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Reasons for worship: a response to Bayne and Nagasawa

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Abstract: Worship is a topic that is rarely considered by philosophers of religion. In a recent paper, Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa challenge this trend by offering an analysis of worship and by considering some difficulties attendant on the claim that worship is obligatory. I argue that their case for there being these difficulties is insufficiently supported. I offer two reasons that a theist might provide for the claim that worship is obligatory: (1) a divine command, and (2) the demands of justice with respect to God's redemption of humanity. I also challenge the soundness of some of the analogies they employ in their argument.

Philosophers of religion, unlike theologians, rarely treat the topic of worship in any detail.¹ This neglect is particularly glaring in the case of religious ethics, where the claim that worship is an obligation receives scant discussion. Fortunately, in a recent paper, Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa attempt to defy this trend, inviting philosophers of religion to explore the topic of worship in more detail by providing a provisional analysis of the concept, and by pointing to some putative difficulties with the claim that worship is obligatory. Asserting that theists are committed to a strong claim about the obligatory nature of worship, Bayne and Nagasawa argue that this claim is unsupported, and that this presents serious difficulties for a theist.

My contention in the present essay is that their conclusion is itself unsupported. Bayne and Nagasawa make their case by examining some reasons widely offered by theists for the obligatoriness of worshipping God. I present two reasons for worship unconsidered by Bayne and Nagasawa: (1) a divine command, and (2) a duty of gratitude based on the redemption of humanity by God. I then argue that their criticisms of attempts to base an obligation to worship on the 'maximal excellence' of God fail because they do not take into account traditional theistic conceptions of God's excellence. This failure to attend to the full implications of

the theist's insistence on God's maximal excellence ultimately undermines important elements of their argumentative strategy.

The Bayne-Nagasawa account of theistic views of worship

Following a brief, but suggestive and well-informed, analysis of the concept of worship, Bayne and Nagasawa offer an account of what appears to be the typical theistic view regarding obligations to worship. According to their account, theists hold the following two theses:

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|----------------------------|---|
| Reasonableness thesis (RT) | Necessarily, it is reasonable for us to worship God. |
| Obligation thesis (OT) | Necessarily, it is obligatory for us to worship God. ² |

In support of the claim that 'most theists' would accept the 'obligation thesis', Bayne and Nagasawa quote two prominent philosophical theologians, Thomas V. Morris and Richard Swinburne (303). Bayne and Nagasawa also attempt to motivate the distinction between these two theses by appealing to a further distinction between 'what it is reasonable to do' and 'what it is obligatory to do'. They do not offer any more precise analyses of 'reasonableness' or 'obligatoriness'. Instead, they present an example designed to generate the intuition that there *must* be some such distinction. They write:

As a parallel consider two positions one might adopt towards a work of art. Someone could refuse to admire Michelangelo's *David* despite acknowledging that the *David* is the sort of thing that it is reasonable to admire. Similarly, one could admit that it is reasonable to worship God without accepting that human beings – or any other beings for that matter – are obliged to worship God. (303)

In addition to helping us see that the two theses theists are allegedly committed to are actually different, this example is also supposed to lead us to accept a further claim, namely, that OT is not entailed by RT. Again, Bayne and Nagasawa do not offer much help the reader see *why* there is no entailment. Instead, the matter is supposed to be intuitive. Indeed, they assert that 'We can see no entailment here', presumably because there is no obvious entailment involved in the case of allied concepts like 'admiration'. The *David* case, in other words, is designed to motivate the intuition that, just because it is reasonable to do something, it does not follow that it is obligatory that one do something.

Since they deny that there is any entailment relation between these two theses, they conclude that the theist must, in order to assert OT, rely on some 'truth-maker' (303). That is, there must be something that is the case that makes it true that 'Necessarily, it is obligatory for us to worship God'. Clearly, given the modality of the claim, this must be something that is the case *in all possible worlds*. In the remainder of their paper, Bayne and Nagasawa explore 'truth-makers' that

have been proposed by various theists and conclude that none of them provides the kind of support required by the strong obligation thesis. On their view, this suggests that theists, since they presumably hold the obligation thesis, face serious difficulties.

