

Divine Moral Goodness, Supererogation and The Euthyphro Dilemma

Abstract: How can we make sense of God’s moral goodness if God cannot be subject to moral obligations? This question is troubling for Divine Command Theorists, as if we cannot make sense of God’s moral goodness then it seems hard to see how God’s commands could be morally good. William P. Alston (1989) argues that the concept of supererogation solves this problem. If we accept the existence of acts that are morally good but not morally required then we should accept that there is no need for an act to fulfill a moral obligation in order for it to be morally good (1989 p.261). This view has been criticized by both Eleonore Stump (1992) and Josef Lombardi (2005), who claim that it is impossible for an agent who has no obligations to perform acts of supererogation. Elizabeth Drummond Young (2013) attempts to defend Alston’s solution by offering a new analysis of supererogation. In this paper I will argue first that Young fails to provide an adequate response to Lombardi’s objection. I will then provide my own defence of Alston’s proposal.

Introduction

“Do the Gods love holiness because it is holy, or is it holy because they love it?”¹

In these lines in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, Socrates raises a dilemma for those who seek to explain the relationship between a holy act and an act that is loved by the gods. If we say that acts are holy because the gods command them then this makes holiness appear arbitrary, as if the gods had loved other acts then it would be these that are holy. However, if we say that the gods love these acts because they are holy then it seems that the god has no role to play in determining which acts are holy. This dilemma is problematic for all theists but particularly so for Divine Command

¹ Plato (1889).

Theorists, those who claim that morally obligatory acts are obligatory because God commands them. Divine Command Theorists are committed to embracing the first horn of the above dilemma and accepting that if God had commanded us to perform different acts then it would be these acts that would be morally obligatory. This is problematic because on this view God's decision to command these acts appears arbitrary, as there is no reason for God to command these acts rather than any others. This dilemma is often viewed as a fatal objection for Divine Command Theory and many introductory ethics textbooks claim that it gives us sufficient reason to dismiss the view that God plays a significant role in ethics.² The aim of this paper will be to investigate whether there is any way for those who embrace this horn of the dilemma to make sense of God's moral goodness. The question of whether Divine Command Theorists can succeed in doing so is an important one. If they can then Divine Command Theorists can avoid what is taken by philosophers to be a devastating objection to their view.

The discussion will proceed as follows: In Section One I will explain in more detail this problem for divine command theorists. In Section Two I will examine William P. Alston's (1989) solution to this problem. Alston argues that an appreciation of the difference between obligation and supererogation, acts that are beyond the call of duty, allows the divine command theorist to avoid this objection. This solution can be seen as part of a broad divine command theoretical approach to responding to The Euthyphro Dilemma, which is to claim that it is only moral obligations that are to be explained by God's commands, not the full range of moral properties.³ In Section

² As pointed out by Stephen C. Evans (2013 p.89). For one example of this dismissal see James Rachels (2002 pp.46-50).

³ For similar approaches see Robert M. Adams (1975) and Philip Quinn (2005). Note, however, that although both take a broadly similar approach to responding to The

Three I will examine criticisms of Alston's solution made by both Joseph Lombardi (2005) and Eleonore Stump (1992), who argue for different reasons, that the idea of divine supererogation does not make sense. I will also make an additional criticism of the possibility of divine supererogation, based on an argument given by Klaas Kraay (2013). In Section Four I will look at one solution to the objection that divine supererogation does not make sense that has been proposed by Elizabeth Drummond Young (2013). Young argues that this objection rests on an overly narrow understanding of supererogation. By shifting the analysis of supererogation Young argues that we can make sense of an agent that is not subject to moral obligations that is capable of performing acts of supererogation. However, in Section Five I will argue that this solution fails to provide an adequate defence of Alston's position for two reasons. First, the proposed analysis of supererogation is implausible. Second, accepting this analysis of supererogation fails to provide an adequate response to the problem facing divine command theorists. I will then, in Section Six, offer my own response to the objection that divine supererogation does not make sense. I will argue that there is a way of interpreting Alston's proposal that does not depend on the notion of divine supererogation and so avoids the problems raised against divine supererogation, as well as those facing Young's proposed response. On this interpretation Alston's proposal has important implications for both Divine Command Theory and for supporters of other views facing their own Euthyphro-like dilemmas.

