

# Do we owe God worship?

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**Abstract:** This article responds to recent arguments that worshipping God cannot be obligatory. It shows how a respect-based account of worship is compatible with the claim that only God is worthy of worship, and compatible with the view that worship is very different from attitudes we owe to creatures. Then, it develops a respect-based account in enough detail to show how our moral motivations to respect creatures generate an obligation to worship God. The upshot is an analysis of worship which can weather recent arguments that worshipping God is not morally motivated.

## Introduction

Historically, theists have regarded worshipping God as obligatory.<sup>1</sup> While there has always been a minority demurring from this judgement,<sup>2</sup> contemporary philosophers of religion have called this obligation into question anew. Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa (2006, 2007), and John Danaher (2012) have recently argued that, on the best available analyses of the concept of worship, it is hard to see why worshipping God would be obligatory. In what follows, I respond to their arguments and defend the traditional view. I will argue that worship is a species of respect, and thereby obligatory.

I argue that the success of their arguments requires three suppositions which are under-motivated. The first is that a successful account of worship must determine that only God is worthy of worship. The second is that there is no natural continuum between the attitude which motivates, and the activities which constitute worship, on the one hand, and ordinary respect and actions which show it, on the other. The third is the use of an unduly narrow sense of the term ‘obligation’.

First, I offer an initial overview of what I call the ‘respect account’ of worship in the succinct form offered by Richard Swinburne, which I take to provide the contemporary articulation<sup>3</sup> criticized by subsequent parties to the debate. Then, I consider Bayne and Nagasawa’s criticisms arising from the intuition that

worship could only be owed to one object, and their interpretation of the phenomenology of worship as implying that it is *sui generis* rather than a species of respect as the respect account claims. Then, I give my own articulation of the respect account in order to show how it escapes Danaher's criticisms of Gwiazda's defence of a near companion. Finally, I defend my respect account against the charge that respect is not obligatory in a way that would generate an obligation to worship God.

### **Swinburne's respect account**

According to Richard Swinburne,

People ought to acknowledge other persons . . . and this surely becomes a duty when those persons are our benefactors . . . the way in which we acknowledge their presence reflects our recognition of the *sort of individual they are and the kind of relation they have to us*. Worship is the only response appropriate to a God, the *perfectly good* source of all being. And if God has given us our *whole life* and *all* the good things it involves, much thankful worship becomes our duty. (Swinburne (2005), 168, my emphases)

This brief argument for religious engagement conflates two distinct considerations: that God deserves worship as a species of gratitude for the good He has done for us, and that God deserves worship as a way of showing respect for the excellence He bears. Let's bracket the first consideration, since both considerations might function as sufficient motivations for the behaviours we describe as 'worship', and they are both (very plausibly) compatible. We don't need to have exactly one account of what worship is, nor of why it is obligatory. Manslaughter, for example, is both illegal killing, and negligent killing; and it is impermissible (as a species of negligence) both because it takes away a life and because it causes suffering. But we do need at least one account, which successfully shows that worshipping God would be obligatory.<sup>4</sup> Let's call the view that we owe God worship because we owe excellent people respect, and He is maximally excellent, the 'respect account'; I will articulate it more precisely in due course.

There are everyday cases Swinburne can appeal to which motivate his first claim: in a culture like ours, it would be wrong to ignore an acquaintance one passes by; this wrongness stems from what they demand from us as persons. When hiking through the wilderness, it would (I believe) be wrong for us to ignore a lone stranger one passes by for the same reasons; whereas in some bustling cities the culture determines that we can discharge our obligation to acknowledge other persons merely by striving not to touch their skin when jammed against them on the Tube. This example of contextual variation, and how pluriform our obligations can be in light of a general obligation to respect people, will become important below. Just because there is no 'perfect obligation' to greet strangers in London does not mean there is no 'imperfect obligation' to acknowledge (to demonstrate respect for) things, owing to their possession of

the perfection of personhood, in general. That imperfect obligation imposes on me the perfect obligation to greet strangers if I move from London to, for example, a village in the Brecon Beacons.

Swinburne is also claiming here that my obligations to show respect to others (and, presumably, to cultivate that respect if I do not have it yet) can alter, given differences in their character. We can begin motivating this by considering the difference in respect we owe to humans as opposed to animals. I have an excuse for lateness to a social meeting if I stop to greet a colleague in the quad, but not if I stop to play with a squirrel.