The principal issue raised by Bayne and Nagasawa is one that recent philosophers of religion have not adequately addressed, namely, the issue of the justification for claims that the worship of God is obligatory. Bayne and Nagasawa are, therefore, to be commended for bringing serious philosophical attention to bear on this issue. Worship is, after all, a human activity that is most characteristically *religious*. As such, it should occupy a prominent place not only in phenomenological accounts of religious life, but perhaps more importantly, in philosophical accounts of religious ethics. In the following section of the paper, I will deal with this primary issue. At present, however, it is important to point out certain aspects of Bayne and Nagasawa's presentation of this issue that are (at least potentially) misleading.

First of all, note the *modality* of OT; theists are alleged to hold that 'Necessarily, it is obligatory for us to worship God'. According to the widely accepted principle that 'ought implies can', the truth of statements about obligations depends upon that of further supporting statements about an agent's capacities to carry out what is required by an obligation. For example, consider the following:

Admiration Thesis (AT) Necessarily, it is obligatory for us to admire Michelangelo's *David*.

The truth of AT depends upon the truth of statements about, among other things, the cognitive situation of individuals in every possible world. That is, a person must meet certain cognitive conditions (e.g. she must be aware of the existence of Michelangelo's *David*, and must be capable of perceiving its aesthetically relevant properties) in order for it to be true of that person that she has an obligation to admire the work. So similarly, the truth of OT depends upon the truth of statements about the various capacities of individuals in every possible world. The mere logical possibility of a person's failing to meet these conditions renders OT false. This is surely a possibility that 'most theists' would countenance.

At a later point in their discussion, Bayne and Nagasawa assert that 'Presumably theists hold that *any* possible entity (apart from God) would have an obligation to worship God were it to be actual (and capable of worshipping God)' (304). This does indeed seem to be a reasonable presumption. However, it is clearly not the same claim as OT, which simply asserts that 'Necessarily, it is obligatory for us to worship God'. Bayne and Nagasawa would therefore have done better to attribute something like the following, more plausible, thesis to 'most theists':

Modified obligation thesis (MOT) For any being with the capacity to do so, it is obligatory to worship God.

The current version of their argument, relying as it does on the apparently unqualified OT, can be too readily rebutted by a theist. For, a theist merely needs to point out that, absent any clear qualifications or provisos, OT is obviously false. A theist need not worry about her inability to defend a manifestly false claim.

A second issue concerns the claim that RT does not entail OT. Certainly, the case of Michelangelo's *David* does render this claim intuitively credible. However, Bayne and Nagasawa weaken their case by failing to provide clarification of what terms like 'reasonable' and 'obligatory' mean. In the absence of such clarification, the intuitive credibility of a claim derived from the case of Michelangelo's *David* seems insufficient to ground any sweeping denial of entailment. For, one certainly could, and probably sometimes *does*, mean with phrases like 'it is reasonable to do A (where A is some action or pattern of actions)' that 'there is a *good* reason to do A.' And, on at least one widely held analysis of obligation, to have an obligation just is to have a good reason to do something.

However, these issues notwithstanding, Bayne and Nagasawa certainly raise an important issue for theists. For, in claiming that it is obligatory to worship God, as most theists have traditionally done, and many continue to do, theists have therefore committed themselves to the further claim that there is some *reason* or *justification* for the claim that we have some such obligation. Bayne and Nagasawa are surely correct in maintaining that at least some account is owed by theists who hold this traditional view. It is to this crucial issue that I now turn.

