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Responses

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In responding here to four respected colleagues I am grateful for their perceptive, and sympathetic but not uncritical, attention to my book. I discuss their comments in an order that permits me to focus first on the good and then on the right. I begin with some remarks addressed to two of my critics at once; there follow sections addressed to each of the four individually.

Martha Nussbaum and Susan Wolf

Is the transcendent Good superfluous?

Nussbaum expresses, in passing, some inclination "to think that the high ratio of agreement on ethical substance between Adams and me is a sign that the transcendent Good does less ethical work, and autonomous ethical judgment more work, in Adams's conception of the ethical than he generally acknowledges." Wolf pursues with interest the question how much of my views about goods could be maintained without the theistic framework I propose, and comments that the latter is "certainly of little epistemological help in discovering what is good, and the idea that what is good is good because it resembles or images God is totally baffling if we are to understand the idea of resemblance or imaging literally."

I'm sure it will surprise neither commentator that my first response to these comments is that the main theoretical "work" that the conception of God as transcendent Good does in my view is not epistemological.[1] My epistemology of morals starts with ethical linguistic and belief-forming practices that precede ethical theory and are largely shared by people of different religious faiths and of none. A theory of a transcendent Good offers an account of the nature of goods initially apprehended in such practices, and thus belongs primarily to the metaphysics of morals. I certainly think that religious documents and religious beliefs can be and often are important sources of ethical discernment, and that religious convictions profoundly shape moral vision.

[1] The *Précis* that begins this symposium should help the reader to understand this paragraph.

But what is demanded, recommended, or prized in the types of religious ethics that most interest me is valued not as a mere means to a distant religious future,[2] but as intrinsically worthwhile, with a value that in most cases can commend itself to the ethical judgment of all. Such views should lead us to expect considerable convergence of ethical vision across religious lines—which in actual fact we find.

Nussbaum is right in suggesting that "autonomous ethical judgment" must do a lot of work in my view—provided that autonomy is not conceived in a way that is alien to my framework. I argue (361) that competence in an ethical practice involves a developed capacity for forming ethical beliefs of one's own, with a measure of independence and novelty, and for reasoned disagreement with other people in ethical matters; that is the extent of its autonomy. I do not conceive of autonomous ethical judgment as a principle that could compete with transcendant Good for a role in ethical theory. I don't see it as a human faculty possessing a theoretically perspicuous structure that could provide a defining and organizing principle for the moral realm, as practical rationality is supposed to do in Kantian ethical theory. It is rather a complex capacity for judgment, grounded in faculties of emotion and desire as well as reasoning—probably in different proportions in different persons of good judgment—and developed in ethical practices under strong social (and presumably also biological) influences. Its role is to discern values and obligations that I take to be independent of it, not to create them.

I have to agree with Wolf that it is not easy to see how a good meal can image God (my own example, 30). Yet we are prepared to analogize a good meal to other excellent things, such as good music, in the predicates of aesthetic appreciation and analysis that we are prepared to apply to it. Such analogies are precarious, and it is hard to identify a clear resemblance between a good meal and a good performance of the Brandenburg Concerti; but it seems that they can have a certain kinship in excellence. And if at a deeper level that kinship is a shared resemblance or analogy to an excellence so transcendent that it largely escapes our understanding, we should perhaps not be surprised if it is hard to understand that more momentous resemblance.

Martha Nussbaum

Transcendence and sainthood

Nussbaum's comments chiefly continue a discussion between us about the sort of transcendence that is an appropriate object of ethical aspiration. What I say in *Finite and Infinite Goods* about transcendence in human ethical life

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[2] There may be a distant religious future of great value—I believe in one—but why would an omnipotent God need or demand an intrinsically worthless form of life as a means to it?

grows out of an account of the transcendent character of the divine Good. I object to widely prevalent ways of thinking about divine perfection in essentially negative terms, and I approach that point by way of an observation about saints. "We often think of the saint in essentially negative terms, as someone who never, or almost never, does a no-no; or in terms of universal quantification, as a person all, or almost all, of whose actions meet a high moral and religious standard." But this is unreal. The most interesting and attractive saints "are typically rough-edged and controversial characters, liable to quite reasonable and often serious criticism from various directions. What is wonderful about them is nothing so tame as a freedom from faults, but something much more positive—and much stranger." Similarly, I argue, "in thinking about the divine perfection,...we should suppose that God's superiority exceeds our cognitive grasp in a positive direction, and is not exhausted by negative or universalizing operations on properties familiar to us" (52).