### **Theism and the ‘uniqueness thesis’**

Bayne and Nagasawa give two objections to the above account which intend to show that it conflicts with a constraint on accounts of worship’s nature and norms which they call the ‘*uniqueness thesis*’. Their first argument rests, I suggest, on interpreting the uniqueness thesis as a claim about the nature of worship rather than a postulate of theism. They point out that

Theists clearly hold that God is an appropriate object of worship, but it is less clear whether theists hold that God is the *only* appropriate object of worship. Call the claim that God is the uniquely appropriate object of worship *the uniqueness thesis*. (Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 301)

And then consider the following case:

It seems possible for a world to contain two beings, each of whom instantiates [maximal excellence, the characteristic in response to which worship is obligatory on the respect account]. Call one of the two beings ‘God’ and the other ‘God\*’ . . . If worshipfulness supervenes on the possession of [maximal excellence] then we would have obligations to worship both God and God\*. (Indeed, God and God\* would have obligations to worship each other.) This result is at odds with the uniqueness thesis. (*ibid.*, 308)

Interestingly, where Swinburne presents his argument for worship being obligatory, and hence motivating religious engagement, he writes ‘The first religious reason for following a religious way is to render proper worship and obedience to whatever God *or gods* there are’ (Swinburne (2005), 168, my emphasis). The implication is that Swinburne would indeed regard both God and God\* as worthy of worship. Perhaps Swinburne’s instincts are not representative of the typical theist’s. Or, perhaps there are ways of making Bayne and Nagasawa’s uniqueness thesis come out true in ways which do not put ‘possible world polytheism’ at odds with it.

Suppose that, as a matter of contingent fact, only God is maximally excellent. Then, indeed, God is the only appropriate object of worship, as a matter of contingent fact; the uniqueness thesis comes out true alongside the respect account. But, of course, the claim that God is as a matter of fact the only maximally excellent being is part of monotheism, not part of an analysis of worship.

We could attempt to uphold their objection by strengthening the uniqueness thesis: perhaps we should interpret it to mean that ‘necessarily, God is the only

appropriate object of worship'. This strengthened claim about who is the proper object of worship can still be made true by the addition of classical theism to an account of worship which does not include uniqueness, rather than requiring an analysis of worship which assumes only one proper object of worship whether or not theism is true. How? Because, on classical theism, God is necessarily, not contingently, the only maximally excellent being.

So the possibility of 'possible-worlds theism' does not show that the respect account is false, but only that, given the respect account, if theism were false, either no or multiple beings would be worthy of worship. If theism is true, and the respect account is true, uniqueness is true. But we should not think the respect account false on the assumption that uniqueness must be true independently of theism.

### **Is worship *sui generis*?**

Bayne and Nagasawa appeal to the uniqueness thesis in another way. When considering holiness, an example of a divine perfection which might merit worship on the respect account, they worry that

holiness appears to be a property that God shares – or at least could share – with other beings . . . there are strains of thought within many religious traditions according to which the faithful become holy. This suggests that holiness *per se* cannot ground worship, for if it did then we would have obligations to worship other holy beings, and the uniqueness thesis would be imperiled. (Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 308)

This criticism seems to misrepresent how Swinburne, at least, is thinking of the connection between worship and the kinds of excellence which merit it. It presupposes that worship is a *sui generis*, 'all-or-nothing' obligation merited by a determinable property borne by the object of worship. On this assumption, that is, whatever degree of holiness (or wisdom, or love) one possesses, one merits a similar response from others; that response is worship. But on the respect account, the property grounding worship is determinate – not just excellence of whatever degree, but maximal excellence – and that worship is the extraordinary way we show the extraordinary respect merited by that particular determinate property. Since creatures do not (and never will) have this determinate property, they are not worthy of worship just because God is.

Let's consider a parody of this argument. I am obliged to give of my disposable income to those who are lacking their basic needs. I can do this in (at least!) two ways: I can give a pony (£25) or a monkey (£500). To tighten the parody's resemblance to its target, let's verb these nouns: I can satisfy the obligations of charity by (*inter alia*) monkeying or ponying someone. If I meet someone (Bob) who is £500 short of their basic needs, I will be obliged to monkey him. But if I meet someone (Annie) who is £25 short, I will be obliged to pony her.

Bayne and Nagasawa's argument against the respect account is akin here to arguing that Bob's poverty cannot oblige me to monkey Bob, because if it did,

then I would be obliged to monkey Annie, which I am clearly not. But, the parody continues, if a lack of basic needs were what merits charity, and monkeying is a form of charity, then I would be obliged to monkey her, since Annie lacks her basic needs. So monkeying (giving someone £500) cannot be a form of charity. Here's the legend: 'charity' is respect, 'poverty' is excellence, 'monkeying' is worship, and 'needing £500 to start flourishing' is maximal excellence.

My parody does not need an equivalent of the uniqueness thesis to run: if it were a valid *reductio* against monkeying being a form of charity, it could run on our intuition that we are not obliged to give Annie £500. Likewise, the uniqueness thesis is more than is needed in their argument against the respect account: intuitively, we are not obliged to worship saints, so if the respect account implies we are, it must be false.

Now, we can see how this argument against helping Bob is invalid: on the correct analysis of how the perfect obligation of monkeying relates to the imperfect obligation of charity, there is no implication that we must give Annie what our intuitions say we need not give her. And so we can see how, on a more faithful articulation of Swinburne's respect account, Bayne and Nagasawa's *reductio* is also invalid. Our obligation to worship God arising from a more general obligation to respect excellence does not entail that we have an obligation to worship less excellent beings, but only that we have an obligation to respect them.

