

Doing all things for God’s glory, acting so that it is God who acts: Kierkegaard, Edwards, and the problem of total devotion

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Abstract: This article accomplishes two things. First, it explores and defends Kierkegaard’s distinctive solution to the Problem of Total Devotion, a problem which has been helpfully identified by Robert Adams. Second, it extends that solution by advancing an interpretation of the command to do all things to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31) according to which we are being commanded to intentionally make every one of our actions such that it simultaneously counts as a divine action: in other words, to act intentionally in all things such that it is God who acts through us.

Introduction

This essay has a twofold purpose. First, I wish to argue that running through much of Kierkegaard’s work is a distinctive solution to what Robert Adams calls the Problem of Total Devotion, which is rooted in Kierkegaard’s understanding of a wide range of commands found in the Christian scriptures; and I wish also at least to show that this solution is plausible and can escape the most obvious initial objections to it, including those raised by Adams himself against views like it. Second – and this is my primary interest – I wish to argue for an understanding of the command to do all things to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31) which is simply another manifestation of the very same solution to the Problem of Total Devotion that is found in Kierkegaard’s interpretation of other scriptural commands. The command ought to be understood, I will argue, as a command to intentionally make every one of our actions such that it simultaneously counts as a divine action: to act intentionally in all things as God’s hands in the world,

such that it is God who acts through us. I will conclude by reflecting on how such a thing might be metaphysically possible. What emerges is a striking picture of Christian ethics: one which envisions people intentionally and voluntarily merging their actions with God's, so that in all human activity it is always God who acts.

I will not wade very far at all into the waters of the scholarly debates over Kierkegaard interpretation, which are both deep and treacherous. I will do enough to show that it is at least initially plausible to think that the solution to the Problem of Total Devotion that I see running through Kierkegaard's works is Kierkegaard's own. But my main focus will be on the view itself: to show it to be plausible and especially to show the fruitfulness of its application in understanding the scriptural command to act in all things for God's glory.

The problem of total devotion

Robert Adams describes the Problem of Total Devotion as follows:

Religious devotion is more than wholeheartedness or unconflicted enthusiasm. It is supposed to occupy a person's life so fully that nothing is left outside the realm in which it reigns. The history of spirituality affords many testimonies to the sweeping character of the claims of devotion to God – not least in the frequency with which independent interests in finite things have been seen as rivals and threats to religious devotion and, figuratively speaking, as a form of 'idolatry,' offering to the creature what properly belongs to God alone. The problem, then, is not essentially one of the distribution of scarce emotional resources. The problem is rather how a genuine and serious interest in something finite (such as love for one's neighbor) can be a part of one's life that at the same time expresses love for God – as it must, if one's whole life is to be devoted to God. (Adams (1986), 170)

I think the problem is best presented as a dilemma: in traditional Christianity, and I would add in most forms of traditional monotheism more generally, two claims are asserted which seem on the face of it at least to be in tension: that our devotion to God ought in some important sense be *total*, and that we ought to appreciate and love the created world (which is *not* God), especially other human beings. Doing justice to either one of those claims seems to run the risk of neglecting the other. The more we insist that our devotion to God be total, the more we seem to exclude or water down love of created things and other people; call this the Denial of Creaturely Love horn of the dilemma. On the other hand, the more we insist that we love other people (and other created things) for themselves, the more we seem to demote God to merely first among a constellation of independent goals, and replace total with merely partial devotion to God; call this the Idolatry horn of the dilemma. Either we fail to love creatures as we should, or we fail to love God as we should.¹

The best way to see the problem is to illustrate both horns of the dilemma. Adams discusses two views which fail in opposite directions. The first is his interpretation of Augustine's view (or, perhaps more precisely, one of the views

Augustine presents on the matter); according to Adams' interpretation, Augustine says that we ought not to love the neighbour for himself, but ought to love the neighbour for God's sake. To love the neighbour for God's sake is, according to this view, to desire our neighbour's good, but only as a means to the further end of loving God, which is our own enjoyment of God. I follow Adams in finding this inadequate, whether or not it is really Augustine's view: it avoids the idolatry horn of the dilemma only to fall into the horn of failing to love the creature rightly. People ought not only to be used by us as means to love God; we ought to love them for themselves.

The second view is the 'putting God first' view: it is sufficient, the view holds, that we love God more than we love anything else, or perhaps that we love God more than we love everything else combined. Because of that, whenever our love of God conflicts with our other loves, we will decide in favour of God. This is perhaps the most common popular view of what devotion to God ought to involve, but it too runs afoul of the problem of total devotion: it avoids the horn of denying creaturely goodness at the cost of falling into the horn of idolatry. As Adams puts it,

Devotion to God is not conceived of simply as the absolutely first among a number of independent interests. It is supposed to be more encompassing, so that other good motives must find their place within it and all of life can be a worship of God. The idea that one should be loving God in loving the neighbor is very deeply rooted. (Adams (1986), 179)

The problem is that 'putting God first does not suffice to exclude idolatry. "Idolatry" signifies here not just worshiping an image of a deity but, more broadly, giving to a creature what belongs to God' (*ibid.*). One can idolatrously organize one's life around an interest in a created thing, even if one does in fact love God more and would give the thing up if God took it away. That is because worship of God is not just a matter of strength of attachment; it is at least also a matter of organizing one's life around God. One might love God more than anything else and nevertheless God might fail to permeate one's life in the right way. So idolatry is not ruled out simply by putting God as first among many interests.²

The challenge, then, is to find an account of the relationship between love for God and love for creatures that navigates between the horns of the dilemma, neither reducing creatures to mere means to the one goal of loving God, nor reducing the love for God to merely the most important among many independent goals.

