HUMAN AUTONOMY AND THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

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Abstract. It is argued here that we have good reason to aspire to be autonomous in certain ways that deserve a place in the theory of virtue, but not in some of the ways that have figured most prominently in theories of moral obligation. This grounds an argument that the sorts of autonomy to which we have reason to aspire need not be enemies of theological ethics. The focus is on the relation of autonomy to obligation in sections 1-4, and on the relation of autonomy to love in section 5.

Can theological ethics be reconciled with a proper valuation of human autonomy? To answer that question we must address a prior question: should we indeed aspire to be autonomous? If so, in what ways? And why?

I. A KANTIAN VIEW REJECTED

I begin by sketching a Kantian metaethical view that I reject. I will call it 'the Kantian view', believing that what I say about it is suggested by passages in the 'critical' works of the last decades of Kant's life. Whether it was exactly Kant's own view, it is a view inspired by Kant that undoubtedly has had, and continues to have, a great deal of influence. I think it worthwhile to think critically about that view, without getting involved in the question whether it was exactly Kant's own view or not.

According to the Kantian view, a good will, which we can have as well as God, is the sole determinant of moral obligation – and, some Kantians would add, the sole ground of any sort of real value. It is a main point of this view that in having a good will, a person is autonomous. One requirement for the relevant sort of autonomy is that the moral law

which one obeys in having a good will is a law that one legislates for oneself. Nevertheless it is also part of the Kantian view that all rational agents legislate the same moral law for themselves. That is because a second requirement for Kantian autonomy is that one is led by pure practical reason alone to legislate that law for oneself, and Kant supposes that pure practical reason leads all of us to the same moral law. The point of speaking of 'pure practical reason alone' in this context is that one is not to be led by faculties or factors external to one's own reason. If one were led by emotion, or desire for an extrinsic end, or by the opinions or desires or commands of other persons, to that extent, according to the Kantian view, one would not be autonomous but heteronomous.

That we legislate the moral law for ourselves, and are led to do so by our own pure practical reason, might also be called 'the Kantian story'. It is an odd story, representing as an exercise of my freedom – for Kant the most important exercise of my freedom – an act by which I obviously limit my freedom, subjecting it to a host of obligations. One might think that our individual autonomy is in tension, not only with theological ethics, but with any morality that places us under obligations.

That tension is not removed by the idea that our own practical reason directs us to accept the obligations. Even if we agree that it is always wisest (perhaps even by definition wisest) to follow the directions of practical reason, the wildest dreams of freedom may whisper in our ear that it would be nice if we could afford sometimes to do something really stupid. The tension between autonomy and obligation is still there. It may not be any harder to come to terms with it on the assumption that the demands of moral obligation come to us from other people and/or from God, if we value (and have reason to value) our social relations with other people and with God at least as highly as we value our own practical reason. That is the heart of my view of the relation of theology to moral obligation.

I do not believe the Kantian story. I will explain why I don't – first with reference to the idea of pure practical reason, and then, at somewhat greater length, to the idea of giving oneself the moral law.

(1) I am not aware of having a Kantian faculty of pure practical reason. This is not to say that I am not aware of choosing and acting for reasons, of reasoning about what would be good or bad, or right or wrong to do, and of choosing, at least sometimes, on the basis of what seem to me the best reasons. To that extent, I agree, I have a faculty of practical reason. But not a faculty of pure practical reason of the Kantian kind. That is,

I do not have a faculty of practical reason that can operate fruitfully without being importantly influenced by my own emotions and my own desires regarding possible consequences of my action. I also do not have a faculty of practical reason that can operate fruitfully without being importantly influenced by my awareness of the beliefs, emotions, and desires of other persons.

In my moral thinking I find that I must rely to a considerable extent on what my socialization as an analytic philosopher has led me to call 'moral intuitions'. These are beliefs, or in many cases inclinations or dispositions to believe, which are not reached by logical inference from other beliefs. They are not in that way products of reasoning, though they often serve as starting points for reasoning. They also are often targets of critical reasoning, for I do not suppose that I should embrace them uncritically. But even after they have survived critical scrutiny, they are not exactly products of reasoning. In their development and staying power they are sensitive to many features of my state of mind and my context, notably including my feelings and desires, and those that I perceive other people as having. I would trust them less rather than more, if I believed they were not sensitive to my own feelings and desires, and to those of other people.