Developing the point further with regard to human ethics, I argue that there is no such thing as *complete* virtue in human beings. The only complete goodness is the divine goodness. Human goodness is always fragmentary, on the one hand; and the possibilities of human goodness, on the other hand, are open-ended, and can transcend the limits of what has seemed normal or natural. The latter sort of possibility, I think, is what is most interesting about the phenomenon of sainthood; I would emphasize that it does not carry with it completeness of virtue.

I instanced Gandhi (along with Francis of Assisi) as one of those saints who "expand the human repertoire" of goodness in this way (56). Nussbaum focuses her most forceful critique of my position on the evaluation of Gandhi. I will decline her invitation to "treat Gandhi as a moral monster"; indeed, I stand by my classification of him as a saint. I must add immediately that I agree that there are things in Gandhi's life that deserve severe moral censure, notably including his failures of awareness, respect, and consideration toward his wife and children. Also his practice, in later life, of "sleeping with young women to test his chastity," mentioned by Nussbaum, is highly offensive and shows (if it needed showing) that the potential sexual partner can be as objectified or depersonalized by sexual asceticism as by lust. Here, however, I must reemphasize that I think of saints as typically having rough edges, and do not conceive of sainthood negatively, in terms of never or almost never doing anything wrong, but rather in terms of enlarging the possibilities of good in some positive direction.

It may have been misleading on this point to speak, as I did, of sainthood as "what theists most admire...in human life" (52). That could suggest the view that a saintly life, such as I take Gandhi's to have been, is unequivocally better, more admirable, more virtuous, all things considered, than a less extraordinary but perhaps more balanced life such as Nehru's. That is not a

view I would endorse, however, and I have little confidence in comparisons of the overall virtue of lives that are admirable in such different ways. I do think there are aspects of the lives of saints that image the transcendent Good more adequately than more ordinary lives do; but I don't think that translates into comprehensive comparisons of the moral excellence of lives as wholes. Sainthood is not the same thing as virtue;[3] in my opinion it is chiefly a matter of transparency to transcendent good, and is often quite one-sided. I think the well known formal procedures for canonizing saints in the Roman Catholic Church are misleading on this point, incorporating an excessive emphasis on the negative criterion of the candidate's freedom from serious sin. Much older, less formal procedures that often responded mainly to a single exceptional feature of the life, in which the relation to the divine good was seen, may have been more appropriate to the nature of sainthood, though perhaps less suited to the needs of a religious institution.

Here I will largely pass over issues about Gandhi's political views. I believe that Nussbaum knows more than I do about the political history and situation of India, and I'm quite prepared to accept that Gandhi was unenlightened on some political issues as well as visionary and creative on others. About this I would say only, in the first place, that I don't think sainthood (or, for that matter, virtue) is to be tested by the value of its *consequences*, but rather by something more intrinsic; and in the second place, that we will have too few saints and heroes if we cannot recognize exceptional goodness in people with whom we also have political disagreements. I will not dwell on these points, as I doubt that I am in serious disagreement with Nussbaum about them.

More troubling to me is the issue Nussbaum raises about the difficulty of separating the good from the bad in Gandhi's life (or in anyone's, I suspect), and about the role of objectionable aspects of his life "in making it psychologically possible for him to do the valuable work that he did." What concerns me most here is not the conditions of Gandhi's political effectiveness. He was untraditional on the subject of caste and was still effective; perhaps he would still have been effective if he had been less traditional in his views of relations between the sexes. I doubt that effective leadership (by anyone) is compatible with as profound a suspicion of one's own appetite for power as Gandhi had in fact of his physical appetites; but I am not convinced he could not have been as successful a leader if he had judged more justly which of his desires he most needed to restrain in his relations with his wife.