Does adding the uniqueness thesis make the *reductio* valid? No – because, when theism is true, the respect account does not imply that anyone but God is worthy of worship. If worship is the kind of respect owed to the maximally excellent, and only God is maximally excellent, then however holy, or wise, or just creatures are, short of perfection, they will not be worthy of worship.

The argument does operate, however, if worship does not enter into a continuum with respect in the way the respect account claims.

The denial of this continuum is implied by another criterion for successful analyses of worship which Bayne and Nagasawa endorse and appeal to. In criticizing a gratitude-based account, they write that it 'runs the risk of "domesticating" worship – that is, of presenting it as continuous with attitudes it is appropriate to take to mundane entities' (306). They endorse Mark Wynn's reading of the religious phenomena surrounding worship, according to which worship 'has no real parallel in our relations with created things' (Wynn (1999), 144–145, endorsed by Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 306).

What motivates postulating this 'gulf' between worship, on the one hand, and creatures, on the other? It cannot be the uniqueness thesis alone. In connection with their endorsement of Wynn's 'no parallel' claim, Bayne and Nagasawa cite worship's 'moral, aesthetic and noumenal components' (Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 306).

That the 'moral' components would be missing on the respect account seems to depend on whether or not we are morally obliged (or otherwise motivated) to respect people. If we are, then worship does not need to be *sui generis* to be

morally salient. As long as respect is obligatory (or morally motivating), worship will get its moral components from being a case of respect. Bayne and Nagasawa (2006, 307) deny that respecting people is obligatory, and Danaher's argument against the respect account requires the same denial, as I hope to show below. Let's defer the question of whether respect is obligatory for now.

Why might the 'continuity' respect account exclude the aesthetic and noumenal components? Why would the *sui generis* alternative guarantee their inclusion?

Let's consider the first question. An answer hinges on the phenomenology of respect. Wynn suggests that paying people their respects might seem 'a wearisome business' (Wynn (1999), 145). Our activities of inter-human praise and acknowledgement are ubiquitous and hence quotidian, whereas practices of worship seem designed precisely to cultivate extraordinary affective responses. There are, indeed, contexts in which we might find the activities involved in respecting people wearisome, and we take for granted much of the social discourse in which we pay each other respect, and feel little if anything while doing it. But the same is true for worshipping God, where committed religious practitioners are concerned. Sometimes religious agents engage in worshipping activities and are committed heart and soul to the enterprise, and reap the phenomenological 'rewards', but sometimes we just 'phone it in', distracted and ill-prepared. On the other hand, there are 'good cases' in the phenomenology of respect: I suggest that those of us who have been in love, or followed a leader, or emulated a role model, will be able to report creaturely analogues of the aesthetic or noumenal. The connection between worship and respect cannot legitimately be broken by appealing to only the ideal cases on the one hand and only the bad cases on the other. The quotidian nature of inter-creature respect, in comparison to the extraordinary affective phenomenology we take to be paradigmatic of worship, can be accounted for partly by the ubiquity of our interactions with creatures. It can partly be accounted for by the difference in degree between the moral significance of showing respect for a good creature and a maximally excellent being, since a rightly ordered agent will presumably appreciate that moral difference phenomenologically.

Now for the second question. Why would the 'no parallel' claim explain the aesthetic and noumenal components?

This question is really rhetorical. The 'no parallel' claim does not secure the aesthetic and noumenal components of worship. This is because any account must draw parallels with inter-creature phenomenology in order to make clear how it secures these components, just as with the moral component. Wynn's own account is an example of this inevitability. Wynn attempts to respect the 'gulf' he sets up in developing an alternative to Swinburne's gratitude account: he proposes that worship is a species of nature contemplation rather than gratitude. For Wynn, worshipping God is appropriate because God pre-eminently instantiates all the perfections found in creation: 'in worship the believer relates herself to the marvel of existence, by placing herself in wonder and adoration before the one

in whom all existence is contained' (Wynn (1999), 151).<sup>5</sup> But this account, too, relies on a continuum between our aesthetic and noumenal reactions to creatures' perfections and delicate givenness, and our reactions to God in worship. In order to unpack his account of worship, Wynn describes conservationists' reactions to flora as illustrative analogues of the worshipper's attitude to God (*ibid.*, 152).

The difference between God pre-eminently possessing all the perfections, and creatures dependently possessing limited perfections, is no less a difference in high degree and hence kind than the difference between God's maximal excellence and creatures' limited excellence. The 'no parallel' claim seems to be a constraint on accounts of worship which misinterprets the data, insofar it threatens to rule out any intelligible account of worship.