1. The Problem of Divine Moral Goodness

Euthyphro Dilemma, they should not be seen as responding to precisely the same issue.

As we have seen, divine command theorists are committed to saying that what makes an act morally obligatory is the fact that God commands it. This is problematic for two related reasons. First, it seems to make divine commands morally arbitrary, as God's commands are not based on any moral standard. As a result, there seems no reason for God to command these acts rather than any others. Second, as Alston explains (1989 p. 255), if God's commands are not based on any moral standard then there does not appear to be any way of making sense of the claim that God is morally good. If we take the standards for moral goodness to be determined by what God commands then the only way to make sense of God's moral goodness is to say that he follows the commands he gives himself.⁴ This is problematic for several reasons. First, it is unclear how to make sense of a being whose moral goodness is the result of following commands he has made himself. Second, even if this can be made sense of, it does not seem to capture what people have in mind when they say that God is morally good. As Alston puts it, when we think of God as being morally good, "We aren't just thinking that God practices what He preaches," (1989 p.255). Most importantly for Alston, however, is that it seems inappropriate to say that a being has a moral obligation when that being cannot fail to fulfill this obligation. He makes this claim in the following:

It can be said that agents ought to do something, or that they have duties or obligations, only where there is a possibility of an opposition to what these duties require. Obligations *bind* us, *constrain* us to act in ways we otherwise might not act. They *govern* or *regulate* our behaviour, *inhibit* some of our

⁴ For the sake of clarity in this paper I will follow Alston, Lombardi and Young in using the masculine personal pronoun to refer to God. I do not, however, mean to suggest that using this pronoun in reference to God is more fitting or appropriate than the feminine equivalent.

tendencies and *reinforce* others. We can say that a person ought to do A only where there is or could be, some resistance on her part to do A (1989 p.257).

The basic point that Alston is making here is that it only makes sense to say that an agent has a moral obligation to act in a particular way if there is a possibility that the agent could instead have performed a morally wrong act. As God necessarily conforms to what would be commanded by moral imperative, he cannot be said to have a moral obligation to conform to them (Alston 1989 p.260).

As my aim in this paper is to offer a defence of Alston's positive proposals for Divine Command Theory I will not investigate whether Alston is right to assume that God cannot be subject to moral obligations. In order for divine command theorists to give a satisfactory account of divine moral goodness, then, they must find some way for an act to be morally good without satisfying a moral obligation.

2. Alston's Solution

Alston's strategy for solving this problem is to try to find a divide between moral obligation and moral goodness (1989 p.261). If it is possible for an act to be morally good without being morally required then the fact that God can perform morally good acts without fulfilling any obligations will not be puzzling. Fortunately for the divine command theorist such a divide seems plausible due to the existence of acts of supererogation. These acts are ones that go beyond what is required by duty. They are, then, morally good without being morally required. Consider the following example, taken from J. O. Urmson's discussion of these acts:

We may imagine a squad of soldiers to be practicing the throwing of live hand grenades; a grenade slips from the hand of one of them and rolls on the

ground near the squad; one of them sacrifices his life by throwing himself on the grenade and protecting his comrades with his own body (1958 pp. 202-3).

Plausibly, this act is morally good but goes beyond what is required by duty. If we accept the possibility of supererogatory acts then, Alston claims, the question of how it is possible for a being that has no moral obligations to perform a morally good act disappears. Those who accept the existence of supererogatory acts are committed to the existence of a division between the morally good and the morally obligatory.

Alston argues (1989 p.262) that to say that an act is morally obligatory is to say more than saying that the act is morally good. It is to make the additional claim that there are general principles that lay down the conditions under which that act is required.

There is no contradiction then, in saying that an agent who is not the subject of moral obligations can nevertheless act in a morally good way.

Alston also claims that his proposal is able to avoid both horns of the Euthyphro Dilemma. However, before we examine how it might do so we will first examine whether this proposal succeeds in explaining divine moral goodness.

3. Problems For Alston's Solution

In the last section we looked at Alston's proposal that by looking to the category of the supererogatory we can save Divine Command Theory from the problem considered in the first section. In this section we will look at problems for this proposal raised by Lombardi, Stump and an additional problem that can be raised based on an argument made in a separate debate by Kraay.

