligation—say, not to have premarital sex—is one of those obligations that results from God's choosing among a set of permissible acts. That is, perhaps the entire set of reasons (prior to any divine

³⁵Murphy, *Essay*, 172.

³⁶I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer, who reminded me of Aquinas's arguments for the necessity of divine law even though we also have natural law (*ST* IaIIae Question 91 Article 4), for pressing this point.

commands) is such that both premarital sex and abstention from it are permissible. God resolves the ambiguity for us by commanding the latter. If a person has submitted to divine authority, then he does have a reason for abstaining from premarital sex. But is this a decisive reason? Murphy offers the following comparison:

It is important to see that this appeal to divine authority is not a desperate turn to divine authority as a stopgap where a theory of normative ethics has failed, any more than an appeal to the existence of a civil law prohibiting driving over sixty-five miles per hour is a desperate turn to the civil law to remedy normative theory's 'failure' to explain why certain people are bound not to drive more than sixty-five miles per hour. Just as human legislators can give reasons rooted in the human good for laying down such a human law, even if the human good does not dictate a particular speed limit, we can provide some account, grounded in the good of rational creatures, of why God would lay down this sort of command.³⁷

I find this comparison instructive. I do think that traffic laws give some reason to do what they say, but I hardly think it's a decisive reason; and judging from the way that those around me drive on the highway, almost no one else does, either.³⁸ A similar point applies in the theological case. Recall the discussion earlier about the strength of my reasons to obey the meteorologist: the fact that her dictates can resolve my clothing quandary is only a weak reason to consent and so gives me *some* reason to obey her, but surely not a very strong one. Likewise, the fact that God's will can resolve practical ambiguities gives me only a weak reason to consent to God's will.

Further, notice that in this form of the argument, a person isn't actually improving her practical reasoning by submitting to God's will. *Ex hypothesi*, the balance of reasons doesn't settle the issue, and so she appeals to God's will to settle it. Here, God's will does not help her to avoid mistakes in practical reasoning; it merely settles matters that are in principle indeterminate. But of course there are other ways of choosing among options. While I might in general let God choose among the range of permissible actions for me, this does not commit me always to letting God so choose. At most, then, the argument from a need for good practical reasoning might ground *limited* submission to divine authority.

Murphy's second argument is one from gratitude. According to Murphy, "gratitude requires one who has received gratuitous benefits from another to be willing to perform beneficial acts for that other."³⁹ The Christian certainly owes a debt of gratitude to God both for his existence and also, one might think, for the love which God has for him. What can he do in return? It isn't clear that one can properly benefit God. He can,

³⁷Murphy, *Essay*, 182. Here he is speaking of the proscription against homosexual sodomy, but his point extends to my example.

³⁸Of course, I (and they) could be wrong on this point. Perhaps the state's dictates are a decisive reason. The matter strikes me as open to debate.

³⁹Murphy, *Essay*, 104, 173.

however, give something to God that God could not otherwise have, namely, his obedience. He can freely submit to divine authority.

Although this argument is very clever, the principle of gratitude strikes me as dubious. Gratitude, in my view, requires being appropriately thankful for what another has done for you. Gratuitous actions or benefits are things that a person does for another without expecting any kind of repayment. If Murphy's principle of gratitude held, however, gratuitous acts should be repaid, thereby creating an obligation for the person who receives the benefits. The problem is that we often perform gratuitous acts precisely when we do *not* want someone to repay them in any form.⁴⁰ Suppose, for example, that my friend is in the process of moving and is just overwhelmed by everything that needs to be done. I may help her pack and carry things unasked precisely because I want to relieve some of her stress. Her being grateful to me is an appropriate response, but I emphatically do not want her to feel burdened by any debt or need to repay me in some form; the whole point of helping her is to make her feel less overwhelmed. She may indeed help me at some point later, but whether she does is entirely irrelevant. Gratitude as thankfulness is a sufficient response on her part.

Further, even if some principle of gratitude were normative, it also isn't clear that what it would require is submission to divine authority. Given what God has done for us, and given further the kind of relationship he seeks to have with us, *loving* God seems more appropriate. Perhaps this love requires submission to divine authority, but if so, that argument must be supplied; submission itself does not follow from either gratitude or love.⁴¹

Murphy's third argument is that submission to divine authority can be a way of solving coordination problems. Just as one submits to the rule of the state to coordinate group action, so one could submit to God as well. In the U.S., among other places, the State dictates that everyone should drive on the right side of the road. With everyone following this rule, driving becomes possible. On this line of reasoning, submitting to God makes even more sense since God, unlike the state, created the world, cares for it, and has ordered it providently. Furthermore, God is not subject to the failings of human political agents: among other things, he is not susceptible to error, and he cares for all of us without fail.