The key issue, I think, is the place of asceticism, and his acceptance of a revised version of the role of a traditional Hindu holy man, in the spiritual

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[3] Virtue is an important topic of ethical theory that is not treated at length in *Finite and Infinite Goods*. I hope to discuss it more fully elsewhere.

economy of Gandhi's own life. I do not view or evaluate his conscious aspiration to sainthood in quite the same way as Nussbaum does. He certainly sought to exemplify excellences that he knew are uncommon, and that seems to me admirable. In his autobiography he has not struck me as offensively sanctimonious, nor as thinking himself superhuman, or better than everybody else. He says of himself, "Whatever is possible for me is possible even for a child." I'm sure that was false, but I think it was probably an expression of moral rigorism rather than of hypocrisy. His asceticism also was largely shared, in intention and in fact, with comrades.[4]

The issue about asceticism is harder for me, however. I have tried in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (especially in chapter 7) to develop an understanding of the possibility of loving a supreme and transcendent Good *in* loving finite goods. It is a relatively unascetical understanding, quite explicitly so, and is developed in conscious opposition to an influential rationale for thinking that an ideal of devotion to a transcendent Good entails an ascetical imperative—a rationale that is very much at home in the Platonic tradition. But I share the concern that I suppose provides the best and most important motive for asceticism. Love for finite good things can be excessive or otherwise distorted. Selfishness and sensuality are serious moral and spiritual problems. The distortion that particularly engages my attention in the "anatomy of good motives gone bad" (199) that I offer in chapter 8 is idolatry. Here too I express what may be a typically Protestant suspicion of ascetical practices, but I agree with the ascetics that some measure of detachment is needed in relation to finite goods—even finite goods that I think we ought to prize, and in some cases love (207-8).

The balance that I favor is not easy to understand, let alone to achieve; and that is a reason for sympathetic understanding of asceticism as an alternative way of trying to deal with serious problems of disordered love. Though it is not my preferred alternative, I know that many people whose lives I admire, including Gandhi, have felt it to be a spiritual necessity for them personally; and I hope not to leave the impression that I find nothing to admire in their seriousness in the matter.

Linda Zagzebski

The value of motives

My defense of an ideal of loving a supreme and transcendent Good *in* loving finite goods, to which I have just alluded, is one of the main topics of Linda Zagzebski's comments. Her initial criticism of what I have said about the evaluation of motives must simply be accepted with thanks. I should not

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[4] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover Publications, 1983), pp. ix, 282, 287.

have equated "the value of [motives' intentional] objects" with "the value of the ends they seek" (183). I agree with Zagzebski that the value of a motive may well depend on the value of its intentional object rather than on that of its end. Perhaps I should speak of evaluating motives by their intentionality.

Zagzebski makes use of this point in her main comment about the reconciliation of devotion to God with an appropriate love for finite goods. She holds that I could have solved the problem more simply by appealing to a distinction between the "end" of a valuation and a reason for it. We can love a finite good *for its own sake*, she suggests, as a final end, and not a mere means, even if our *reason* for loving it is that God loves it, or that God has commanded us to love it. Perhaps this solution will work, but I think it has its own difficulties. I agree that the reason for a valuation can be distinct from its end, but I do not see as clearly as I would like whether one person's love can be a reason, as distinct from an inspiration, for another's. I suspect it is harder to understand God's loving something or commanding us to love it as a reason for love of the object than as a reason for *wanting* or *trying* to love it.

Wanting and trying to love something are *higher order preferences*. Loves that are a fully integrated part of your life will be affirmed by higher order preferences for loving what you love. I have argued that higher order preferences motivated by love for God are one of the main ways in which love for God can provide an organizing principle for one's motivational system. Others are "a strong general disposition to value," for their own sake, things that are in fact good by virtue of faithfully imaging God in some degree; and "an attitude of being *for* the good in general," where God is in fact the supreme Good (191).

The account of obligation

Zagzebski raises an important question about my account of obligation in terms of the commands of a loving God. "But why would a loving person make demands at all?" she asks, commenting, "*Prima facie*, making demands is not a loving thing to do." My first response to this is that I do not think demands are necessarily unloving. And of course Zagzebski agrees, allowing that there can in principle be good reasons for making a demand. I suppose an uncontroversial case of a justified and possibly loving demand would be parents' injunction to small children to stay out of the street. Zagzebski suggests that only *moral* reasons could justify making demands. I doubt that this is true, unless perhaps trivially so. I think we are justified, for instance, in making demands on our students, for the sake of *intellectual* values that we want for them. If that counts as a moral reason, then I suppose any type of value can give rise to moral reasons for making demands.