The Kierkegaardian solution

The heart of what I take to be Kierkegaard's solution to the Problem of Total Devotion is his reading of the command to love one's neighbour as oneself. This is, he says, a command not simply to love one's neighbour, or to love one's neighbour

just as strongly as one loves oneself, but is instead a command to bear a certain distinctive *type* of love toward others – to love them *as* one’s neighbours. In other words, it is possible, he thinks, to love another person, say, as a friend, without bearing them any of the sort of love commanded in the command to love one’s neighbour. The major distinguishing feature of neighbour-love, at least from the perspective of understanding how this account deals with the Problem of Total Devotion, is, according to Kierkegaard’s description of it, the fact that it involves God as the ‘middle term’ (Kierkegaard (1962), 70). In this sort of love, somehow, God lies between you and the neighbour you love, such that you love your neighbour *through* your love for God.

Now, this might be developed in a number of ways, but here is my best attempt. I’ll start by assuming Alexander Pruss’s general account of love. Love, he argues, always involves three components: an appreciation of the beloved, a desire for the beloved’s good, and a desire for union with the beloved.³ Now, appreciation, like belief and desire, is sensitive to description (or, to use Thomistic language, ‘aspect’): one can appreciate something under one description without appreciating it under another, or equivalently, one can appreciate one aspect of something without appreciating other aspects of the same thing. To love another with God as the ‘middle term’ could be to appreciate them under descriptions relating to God (or, equivalently, to appreciate aspects of them related to God) and on the basis of that appreciation desire their good and union with them. This unique sort of appreciation will likely result in a focus on particular goods to be desired for the beloved and particular kinds of union to be desired with them, but it is the distinctive kind of appreciation which lies at the bottom of what distinguishes this type of love from other types.⁴

If this is right, then love with God as middle term is at its heart a distinctive way of seeing the beloved: seeing them through a divine lens, as it were, so that the characteristics which explicitly relate them to God are brought to the forefront. What characteristics might those be? Most centrally, it seems to me, *the image of God*, but Kierkegaard also suggests (in *Works of Love*) the characteristics *loved by God* and *one whom God has commanded me to love*. (He also suggests a few others in other works, which I’ll mention soon.) So, to love someone as your neighbour, which is to love them with God as the middle term, is to appreciate them *qua* divine image-bearer, as beloved of God, as one whom God has commanded me to love, and/or under some other God-related description, and to desire their good and union with them on that basis.

This explains why the command to love one’s neighbour applies even to one’s enemies and, as Kierkegaard perhaps surprisingly argues, to oneself – ‘if the command is properly understood, it also says the opposite: “You shall love yourself in the right way”’ (Kierkegaard (1962), 39). It is possible to love yourself without loving yourself with God as the middle term; to love yourself with God as the middle term would be to appreciate yourself as a divine image-bearer and love yourself on that basis. His explanation of how to love your enemies reinforces

the idea that loving them with God as the middle term involves appreciating them under certain descriptions, or seeing them differently: 'Men think it is impossible for a human being to love his enemies, for enemies are hardly able to endure the sight of one another. Well, then, shut your eyes – and your enemy looks just like your neighbor' (*ibid.*, 79). What he is describing here is a kind of redirection of attention: looking away from the characteristics that make your neighbours your enemies, and attending instead to the characteristics which relate them to God.

This pattern is most thoroughly and explicitly developed by Kierkegaard in his treatment of the command to love one's neighbour in *Works of Love*, and the problem of total devotion is certainly raised most acutely precisely by the paired commands to love God totally and to love one's neighbour as oneself. But once the pattern is familiar, I think it can be discerned in other parts of Kierkegaard's work, dealing with other scriptural commands. For example, Kierkegaard's discussion of the relationship between the spiritual attitudes of faith and infinite resignation in *Fear and Trembling* can be read as evincing the same basic pattern of attachment to things with God as the middle term. Kierkegaard makes the rather notorious and difficult claim that Abrahamic faith in some way presupposes infinite resignation but at the same time goes beyond it to 'regain' the finite world.⁵ Perhaps the thought is this: the default for human beings is idolatry, an attachment to created things that crowds out or competes with attachment to God. Infinite resignation involves abandoning this idolatry and being willing to give up (or actually giving up) everything for God's sake. Faith's 'regaining' the finite involves a kind of attachment to finite things which does not compete with devotion to God or contradict one's willingness to give up everything for God's sake, and so in that sense presupposes infinite resignation. What kind of attachment could that be? Attachment with God as the middle term: attachment to things under descriptions relating those things to God. The relevant descriptions on offer in *Fear and Trembling* are different from those in *Works of Love*; they include, I take it, *gift of God* and, most importantly in the case of Abraham's attachment to Isaac, *promised of God*.⁶ If one's primary attachment to things is on the basis of their status as the gift of God – if, more precisely, we appreciate and desire them under the description *gift of God* – then in a certain sense our attachment presupposes a kind of infinite resignation, a willingness to give everything up for God, since our main concern even in our attachments to finite things is the ways in which those finite things relate to God.

This reading of *Fear and Trembling* is very quick. But even if it isn't correct, it does indicate something important: the pattern of love with God-as-middle-term has a broader application than simply the love we ought to bear to other people. It can also apply, in broad strokes, to our attachments to every part of the created order. The view, in that case, would be that we ought to be attached to *everything* we care about with God as the middle term – appreciating them under descriptions (of various kinds) relating those things to God. If we generalize

the God-as-middle-term analysis of neighbour love in this way to all attachments to the created order, what we end up with is a general approach to scriptural ethics that would apply to a broad range of scriptural commands. It is a unifying interpretation of a wide range of biblical ethical teachings, including but going beyond the central love commands. It also looks like a general solution to a difficult problem for those teachings: the Problem of Total Devotion. The way to show how it solves this problem is to show how it avoids both horns of the dilemma.

