

The grounds of worship again: a reply to Crowe

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Abstract: In this paper we respond to Benjamin Crowe's criticisms in this issue of our discussion of the grounds of worship. We clarify our previous position, and examine Crowe's account of what it is about God's nature that might ground our obligation to worship Him. We find Crowe's proposals no more persuasive than the accounts that we examined in our previous paper, and conclude that theists still owe us an account of what it is in virtue of which we have obligations to worship God.

Introduction

Although one would not have guessed it from the amount of attention that the topic has received from recent philosophers of religion, the God of theism is first and foremost a being that is worthy of worship. In the paper that forms the target of Crowe's discussion we attempted to shed some much-needed light on worship.¹ Our focus was not on the question of whether theists hold that human beings are obliged to worship God, for we took it as obvious that theists – orthodox theists, at any rate – hold that we have such obligations. Instead, our concern was to determine what might ground the obligation to worship God. We surveyed a number of candidate grounds and argued that none is compelling. Given the centrality of worship to theism, we took this result to be a serious problem for theism. In his response, Crowe argues that we misunderstood the nature of the theist's conception of worship, and that we underestimated the theist's resources for defending the claim that we ought to worship God. We address these points in turn.

The nature of our obligations to worship God

We made two central – and, we thought, fairly uncontroversial – points in our characterization of the theist's conception of worship. Firstly, we distinguished the claim that it is reasonable to worship God (the reasonableness thesis – RT) from the claim that we have obligations to worship God (the obligation thesis – OT), and claimed that most theists endorse both. Secondly, we claimed that most theists would endorse the claim that our obligations to worship God are necessary rather than contingent. Crowe takes issue with our treatment of both of these topics.

We took the distinction between the RT and the OT to be fairly straightforward. Although we regard theists as committed to both theses, our concern was restricted to the OT. (In this way, our treatment of worship differed from Rachels's account, for Rachels was concerned to argue that worship is not reasonable.)² So, although it wasn't critical to our paper, we claimed that the RT does not entail the OT. Because of this, we claimed, the theist might be at liberty to claim that it is reasonable but not obligatory to worship God.

Crowe takes issue with this last claim, arguing that because we didn't analyse what it is for something to be reasonable or obligatory, we failed to show that the RT does not entail the OT (466). Now, it is certainly true that we did not provide an analysis of what it is for an action to be either reasonable or obligatory. But we're not convinced that we needed to. In general there seems to be no entailment from 'it is reasonable to *x*' to 'it is obligatory to *x*'. Learning to play the piano, buying flowers for one's spouse, and donating spare furniture to charity are all reasonable things to do, but in the usual run of things they are not obligatory. In light of this, it seemed to us that one needs an argument for the claim that the RT entails the OT. It *still* seems to us that an argument is needed here. Further, we have no idea of how such an argument might go.

Of course, it might turn out that the reasons in virtue of which it is reasonable to worship God are also reasons that make it obligatory to worship God. And if it did turn out this way, then there would be a sense in which the RT would entail the OT. But in such a case, the entailment would go through in virtue of features that would be particular to this case rather than in virtue of any general claim about the relationship between what it is reasonable to do and what it is obligatory to do. In light of this, it seemed to us best to insist on a clear distinction between the RT and the OT.

What about the claim that the typical theist holds that our obligations to worship God are neither universal nor necessary? Crowe argues that few theists would wish to sign up to this claim, for the theist would want to allow that there are people who fail to meet the cognitive conditions required in order to have an obligation to worship God.

We agree that the theist is likely to allow that those who cannot worship God have no obligations to worship God, and we never meant to imply otherwise. The ‘us’ in ‘necessarily, it is obligatory for us to worship God’ was meant to refer to those human beings who have the cognitive and emotional capacities to worship God, and in a number of places we stated that the OT applies only to people (or creatures) that are *capable* of worshipping God (see, for example, 304). Perhaps we should have made this point more explicitly, but we assumed that such a proviso would be fairly uncontroversial – after all, ethicists talk about the necessity and universality of moral obligations without worrying too much about the fact that there are some individuals (infants, say, or the mentally impaired) to whom such obligations fail to apply. So, we take it as common ground between ourselves and Crowe that orthodox theism is committed to the claim that, necessarily, all beings that are capable of worshipping God have an obligation to worship God. The central question is whether theism has the resources to explain why we might have this obligation.³

Grounding the obligation to worship God

In the target paper to which Crowe is responding we surveyed a number of arguments for the OT. We found none of these arguments persuasive, and concluded that the case for thinking of worship as obligatory has yet to be made. Crowe argues both that our survey of possible grounds for the OT was incomplete and that we were unfairly dismissive of some of the accounts that we did examine. Let us take these issues in reverse order.

One of the accounts that we discussed is the maximal-excellence account according to which we have obligations to worship God because of His maximal excellence. We objected to the maximal-excellence account on the grounds that if God’s possession of good-making features to a maximal extent generates obligations to worship Him, then it ought to be the case that the possession of these same kinds of good-making features in lesser degrees ought also to generate something akin to obligations to worship. But it seems that possessing virtues of various kinds generates no obligations to worship. We might have obligations to respect and admire those who are more virtuous (powerful, wise, etc.) than ourselves, but we do not appear to have obligations to worship them.

Crowe responds by emphasizing the incommensurability between the divine properties and human nature: ‘Finite beauty, goodness, power, and knowledge are simply inapplicable to God, no matter how magnified these properties might be’ (473) We agree (if only for the sake of argument) that God does not possess *finite* beauty, goodness, power, or knowledge, but it was no part of our argument to suggest that He does. Rather, our argument was that to the extent that both God and human beings possess the same kinds of good-making properties – beauty, goodness, power, and knowledge – then one would expect them to ground

worship in both cases or in neither. Either way, we have obligations to worship God if and only if we have obligations to worship those human beings who possess these good-making features.