The first problem we will consider is raised by Lombardi. He argues that Alston's solution to the problem rests on a misunderstanding of what it means for an act to be supererogatory as, "it makes no sense to speak of supererogation (going beyond

obligation) in the case of an agent who has no obligations in the first place,” (2005 p.314). This claim seems hard to deny; it is impossible for an agent who has no duties to perform an act that goes beyond some duty. After all, a supererogatory act is usually defined in the philosophical literature as an act that goes beyond the minimum that morality demands of an agent.⁵ The reason this is the case is simple. In order for an act to go beyond what is required by duty, there must be some other available act that is morally permissible without being morally wrong. An agent who is not subject moral obligations is not subject to any moral demands. As a result, such an agent could not perform an act that goes beyond the minimum that morality demands of him. For this reason, if we accept that God is not subject to moral obligations then we should also accept that God is unable to perform acts of supererogation, at least if we accept the traditional account of supererogation as involving acts that exceed the minimum that morality demands.

Stump provides a more lengthy criticism of Alston’s proposal. The problem she raises against this solution is that, “it isn’t clear that the category of the supererogatory can be applied to a being who is omniscient, omnipotent and supremely good,” (1992 p.478). Stump supports this claim by pointing out that when an act is supererogatory it is because we feel that performing the act would require a greater demand on the agent’s strength or resources than anyone has the right to demand from her. Stump supports this claim in the following way:

It might be morally good of [an agent] to give all she has to the poor, but no one has a right to demand of her that she impoverish herself in that way; and if

⁵ This term is coined by McNamara (1996 p.427). Benn (2014 p.59), Ferry (2012 p.574) and Hansson (Forthcoming) make similar points.

she fails to give all she has to the poor she won't have acted in ways she ought not to have (1992 pp.478-9).

In other words, what makes it morally justifiable for an agent to perform a sub-optimal act rather than the best act available is the limited amount of resources that she has available to her. Given these limited resources, donating money to the poor will have a significant negative impact on her own well-being. As a result, Stump claims that no one can demand this act from the agent. However, because God's resources are infinite this can never be the case for him (1992 p.479). This makes it hard to see how an act could ever be supererogatory for God.

One way in which someone might respond to Stump's objection is by claiming that God is capable of performing morally good acts that no one has a right to demand from him. We might think that this is problematic, as if no one has a right to demand these acts from God then we might think that they cannot be morally obligatory. If this is the case then it looks as if Stump's claim that God cannot permissibly act sub-optimally will have been shown to be false.

Stump accepts that God is capable of performing acts that are morally good but that no one has a right to demand from him (1992 p.479). However, as Stump points out, this response to her objection only works if we think that rights and obligations perfectly correlate. If we accept that it is possible to have an obligation without anyone having a corresponding right then this response gives us no reason to think that God does not have an obligation in these cases. Stump's point is that even if there are acts that no one has right to demand that God perform, it may still be the case that these acts are morally obligatory. To support this point Stump says the following:

Mercy is giving people more than they deserve or have a right to. But, as every parent knows, there are times in dealing with human persons when it seems as if it would be morally wrong not to act out of mercy. If justice would cement an adolescent in rebellion but mercy would soften his angry heart and restore him to civilized society, then (other things being equal) it seems morally wrong not to employ some mercy in dealing with him (1992 p.479).

If we accept that in this case the adolescent has no right to mercy but there is, nevertheless, a moral obligation to be merciful then we are committed to accepting that it is possible for rights and duties to come apart. If this is possible then it does not follow from the fact that no one has a right to demand that God performs some morally good act that God had no obligation to perform it and so this objection to Stump's view is unsuccessful.

The final problem that can be raised against Alston's proposal is one that can be built from an argument made in a different debate by Kraay (2013). Whilst discussing the question of whether it is possible for God to satisfice, that is to perform acts that are good enough without being the best available, Kraay argues that this would mean that it is possible for God to be morally surpassed by someone who performs the supererogatory alternative (2013 p.405).⁶ This is problematic, as God is generally thought to be an essentially morally unsurpassable being.