Phenomenologically, there is indeed a great difference between inter-creature respect, and creature-God worship. But this can be accounted for without insisting that worship is *sui generis*. If Swinburne's position is our paradigm of an account which posits 'continuity' between worship and inter-creature attitudes, it's worth noting that he still writes of a qualitative distinction between them – worship is 'a peculiar respect' – arising out of God's greatness being 'incomparable' with any creature's excellence (Swinburne (1993), 298). 'Incomparable' has to be read emphatically, not literally, here: clearly we can compare God's excellence to creatures in all sorts of ways, and Swinburne does so.<sup>6</sup> But God's excellence is very, importantly, different from creatures' virtues. The limit case is different from the ordinary case; and the limit case of respect will be as different from the ordinary case as maximal excellence is from the kind of virtue and probity we find in those creatures we look up to and admire.

Benjamin Crowe's criticisms of Bayne and Nagasawa can be understood as attempts to articulate this tension between similarity and difference, while conceding in principle Wynn's 'no parallel' claim. Crowe appeals to Patristic authors to stress the extent to which God's goodness exceeds ours, and hence the difference between the respect we owe Him and the respect we owe each other. But, conceding the 'no parallel' claim, he interprets Aquinas as claiming that, even if God's goodness is continuous with creatures', it only merits our love, whereas His 'excellence', which 'is such that it cannot be shared with anything else' (Crowe (2007), 472–473) is what merits our worship. This interpretation invites the reply that we have lost our grip on what it is about God which grounds obligations to worship Him (Bayne & Nagasawa (2007), 478).<sup>7</sup> We know that what we call 'excellence' in creatures motivates respect. But if whatever we call 'excellence' in God is something else, we don't know that that feature motivates any response at all.

The solution is to interpret that classical theology in a way which affirms that analogies are not to be treated as equivocations. We should deny the 'no parallel' claim; or, rather, we should notice that the right version of it will be made true by the difference between God and creatures, without the worship-theorist needing to do 'extra work'. There's a continuity between other activities and attitudes arising from respect, and the activity of worship and the 'peculiar respect' it



manifests and teaches. And there is also a gap between how worship ‘feels’ when we get it right, and how rightly ordered respect for creatures ‘feels’. But this arises from the gap between God and creatures, not from the nature of worship, or respect, itself. And since the gap admits of continuity, Bayne and Nagasawa’s second argument against the respect account will not succeed.

### **The respect account, defined**

While I have unpacked Swinburne’s germinal respect account to show how it can resist criticisms, I have not yet lain it out explicitly. For clarity’s sake, the respect account I advocate operates this way.

Both actions and attitudes might be obligatory. Some actions might be obligatory insofar as they are ordinary manifestations<sup>8</sup> of obligatory attitudes. When we encounter persons (or perhaps anything relevantly person-like, such as animals), we are obliged to hold an attitude or attitudes we will describe as ‘respect’. If we think only actions, but not attitudes, can be obligatory, because we cannot choose what attitudes we have, this might translate into an indirect obligation to cultivate a disposition to hold such (an) attitude(s).<sup>9</sup>

For the purposes of exposition so far, I have appealed solely to respect; and I have suggested that this term is expansive enough to provide for an account of a phenomenon as diverse as worship. But for some of us the term may still pick out something too narrow or ‘thin’. If we find the term has too narrow a meaning as we understand it in ordinary language, we can consider the term as used in this ‘respect account’ as carrying a special stipulative sense such that it covers a family of related reactive attitudes to perfections, such as admiration or awe, which plays the relevant role in our account. A natural concern is that using the term with this special sense means that the respect account is really a disjunction of alternative accounts no one of which is a plausible account of worship, and why worshipping God is obligatory, on its own. But insofar as these reactive attitudes are in fact related, this concern should be allayed.

Ordinarily, agents who hold such an attitude will show that attitude in a range of activities the details of which are subject to culture and circumstances: let’s call such actions and activities ‘showing respect’. We can thereby naturally speak of an obligation to show respect to people. We can speak even more simply of an obligation to respect people, and mean by this expression that we are obliged to carry out actions which show respect, as well as meaning that we are obliged to bear or cultivate respect. So when I use ‘respecting people’, I will mean all these.

The strength of our obligation to respect someone, and the degree or kind of respect we owe them, can vary with their characteristics. So, there will be many different types of activities and actions of showing respect corresponding to how these different degrees and kinds of respect will be manifested by ordinary agents.<sup>10</sup> So, insofar as we can naturally speak of an obligation to show respect, we can naturally speak of our obligation to praise changing in its particular



demands, in response to the object which demands our respect. Consider the differences between politeness, friendliness, praise, and veneration.<sup>11</sup> In the limit case, where the object is maximally excellent, the degree or kind of respect we owe will manifest itself in a correspondingly distinctive form of praise. And this we call 'worship'.

If we are concerned that scaling degrees of respect owed will too easily mean that obviously unreasonable acts will be demanded of us, we can think of our imperfect obligation to respect people as a *pro tanto* obligation among other *pro tanto* obligations. For example, we might be generally obliged to punish wrongdoing in proportion to how wrong some crime was, but never obliged to carry out acts of punishment which would violate a criminal's human rights, because punishing wrongdoing stands as one *pro tanto* obligation among others such as respecting human dignity. Likewise, the fact that our obligations of respect scale (not necessarily monotonically) with the perfection of their objects does not mean that these obligations will necessarily dominate other obligations to deliver counter-intuitive results.