What I have just said does not get to the heart of the matter, however. I believe that the possibility of making demands, and also good reasons for doing so, are intrinsic to the nature of mutually loving relationships. In marrying, two people promise to love and support each other in fundamental and comprehensive ways. In the ceremony this is expressed in the form of promises. Promises license demands, but the demands are not made explicit as such on this occasion (except perhaps by an officiating authority, if the ceremony includes an exhortation or homily). If trouble erupts in the relationship, however, it will become clear, in anger and hurt, that demands were implicitly made on both sides (some of them, perhaps, as elemental as "Don't beat me up!")

And how should it be otherwise? When people marry or form a life partnership, what they want, rightly, and usually explicitly, is a relationship in which each relies on the other for help and support in personal needs, and in which each needs the other as partner in a relationship which both prize for its own sake. Typically that is more or less explicit in the context of committing to the partnership. Neither party is signing on to be a sugar-daddy or sugar-mommy to an irresponsible child. That would not be the mutually loving relationship they want and ought to want. Extensive demands are implicit in this mutual reliance.

Commonly, I think, they are not unwelcome demands. Most of us have had the experience of feeling overburdened with responsibilities. But would we really wish to be totally without responsibilities? I doubt it. Most of us want to have a significant role or roles in relation to other people, and such roles involve having other people rely on us for things, and thus bring with them, at least implicitly, other people's demands on us. If you are a member of an orchestra or an athletic team, for instance, there is a social demand on you to show up when the group is going to play, and to try to do your part well.

Perhaps these considerations may be of some help in understanding the fact that in some religious traditions, including both the Jewish and the Calvinist, God's commandments are seen as a great gift, an object of joy and longing.

> Thy statutes have been my songs,
> in the house of my pilgrimage (Psalm 119:54 RSV).
> I am a sojourner on earth;
> hide not thy commandments from me!
> My soul is consumed with longing
> for thy ordinances at all times (Psalm 119:19-20 RSV).[5]

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[5] See also Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Psalm 19:7-14.

Having responsibilities to other people can be part of what gives meaning and value to life; how much more so, having responsibilities to God. And demands, made (often implicitly) in appropriate contexts, play a major part in the creation of responsibilities.

Zagzebski asks "why the demander should be angry when his demands are not met"—a good question. I believe that within appropriate limits anger on one side and a feeling of guilt on the other are a fitting recognition of the hurt that one party has done to the other or to the relationship or shared project to which they were mutually committed. It is appropriate for both of them, from their different standpoints, to hate the act that violates the relationship and the demands implicit in it. That said, it must be acknowledged that anger is a dangerous emotion that easily and often overflows its proper bounds in a torrent of self-indulgence.

God, of course, does not depend on us as we depend on each other, and thus may be thought to have less reason to be angry about unmet demands. On the other hand, a God who cares about people and makes demands on us for the sake of other people may still have reason to be angry about violation of those demands. And a God whose love for us is a sort of Eros, desiring something like a personal relationship with us, becomes in a way vulnerable to us, and may have something like a spouse's reasons for being angry about violation of demands involved in the relationship. Divine commands and divine anger are conceived in that way in the Bible, and (in chapter 5) I have defended a view of God as having the relevant sort of Eros.

Another deep question Zagzebski raises is "why we *have* to do what God commands." Here we may not be very far from the point at which answers come to an end. I am not sure I have more to say about the question than I have said in chapter 10, where I argue that being under a social requirement to do something is one important way of having to do it, if one has certain kinds of reasons to honor the demand; and in chapter 11, where I argue that being under a divine requirement to do something is the way of having to do it that we would have the strongest reason to honor. My view is that having (morally) to do something *consists in* being under that sort of requirement.

Philip L. Quinn

The formulation of my divine command theory

Quinn asks whether this relation of consisting in, or being constituted by, is the relation of property *identity*. He points out that in *Finite and Infinite Goods* I do not assert as clearly as I did in earlier papers that being under ethical obligation to do something is *identical* with being commanded by a loving God to do it. I don't think that in preparing the book I was conscious of stepping back from that assertion, but perhaps I have done so. More

important is the question whether I should do so. Thus far I am inclined, being asked, to reaffirm the identity claim. I think it fits the reasons for it in my theory as well as can normally be expected for claims of property identity in philosophical theories. I grant, however, that there might be reasons for me to "leave open the exact nature of the dependency relation." One such reason is that it is not part of my metaethical project to offer any general theory of properties. A more specific reason is that on my account, the metaphysical reality constituting facts of obligation is complex and should probably be considered as including, not only God's being loving and issuing commands, but also such facts as God's having created us as beings who can find God's commands reason-giving.