It avoids the Idolatry horn of the dilemma by making love for created things simply an extension of love for God, and therefore something that cannot possibly compete with love for God. What is meant in saying that God-as-middle-term love is just an 'extension' of love for God? It isn't that God-as-middle-term love just *is* love for God. It may be possible to love God without loving others, if you are (say) unable to perceive the connections between others and God, which shows that love for others doesn't simply reduce to a sort of love for God. No, God-as-middle-term love is an extension of love for God in the following sense. Love for God involves, at least, appreciation of God and desire for union with him.⁷ As I've said, love with God as the middle term is defined in terms of the sort of appreciation you have: you appreciate others under descriptions that relate them to God. Now, you can't appreciate others *because they reflect or relate to God* unless you already appreciate God. If you don't appreciate God – that is, find him good – then you won't appreciate someone *because they reflect God* – that is, you won't find that aspect of them to be good. Moreover, if anything weakens your appreciation of God, then your appreciation of others on the basis of their relation to God will weaken as well. There is a kind of asymmetric dependence relation between appreciation of God and appreciation of others on the basis of their relation to God: the latter depends entirely on the former, and can never exceed it in strength. That is why God-as-middle-term love can never compete with love for God: any weakening in your appreciation for God will also weaken your appreciation for others on the basis of their relation to God. If God-as-middle-term love were ever to undermine love for God, it would simultaneously and to exactly the same extent undermine itself.

It seems likely to me that avoiding the Idolatry horn of the dilemma is one of Kierkegaard's motivations in both *Works of Love* and *Fear and Trembling*. Infinite resignation (and the fact that faith must presuppose infinite resignation in some way) seems to me to be concerned with the avoidance of idolatry. And the motivation for finding a distinctive type of love to which the command to love the neighbour refers seems in part to be motivated by the ways in which the ordinary preferential loves (like friendship and erotic love) can go wrong of their own nature, because they are susceptible to idolatry. As C. S. Lewis says, 'love ceases to be a demon only when he ceases to be a god' (Lewis (1960), 6). Only neighbour love cannot go wrong in these ways, because only neighbour love immunizes against idolatry.⁸ Whether or not that is one of Kierkegaard's

explicit motivations, however, the view of love that I have sketched (inspired by Kierkegaard) does in fact solve the Idolatry horn of the dilemma quite effectively.

It avoids the Denial of Creaturely Love horn of the dilemma by making the neighbour an end in himself. The difference between the Kierkegaardian view and the Augustinian view which Adams criticizes can be subtle. Both might properly be described as 'loving others for God's sake' or 'loving others because one loves God', but what 'for God's sake' and 'because' mean is different in the two cases. In both cases, love for God *governs* in some sense love for creatures, but the governance takes different forms. In the Augustinian view, the governance is one of ends and means: loving others is a means to love God. In the Kierkegaardian view, the governance is one of aspects or descriptions: love for the neighbour is focused on aspects of the neighbour of which one has explicit awareness of how they reflect and relate to God. The resultant desire you have for your neighbour's good, though, is not a means to any further end; you desire his or her good for its own sake. Kierkegaardian neighbour-love – love with God as the middle term – does involve loving creatures for themselves and desiring their good as an end in itself. Perhaps the difference can be captured thus: in the Augustinian view, we love others *to* love God; in the Kierkegaardian view, we love others *through* loving God.⁹

This isn't yet a complete solution to the Problem of Total Devotion, though, because we haven't yet given an account of how love with God-as-middle-term interacts with other sorts of love for the same things.¹⁰ God-as-middle-term love itself avoids the Problem of Total Devotion, but the Christian still might bear other types of love (like friendship love or erotic love) towards those who are also loved with God as middle term. Those types of love are still vulnerable to the Problem of Total Devotion: how to avoid the temptation to idolatry inherent in such loves? As it happens, interpreters of Kierkegaard are divided on whether he would allow for the faithful continuation of the preferential loves or would advocate instead replacing (or perhaps transforming) such loves with (or into) God-as-middle-term love.¹¹ I won't weigh in on the debate over how to interpret Kierkegaard here. I will say, however, that I think the Kierkegaardian view can solve the Problem of Total Devotion either way. If the preferential loves are eliminated and only God-as-middle-term love remains, the problem is solved for the reasons I've already pointed out; but it seems to me that it can be solved even without eliminating the preferential loves, for the following reason.

In that case, we could take Kierkegaard's view to be that neighbour-love in some way surrounds or protects the other kinds of love from themselves, as it were. As Kierkegaard, and Lewis after him, points out, each of those other loves can quite easily 'go bad'; they can turn into jealousy or hatred without changing their fundamental nature, and this is a manifestation of their tendency to idolatry. Neighbour-love can put limits on those loves and keeps them from exceeding their proper bounds. How does it do that? I think that there has to be some way in which neighbour-love ought to *govern* or *control* the other loves. What does this 'governance'

amount to? Perhaps it will be adequate to say that the person bearing both types of love towards a person ought to be disposed to resolve any conflicts between them in favour of neighbour-love. And with that further condition, we've outlined something like a complete solution to the Problem of Total Devotion: love with God as the middle term loves people for themselves, but it is itself immune to idolatry, and when it governs all other types of love, prevents them from turning into idolatry as well.