Reasons for worship

While their discussion could be improved on several points, Bayne and Nagasawa are certainly correct in arguing that theists need to give some account of the obligatoriness of worship. That is, theists need to offer a *reason* for MOT. After presenting their case for this claim, Bayne and Nagasawa proceed to examine four possibilities, two of which seem to me to be more attractive than the others, namely the 'creation-based' account and the 'maximal-excellence' account.³ As mentioned previously, Bayne and Nagasawa judge that none of these putative reasons in fact grounds the claim that it is obligatory to worship God. They conclude that 'insofar as it is reasonable to think that the grounds of worshipfulness would be scrutable to us, our inability to determine what those grounds could be gives us reason to call into question the claim that we have obligations to worship God' (311–312). They recognize, of course, that their arguments fall short of conclusively showing that there is no obligation to worship God (312). Still, readers are clearly meant to draw the conclusion that Bayne and Nagasawa have presented a serious challenge to traditional views about worship.

My contention, however, is that, while Bayne and Nagasawa certainly present a case for the thought that worship should be given serious philosophical attention, they fail to offer a significant challenge to the claim that worship is obligatory.

To see why, recall a point made towards the conclusion of the previous section. In their discussion of the relationship between ‘reasonableness’ and ‘obligatoriness’, Bayne and Nagasawa rely on likely reactions to the case of admiration for Michelangelo’s *David*. Certainly, it seems likely that a person’s intuitions might incline toward the thought that a person can think it reasonable to appreciate great art while she might simultaneously balk at the claim that it is obligatory to appreciate it. Whether or not this thought is coherent is, however, another issue.

To show that it is, one would need to appeal to a theory of reasons that allows one to distinguish, for example, between ‘reasonableness’ as the absence of positive irrationality and ‘reasonableness’ as the possession of a compelling reason. Bayne and Nagasawa, however, do not rely on any such account. As a result, when it comes to their examination of putative reasons for worshipping God, they cannot make any a priori judgements about what could or could not constitute a sufficient reason of the sort required to constitute an obligation. Instead, they must approach the issue on a case-by-case basis. This, however, leaves them open to the possibility that some other reason, not considered by them, could be offered by a theist for the claim that it is obligatory to worship God. Assuming that there are such reasons (an assumption which will be made good below), it is not clear that Bayne and Nagasawa have presented any serious threat to traditional theistic views of worship.

With these considerations in mind, it is apparent that theists have a perfectly good reason, of a broadly ‘deontic’ type, for worshipping God, i.e. the so-called ‘Great Commandment’. In its original formulation, the commandment is ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear’ (Deuteronomy 6.5, 13). Of course, the Great Commandment does not explicitly mention *worship*. Still, theists maintain that worship is an activity that is expressive of the sorts of attitudes enjoined here, i.e. love, fear, and service.

According to one popular theistic conception of ethics, divine commands constitute reasons for action. In fact, on one particularly strong version of this conception, to say that someone ought to do something just is to say that God commands one to do it.⁴ The so-called ‘property-identical divine-command theory’ maintains that the property of being obligatory just is the property of being commanded by God. The ‘Great Commandment’ can be read as presenting, among other things, strong evidence that worship has the property of being commanded by God. Thus, *ex hypothesi*, worship of God is obligatory.

Still, one need not appeal to this strong version of the divine-command theory to hold that the ‘Great Commandment’ provides us with a compelling reason to worship God. That worship is indeed commanded by God, who is a morally perfect being, and who therefore always wills the best, entails that worship belongs to the best. Assuming that we have an obligation to promote the best, it

follows that we have an obligation to worship God. In any event, theists clearly have at their disposal a consideration that is strongly in favour of MOT.

Another reason for worshipping God, of the sort that appears to constitute an obligation, is suggested by a remark made by Bayne and Nagasawa in their discussion of 'creation-based' accounts of the obligation to worship. Creation-based accounts rely on the claim that we owe God worship as the source of our being. As Bayne and Nagasawa correctly observe, these accounts rely on the idea that 'we ought to be grateful to God for having been created, and we could only have reason to be grateful for having been created if we are benefited by our creation' (305). That is, creation-based accounts of worship turn on the idea that we can incur obligations in virtue of having been benefited by another person. Bayne and Nagasawa seem to grant this, for they go on to criticize creation-based accounts by raising the question of whether or not having been created is, in fact, beneficial to those who have been created.