Perhaps I should add that I think claims of property identity in philosophical theories commonly invite as much explanation as they contribute. When I say that "moral obligation *is constituted by* divine commands," I mean that the metaphysically fundamental facts that are the truthmakers for claims about moral obligation are facts about divine commands (plus, probably, other facts about our relation to God). If I add that the relation between moral obligation and being commanded by God is one of property identity, I ascribe a certain logical structure to the relation, but I do not think I carry the analysis to a deeper metaphysical level.

Quinn also continues a debate between divine *command* and divine *will* versions of what may be called, broadly, theological voluntarism about moral obligation. Part (only part) of my critique of Mark Murphy's development and defense of the divine will version was an argument that in order to allow for at least the possibility of supererogation, theological voluntarists should want it to be possible for God to want us to do something without wanting it to be obligatory for us, and therefore without making it obligatory. I judged that this would not be possible on Murphy's theory, and suggested that his account might therefore be amended to provide that the divine volition that makes an action obligatory is not a willing that the action be done, but rather a willing that it be obligatory. But in that case, I asked, "why would God ever want something to be obligatory but not command it?" (260)

Quinn proposes, however, to make use, on Murphy's behalf, of a feature of Murphy's theory that I had passed over. The antecedent volition of God that according to Murphy constitutes moral obligation is God's not just *wanting*, but antecedently *intending*, us to do something. Accordingly, Quinn suggests that "obligatory actions are actions that God both wants us to perform and antecedently intends that we perform, while supererogatory actions are actions God wants us to perform but does not antecedently intend that we perform." This formulation is very much in keeping with Murphy's account, but seems to me to be attended with a difficulty akin to the problem that led me to set aside the formulation in terms of antecedent intentions in

the first place (259n). What is the difference between God's wanting us to do something and God's antecedently intending us to do it?

An intention is normally an intention to do something oneself. We do sometimes speak of an agent (*A*) intending another person or thing (*X*) to do something, but I think that normally implies an intention on *A*'s part to do something to see to it, or at least make it significantly more likely, that *X* will do what was intended. We may certainly say, for example, that the designer *intended* this chair to go in the living room, and that one to go in the family room; but if she didn't intend to do anything, even verbally, to bring about that result, it would surely be more accurate to say only that she *hoped* the chairs would be arranged in that way. And what, if not commanding us accordingly, does God intend to do to make it more likely that we will do what God "antecedently intends" us to do?

There is another and at least equally weighty reason for me to prefer the divine *command* version of theological voluntarism. I make a first approach to understanding the nature of obligation in general, including institutional obligation, in terms of social requirement, and seek a more perfect and more plausible candidate for constituting *moral* obligation in what *God* requires of us. "But requiring...essentially involves communicative acts" (262), which in God's case can be seen as commands.

Abraham's problem

In my book the title of chapter 12 is "Abraham's Dilemma," but perhaps I should rather have called it "Abraham's Problem," since one of my theses about it is that it is not a "moral dilemma" in one current technical sense of that phrase. That is, I deny that something commanded by God, and therefore obligatory, can also be morally wrong. On a divine command theory, the act would have to be forbidden as well as commanded by God in order to be wrong as well as obligatory; and I claim that such conflicting commands do not cohere with my divine command theory, arguing (as Quinn notes) that requirements imposed by divine commands "cannot plausibly be taken as constituting moral obligation unless they are reasonable, and it cannot be reasonable to require something contradictory or impossible" (283).

Quinn objects to this argument, pointing out quite rightly that it implies a principle of agglomeration that I have neither formulated nor defended and that might well be controversial in discussions of moral dilemmas. The agglomeration occurs when I imply that for God to require Abraham to kill his son and at the same time require him not to kill his son would be to "require something contradictory or impossible"; the impossible requirement would presumably be to kill and not kill his son. On reflection I think I should simply abandon the possibly controversial agglomeration. The intuition driving my argument was not about possibility or impossibility of per-

formance but about reasonableness or unreasonableness of requirement. I am happy to amend the argument to state that "it cannot be reasonable to impose on someone, at the same time, requirements that contradict each other."