As mentioned above, the actions which satisfy our respect obligation will be manifold, and might frequently depend on local customs. The degreed picture only complicates this, but we can give some illustrative examples of actions which show different degrees of respect. We might be polite, for example, to a stranger we sat next to on public transport, about whose virtues we know nothing – other than that they are a person and so deserving of our politeness. But suppose that we recognize them from the newspaper as the fellow who saved the child drowning in the river, or the lady who put in extra shifts to treat casualty patients after a building fire: then we might congratulate and wish them well in whatever way our culture deems appropriate.

If we can imagine how such behaviour would 'scale up' to become an appropriate response to a perfect being, the respect account might not only explain and vindicate religious worship, but also allow us to comparatively evaluate different activities purporting to be obligatory because instances of worship. For example, James Rachels has argued that theism is false because it entails that we owe God worship, but worship entails unconditional obedience, which we cannot owe to anyone since the autonomous nature of moral obligation means obedience can only ever be owed conditionally on its helping us satisfy some other obligation we take on for ourselves (Rachels (1971), 333–335). To simplify Rachels's account, this offer of obedience is the fundamental action which lies behind the various ritual activities we think of as instances of worship. But if the respect account is true, and we would never offer unconditional obedience out of respect no matter how much respect were owed nor how perfect the object, then the offer of obedience may not be what is happening in these rituals if they are instances of worship; or, if they must be understood as offers of obedience, then they will not be good acts of worship on the respect account. On the other hand, when we consider those religious, ritual activities which, before analysis, we took

intuitively to be acts of worship, we can see how they might be actions which manifest an extreme form of respect. Litanies of praise, and acts of sacrifice or gift-giving, are readily interpreted as extreme cases of our congratulation of, and friendliness to, the local hero met on the train. Given the complexity of the ways in which we show our attitude of respect, the respect account provides a framework for interpreting and evaluating the acts of worship we have inherited, while also understanding why 'genuine' acts of worship would be obligatory.

An issue in interpreting the phenomenology of worship which is natural to return to at this point is that it often seems grounded in aspects of a relationship which concern two people's history of interaction. One example would be Swinburne's suggestion that worship is connected to the gratitude apt to a giver of past favours. Another would be the idea that we owe the attitude of devotion or loyalty to those to whom we have made a past commitment, and that worship is at least connected to these attitudes. Two options are available here. One is to treat these other aspects as grounding alternative, mutually compatible accounts of worship, any of which might be sufficient to morally motivate someone's worshipping another in limit cases. The difficulty this option faces is in explaining how these are all accounts of the same thing: we will be left wanting an explanation as to why the relevant collection of religious practices seems aptly described by one word, rather than constituting a motley disjunction. The second option is to suppose that respect owed might be diverse in kind as well as degree, and differ not only due to degree and kind of excellence of the respected party, but also due to differences in the nature of the relationship between the parties. So the difference in attitude I owe my father, as opposed to an equally wise and caring teacher, could be construed as a difference in degree or quality of respect; but this difference is due to aspects of our relationship which are independent of his excellence relative to me or that other teacher. This option supposes a fundamental connection between these various attitudes of positive regard, but this supposition does not strike me as counter-intuitive. In other words, the respect account can be stretched to operate as a 'master account' of worship, if having one is a theoretical desideratum. Again, theism can supply the lemmata which explain why God is uniquely worthy of those action-types whose tokens manifest maximal gratitude or maximal devotion, which we pick out by 'worship'. For now, however, let's bracket these complications to focus on allaying criticisms of the 'simple' respect account.

### **The respect account and Gwiazda's threshold account**

To discern remaining reasons for rejecting this account, we need to consider Gwiazda's proposed neighbour to the respect account above, and how that respect account escapes Danaher's criticism of Gwiazda's account.

Gwiazda's defence of the respect account appeals to this 'limit case' picture described above, but without making the explicit commitments concerning

general obligations to respect people which I have drawn from Swinburne. This is a consequence of how Bayne and Nagasawa have shaped the debate: Gwiazda accepts their use of the uniqueness thesis and the ‘no parallel’ claim, and so is mainly concerned to secure the conclusion that ‘maximal-excellence accounts [of the grounds of worship] can ground an obligation to worship God without lesser degrees of excellence grounding lesser obligations to worship lesser entities’ (Gwiazda (2011), 522). My respect account, in contrast, allows lesser degrees of excellence to ground lesser obligations to show respect to lesser entities, but calls the actions satisfying those lesser obligations ‘showing respect’ rather than ‘worship’.