⁶ An interesting question that is raised by Kraay's work on the possibility of divine satisficing is whether or not this issue is separable from the issue of the supposed incompatibility between divine freedom and divine moral perfection. The problem of divine freedom is roughly, if God is morally perfect then it is logically impossible for him not to create the best possible world. However, if it is impossible God not to create the best possible then it looks like God did not create the world freely, as he was unable to do otherwise (for detailed overview of this problem see Rowe and Howard-Snyder 2008). While a full investigation of the question of how closely connected the issue of divine satisficing is to the issue of divine freedom is beyond the scope of this

Kraay points out that if it is possible to satisfice then it must be possible for that agent to perform a supererogatory act. For our purposes we are interested in the converse claim, that in order to perform a supererogatory act it must be possible for that agent to satisfice instead. This point picks up on a claim made by a number of philosophers who have written on the concept of supererogation that in order for an act to be supererogatory there needs to be an alternative act available that the agent could perform and that is not supererogatory.⁷ The reason this is the case is simple. In order for an act to go beyond what is required by duty, there must be some other available act that is morally permissible without being morally wrong. Given this point we can now raise Kraay's objection against the possibility of divine supererogation. If divine supererogation is possible then divine satisficing is possible. If divine satisficing is possible then it is possible for God to be morally surpassed. As a result, those who take God to be morally unsurpassable should reject the possibility of divine supererogation.

paper it is worth pointing out one way in which these two issues could come apart. Suppose God was faced with a choice between creating two equally good worlds and a range of inferior worlds. In this case God would have some limited freedom to choose which world to create. However, if we accept that God is essentially unsurpassable then it would still be impossible for him to satisfice by creating one of the lesser worlds. Of course, this point does nothing to solve the problem of divine freedom but it does show that it is that the issue of divine satisficing is not fully reducible to the issue of divine freedom. Another way in which these two problems are separable is that it might be possible to reconcile divine freedom with an inability to do less than best by arguing that divine freedom, unlike human freedom, does not require the ability to act in a morally suboptimal way (See Mawson 2005 for a defence of this position). On this account divine freedom can exist even if divine satisficing is impossible. However, it is possible that a solution to the problem of divine freedom may have implications for the question of whether or not divine satisficing is possible. Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to consider this issue.

⁷ McNamara offers the most explicit formulation of this idea claiming that we should understand an act being beyond the call of duty in terms of a ranking of worlds. An act is beyond the call of duty if it is higher ranked than other possible worlds *available* to the agent where she acts permissibly from then on (2011 pp.212-213). Essential to this understanding of supererogation is that the other worlds are accessible. Worlds that are not accessible to the agent are not relevant to the question of whether or not an act is supererogatory.

In this section we have seen three problems for the claim that by appealing to the concept of the supererogatory we can make sense of God's moral goodness in the absence of moral obligation. The differences between these three objections are subtle and it is worth explaining exactly how they differ. Lombardi argues that divine supererogation is impossible because God is not subject to moral obligations and so cannot perform an act that exceeds the minimum that morality demands of him. Stump on the other hand argues that, because God is omnipotent, if God is subject to moral obligations then he will be morally obliged to perform the best act available, as it is only our finite resources that limit what can be morally demanded from us. While Lombardi is pointing out the difficulty of making sense of supererogation for an agent who is not subject to any moral demands, Stump is questioning how an omnipotent moral being could be morally permitted to perform a sub-optimal act. Finally, Kraay argues that divine satisficing is impossible. The reason for this is that if divine satisficing were possible then it would be possible for God to be morally surpassed and God is essentially unsurpassable. While Stump is arguing that it would be morally impermissible for God to perform a sub-optimal act, Kraay is arguing that it would be logically impossible. All three of these objections cast doubt upon the possibility of divine supererogation and, as a result, seem to cast doubt upon Alston's solution to the Euthyphro Dilemma.

4. Young's Response

In this section we will look at Young's attempt to defend Alston's account against Lombardi's objection by arguing for a new analysis of the concept of supererogation. If successful then this response will also serve as a response to Stump's and Kraay's objections.