However things may stand on this score with creation-based accounts of worship, it is worth pointing out that the idea underlying them calls to mind an account of religion (which includes 'adoration' or 'worship') offered by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae*. Aquinas argues that religion is a *moral* (rather than a specifically theological) virtue connected to justice. Justice means 'fully rendering to another the debt owed him'.⁵ Thus, religion is a virtue of rendering God His due. Aquinas makes it clear that religion includes worship, both as an attitude and as a set of patterned activities.⁶ As for the grounds of this obligation, Aquinas appears to accept both a creation-based account and a maximal-excellence account.⁷

Setting these aspects of Aquinas's account aside (for the moment, at least), but retaining the basic thought that religion is a species of justice, another account of the obligation to worship, not considered by Bayne and Nagasawa, comes to mind. This account, which certainly figures prominently in the history of both Judaism and Christianity, might be called a 'redemption-based' account. The basic thought is that, since God has performed acts of incalculable benefit for humanity, human beings are therefore obliged to render God His due as far as they are capable by worshipping Him.

One attraction of this account is that it does not face the principal difficulty raised by Bayne and Nagasawa for the creation-based account. Recall that, by their lights, it is not unambiguously clear that bringing a person into existence actually benefits that person. That is, existence by itself might not constitute a good for everyone of the sort that would render the worship of God obligatory. This suggestion certainly has some intuitive plausibility. However, it does not seem to apply to another crucial action of God, namely, His redemption of humanity. To see how this might anchor an account of the obligation to worship, consider some remarks from the Nativity sermons of Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626), one of the most important theologians in the early development

of Anglicanism, and a leading figure behind the King James translation of the Bible.

Recalling a theme prominent in patristic authors, Andrewes focuses on the implications of the Incarnation, the central claim of Christianity, for human life here and now. The 'bounty' of God, manifest in the Incarnation, consists in the fact that 'We are made the sons of God, as He the Son of man; we made partakers of His divine, as He of our human nature [2 Peter 1.14].'⁸ As early as Irenaeus of Lyons, theologians and apologists made use of the formula 'God became a human being so that human beings might become divine' to express the soteriological significance of the Incarnation.⁹ Availing himself of the same thought, Andrewes then uses a further notion, which clearly comports well with Aquinas's view of religion as a species of justice. Of the Nativity, Andrewes observes 'That as it is the time when we from God receive the fullness of His bounty, so it might be the time also when He from us may likewise receive the fullness of our duty.'¹⁰ Our 'duty', in this instance, includes specifically religious observances of the sort constitutive of Christian worship.¹¹

Andrewes offers a parallel set of considerations in his Good Friday sermon from 1605:

And He loving us so, if our hearts be not iron, yea if they be iron, they cannot choose but feel the magnetical force of this loadstone. For to a loadstone doth He resemble Himself, when He saith of Himself, 'Were I once lifted up,' *omnia traham ad Me* [John 12:32]. This virtue attractive is in this sight to draw our love to it.¹²

Here, Andrewes goes so far as to suggest that the spectacle of God's suffering and death naturally evoke in us a feeling of obligation. Both in the case of the Incarnation generally, and of the Passion in particular, Andrewes's thought is that God has provided us with something unambiguously good, such that we now owe worship to God. On the Christian hypothesis, redemption places human beings in the best condition possible for them. While sheer existence may be of questionable value for some people, participation in divinity is surely not. Beyond this, however, the concept of the Incarnation entails that God Himself, the supreme, incommensurable goodness, became fully present to and available for human beings in a concrete, tangible manner. Here again, there is no scope for ambiguity regarding the goodness of what God has rendered to humanity. Thus, invoking the Thomistic idea that religion (which includes religious observance) is a part of justice, theists could respond to the issue raised by Bayne and Nagasawa by pointing out that God has benefited humanity in an unsurpassed, indeed, unsurpassable, manner.