This argument is stronger than the other two, but it is limited in scope. Only a small number of divine commands can really be seen as solving

⁴⁰Indeed, I suggest that this is the normal state of affairs. A reviewer has interestingly suggested that we could keep Murphy's principle by understanding such cases as ones in which a person performs a gratuitous act and then waives any claim to repayment. My intuitions don't cut this way; if not wanting to be compensated is the normal state of affairs (as I think it is), then it seems simpler to hold a principle on which being appropriately thankful is the appropriate response. Instances in which something more is demanded could be accommodated by a different principle. This issue is very interesting, and one I cannot settle here.

⁴¹In an article in progress, I argue that a person's love for God, and God's love for her, is exactly what is needed to solve the problem of divine authority. In the last section of this article, I outline how my account works.

coordination problems. Murphy himself recognizes this fact,⁴² which is presumably why he offers the first two arguments.

Murphy thinks that these three arguments provide “decisive reasons for rational beings to subject themselves to divine authority.”⁴³ I have argued that they do not, either separately or jointly. However, even if they do, can these decisive reasons make it *morally* obligatory to submit oneself to divine authority? Interestingly, Murphy himself seems to vacillate on whether a Christian is morally obligated to submit. After giving these three arguments, he takes up the question of what can be said in criticism of someone who fails to submit. Since he thinks his arguments are decisive,

[w]hether one is under divine authority is not a practically neutral matter; one is *required* in reason to subject oneself to God’s rule. And so while it is always open to one to free oneself from divine authority, one can do so only by engaging in the deepest unreasonableness.⁴⁴

Later, however, when discussing the proscription against homosexual acts, he writes:

Those who are not subject to divine authority [on account of not submitting] and perform acts of sodomy are *morally guilty*, but not for disobeying God’s command; they are guilty of practical unreasonableness for failing to submit themselves to divine authority.⁴⁵

One can be guilty of practical unreasonableness without being morally guilty, though. Of the three arguments he gives, only the second, the argument from gratitude, comes closest to supporting moral guilt. (The need for better practical reasoning and the need to solve coordination problems seem more like practical, not moral, considerations.)⁴⁶ A failure to be grateful does seem like a moral failing of some sort. Unfortunately, the argument from gratitude is also the weakest of the three arguments he gives. I conclude that his arguments do not provide decisive reasons, much less morally obligating ones, for submission to divine rule. Furthermore, they also do not provide reasons for *complete* submission to divine authority.

V. Consenting out of Love

Above, I suggested that love for God seems to be an appropriate response of gratitude for what God has done for us. It is also, of course, appropriate

⁴²See Murphy, *Essay*, 146.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 175, Murphy’s emphasis.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 183, my emphasis.

⁴⁶One might object: if God’s commands (once one consents to them) are morally obligating—that is, if one will do better, morally, by acting on God’s commands, then doesn’t it follow that one has a moral reason to consent? Perhaps; the main problem, however, is that on Murphy’s account of authority, there is no connection to accountability, blame, or guilt. It’s therefore very unclear that God’s commands, even if one consents to follow them, are *morally* obligating. See also note 52.

given that God seeks to have a loving relationship with each of us. Here I shall argue that careful consideration of this relationship shows that it provides morally decisive grounds for a Christian to submit to God's will.⁴⁷ In other words, the Christian who truly loves God should, out of this love, submit to divine authority. Not doing so, I claim, is inconsistent with this love.

Murphy himself gestures in this direction:

It might be that allowing another to complete one's determination for one [i.e., submitting to divine authority] is itself a benefit to that other; or, if it is not exactly a benefit, an expression of one's regard, respect, or love for the other.⁴⁸

He doesn't elaborate on this point, but I think that this is the right way to proceed.⁴⁹ To start, consider again the husband who allows his wife to set drinking limits. Many people are quite aware of their own limits and have no trouble sticking to them. Still, he may consent to follow his wife's dictates because he knows that it will reassure her. Allowing her to set the boundaries can be an expression of his love for her. In fact, I think that this kind of consent can be a very powerful expression of love. Among other things, it demonstrates his trust in her to make a good decision. Allowing another to have a say in how one lives one's life is a very significant concession.

Consenting to others' wishes can also be one of the only ways we have of expressing love for someone else. When the subject of church music comes up, my mother occasionally remarks that she despises the hymn "Amazing Grace" and does not want it played at her funeral. That gives me a strong reason to ensure that her wish is fulfilled. But why? She won't experience her own funeral. The answer is that honoring her wishes is a way of expressing love for her, even if she isn't there to appreciate the expression.⁵⁰

In the divine case, this point is especially relevant. God is, of course, present in a certain sense to us, but, with a few exceptions, God is not *physically* present to humans. Consider here especially the Apostles' situation: they saw Jesus die, and then they saw him rise from the dead, only to

⁴⁷Here I will be able to do no more than offer a very rough sketch of my view. In an article in progress, I lay out the argument in detail.

⁴⁸Murphy, *Essay*, 166.