The reason that Lombardi gives to reject Alston's view is that it is impossible for an agent who has no obligations to perform supererogatory acts because there are no duties for such an agent to go beyond. Young starts by noting (2013 p.84) that Lombardi's objection to Alston's proposal will only work if our definition of the supererogatory makes reference to the obligatory. As Young acknowledges (2013 p.86) this is an understandable assumption because this has been the dominant approach to defining supererogation since Urmson began the contemporary discussion of supererogation in moral philosophy. Moreover, Young notes (2013 p.89) this fits well with the common view of moral evaluations that runs from the supererogatory at the top of a declining scale of acts down to the obligatory, permissible to the forbidden.

However, Young argues (2013 p.91) that despite the prevalence of this definition of the supererogatory there is good reason to move towards a new analysis of the concept. Rather than focusing on the relationship between supererogation and duty we should analyze supererogatory acts in terms of the motivation that leads agents to perform such acts. Young appeals to Patricia McGoldrick's (1984 p.90) claim that such acts are voluntary acts motivated by love. This Young claims is a better analysis of the supererogatory than definitions that reference duty. The reason Young gives to support this claim is that, "how we recognize and respond to acts as supererogatory has nothing to do with measurement against a comparable duty," (2013 p.90). This claim is supported by appeals to the moral phenomenology of both the performers and audience of supererogatory acts. From the agent's point of view, those who perform acts of supererogation report a direct, unmediated response to a situation. Young (2013 p.91) gives the example of Wesley Autrey who risked his own life to save a fellow passenger on the New York Subway. As Young describes it, in interviews after the event Autrey suggested that rather than carefully balancing the pros and cons

of action, “he saw what he had to do and just did it,” (2013 p.91). From an audience point of view the certainty with which people like Autrey act gives, claims Young, “an air of fittingness to their action,” (2013 p.92). In neither the agent nor the audience is the thought that the act is not obligatory a major part of moral phenomenology of these actions. This Young takes to support her claim that we should stop defining supererogation in reference to duty and analyze the concept in terms of the motivation of love that leads to the performance of the act.

Young claims that this proposed analysis of supererogation allows us to make sense of the idea of divine supererogation in a way that avoids Lombardi’s objection (2013 pp.94-95). By defining such acts in terms of the motivation rather than in reference to obligation we can say that it is possible for God to perform acts of supererogation without saying that God is subject to moral obligations.

Although Young does not consider Stump’s objection, accepting this account of supererogation allows us to avoid this objection too. As we have seen, Stump claimed that what makes acts supererogatory is that these acts involve too great a demand on strength or resources to be morally required for normal agents but that no act could fit this description for God. Young’s account of supererogation avoids this objection by focusing not on how much we can demand from an agent but on what motivates the agent to perform the act. We can see then that if we accept Young’s account of supererogation then we can make sense of divine supererogation that avoids both of the objections we have considered so far.

This account of supererogation will also avoid the problem built upon Kraay’s objection to divine satisficing. The problem was that in order for an act to go beyond duty there must be some less morally valuable permissible act available. Young’s

account avoids this worry by not defining supererogation in terms of duty and, as a result, making it possible for an act to meet this definition even when no alternative acts are available.

5. Why Young's Solution Does Not Work

In the last section we saw that if we accept Young's account of supererogation then we can make sense of divine supererogation in a way that avoids Lombardi and Stump's objections. However, in this section I will argue that this solution to the problem is unsuccessful for two reasons. First, there is good reason to reject Young's account of supererogation. Second, accepting this account of supererogation leaves us unable to solve the initial problem for divine command theorists.

We should reject Young's analysis of supererogation because being a voluntary act motivated by love is neither necessary nor sufficient for an act to be supererogatory. Let's start by examining why being motivated by love is not necessary for supererogation. Consider the case of Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor who dedicated his life to bringing fugitive Nazis to justice.⁸ According to Wiesenthal, the reason why he dedicated his life to this cause was not vengeance but justice.⁹

Wiesenthal's actions saw him subjected to physical attacks from neo-Nazis. He also had to suffer the emotional pain of constantly reliving his traumatic experiences.¹⁰ It isn't

⁸ In [Author's citation removed] I use this case to support a different claim, that acts of supererogation do not need to be performed by agents with altruistic intentions. I also argue against including a motivation condition in the definition of supererogation here but in this paper I will restrict my criticism of Young to the claim that being motivated by love is not necessary for supererogation.