Objections to the Kierkegaardian solution

The Kierkegaardian solution as I have described it is recognizably a version of what Adams calls the 'religious reasons' solution to the Problem of Total Devotion. The 'religious reasons' solution says that if we love others for religious reasons, that is, for reasons relating to God, then our love for others can be thought of as an extension of our love for God instead of a competitor to it. God-as-middle-term love seems to satisfy this description, and so Kierkegaard's solution is a version of the 'religious reasons' solution. Adams rejects the 'religious reasons' solution, on the basis of two arguments. Both are deep and important, but I think an adequate reply can be given in defence of the Kierkegaardian solution in both cases.

Adams' first objection is that loving someone because of something to do with God is not 'loving her for herself'. Many traits (like looks or even moral character) are too peripheral to 'who we are' to count as being loved for ourselves if those traits are the reasons we are loved. Adams notes that the image of God might be comparably safe from this objection, because the image of God is so central to who we are. But then he says 'it could seem too much like "loving" someone for her similarity to her mother, which hardly counts as loving her for herself'. The remainder of his argument is 'Probably you are loved for yourself if you are loved for the intrinsic glories of the image of God in you and not just for the relation of similarity to God - but how much does loving you for the first of this pair of reasons express a love for God?' (Adams (1986), 177). I agree with this last claim: for Kierkegaard's view to count as a distinctive solution to the Problem of Total Devotion, it must be that loving another with God as the middle term precisely means appreciating them under the description of, and desiring their good and union with them on the basis of, their resemblance to or other relation to God. So love with God as middle term is love on the basis of resemblance or other relation to God. But I'm not convinced that this entails that we do not love others for themselves when we love them with God as the middle term.

Adams' argument really ends up turning on the analogy with loving someone on the basis of her resemblance to her mother. Now, this is not a bad analogy of Kierkegaard's view of neighbour love; it is in fact pretty useful for explaining the view. I think the analogy can explain how God-as-middle-term love can be psychologically realistic, for instance. We can make sense of immediately loving someone

we've never met if we are able immediately to recognize her mother, whom we have long loved, in her. Similarly, if we really do know and love God, it can make sense psychologically to love people we've never met if we can see in them the reflection of the God we love. So the analogy is, overall, a good and useful one.

However, there are some crucial differences that seem to me sufficient to distinguish the two cases for the purposes of Adams' argument, which turns on the claim that love for religious reasons doesn't constitute loving people for themselves. Why is it that loving someone on the basis of her relationship to her mother does not constitute 'loving her for herself'? One obvious answer is, as Adams says, that it is *precisely* the fact that a person's resemblance to her parent is 'too small or peripheral or accidental a part of oneself' (Adams (1986), 177). For one thing, children can and often fail to resemble their parents, and so such resemblance is accidental in the relevant sense; for another (and perhaps more important) thing, the 'resemblance' that a person can have to their parent is always something that sets that pair apart from other people (like physical appearance, or manner, or perhaps some character traits), and so isn't sufficiently central to who that person is in the deepest sense. The image of God is profoundly different, as Adams himself admits, as it is both essential to humanity (according to the usual Christian metaphysics) and central to what makes us who we are and gives us our distinctive dignity and worth. So resemblance to one's mother and resemblance to God are different with respect to their centrality and moral significance, which seems to be relevant to the question whether loving people on the basis of those properties constitutes 'loving them for themselves'.

Another relevant difference between the two cases is that the woman and her mother are on the same ontological level, as it were. Parent and child are the same sort of being, basically equal in worth; the child is not less worthy than the parent. To love you only on the basis of your resemblance to another being on your level – to subordinate your value to theirs in that way – is unfitting, because your value is not in fact subordinate to theirs in that way. By contrast, it is quite plausible to think that subordinating the value of a human being to God in that way is eminently fitting, as God belongs on a different ontological level. To make this claim precise would take us too far afield from the subject of this article; I will content myself with noting that both the Thomistic metaphysics of participation (according to which all created things have goodness in a sort of derived way, while God has it in an underived way) and Adams' own Platonic theistic metaphysics of goodness (according to which God is not a good being but Goodness itself) could be used to support this point.¹²

So I think the analogy fails to show that the Kierkegaardian view doesn't involve loving people for themselves. Perhaps a different way to support this same objection could be to point out that human beings all bear the image of God, and so loving them solely on the basis of the image of God wouldn't allow for enough appreciation of the uniqueness of those who are loved to constitute loving them 'for themselves'. This, too, can be answered: the image of God may be

particularized to each individual. That is, each person might have particular ways in which they resemble or depict God, and I still love you on the basis of your resemblance to God if I love you on the basis of that unique resemblance to God. So even love with God as the middle term, which can be had towards every person, can nevertheless vary somewhat in detail depending on the particular person.¹³ The parent-child analogy might actually help here. Two siblings each reflect their parents: some of the reflections will of necessity be shared between the two, but many need not be, and some probably will not be. The same can be true of the ways human beings reflect God.

Adams' second objection is that the 'religious reasons' view is an incomplete solution to the problem of total devotion without some further account of love for non-religious reasons: are we only to love for religious reasons, or can we love for other reasons as well, and if so, how does our love for non-religious reasons relate to our love for religious reasons? I have met this challenge with my account of the governance or control relationship between God-as-middle term love and the preferential loves. However, I think another objection naturally and immediately suggests itself: doesn't the very same problem of total devotion immediately recur in the form of the tension between God-as-middle-term love and the preferential loves? In other words, doesn't the idolatrous competition between love for God and love for created things recur in the form of the competition between love for created things under descriptions referring to God and love for created things under other descriptions? My implicit attempt to solve this problem was to refer to a 'control' criterion, according to which the attachment with God as the middle term 'controls' in some sense the attachment without God as middle term, but at this point aren't we back to the picture of God as one attachment among many, but simply the most important one – the 'putting God first' solution that proved inadequate?