⁴⁹For a similar view, see Robert Adams: "*valuing one's social bonds* gives one, under certain conditions, a reason to do what is required of one by one's associates or one's community The reason I have in mind is not one that arises from a desire to obtain or maintain a certain kind of relationship, though such a desire can obviously be a motive for complying with social requirements. The reason I have in mind is rather that I value the relationship which I see myself as actually having, and my complying is an *expression* of my valuing and respecting the relationship" (*Finite and Infinite Goods*, 242, his emphasis).

⁵⁰Note that I do not act for the sake of fulfilling my mother's wishes; I act for *her* sake. The former is something that is done by, e.g., clerks, car mechanics, etc., none of whom act for her sake. David Velleman makes this point in his "Love as a Moral Emotion" (*Ethics* 109: 338–374), 356. It is because I act for her sake that my act is an expression of love.

leave again. He promised to return, but in the meanwhile he told them to evangelize to all nations. With him no longer present to them, one of the only ways the Apostles could express their love for Jesus was to carry out his commands. Moreover, those commands essentially dictated how they were to treat others—*others whom they knew that God also loved*. In acting on those commands, they were able to take up and make their own something that they knew was tremendously important to God, namely, the care and concern that God had for all humans. Post-Apostolic Christians are in the same situation, though of course few of them have seen Jesus. They await his return; in the meantime, they carry out his commandments out of love for him.

This motive (reason) is far stronger than any of the three that Murphy develops. Moreover, it offers a much better connection to moral obligation than any of those three. It may indeed be true that following God's commands is a way of acting on correct practical principles, but as I remarked earlier, erring in practical reason is not the same thing as being morally guilty. If your beloved asks you to do something, however, you have, *ceteris paribus*, a fairly strong reason for so acting. Assuming that there are no countervailing considerations, I think it is a moral failing simply to ignore your beloved's request.

Of course, ignoring it is one thing; deciding, after consideration, not to honor it is something else. And the fact that honoring another's wishes can be a powerful expression of love does not make honoring those wishes obligatory. While the foregoing considerations might make it easy to see how love for God would *motivate* a Christian to submit to God's will, it is less clear that this love makes submission *obligatory*. This point seems especially correct when what is at issue is not simply some specific request but instead whether a Christian should *fully* submit to God's will. Does a Christian's love for God really make complete submission to divine authority morally obligatory?

I think it does. It is important to note that a Christian's relationship with God is a *sui generis* relationship, even though it does have similarities to human love relationships. God loves each of us far more intensely than any human could, and in fact he has created us to be in communion with him—not just individually, but as a whole people. Moreover, God does not make unreasonable demands. To be sure, some of them are quite demanding, but, given that God understands better than we do what is good for us and for others, it is hard to see how those commands are *bad*. Further, while submission to divine rule is an exceptional thing to ask, for reasons already given by Murphy, it doesn't amount to a complete surrender of one's autonomy to God.

Let us look at it from the other direction: what would be the objection to submitting to divine authority for the person who loves God? Consider carefully the Christian who loves God and who recognizes all of the foregoing points. He realizes (as best he can) the extent and depth of God's love, and he recognizes the inherent goodness in what God commands.

For such a person, I think it would certainly be true that submitting to divine authority would be a very powerful expression of his love for God. But his reasons run deeper than that; knowing all of the above and yet failing to submit to God's will would amount to a rejection of the relationship God seeks. It would be one thing if, lacking any relationship to God at all, he decided that this sort of love just wasn't what he wanted. But that is not his situation; he is already in love with God. From that perspective, not to submit to God's will is not to trust God. Knowing what he does about God, it amounts to a violation of his love relationship with God. It amounts, that is, to a violation of a moral obligation.⁵¹ And if a Christian who loves God is morally obligated to consent to God's will, then, given his consent, he is morally obligated to obey God's commands.⁵²

I conclude that Murphy's approach to understanding divine authority can indeed be made to work, though not for the reasons he gives.

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⁵¹One might object: aren't moral obligations supposed to be the result of divine commands? If so, then my argument that a Christian's love for God itself generates a moral obligation seems to make at least some obligations independent of God's commands. This objection is correct. However, the purpose of my argument is to offer an account of divine authority (that is, to explain why God's commands are morally obligating), not to defend any particular version of Divine Command Theory. The theorist who wishes to make God's commands the *only* source of moral obligations will thus be disappointed with my argument. I thank an anonymous referee for calling my attention to this point. I cannot, here, justify the claim that a violation of a love relationship is a distinctively moral failure.

⁵²However, it is less clear that he is obligated to obey God's commands if he does *not* consent, even though his failure to consent would, on this view, itself be a moral failing. Fulfilling an obligation may lead to other obligations, but if one doesn't fulfill the first, it isn't clear that one can be held responsible for not fulfilling the others since one may not have taken them on. On the other hand, if a person does not fulfill an obligation precisely in order to avoid taking on others, one might think that he is additionally guilty in virtue of this avoidance. It is worth reiterating here that, even if my positive proposal is successful, traditional DCT (the view that God's commands are naturally authoritative) will not be vindicated. Murphy's point, and mine, is that there can still be an essential role for divine commands even if traditional DCT cannot be defended.