Crowe emphasizes the ‘incommensurability’ of divine properties with human properties. We find his conception of incommensurability rather opaque. If Crowe means by that term that God’s knowledge, power, etc. are fundamentally distinct from our knowledge and power, etc., and literally incommensurable, then it’s not clear in what sense theists could say that God is more knowledgeable and more powerful than us. On the other hand, if Crowe means only that God’s knowledge, power, etc. are much more comprehensive and extensive than ours, then he is in agreement with our assumption: God and human beings possess the same good-making properties. This latter reading is in fact suggested by Crowe’s example of the brightness of the sun and that of a candle, for surely one can measure both the brightness of the sun in terms of that of a candle!

We turn now to Crowe’s discussion of some ways in which the OT might be grounded that we had not considered. The first such way that Crowe recommends involves a divine-command theory of moral obligation, according to which our obligations to worship God are grounded in God’s command that we worship Him, conjoined with the fact that God’s commands generate moral requirements. We omitted to discuss this approach to worship in our paper, but it is surely a proposal that many theists will find congenial.

But should they adopt it? The fact that God has commanded that we worship Him might give us good reason to worship Him, but it seems to avoid the truth-maker problem with which we started; that is, it doesn’t identify the kind of property that it seems reasonable to look for as a ground of worship. There seems to be something rather odd – perverse, even – in the thought that worship might be grounded in imperatives.⁴ Attitudes akin to worship – love, admiration, respect – tend not to be under volitional control. We do, sometimes, command parents to love their children and vice versa, but the coherence of such claims is questionable. Attitudes such as love can be best elicited by regarding the target object in a certain light. We are not completely passive with respect to the objects of our love, admiration, respect and worship, but there is a limit to how far volition can extend in such domains.

On a related note, it seems to us that a divine-command defence of the OT is at odds with the phenomenology of worship. It is hard to imagine theists conceiving of their act of worship as grounded in the commands of God. The phenomenology of worship seems to represent worship as a response to the very being of God, rather than as a response to God’s commands. Phenomenological considerations may not be decisive here, but it would be rather odd for an account of the grounds of our obligation to worship God to be at odds with the very act of worship itself.

The theist might attempt to address these worries by invoking a divine-command theory of the *good* in addition to a divine-command theory of the *right*. That is, she might hold that what is valuable is of value only because of God's attitudes to it. Applying this position to the issue at hand, one might hold that God – or, more particularly, the worship of God – is of value only in virtue of the fact that God deems it to be so. There is, on this account, no independent truth-maker of the obligation to worship God beyond God's attitudes to Himself. Obviously one cannot evaluate this account of the OT short of evaluating divine-command theories of the good, and that is too large a project to take on here. However, it does seem to us that this approach is rather similar to the brute-fact account of the OT, which we have already examined and rejected in our original paper.

Crowe's second proposal for grounding the obligation thesis appeals to God's redemptive activity. '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' (470). Although this line of thought might be attractive to some theists, it seems to us not to get to the heart of the matter. Redemption is, fundamentally, the salvation from sin. But what does sin involve if not the failure to worship God in the way that one ought? The grounds of the obligation to worship God must be logically or conceptually prior to redemption. This is not to say that redemption might not bring with it additional reasons to worship God, but it seems to us that the grounds of our obligation to worship God cannot, at base, reside in God's redemptive activity.

Suppose that the search for a compelling ground for the OT proves fruitless. What then? One might return to the question of whether the obligation to worship God needs to be grounded. The theist might argue that reasons run out at this point, and that the obligation to worship God no more stands in need of justification than do obligations to love one's friends and family. We ourselves are not much attracted to this position, but we do recognize that it deserves serious consideration.

Finally, a methodological issue: we considered (and rejected) various accounts of what it is that might ground worship, but we did not claim to have examined all possible accounts of worship. Crowe holds that this case-by-case approach vitiates our approach, for of course there might be plausible accounts of worship that we failed to consider. We grant that there might be accounts of worship that we failed to consider; indeed, a large part of our motivation in writing the original paper was to encourage theists to explore the grounding of worship more fully than they have done to date. But none of this undermines our case-by-case methodology. We did not present a 'master-argument' for thinking that no plausible account of the obligation to worship God will be forthcoming, but then again we did not claim to present any such argument.

We are grateful to Crowe for his comments on our paper. Although we disagree with him about many things, we are of one mind in thinking that the notion of worship deserves more attention than it has recently received. Of course, as Crowe's paper reminds us, when put in historical perspective the neglect of worship is a relatively recent phenomenon. Perhaps the first order of business ought to be a thorough a re-evaluation of medieval treatments of worship.⁵

Notes

1. Benjamin D. Crowe 'Reasons for worship: a response to Bayne and Nagasawa', *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), 465–474 (in-text references are to this article); Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship', *Religious Studies*, 42 (2006), 299–313.
2. James Rachels 'God and human attitudes', *Religious Studies*, 7 (1971), 325–337.
3. There is a rather tricky issue here that ought to be recognized. According to many versions of theism, our ability to worship God is dependent on the grace of God. Such accounts often come close to the position that all of those with the ability to worship God do in fact worship God, and that those who don't worship God fail to do so only because God's grace hasn't been given to them.
4. See Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa 'I can't make you worship me', *Ratio*, 18 (2005), 138–144.
5. We wish to thank Benjamin Crowe for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.