This is indeed a very similar and closely related conflict, but I think it is not precisely the same one. And, crucially, I think it is not as religiously objectionable as the original tension at the heart of the problem of total devotion. Here are a series of observations which suggest that the tension between God-as-middle-term love and the preferential loves is not simply a recurrence of the Problem of Total Devotion, and that the Kierkegaardian solution is in fact a solution to the problem.

First, the tension between God-as-middle-term love and the preferential loves is not a competition between our attachment to God and our attachment to creatures. It is a competition between our attachments to creatures in terms of their relation to God and attachment to creatures in other terms. It is a tension between two kinds of attachment to created things. So the attachment is not Creator-creature; it is within the realm of attachments to creatures. So it seems to me not to run aground on the 'idolatry' horn of the dilemma in quite the same way.

Second, this is not simply a return to the 'putting God first' view, and it doesn't have the same problems as that view does. On the Kierkegaardian view, we are attached to everything via its relationship with God, and so God is not competing

with creatures for our attention. Even if we are also attached to creatures in other ways, still we are attached to all of them with God as the middle term, and it is that attachment which is the controlling one. So there is a harmony between our attachments to creation and our attachment to God that you don't find on the simple 'putting God first' model.

Furthermore, the Kierkegaardian view avoids the kind of idolatry Adams identifies as afflicting the 'putting God first' solution, which is that even a lesser attachment can be an idol if your life is organized around it. If you really have love with God-as-middle-term for every created thing, and in each case that love controls the other sorts of love you have for the things, your life *is* completely organized around your love for God. I can't imagine such a person who nevertheless organizes their life around something other than God. The 'putting God first' solution allows for you to love something without reference to God, and that is why it is vulnerable to idolatry. But the Kierkegaardian view doesn't allow this – anything you might idolatrously focus your life around, you love *that very thing* first and primarily with God as middle term, so your interactions with it will themselves be informed and governed by your love for God.

Third: nevertheless, in the Kierkegaardian view as I have developed it there is still a kind of attachment – preferential love – to created things that does not involve God as middle term. Even if there are reasons (just given) to think this isn't as objectionable as the 'putting God first' solution, why keep those around at all? I think that this is just the right level of independence for created things in a traditional monotheistic view of religious devotion. According to monotheism, God created a world that is not identical to or a part of himself, and this world is good. It is appropriate to recognize that, and this view leaves room for that recognition – without, I think, crossing the line into idolatry.

I haven't argued that Kierkegaard's solution is superior to all others, or even done the exhaustive interpretative work to prove that what I've described is in fact Kierkegaard's solution. But I have argued enough to show, I hope, that the view is a plausible reading of Kierkegaard, that some of the most obvious objections to it can be met, and that it has a number of virtues. And that is enough for me to proceed to my primary interest: to offer an understanding of the command to do everything for the glory of God according to which that command corresponds precisely with Kierkegaard's understanding of the neighbour-love command (and the commands regarding our attachments to other created things). And, as a matter of fact, this understanding is a natural and necessary extension of the Kierkegaardian solution to the problem of total devotion.

Extending the Kierkegaardian solution: acting in all things for God's glory

Consider the famous command in 1 Corinthians 10:31: 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.' Note initially the fact that

the command seems to be concerned with a kind of total devotion to God: we might therefore expect some kind of connection to the Problem of Total Devotion. And I will argue that there is one.

This seemingly simple command is harder to interpret than you might expect, mainly because of the difficulty of the concept of glory. The usual interpretation is to think of glory as a 'manifestation of goodness', as Aquinas puts it, where this is understood as a manifestation to the understanding.¹⁴ That is, glory is something like reputation or acclaim: the recognition or appreciation of the excellent thing. (Aquinas also notes that 'glory' can refer to the excellent thing itself – in this case, God himself – under the description 'deserving of appreciation'.¹⁵ Pretty clearly, unless process theism or pantheism is true, our actions cannot contribute to the excellence of God itself, which means that the glory to which our actions are supposed to contribute cannot be of this sort. So I'll leave that sense of glory to one side.) So the command would have to be understood as something like this: in all things act so that God will be praised as a result.¹⁶

There are a number of problems with that interpretation, though. A lot of the things that are right to do won't result in God being praised. In fact, we can probably imagine a lot of circumstances where obeying God will result in him being ridiculed. Also, there are plenty of wrongdoings that may well result in God being praised more than he would be if the right thing is done. This interpretation, in other words, seems too consequentialist for Christian ethics. We could tone it down to just say that God's reputation is one thing we should consider when deciding what to do – so the command would just say to 'try to protect God's reputation if you can' or something like that – but that really seems not to capture the totalizing character of the command. Another option would be to take it to be saying just that *you* should be praising God while doing whatever you are doing. That's not an implausible take, but I'm still unsatisfied, because that interpretation makes seeking the glory of God in something you do *in addition to* or *alongside* the other things you are doing. It doesn't capture the way in which we seem to be commanded to do those things themselves unto the glory of God.