At least as scary as the thought that God's commands might contradict each other is the thought that God might (unambiguously and without contradicting it) command something horribly evil, or at any rate one of those things that seem horribly evil to us. Quinn suggests that my framework should lead us to "expect there to be at least a few genuine divine commands that shock us." I don't think I would say quite that, but I agree, and think it important, that genuine divine commands can be disturbing and contrary to ethical beliefs that we have accepted. What I insist is that claims that God has commanded something shocking must be critically examined. I attempt such an examination with regard to a supposed divine command to kill one's son as a sacrifice, and I conclude against the reasonableness of believing in the genuineness of the command in the case as I conceive of it.

Quinn suggests that I should hold more open than I have done an epistemic possibility that God may command us, and thus impose on us a valid obligation, to kill someone as a way of offering a sacrifice to God. That is probably the weightiest and certainly the most excruciating of the issues that Quinn raises. I want to emphasize that it is an *epistemological* issue. How are theists to assess claims or suggestions that God has commanded thus-and-so?

Two recurrent themes of *Finite and Infinite Goods* bear on this question. One is the appropriateness of what I call a "critical stance" toward all ethical questions. All of God's commands and judgments are right; God is the ethical standard. But our beliefs (even the most cherished) about them must be distinguished from God's commands and judgments themselves. To fail to make that distinction is idolatry. We express our respect for the distinction between God and us by maintaining a critical stance toward ethical and theological beliefs, being ready in principle to consider arguments against any of them, though we may quite rightly be strongly attached to some of them.

A second theme is the central role that a sense or vision of the good should have in the formation of ethical and theological judgments. If we have a sense or vision of the good, many influences will have entered into it: our experience of life, and our reactions to it; innate human proclivities; childhood ethical training, and ethical beliefs we have acquired from others. If we adhere to a religion, its traditions, scriptures, and doctrines will probably have played a part in forming our ethical sense. But in any particular juncture in which we have to consider whether something has really been commanded by God, I believe we have little hope of making a judgment that is religiously or ethically sound, or even plausible, if we do not bring to the occasion a sense or vision of the good that is reasonably well formed and at least largely

sound. I believe that without some such ethical sensibility or criterion, we will have no adequate or humane way of discerning which signs are from God or how they should be interpreted.

I do not think these themes are contrary to belief in a transcendent, in large measure incomprehensible God who "screams with the hawk and laughs with the hyenas." That belief does indeed suggest that it is epistemically possible, in principle, that we are blind in our opposition to the prophet of a revival of bloody rituals of human sacrifice. But it suggests no less strongly the possibility that the purported prophet is blind. It gives no reason to suppose that we have a better or likelier way of honoring God in our judgments than by maintaining a critical stance in ethics and trying to apply to purported revelations what seems to us our own best sense of what is good. This is not to deny the possibility of divine revelation in ethics; in fact, in my book I affirm that possibility. It is rather to insist that our sense of the good should be critically engaged even in considering questions of revelation. It is such an engagement that I have tried to pursue in thinking about Abraham's dilemma; and I have tried to pursue it in detail, not just taking it for granted that there are no circumstances in which something that could be conceived as a human sacrifice could be seen credibly as commanded or invited by God, but inquiring rather about the human and religious meanings that might affect the credibility of a purported divine command in different contexts.

I see how the statement that the Good itself "screams with the hawk and laughs with the hyenas" can be read as suggesting that no human sense of value is applicable to questions of ultimate or divine goodness. But I would resist the inference (if made; I don't mean to suggest that Quinn makes it). Even the appeal of the claim about the hawk and the hyenas is hardly independent of a sense of the good. The hawk's scream and the hyena's laughter participate in a value of the world—a beauty, perhaps, or a sublimity—that does not fit easily in our ethical schemes but that certainly can strike a chord in our sense of the good, evoking our respect.

Quinn's interesting concluding comments about my refusal to decide the question, how we should respond if God confronted us with "a sign that we could not credibly fail to interpret as a genuine command from God to offer otherwise unnecessary human sacrifices" (290), prompt me to examine that question a bit further. I am sure there are decisions in the neighborhood that we should not make, but perhaps I have not identified them precisely. My theory seems to imply that if a loving God really commanded us to offer such a sacrifice, we would be under obligation to do it, in "trusting obedience," as I suggested without full endorsement (290). Perhaps what we should not try to decide in our present actual situation is a pair of questions that are largely epistemological.