⁹ Hence why the title of one of Wiesenthal's books is *Justice Not Vengeance* (1989). In this book Wiesenthal's friend, Peter Michael Lingens, tells of the important role that the idea of justice had in shaping Wiesenthal's view of the world from an early age (1989 p.3).

¹⁰ Wiesenthal talks of the emotional pain he put himself through here (1989 p.27) and the physical attacks here (1989 p.401).

completely clear whether Wieselthal can be said to have been motivated by a desire to benefit others with his act. Young could perhaps claim love for those that died motivated Wieselthal to act in this way. However, we might well think that it was a simple desire to bring about justice that motivated Wieselthal. Importantly, this does not seem to prevent the act from being supererogatory. If we accept this then an act does not need to be motivated by love in order to be supererogatory.

Nor do these conditions seem sufficient for an act to be supererogatory. Consider a controlling father who loves his daughter and thinks that her boyfriend is making her unhappy. Suppose the father's love for his daughter leads him to be unfriendly to the boyfriend. This act may well be one that is motivated by love for his daughter but it seems odd to describe it as supererogatory. Similarly, a terrorist may be motivated by a love for his religion to kill thousands of people. Both of these acts may be voluntary and motivated by love but neither is supererogatory.

We have seen then that Young's analysis appears to be neither necessary nor sufficient for supererogation. However, Young might respond that this is because her analysis is supposed to be revisionary. While it is true that her account does not fit with our intuitions in the cases considered above she might claim that this is because we are working with an understanding of supererogation as being defined in reference to duties. This is a strange claim to make given the long history of the term being defined by both theologians and moral philosophers as meaning 'beyond duty'.¹¹ Those who want a word to describe voluntary acts that are motivated by love should coin a new term rather than giving a new definition to an existing term with a fairly well understood meaning.

¹¹ Young accepts that this is how moral philosophers use the term. For an account of the theological origins of the term see Heyd (1982 Ch.1).

A far bigger problem for Young's account, though, is that if we define supererogation in this way, then it fails to provide a solution to the problem Alston was seeking to respond to. Remember that the problem for Divine Command Theory that Alston was responding to was that if God is not bound by moral obligations then there does not seem to be any way to account for God's moral goodness. If God's commands are not based on any moral standard then there does not appear to be any way of making sense of the claim that God is morally good. In order to solve this problem we need some way of making sense of moral goodness in the absence of moral obligation. Young's analysis of supererogation fails to provide this. If we accept Young's account of supererogation we are able to say that God performs supererogatory acts but this does not allow us to say that these acts are morally good for God to perform, as this is not part of Young's definition of 'supererogatory'. We can accept that God performs voluntary acts that are motivated by love but this gives us no explanation as to how a being that is not subject to any moral obligations can perform morally good acts. Even if we are willing to grant Young's new analysis of supererogation, then, it does not provide us with a solution to the problem facing Divine Command Theorists.

In this section I have argued that Young's solution fails to provide an adequate defence of Alston's proposed solution to the problems facing divine command theorists. First the conditions Young gives seem to be neither necessary nor sufficient for supererogation. Second, and most importantly, accepting this analysis of supererogation fails to provide us with a solution to the problem facing Divine Command Theorists.

6. Saving Alston's Proposal

So far we have considered three problems for Alston's proposed solution and how Young's response fails to provide an adequate defence of this solution against these objections. In this section I will give a different defence of Alston's proposal that is able to provide an adequate response to all three objections.

The way to save Alston's proposal is to reject the assumption, made by Lombardi, Stump and Young that its success depends on the possibility of divine supererogation. Before I begin my defence of this proposal, it is worth noting that at no point in his discussion does Alston claim that his solution to the problem facing Divine Command Theory is to claim that God performs acts of supererogation. Rather, Alston introduces supererogation into the discussion in order to 'nail down' the distinction he makes between moral goodness or value on the one hand and moral obligations, duties or 'oughts' on the other (1989 pp.261-262).