Thankfully, I think there is a fuller understanding of the concept of glory available to us – Jonathan Edwards's understanding – which both opens up another way to understand this command and which ultimately leads us back to Kierkegaard's solution to the Problem of Total Devotion.¹⁷ Edwards agrees that both of the things Aquinas identifies as divine glory – God's excellence itself (understood as deserving of manifestation) and the creaturely response of praise and appreciation – do indeed constitute divine glory. But he adds a third thing that fits in between the other two, another sense in which the divine excellence is 'manifested': the *deeds* of God which express the character of God. Those deeds are themselves glorious (that is, excellent and deserving of appreciation), but more to the point, they themselves constitute a kind of manifestation of God's excellence and so constitute one sort of divine glory. (In fact, Edwards sees all three – a being's excellent character, an excellent deed expressing that

character, a response of appreciation – as one complex whole which he names ‘glory’. I am willing to consider each thing individually as a type of glory which naturally accompanies the other types, and I think Edwards would agree, since he says that glory sometimes refers to the parts and sometimes refers to the complex whole.)

This extra type of glory allows for another interpretation of the command. There is a long history in Christian theology of giving credit to God for the good things that human beings do, to the point that it is appropriate to say that *God* did those good things. If that is true – and I will explore in the next section a couple of possible sets of metaphysical assumptions that could lie behind that idea – then we can contribute to God’s glory in the sense that Edwards identifies, by making our actions a constituent part of a larger excellent deed of God’s. We can act as his hands, as it were, such that our actions constitute God’s excellent actions, which in turn constitute God’s glory.

The command would be more than merely a command to act as God’s hands; it would be a command to do so intentionally. It would be a command to intend all of our good deeds under the description *constitutive of the deeds of God* or some related description. Note that this amounts to saying that your attachments to your own actions, in the form of your intentions with respect to those actions, ought to proceed with God as the middle term. And so this interpretation turns out to be a version of the Kierkegaardian solution to the Problem of Total Devotion. What Kierkegaard’s view does for love of the neighbour this interpretation does for our attachments to our own actions.

It seems to me that this is an important application of the Kierkegaardian solution to the Problem of Total Devotion, since that problem applies to our attachments to our own actions as well as to our love for other people and our attachment to the created world. If we regard all of our actions merely as means to further ends, we miss how they can be intrinsically valuable (the Denial of Creaturely Love horn – in this case, love for our own activity); if we appreciate the intrinsic value of at least some of our actions, but detach that appreciation from our devotion to God, then we run the risk of making our love for God compete with our appreciation of our own deeds (the Idolatry horn).¹⁸ This interpretation of the command solves the Problem of Total Devotion in precisely the same way as the Kierkegaardian solution does. If we do each action unto the glory of God in Edwards’s sense – intending them as constitutive of a great deed of God’s – we can appreciate our actions’ intrinsic value (avoiding the Denial of Creaturely Love horn) with a type of appreciation that is merely an extension of our regard for God, and so cannot possibly compete with our regard for God (avoiding the Idolatry horn). Since we do what we do in order to be a part of what God is doing, our actions cannot compete with our devotion to God, but instead become expressive of that devotion.

For a complete solution, we still need the same governance relationship between our attachments with God as the middle term and our other attachments.

You can intend your actions under other descriptions too, or to put it another way, act for more reasons than just to be part of what God is doing; but if those intentions come into conflict with the intention to act as God's agent in the world, the latter intention should prevail. That protects the other intentions from crossing the line into idolatry and ensures that all of our actions without exception express and are controlled by our devotion to God.

The fact that this interpretation of the command both solves a distinctive aspect of the Problem of Total Devotion and unifies this command together with other scriptural commands, especially the key commands to love God and neighbour, seems to me to provide a further argument in its favour. In fact, this strikes me as by far the strongest argument in its favour. It allows us to see this command as an expression of the very same picture of a flourishing human life – the very same picture of the relationship that we ought to bear to our creator and his creation – that is expressed in the other biblical commands, including especially the love commands, upon which hang all the Law and the Prophets. The coherence and unifying explanatory power of the interpretation is an indication of its truth. Thus, even if my objections to interpreting the command solely along the lines allowed by the Thomistic concept of glory are unconvincing, these extra advantages provided by interpreting it along the lines allowed by the Edwardsean concept of glory ought to lead us to accept that interpretation.

One objection to my interpretation is this. It may seem that this interpretation unreasonably requires that my intentions be overly complex. Supposedly I need to see my actions as part of what God is doing, and intend them under that description: in everything I do, I need to intend to be part of what God is doing. Surely I can't be holding all that in my head every time I have breakfast, or stumble into the shower when I wake up, or walk from my car to my office, or try to solve a complicated logic problem. I can barely hold all those symbols in my head as it is, and now I'm supposed to be thinking about God at the same time?

My reply is that things are simultaneously easier and harder than this makes it seem. It is easier than this because you don't have to be holding your intention in your conscious mind at the very time that you are doing the action in order for it to count as your intention. I think it fair to say that I walk to my office in part in order to provide health insurance for my family. That was a big part of my motivation in taking the job, and a big reason I don't leave to do something else, or sleep in and skip work. But I'm not thinking of that every morning I go to do my job. Or I might be doing a logic problem in order to pass a class, but the problem is difficult enough that I must devote all my conscious attention to it, so that I am not currently thinking about passing the class while doing the problem. Similarly, I could be doing things for God's glory – in that a concern for God's glory is indeed part of why I am doing what I am doing – without that being currently in my conscious mind while I am doing it.

On the other hand, that point shows that the command is harder to fulfil than it might initially seem. It isn't enough for me to be eating and drinking to the glory of

God that I be thinking about, or even praising, God while I eat or drink. All that accomplishes is that I am glorifying God in addition to eating and drinking, not that I am eating and drinking *to* the glory of God. The glory of God – that is, the prospect of participating in God’s activity in the world, of doing God’s work – must actually enter into my motivation for eating and drinking. That is harder, and requires that a concern to act as God’s agent runs pretty deep in my character.