Gwiazda’s solution is to suppose that the obligation to worship is a ‘threshold obligation’. In some circumstances, he argues, we are obliged to carry out an action, but only because some relevant degreed properties have passed a threshold degree. Before, when they lie below that threshold, we do not have the obligation. His example is a parent’s obligation to feed her child: she can permissibly deny him food if he’s misbehaving, until his hunger passes a certain threshold, at which point she is obliged to feed him (*ibid.*). In the worship case, the perfections of a person can reach to any but the maximal degree, and we are not obliged to worship them; but at the maximal degree, they pass the threshold and we are obliged to worship that person. Because there is no obligation at all, of any kind, below the threshold, there is no risk of the obligation to worship God, because He is perfect, entailing an obligation to worship creatures because they are good, so generating a *reductio* or violation of uniqueness of the kind discussed above.

Gwiazda’s solution avoids generating the result that creatures would be worthy of worship, but does this by obscuring the analogue between creaturely and divine respect which made the respect account morally intelligible in the first place. We are left with a *sui generis* obligation to worship a maximally excellent being. Danaher picks up on this omission by pointing out that threshold obligations are a species of perfect obligation – and actions are only perfectly obligatory if they are ways of satisfying an imperfect obligation. The reason the parent becomes obliged to feed her child when the child is too hungry is because she already had a standing obligation to care for the child. When the child is not too hungry, the perfectly obligatory act which satisfies her duty of care is to discipline the child; but the specific act which will satisfy her imperfect obligation of care changes to feeding when he is too hungry (Danaher (2012), 474).

In the worship case, however, Gwiazda has not provided for an imperfect obligation which becomes ‘crystallized into a concrete course of action’ (*ibid.*), a perfectly obligatory act, in the context where we encounter God. For Gwiazda’s account to work, Danaher argues, there needs to be an imperfect obligation to worship already in place; then it ‘crystallizes’ into the perfectly obligatory act of ‘worship God’ in response to God’s threshold-crossing maximal excellence. Danaher points out that we would need to supply another account of worship

to show that such an imperfect obligation exists: 'thresholds could only be appealed to if there was pre-existing agreement [between worship advocate and critic] to the effect that worship was imperfectly obligatory or supererogatory' (*ibid.*).

To clarify what Danaher is getting at, let's return to the case of Bob and Annie. I have an imperfect obligation to give charitably, to provide for the basic needs of those who cannot supply themselves. Suppose I have plenty of money myself: if I come across Bob, my imperfect obligation imposes on me a perfect obligation to give him £500; when I encounter Annie, to give her £25. These are both different action-types – we called them 'monkeying' and 'ponying' respectively. The point Danaher is making is that monkeying is a threshold obligation, certainly – it binds me only if someone needs £500, but not when they need less – but if there were no general obligation to give to the needy, then neither would monkeying be obligatory, even when I come across Bob. And on Danaher's account, there seems to be no such general obligation.

The respect account I have developed satisfies Danaher's demands, however; there is an imperfect obligation which can generate the perfect obligation to worship God, but that general obligation does not generate the absurd consequence that we should worship any creatures. It supposes, instead, only that there is an imperfect obligation to show respect. And this imperfect obligation, when we encounter God, generates a perfect obligation to worship Him.

### **Respect is obligatory enough**

The way to resist the respect account is to deny that showing respect is obligatory. Then worship cannot be obligatory. First, the critic might argue that showing respect is only indirectly obligatory – it is morally motivated only because showing respect typically satisfies some other, more fundamental obligation. But that more fundamental obligation does not generate respect obligations in the specific case of our relationship to God. Or, second, they might suggest that showing respect is merely supererogatory, so that worship, by extension, is merely supererogatory.

There are elements of both strategies in Bayne's, Nagasawa's, and Danaher's criticisms. The former write that 'Most of us recognize various other persons as our moral superiors, yet few of us suppose that we have *obligations* to worship such persons. Perhaps we ought to recognize their moral superiority and aspire to emulate their behaviour, but these attitudes seem to fall short of worship' (Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 307).

Treating this quotation as an example of the first objection to the respect account, we can understand them as claiming that recognizing and emulating moral superiority are indirectly obligatory, as ways of helping us to satisfy the general, imperfect obligation to cultivate virtue. But, so the response continues, the act of worship does not help us to satisfy that imperfect obligation; so worship is not obligatory.

The defender of traditional norms of worship should reply that we can give an account of worship as the extreme case of any or all of these other indirect obligations. Unless there is a reason, specific to God's case, to think that recognizing His excellence, and seeking to emulate Him, would fail to satisfy our obligation to grow morally, worship will thereby be obligatory, since on the respect account, worship is (at least) the form or manifestation of moral recognition appropriate to the perfect being. It will be indirectly obligatory – but indirect obligations are obligations nevertheless.

There are other ways to interpret this passage. Suppose that Bayne and Nagasawa accept that recognizing and emulating moral superiority are obligatory. If they are directly obligatory because they are instances of respect, then worship will be obligatory as an instance of the high respect we owe to the perfect being. If they are indirectly obligatory as manifestations of respect, then worship will again be obligatory as a manifestation of our respect for the perfect being. If they are directly obligatory in and of themselves, we can notice that they come in degrees and kinds, just as respect does, and so we can generate from them structural analogues to the respect account, giving a nearby alternative account of worship which makes it obligatory because recognition and emulation of the morally superior are obligatory.