(*i*) Under what circumstances are we prepared to disobey a command, having concluded that it does indeed come from a supernatural being, but that the being from which it comes cannot be a *loving* God? I have interpreted the Purka clan's abandonment of their sacrifice-demanding goddess as based on such a conclusion, and I have expressed approval of their decision on that basis (282). To decide in advance, however, that such and such evidence would justify such a conclusion and such a decision seems religiously presumptuous, and perhaps a proleptic abandonment of faith in one's deity, about whom, we are assuming, one does not actually have that disturbing evidence.

(*ii*) Under what circumstances should we conclude that a *loving* God has really commanded us to offer otherwise unnecessary human sacrifices? Here, likewise, I think it would be presumptuous, "tempting God," to decide in advance that such and such evidence would force us to draw a conclusion that (if false) would be highly insulting to God.

Refusing to decide these two epistemological issues, however, is quite consistent with deciding (*iii*) that if we were *certain* that a *loving God* had commanded a human sacrifice, then we should and would do it. Whether the theistic believer should refuse to decide this third issue is the hardest issue about decisional abstinence in this matter, but I am inclined to think it wisest not to try to decide even this issue. For in the first place, if we ever actually found ourselves in the horrendous situation, we would surely be right to distrust any conditional decision we had made before we experienced it. And in the second place, it is hardly honoring to God to think of this as an issue that demands our attention. And finally, some biblical precedents (Genesis 18:17-33; Exodus 32:7-14) suggest that if we ever concluded we were in such a situation, our first step ought perhaps to be to argue with God, in the hope that the apparent command would not be God's final decision in the matter; and it seems, again, presumptuous to set a limit to how persistent we should be in such remonstrance.

Susan Wolf

Distinctively moral obligations

Wolf objects that my account of obligation fails to capture "the notion of distinctively *moral* obligations"—the idea of obligations that "we seem to owe directly to people themselves, independently of God's endorsement." She suggests that "what we commonly understand as the sphere of moral obligations and of the associated notions of moral right and wrong may be better interpreted, as Scanlon does, in terms of what we owe *to each other*, and not as a specialized offshoot of our love or appreciation of a transcendent Good." How should I respond?

I am persuaded that there is something here that I have not accounted for in my book. Much, at least, of what we are morally obliged to do we do owe (directly, if you will) to our fellow human beings. It does not follow, of course, that we do not *also* owe it to God—as in many cases falling under the criminal law it is plausible to think that we *also* owe it to the state. But there is much that we owe to other human beings—typically to identifiable individuals who have a special entitlement to be angry or resentful, and to reproach us, if we fail in our obligation.

I do not think we owe these debts "independently of God's endorsement," or independently of relation to a transcendent Good. For what we owe to other human beings is neither all nor only those things that they in fact demand of us, but rather what they do or could *rightly* demand of us; and the latter, I believe, is determined by God's commands.

Within what God commands, however, I do think we should be able to distinguish what we owe to each other (as well as to God)—and should be able in many cases to say *to whom* we owe it. The development of a full account of this owing one another, within a theistic ethical framework, would require at least an additional chapter; here I can only suggest five principles to be included in such an account. (*i*) What we (validly, morally) owe to each other is part of what is demanded of us by God's commands, and is ultimately determined by God's commands. (*ii*) Everything we owe to other human beings can be seen as falling within the scope of a more general duty to take rightly into account, in our practical decisions, what Scanlon calls the "interests" or "the claims and status of [those] individuals."[6] (*iii*) In many cases, though not in all, if I owe something to you, you can release me from that moral obligation in a way that other people generally can't. (*iv*) Other things being equal, if another person does not perform what he or she owes to you, you may rightly feel angry or resentful about how *you* have been treated (along with others, perhaps), and you may rightly demand an apology, or some more substantial compensation for harm you have suffered in the matter. (*v*) As Scanlon agrees, what we owe to each other does not exhaust the domain of what is commonly called "morality";[7] it may be contrasted, not only with purely religious obligations such as some believe sabbath-keeping to be, but also with duties of honor and integrity, or of charity and mercy, which may be regarded (correctly, I think) as moral duties although no human individual can claim them from us as a right. I believe such ways of delineating a realm of what we owe to each other are quite compatible with the view that rightness in these matters is ultimately determined by the

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6 T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 202, 219. What we owe to human individuals are thus to be, in Scanlon's terms, things that they have "personal reasons" for demanding of us.