Metaphysical presuppositions of the extension

This extension of the Kierkegaardian solution of the Problem of Total Devotion to our attachments to our own actions assumes that we can act in such a way that all of our actions partially constitute divine actions. In this section, I will explore two ways in which this could be true. The first approaches the question by thinking about the metaphysics of divine providence; the second approaches it by thinking about the possibility of divine authorization for human beings to act on God’s behalf.

Divine providence

If we are trying to see how human actions can constitute divine actions, it is natural to start with the view of divine providence that gives God the most control over human actions: theological determinism. Is theological determinism sufficient by itself to explain how human actions can constitute divine actions in the way that the Kierkegaardian view requires? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is no. That is because, if theological determinism by itself were enough to entail that everything good that humans do is also done by God, then it also entails that everything bad that humans do is also done by God – everything that happens, period, is done by God. But if that is so, then the command to act in all things in such a way that your action constitutes a divine action turns out to be vacuous: everything you do, no matter what you do, satisfies the command. There must be some way to distinguish between the good and bad things that humans do such that at least the bad things don’t constitute divine actions, for the purpose of interpreting the command.

Introducing free will (whether you think of it as a libertarian does or as a compatibilist does), by itself, doesn’t solve this problem. Because if you say that human evil doesn’t constitute a divine action because it is done freely – if the intermediation of free will is enough to make it so that the actions don’t count as divine actions – then the same applies for good human actions, as the intermediation of free will should also imply that the good human actions don’t constitute divine actions. So we must look elsewhere for a way to draw the line between good and bad actions such that the bad actions don’t and the good actions do constitute divine actions.¹⁹

Setting up the problem this way – as drawing a line between good and evil actions – naturally leads, I think, to the privation theory of evil. If we accept the privation theory of evil and a strong doctrine of God as the First Cause of everything that exists, we can say that God causes all of the good things but brings about the bad things not by causing them but by a kind of withdrawal, a leaving of things uncreated. We can even pair that with the claim that God intends only the good things that happen.²⁰ That would then allow us to say that all of the good things that happen constitute divine actions, and none of the bad things constitute divine actions. This sort of view fits naturally with theological determinism, but may well also be compatible with libertarian views of the will and a variety of views of divine providence.²¹

If this is the metaphysical underpinning of the command to do all things for God's glory, then the actions that are required by that command turn out to be coextensive with the actions you already have reason to do: the good ones. So the command will require the same actions that were already required; it just requires also a particular kind of additional motivation for performing those actions: don't just do them because they are good, but also because in doing them you get to be a part of what God is doing.

Divine authorization

It is tempting to stop there, but there may in fact be another possible metaphysical underpinning to the command, which doesn't require any particular view about the metaphysics of evil or of divine providence. Consider the phenomenon of what we might call *representative action*, which is related to collective action. There are many ordinary cases where the actions of one person or group are rightly ascribed to another person or group. Consider an ambassador who makes an agreement; it might rightly be said that it is the country which the ambassador represents which has made the agreement. Or consider that the actions of soldiers are often (rightly) ascribed to their commander; in a biography of Ulysses S. Grant, the author asserts that 'McPherson took the town in a bout of spirited fighting' (Chernow (2017), 263). The commander, McPherson, counts as having taken the town, despite the fact that it was McPherson's soldiers, not McPherson himself, who did the fighting. So it seems possible for someone to act on another's behalf, such that the actions of the former are rightly ascribed to the latter.

For us to act on God's behalf such that our actions constitute divine actions, we will have to be acting in accord with his commands. And not just any commands will do; if one of my sons tells his younger brother to headbutt the wall and the younger one does it, it doesn't follow that the instigator headbutted the wall. The command in some way would have to define an authorized mission. I can't provide a list of conditions which are necessary and sufficient for such authorization, but it does seem pretty clear that many of the commands of God recognized

by Jews and Christians *do* constitute such an authorization: the commands to fill and govern the earth, and the Great Commission to go and make disciples, seem to be divinely ordained missions in which humanity acts on God's behalf as subordinate rulers and caretakers of the world. (It is plausible to think that the concept of a covenant between God and humanity includes this idea of a divinely ordained mission to act on God's behalf.) If human beings intentionally act in accordance with these divinely ordained missions, then their actions can count as divine actions.

Nicholas Wolterstorff discusses basically this phenomenon when he discusses human beings speaking on behalf of God such that their speech counts as divine speech.²² Speaking on someone's behalf is a special case of acting on their behalf. It is important to notice that you can be authorized to act on someone's behalf without being authorized to speak on their behalf, such that your actions constitute their actions without your speech constituting their speech. Furthermore, your actions on their behalf might even include speech acts, such that your speech act counts as an action of the person on whose behalf you are acting, without your speech act counting as a *speech act* of the person on whose behalf you are speaking. An American soldier distributing aid might tell those seeking help to go to a warehouse at a particular time; that soldier's speech act might partially constitute the action *the United States of America is distributing aid* without constituting the action *the United States of America is telling you to go to the warehouse at this time*. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, speaking on God's behalf (as the prophets do) is a significantly rarer phenomenon than is acting on God's behalf, even though acting on God's behalf often includes speaking. In obedience to any number of divine commands, I might speak encouraging words to someone; my words might partially constitute *God's encouraging* that person without also constituting *God's speaking encouraging words* to that person.