I suggest that, given the continuum between ordinary respect and respect for God set out in the respect account, the burden of proof is on the critic as to why the propriety of our 'reactive attitudes' concerning praise and blame should be confined to the creaturely case and not extended to the divine case.

Now let's consider the second line of attack: that showing respect is merely supererogatory. The propriety of praising the excellent stops short of the obligatory.<sup>12</sup> In that case, worship will not be obligatory just by being a species of showing respect. Bayne and Nagasawa's distinction between the thesis that worshipping God is reasonable, and the thesis that worshipping God is obligatory, raises this concern. They concede the former thesis, but add that:

[T]here does not seem to be any . . . entailment [between rational motivation and obligation] with respect to closely allied concepts such as love, respect, awe and admiration. Something can be *worthy* of admiration, in the sense that it is reasonable to admire it, without it being the case that all creatures capable of admiring it ought to admire it. (Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 303)

But if motivations of this kind are ever to rationally dominate other alternative actions, admiration of excellence – respect – must at least be supererogatory. If an action-type is supererogatory, however, certain extreme situations can arise in which actions among a narrower sub-type would be perfectly obligatory. Consider again our case with Bob and Annie. Perhaps giving to charity in general is not obligatory, but supererogatory; but this supererogatory motive could still provide for perfect obligations. It seems implausible to suppose that someone with plenty of money, meeting Bob or Annie face-to-face, knowing about their circumstances, would not be obliged to give them what they need to start flourishing.

As Danaher admits:

[M]ost ethicists would deem the provision of assistance to those who are in need supererogatory. Thus, even if there is no general obligation to assist, there is at least a general recognition that assistance is morally praiseworthy and it is relatively easy to imagine that praiseworthiness can shift to obligation in the particular context of [for example] the Good Samaritan case. (Danaher (2012), 474)

The respect account can appeal to this admission to generate a strong case that worship is obligatory even if respect is generally speaking only supererogatory. If we can find just one case where some instance of showing respect is obligatory because the object is more excellent, relative to a case where they are merely supererogatory, then worship will be obligatory – even if that obligation can be dominated in turn by other obligations bearing on the putative worshipper.<sup>13</sup> Such cases abound in our social practices, at least if we take them at face value. The fastest three runners deserve their medals, and it would be shameful not to reward them;<sup>14</sup> the runner who comes in last is worthy of ‘mere’ respect for being a competitor. Praising students who pass exams seems morally worthwhile; but we would be remiss to do nothing special to honour the top students.

If we criticize such examples by insisting that everyone ‘deserves’ respect in the strong sense the victors deserve respect, then we appear to have accepted that respect is obligatory. Then worship will be obligatory. Alternatively, the critic can insist that these practices all serve ulterior motives. But by that point, I suggest, the burden of proof has shifted from the defender to the critic. The respect account appeals to our ordinary moral intuitions and simply extends them to the divine case.<sup>15</sup>

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## Notes

1. I take it that the broader question is whether we have compelling moral motivation to worship God, but Swinburne, Bayne, and Nagasawa narrow this question into one of whether or not worship is obligatory, and so I use this language throughout in the hope that it can be 'translated' into other moral vocabularies to which interested parties might be committed.
2. In his *Natural History of Religion* Hume (1993) presents worship as sycophancy appropriate for human monarchs, transferred to God by confusion. Kant regards religious activities attendant on worship as morally irrelevant at best: see Ward's (1972, 150) and Reardon's (1988, 146) interpretations.
3. One can find historical analogues, however, across the Christian theological spectrum: in Aquinas, for example, who regards religious activity as a form of justice (*ST* [= Aquinas (1920)], 2a.2ae.q81.a4); and in the seventeenth-century Reformed catechism, *The Whole Duty of Man* (Anonymous (1739), 96). Aquinas' account is echoed by More (1930, 117). Hutcheson's articulation of the grounds of worship in *A System of Moral Philosophy* is strikingly similar to Swinburne's in formulation (Hutcheson (1969), 210). For a descriptive overview of the history of theological and philosophical accounts of the norms of worship, see Taylor (2005).
4. Below, I suggest how the gratitude account can be articulated in connection with the respect account I articulate, in such a way that it escapes some of Bayne and Nagasawa's objections. Yet there are remainders I do not have space to address here, which are worth mentioning to motivate my focus on the praise account: put very briefly, they worry that the intuition that only actually existing persons can be benefited by actions will mean that God does not even benefit creatures by creating them, so that none will owe Him gratitude *qua* creator, and that even if this intuition is wrong, creatures whose existence is overall bad for them will not owe God gratitude *qua* creator (Bayne & Nagasawa (2006), 307-308). Adams (1999) has argued that Christian theism includes the view that God will not create anyone whose existence is overall bad for them.
5. Wynn also makes an argument similar to Bayne and Nagasawa's as given above: 'one basic challenge for any account of worship is to point to some respect in which human beings and God differ, in order to sustain the thought that worship is a proper response to one but not the other' (Wynn (1999), 151). But, as I have argued, Swinburne's thanks and praise account already satisfies this condition, once theism is granted, since theism tells us that only God, and not us, is the creator and the perfect being; and worship is merited by the determinate properties of creating everything and maximal excellence, not the determinable properties of having granted some benefit or other and possessing some degree of perfection or other.
6. One general suggestion is to read defences of the 'no parallel' claim as cases of what Smart calls 'performative transcendence' (Smart (1978), 18), where we deny our ability to express something in order to show how it exceeds our expectations or conceptual comfort. Plausibly, performative transcendence is the kind of activity which might constitute showing respect in a way apt to a maximally excellent being; so those writing about God who are sensitive to His excellence might engage in it out of habit despite its imprecision.
7. We should distinguish between this and two other readings of this Thomistic claim: the second would be that God's excellence isn't a matter of His instantiating an abstract object, *excellence*, distinct from Him, as might be the case with creatures; the third that the excellence of God is not the same excellence as the excellence creatures participate in. Neither of these has to bear on accounts of worship, since presumably the ontological chips could fall in all sorts of ways while the phenomenology and ethics remain constant.
8. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the case of attitudes which might truly be said to be held by someone, but which are never expressed in any actions: their example was respect for a politician. If the politician is a foreigner they might never vote for her; if none of their friends or colleagues follows that