The fact that Alston introduces this distinction into the discussion does not commit him to the view that in the absence of moral obligations the only way to make sense of God's moral goodness is through his performance of acts of divine supererogation. We might instead interpret him as saying only that if we accept the possibility of acts of supererogation then we are already committed to moral goodness and moral obligation being distinct from one another. The role of supererogation in this proposal then, is not to mark out space for an act that is good but not required which we can then say are the kinds of acts God performs. Rather, supererogation is introduced to show that if we accept the possibility of acts of supererogation then we are already committed to the idea that the standards or moral goodness and badness, though obviously related in some way, are independent to the standards of right and wrong.

Once we have made this distinction then making sense of God's moral goodness in the absence of moral obligation is no longer puzzling. If we accept this distinction then we should accept that the question of whether an act is morally good is separate from the question of whether it is morally obligatory. This allows us to say that in the absence of any moral obligations it is possible for an act to be morally good. This is the point I take Alston to be making when he claims that, "S morally ought to do A' adds something to 'It would be a morally good thing for S to A,'" (1989 p.262). What Alston is claiming here is that it does not follow from the fact that an act is morally good that it will also be morally obligated. Alston is even more explicit on this point in the following:

Justice, mercy, and lovingness can be moral virtues for God as well as for man, though in His case without the extra dimension added to our virtues by the fact that exhibiting them involves satisfying our obligations. (1989 p.266).

We might accept that this is the point Alston is making but maintain that this only helps the divine command theorist if it makes sense to think of God as performing acts of supererogation. However, this does not follow from this distinction. As a number of philosophers have pointed out, there is no contradiction in explaining moral obligations in terms of divine commands but not explaining moral goodness in this way.¹²

To see why imagine a world in which there was no moral obligation but only moral goodness and badness. In this world all acts can be placed on a scale between moral goodness through moral indifference all the way down to moral badness. Without the introduction of moral obligation into this world it would not make sense to talk about

¹² See Adams (1973), Quinn (2005).

an act being morally right or morally wrong. We can only describe acts as better or worse than other acts. Now imagine that we introduce into this world a divine being who is capable of making acts morally obligatory for others but cannot himself be the subject of these obligations. While, by stipulation, this divine being would be incapable of acting in line with duty, he would be capable of performing morally good acts. In this world the divine being is only responsible for setting the standard of moral obligations. He would have no control over whether or not an act is morally good or bad. Stipulating that such a being cannot be the subject of moral obligations does not commit us to the view that this being must either perform acts of supererogation or be incapable of performing morally good acts. Instead we can simply say that his acts conform to the existing standards of moral goodness. We can say this and accept that Stump and Lombardi are right to say that the idea of divine supererogation makes little sense. What this shows is that we do not have to accept the possibility of divine supererogation in order for Alston's proposal to work.

To be clear, my claim is not that Alston's claim is that God actually was introduced into a world in which moral standards already existed. Rather, the point is that imagining such a world allows us to see that there is no contradiction in claiming that what determines whether an act is morally obligatory is separate, though perhaps related in interesting ways, from what determines whether an act is morally good or bad.¹³

¹³ We might wonder whether this is really what Alston meant by his proposal. While my aim here is not Alston exegesis there is at least some reason to think that this is what he intended. Interestingly, Stump comments in a footnote (1992 p. 487 fn.5) that in response to her paper Alston maintained that the supererogatory is sufficient but not necessary to make the divide between moral obligation and moral goodness. This suggests to me that Alston does intend this interpretation. It is important not to overstate the interpretative point. I am not claiming that this is the only acceptable

On this interpretation, then, the objections raised by Lombardi and Stump are irrelevant. We can accept that it is impossible for a being who is not subject to moral obligations to perform acts of supererogation without abandoning Alston's proposal. We can do so because on this interpretation we do not need to claim that God is capable of performing supererogatory acts in order to explain God's moral goodness. This proposal is also able to avoid the two horns of The Euthyphro Dilemma. The first horn is that if Divine Command Theory explains what makes an act morally obligatory by appealing to the fact that God has commanded the act then it appears as if God's commands are morally arbitrary, as there is no reason for God to command these acts rather than others. This account avoids this objection because it allows God's to base his decisions about what to command on pre-existing moral standards. However, unlike the standards of right and wrong these standards only cover what makes an act morally good or bad. This interpretation then, allows divine command theorists to say that while God set the standards for right and wrong his decision was not morally arbitrary, as it was based on pre-existing standards for moral goodness and badness.