This point leads naturally to a consideration of the other primary ground for worship considered by Bayne and Nagasawa, namely, God's maximal excellence. Here, they have hit upon a thought that is central to Christian theism, and, indeed, to most theistic religious systems. Again, one can look to Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the earliest Christian theologians, who attributes greatness to God on the

basis of properties like moral perfection and power.¹³ Tertullian, who lived and taught several decades later, also expresses the notion of God's supreme excellence: 'In so far as human limitations can define God, this is my definition of his nature, a definition which will be admitted by the general sense of mankind: God is the supreme being, existing in eternity, unborn, uncreated, without beginning, without end.'¹⁴

The Cappadocian Fathers, particular Gregory of Nyssa, also tended to ascribe 'unlimited' and 'unrivalled' beauty and goodness to God.¹⁵ Bayne and Nagasawa argue that maximal excellence fails as a ground for worship because the properties constitutive of it are shared with finite beings, and theists certainly do not regard us as having obligations to worship finite beings, no matter how excellent they might be (307–308). Thus, God's excellence does not provide an obligation-constituting reason to worship God. Their argument on this score conforms to their general strategy throughout their paper of appealing to analogies with non-divine beings and our attitudes towards them (recall the example of Michelangelo's *David* discussed above). This is, however, precisely where they go wrong. The considerations offered by Bayne and Nagasawa fail to show that God's excellence does not provide an obligation-constituting reason to worship God.

Consider again the passage from Tertullian quoted above, in which he qualifies his list of divine attributes by adding a statement about the limitations of human understanding. This is a qualification that figures into a broad range of authoritative theological positions. So Origen: 'if there is anything that we are able to conceive or understand about God, we are bound to believe him far superior to anything which we conceive',¹⁶ Similarly, while Gregory of Nyssa explicitly attributes both beauty and goodness to God, he stresses that the beauty and goodness of God are incommensurably superior to those of created things, to the extent that they no longer really constitute the same properties. God's beauty is 'far removed from everything recognizable in bodies by the eye', and His goodness is such that it is 'impossible for such a thing to come within the scope of our comprehension'.¹⁷

Aquinas, who regards God's excellence as a good reason to worship God, articulates the implications of God's supreme goodness for the nature of human worship. For Aquinas, the issue concerns whether or not the virtue whereby we render due honor to God is conceptually distinct from other virtues. He writes:

The object of love is the good, but the object of honour is some type of excellence. God's goodness is given to creatures, but the excellence of his goodness is not. Therefore, the charity by which we love God is not distinct from the charity by which we love our neighbour, but religion by which we honour God is different from the virtues by which we offer honour to our neighbour.¹⁸

For Aquinas, then, there is some sense in which God shares goodness with creatures. What differs is the degree of *excellence*. God's excellence is such that it

cannot be shared with anything else. This seems to be another way of making the point found in the early patristic authors discussed above, namely, that God's goodness is incommensurably superior to that of anything else.

These qualifications imply that no analogy is really adequate for capturing the divine nature. Finite beauty, goodness, power, and knowledge are simply inapplicable to God, no matter how magnified these properties might be. So, it is not the case that God *shares* these properties with any finite thing. The fact that theists do not think it appropriate to worship a good person, a powerful person, or a beautiful person tells us nothing about the reasonableness of worshipping God. It is not the case that the properties that, on classic theists' accounts, render God worthy of worship are properties that human beings (or anything else, for that matter) could ever have. Origen likens the difference between the properties of finite beings and God to the difference between a dim, flickering candle flame and the sun. Both are certainly bright and hot, but the brightness and heat of the sun are incommensurably greater than that of a dim candle flame. Similarly, a good person and God are both 'good', but God's goodness is incommensurably greater to such an extent that we are no longer talking about the same property. It does not follow, therefore, from the fact that the goodness of a human being gives us no reason to worship that person that divine goodness gives us no reason to worship God.