7 Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 171-77.

commands of God—a God, to be sure, who cares about the interests of human individuals.

Can the sphere of moral obligations be interpreted better, as Wolf suggests, or as well, without reference to commands of God? Here I will pursue a hint I voiced in the introduction to *Finite and Infinite Goods* (6) but did not pursue in the book, that if a nontheistic Platonism "would have any theory of obligation at all, it would have to take quite a different line from that which I have pursued." The best such line, I suspect, would assign to human demands much the same role that they have in my theory of obligation, but would seek the ultimate criterion of obligation in facts of value rather than in commands. A first step in this direction is easy and plausible, as far as it goes. If one is living within a social system in which a morality is generally accepted through which the society makes demands on all its members, and the members make demands on each other, then one is morally obliged to follow the requirements of that morality, *insofar as they are good requirements*. This much will be largely endorsed by any plausible substantive ethical theory, including any plausible substantive ethics of divine commands, though some theories, including mine, will seek a deeper metaphysical grounding for it.

Wolf will not be surprised that I think difficulties begin, or greatly increase, when we consider that some generally accepted moralities have been grossly deficient, and arguably all generally accepted moralities are bad in some ways. What are our moral obligations in matters in which the morality generally accepted in our society is deficient? The most obvious next move, from my point of view, if we are avoiding appeals to divine commands, is to appeal to a standard of goodness of social requirements. What we are morally obliged to do, we may think, where our society's actual demands are deficient, is to live in accordance with the *best* possible set of social requirements. If this is to yield reasonable demands, it must not mean the set of requirements that demand the best possible behavior, but rather the set of requirements it would be best to have socially accepted as a morality. They must also be requirements that include provisions addressing the situation in which we actually find ourselves.

This move has obvious kinship with some rule-utilitarian or indirect consequentialist approaches, except that I do not assume that the best set of social requirements will necessarily be the one with the best *consequences*. We get something more like Scanlon's view if we suppose that the best set of requirements will be the one that most reasonably takes into account all the reasons that the personal interests, claims, and status of human individuals would give them for demanding or objecting to possible requirements; but I don't mean to assume exactly that either.

I certainly grant at least that in any plausible ethical theory, including a plausible divine command theory, the moral requirements affirmed as actually in force must be seen as good ones (cf. 245, 255). I am skeptical, however, about the idea of "the best possible set of social requirements" and the role that is assigned to it here. (*i*) *Is* there a *best* possible set of requirements? It seems likely that there are a number of sets of possible requirements with quite diverse advantages, among which different people might reasonably make different choices. We may suspect that any confidence that there is a best here springs from a conviction that one set of requirements is *the right* one; but then that rightness remains to be explained. (*ii*) The belief that something is required under the *best possible* set of social requirements (but perhaps not under some alternatives that are good in their own way) hardly supports the sense that one morally *has to* to do it as strongly as the belief that it is demanded by *good actual* social requirements does. (*iii*) Scanlon proposes, in effect, that what is morally required is just what is required under *every* set of requirements that could reasonably be chosen. The belief that something is required in this way has no doubt more motivating force than the belief that it is required only under the *best* set of requirements (though still less force, I think, than the belief that it is required by a perfect deity, or even by a good set of actual social requirements). In respect of this proposal, however, we may wonder, in the first place, whether too little will be morally required; and in the second place, whether the idea of requirements that can reasonably be chosen must not be that of ones that can *rightly* (not wrongly) be chosen—so that again rightness remains to be explained.[8]

I remain, therefore, of the opinion that divine commands provide a more comprehensive and satisfying grounding for moral obligations than is clearly provided by considerations of goodness or reasonableness of requirements without appeal to divine commands. Of course that will hardly suffice to convince ethical theorists who do not believe in a divine commander; and it may be reasonable for them to regard moral right and wrong as grounded nontheistically in the goodness or reasonableness of requirements, even at some cost in loss of determinateness of moral obligation.

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[8] I have developed these points about Scanlon's view somewhat more fully in "Scanlon's Contractualism: Critical Notice of T. M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other*," forthcoming in *The Philosophical Review*; but I have not discussed there, as I have here, the relation of his theory to my own.