Importantly, this proposal can avoid the first horn of the dilemma without getting impaled on the second. The other horn of The Euthyphro Dilemma for Divine Command Theory is that if moral obligations are not explained by God's commands then it seems as if God is not ultimately responsible for what makes an act right or wrong. On this interpretation, God is ultimately responsible for the rightness and wrongness of actions, as the standards for rightness and wrongness are fully determined by God's commands.

way to interpret Alston's proposal. Rather, I am claiming that this is one acceptable way of interpreting it.

We might think that because moral goodness and badness are not explained in reference to God's commands, there is a sense in which God is not fully responsible for determining whether an act is right or wrong. However, this objection ignores the freedom God has to choose where to set the level of moral obligations on this pre-existing scale or indeed whether to set any such standard. God could choose whether to impose a very demanding level of moral obligations, something less demanding or just refrain from imposing any moral obligations whatsoever. Before God sets such a standard an act can be morally good or bad but cannot be right or wrong. We can see then that while on this picture God does not determine what makes an act good or bad he retains significant control over what makes an act right or wrong.

Nevertheless, divine command theorists might worry that such an account does not give the divine a sufficiently central role in morality. The obvious limitation of the account we have given so far is that we now need an account of what it is for an act to be morally good. While my aim in this paper is only to defend the ability of Alston's proposal to account for divine moral goodness it is worth briefly mentioning how Alston responds to this worry. Alston responds by giving an account of moral goodness in which the supreme standard of goodness is set not by God's commands but by God's own features (1989 pp.268-270). Whereas moral obligations are determined by divine commands on Alston's view, moral goodness supervenes on every feature of God. For something to be morally good on this account just is for it to have certain properties that are properties of God. On this account, then, moral goodness pre-exists moral obligation but does not pre-exist God. It is features of God that determine what is morally good and God's commands that determine what is morally obliged. This account allows us to give an independent standard for moral goodness whilst giving God a central role in morality.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have investigated Alston's claim that an appreciation of the possibility of acts of supererogation allows for an explanation of divine moral goodness that does not depend on the claim that God is subject to moral obligations. Alston's proposal has been criticized for depending on the possibility of divine supererogation. I have argued that the way to save Alston's proposal is not, as Young proposes, to provide a new analysis of supererogation but to reject the claim that this proposal depends on the plausibility of divine supererogation. I have offered an alternative interpretation of Alston's proposal from that considered by Stump, Lombardi and Young. On this interpretation Alston introduces the concept of the supererogatory not because he thinks that God performs supererogatory acts but merely to draw the distinction between a morally good act and a morally bad act. This distinction then allows us to say that agents who are not subject to moral obligations can perform morally good acts without the need to say that in doing so they perform acts of supererogation. On this interpretation, Alston's proposal is able to avoid the objections raised against divine supererogation without being impaled by either horn of The Euthyphro Dilemma. This is important, as it offers Divine Command Theorists a way of responding to one of the main objections that is raised against their view.

In recent years versions of The Euthyphro Dilemma have been raised against a variety of ethical theories. For instance both Julia Driver and Jason Kawall consider versions of The Euthyphro Dilemma that can be raised against virtue ethical accounts of right action.¹⁴ Similarly, Nicholas Southwood considers a version of the dilemma that can be raised against contractualist theories.¹⁵ Before finishing, it is worth noting

¹⁴ See Driver (2006 p.118) and Kawall (2009 p.17).

¹⁵ (2010 p.175).

that Alston's proposal offers one form of defence strategy against such criticisms. Those seeking to defend theories of right action that depend in some way upon either what a virtuous agent would do or advise or the principles of morality that rational contractors would choose can avoid their on versions of this dilemma by acknowledging the divide between moral obligations and moral goodness. Of course the limitation of this move, as with Alston's, is that it is incumbent on anyone using this strategy to then give an account of moral goodness that is not derived from the account she has given of moral obligation. Whether it is possible for either the virtue ethicist or the contractualist to give such an account is a question worthy of investigation.

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