These considerations also provide further reasons to be hesitant about the strategy that Bayne and Nagasawa employ throughout their paper. Much of their case for the claim that theists face problems regarding the obligatoriness of worship rest upon an analogy with a work of art, e.g. Michelangelo's *David*. The views just considered – from Tertullian, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa – suggest that such analogies are at best of limited value, and at worse are deeply misleading. God and Michelangelo's *David* are such that they really cannot share properties in a way that warrants conclusions about the properties of the one on the basis of the properties of the other. Thus, theists have a strong reason to resist the moves made by Bayne and Nagasawa in their discussion of the obligatoriness of worship.

Bayne and Nagasawa are to be commended for bringing the topic of worship to the attention of philosophers of religion. As one of the defining features of religion as a way of life, it is indeed regrettable that it has received so little attention from contemporary philosophers. Their analysis of the concept of worship is both provocative and suggestive, and it clearly demonstrates the necessity of phenomenological analysis to informed discussion and debate regarding some of the most important topics in philosophy of religion. At the same time, however, their claim that significant problems attend theistic views of worship is not supportable as it stands. Since their framing of the issue forces Bayne and Nagasawa to adopt a case-by-case approach to putative reasons for worshipping God, their argument is too exposed to any number of plausible and historically viable

candidates for such reasons not considered in their paper. Moreover, their criticisms of the maximal excellence account of the obligation to worship God, as well as many other elements of their discussion, fail to take into account the full implications of theistic views about the excellence of God. This significantly undermines the force of major elements in their discussion.¹⁹

Notes

1. An important recent exception to this rule is Robert M. Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
2. Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship', *Religious Studies*, 42 (2006), 299–313. All reference in the text are to this paper.
3. The two other possibilities considered by Bayne and Nagasawa are a 'prudential-reasons' account and the claim that the truth of OT is simply a brute fact. The latter appears undesirable, given the connection between reasons and obligations mentioned at the close of the first section of this paper. Bayne and Nagasawa raise excellent questions regarding the defensibility of the former, prudential account. I would also suggest that most perspicuous theists would shy away from such an account for their own reasons as well.
4. This position is implied by the view presented by Robert M. Adams in 'A modified divine command theory of ethical wrongness', in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 97–122. Another careful presentation of the so-called 'divine-command' theory of ethics is in John E. Hare *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
5. Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologiae*, IIaIIae, 58, 2. I have relied here upon Kevin D. O'Rourke OP (ed.) *St Thomas Aquinas: Summa theologiae*, vol. 39: *Religion and Worship* (London: Blackfriars, 1964).
6. *Ibid.*, IIaIIae, 81, 7.
7. *Ibid.*, IIaIIae, 81, 3.
8. Lancelot Andrewes *Works*, vol. 1:17, *Sermons on the Nativity and 8 Sermons on Ash Wednesday* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 59.
9. It is important to notice that what is being asserted here is *not* that human beings *become God* through the Incarnation. Instead, human beings become more *like God* than they are at present, by sharing, as far as the limits of human nature allow, in divine attributes like moral goodness and immortality. One way of thinking about this is that the 'image of God' is restored in human beings. An 'image' is, of course, never identical to the original. For an excellent discussion of this tradition of Christian soteriology, see Norman Russell *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
10. Andrewes *Works*, vol. 1, 59.
11. *Ibid.*, 60–62.
12. Andrewes *Works*, vol. 2:6, *Sermons Preached in Lent, 3 Sermons on Good Friday, 13 Sermons on Easter-day*, 182.
13. See Henry Bettenson (ed.) *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Father from St Clement of Rome to St Athanasius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 65–66.
14. *Ibid.*, 104.
15. For an erudite and accessible discussion of the Cappadocians, see Jaroslav Pelikan *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993).
16. Bettenson *Fathers*, 185.
17. Quoted in Pelikan *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 138.
18. Aquinas *Summa theologiae*, IIaIIae, 81, 4.
19. Special thanks are due to Peter Byrne, Tim Bayne, and Yujin Nagasawa for many pointed and helpful comments and criticisms on an early draft of this essay.