country's politics she might never come up in conversation and so receive the respecter's praise. The respect account can cope with such cases by understanding 'ordinary manifestations' of an attitude to include dispositions to act in circumstances which might never be realized. While we might think it consistent with my respecting someone that I don't in fact greet them politely because I never meet them, we would not think it consistent with my respecting them that I should be indisposed to greet them politely were I to meet them.

9. If we think only actions, but not attitudes, can be obligatory, because we have a strong view about the disconnect between the cognitive or affective states involved in attitudes on the one hand, and the sphere of moral obligation on the other, then the following account might yet work if we suppose we have obligations to act as if we had a certain attitude. If it would not, I offer two brief defences of the general claim that attitudes (or actions which cultivate them) can be obligatory. First, it can be obligatory to do actions because they produce or sustain intrinsic goods, particularly if production of them is well within one's control. Some attitudes are intrinsically valuable – such as, for example, a mother's love for her child. So the cultivation or holding of attitudes can be obligatory. Second, judging someone as having done wrong is often evidence that they have shirked an obligation. There are cases in which failure to hold, or cultivate, a certain attitude inspires a response of blame: for example, the wife who fails to continue loving her husband as he grows old and his virility and wit fade. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possible view about the disconnect between obligations and attitudes.
10. Why think that these different degrees, and perhaps kinds, of excellence merit different degrees and kinds of respect, rather than meriting a whole range of attitudes? One reason is that this picture is more parsimonious. We know that there is a degree of excellence which merits a degree of respect. We can explain many common-sense moral judgements in terms of different degrees of respect owed, without appealing to fundamentally different morally salient attitudes to ground those judgements. But the best argument would be a more comprehensive analysis of those moral judgements, and other kinds of moral language use, surrounding the attitudes and actions merited by appreciating excellence. In lieu of such a survey I have to rely on the few examples I have given here, and hope that they match the reader's experiences.
11. In connection to the previous note, consider the differences between gratitude of different degrees and kinds and different apt ways of thanksgiving; and between loyalty or devotion of different kinds and different apt ways of expressing or acting from that loyalty. If we think that gratitude and loyalty are forms of respect, then activities like gift-giving, fidelity, and sacrifice will be types of action (or restraint from action) which show respect. If we think they are not, that there are these different types of action connected to gratitude and loyalty will enable the recognition that worship could be understood as such a type of action for both or either of gratitude and loyalty, as well as respect.
12. On this position, our language about 'desert' of respect would not imply that others are obliged to show respect to the deserving, which might seem odd to readers who think that  $x$  can't deserve  $y$  unless others owe  $y$  to  $x$ .
13. Swinburne admits this much when articulating our obligations to God (Swinburne (1993), 214; *Idem* (2005), 169).
14. Perhaps our perfect obligations to give prizes in cases like this arise not from an imperfect obligation to praise excellence, but from an implicit contract between the prize-giver and the competitor, which we are obliged to fulfil. But this interpretation would not explain why the competition was worth holding in the first place.
15. An early draft of this article was presented at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion's weekly workshop, and I would like to thank the attendees for their questions and suggestions. Even earlier drafts of ideas that became this article were presented at the 2016 annual Christian Philosophy Conference at St John's Seminary Womersley, and the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers later that year, and I'd like to thank attendees of presentations at both for their advice.