An additional observation made by Wolterstorff is helpful here. In deputized speech – speech authorized in such a way that it constitutes a speech act of the deputizer – ‘the deputation need not . . . take the form of the [deputized person's] being given *the very words* he is to utter’ (Wolterstorff (1995), 45). A head of state might authorize an ambassador to speak on his or her behalf, such that the ambassador's speech acts do count as speech acts of the head of state, without explicitly laying out everything the ambassador is to say. The same holds true in the case of deputized action: the general missions given by God might leave quite a bit of discretion in the hands of his commissioned representatives to decide precisely how the mission is to be carried out, and nevertheless if the actions decided upon by the commissioned representatives are intended to fulfil the mission, they can still count as divine actions.

If this is the metaphysical underpinning of the command to act in all things for God's glory, then that command turns out to be somewhat more restrictive than the previous metaphysical underpinning would make it. The actions it requires of you are not coextensive with the actions you already have reason to do. If

you are to do all things in such a way that they constitute acting on God's behalf in this way, then you are to restrict yourself only to actions which specifically obey the commands of God which constitute the divinely ordained mission – that is, you are required to limit yourself only to actions which contribute to that mission. You are to devote yourself exclusively (and intentionally) to the mission. If there were such a thing as an action that was good but which didn't contribute to fulfilling the mission he's given you, this way of taking the command would forbid that action.²³

So there is more than one metaphysical account that could underwrite the command to act in all things for God's glory. I won't decide between them, and I won't rule out other possibilities. However the story goes, understanding the command as I have allows us to extend Kierkegaard's solution to the Problem of Total Devotion to our attachment even to our own actions, and that extension is both natural and necessary. Our actions can become idols just as easily as other people can; and we can avoid that idolatry by intending our actions as parts of what God is doing in the world.

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Notes

1. This is a kind of devotional correlate to familiar metaphysical problems for traditional monotheism that have to do with the relationship between a self-sufficient, infinite creator and a distinct creation, such as what the theologian Cornelius Van Til (1974) called the 'full-bucket paradox', which likened God's creating to adding water to an already-full bucket. See, for example, Kretzman (1991).
2. See Adams (1986), 179–180 for this line of thought.
3. Pruss (2011), 17–18.
4. That means this account disagrees with Pruss's claim that types of love are individuated solely by desires for distinctive types of union; see *ibid.*, 19.
5. Kierkegaard (2006), 21–46.
6. For an account of Johannes de Silentio's (the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*) claim that faith's 'regaining' of the finite is 'absurd', see Johnson (2011). I make the point in that essay that it is crucial to remember, as Kierkegaard always did, that Hebrews 11:17–19 says that God's promise that Abraham's descendants would come through Isaac is at the core of Abraham's faith in that situation.
7. The third condition, desire for the beloved's good, would require some sort of explanation of how it is possible to desire the good of a perfect being; perhaps it would do to say that we must share God's interests (love what God loves). I will leave that question aside, though, since it isn't necessary for any part of the argument that follows, which focuses on the appreciation aspect of love.
8. This strikes me as the main way in which Kierkegaard's treatment is superior to Lewis's. Lewis is perhaps better at identifying all the ways in which other types of love can go wrong, but only Kierkegaard's God-as-middle-term analysis explains why the distinctive type of love which Kierkegaard calls neighbour love and Lewis calls charity is not susceptible to abuse in the same way.
9. Thanks to David Alexander for this formulation.
10. Robert Adams points this out and considers it an objection to views of this sort; I will discuss that objection further in the next section. Adams (1986), 177–178.
11. See, for example: Ferreira (2001), Krishek (2008) and (2014), Lippitt (2012), and Breiner (unpublished).
12. See, respectively, Murphy (2017) and Adams (1999).
13. Thanks to C. Stephen Evans in conversation for pointing out this line of thought.
14. Aquinas (2003), 342.
15. *Ibid.*
16. David Alexander, in correspondence, suggests an alternative interpretation: in all things act so that God ought to be praised or deserves to be praised. I think this collapses into the interpretation I ultimately defend, since for God to deserve to be praised for an action that I do, he must deserve credit for my action, and so my action must in some way be ascribable to him.
17. Edwards (2009), ch. 2, sect. 6 and especially sect. 7.
18. An autobiographical note might reinforce this point: when I first encountered the Problem of Total Devotion (before reading Adams taught me to name it thus) as a pressing existential problem in my life, it was in the form of idolatrous attachments to my own actions, not in the form of idolatrous attachments to other people. I recognized that my intense concern for academic and athletic excellence seemed to be idolatrous, but I rebelled at the thought that Christians should be the ones who cared less than other people did about such excellence. That shows, I think, that the Problem of Total Devotion applies not only to our attachments to others but also to our attachments to our own actions, and so it too needs a form of

Kierkegaard's solution: don't care less about that excellence, but care differently about it, with God as the middle term.

19. The last two paragraphs of reasoning could have been conducted with Molinism rather than theological determinism as the starting point.
20. For development of that idea in the context of theologically determinist views of divine providence, see Alexander (2014), White (2020), and Alexander & Johnson (2016), chs 3 & 5.
21. There are, after all, libertarian Thomists. For one such libertarian Thomist view, see Koons (2002).
22. See Wolterstorff (1995), 42–51. The relevant phenomenon, authorized speaking in the name of someone else, he calls 'deputized discourse'. The other mechanism by which human speech might constitute divine speech, which Wolterstorff calls 'appropriated discourse', is less analogous to the mechanism I'm describing for human actions to count as divine actions.
23. An idea like this has had surprisingly broad appeal. It can be seen in the Reformed theologian John Frame's treatment of the Reformed 'regulative principle of worship', which he extends to all of life, and in Mark Murphy's discussion of the new natural law theorists, often Roman Catholic thinkers, with respect to their treatment of the natural 'good of religion'. See Frame (2008), 464–486, and Murphy (2017), 148–156.