(2) In addition to not being aware of having a Kantian faculty of pure practical reason, I have never experienced the moral law as a law that I give myself. In my first encounters with moral imperatives, undoubtedly, I experienced them as commands of my parents, and sometimes of other adults. This was not enough, by itself, to give me a conception of moral obligation, or moral rightness and wrongness. I did not have that until I saw a difference between something that was forbidden just because my parents did not want me to do it, and something that was wrong whether or not my parents actually commanded me not to do it. Not that it was up to me whether such a thing was right or wrong – rather it was wrong in such a way that it was not even up to my parents whether it was right or wrong. And I did not figure out for myself that there was such a difference; my parents made it clear to me that they recognized such a difference, and that they believed there were things that would be wrong for them to do – indeed, that would be wrong for any human being to do. In this way I encountered the moral law as a law that is binding on us in a way that we cannot achieve by legislating it for ourselves.

Obligation is distinct from any commitment we may have to fulfil the obligation. A commitment to obey the moral law I can (and even must)

give myself; the obligation to obey the moral law I cannot give myself. The moral law, and obligation, as such, meet me as a demand on me, a demand that comes to me from outside me. I may, and I in fact do, interpret the moral demand, as my parents did, as a demand from God; and to some extent I experience it as a demand from God. As such it may stand opposed to demands from fellow humans. And the plausibility of interpreting it as a demand from God has as one of its supports the more general fact that I experience the moral imperative as something I cannot give myself but must encounter as a demand of another person or persons.

My voluntary choices, to be sure, can and do contribute to shaping the particulars of my moral obligations; but it is not in general simply up to me what those particulars will be. I can give myself an obligation by making a promise or volunteering for a responsibility. In most such cases, however, there is some dependence of my obligation on the will of one or more other persons. If others do not acquiesce in my having the responsibility, my volunteering probably will not result in my acquiring an obligation. And in typical cases of obligations arising from promises, the person to whom I made the promise can voluntarily release me from the obligation, but also has a right to hold me to it.

II. THE SOCIAL NATURE OF OBLIGATION

That obligation meets me in demands of another person or persons reflects the social nature of obligation. Facts of obligation are normative facts, certainly; but they are at the same time social facts, facts about relations between persons. Obligations are obligations to someone – to someone else, someone other than oneself. Talk of 'obligations to oneself' I regard as metaphorical. It may in some contexts be an illuminating metaphor, but the supposed obligations to oneself are not binding in the same way as real obligations are.

If I have a real obligation, there is some other person or group of persons to whom I owe the fulfilment of that obligation. If the social fact of obligation is clear, they and those who sympathize with them require me to fulfil the obligation. They may or may not express the requirement as an explicit demand. In many cases, the requirement may be left implicit, as an expectation understood by all who have been initiated into the social context. The expectation may be manifested in such facts

as that if I fail to fulfil the obligation, without a good excuse, those to whom I owe it will have reason to resent the non-fulfilment, and may be angry at me.

The social character of the morality of duty, and of its grip on us, finds more acknowledgement than one might expect in the work of one of the most influential and important Kantian moralists of the twentieth century, John Rawls. One of his best-known ideas is that of an imagined 'original position', defined by certain conditions of knowledge and ignorance. Rawls argues that the correct principles of justice that would govern an ideal political society or state are those that any one of us, in the original position, would have most reason to choose to govern a society in which we would live our whole lives. This is obviously reminiscent of the Kantian story in which each of us, led by our pure practical reason, legislates for ourselves the moral law. But Rawls' view is also different from Kant's in instructive ways.

In both stories we are meant to identify with a single individual being led by reason to adopt, and agree to be bound by, a set of principles that should govern us all in our relations with each other. That is the striking point of similarity between the stories. A deeper but less obvious similarity is that for both Kant and Rawls the principles that the individual is to legislate are meant to enhance the freedom of the individual. One's freedom is limited by one's own obligations under the principles, but is more importantly enlarged by being protected by the obligations assigned to others under the principles. According to 'the universal principle of right' in Kant's *Rechtslehre*, 'Any action is right ... if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law.'[1] Similarly, Rawls' first principle of justice, to which he assigns absolute priority for the ordering of a just society, is that 'each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.'[2] The protection of free choice, thus emphasized by both authors, is an important affirmation of a form of individual autonomy.

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Mary J. Gregor, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, the volume on *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 387 (Ak 6:230).

[2] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p 53. This formulation is a little more precise than that in the 1971 first edition.

The differences between Kant and Rawls, however, are many and important. Most obviously, the Kantian story is supposed to be true – about something that really happens, perhaps in our experience in time, and certainly in the noumenal realm above time. Rawls' original position, on the other hand, is acknowledged to be an impossible fiction that could not be true of any human being – though it may be a useful exercise to imagine ourselves choosing moral or political principles under the constraints imposed in the fiction. Connected with this literary difference is a substantive difference regarding moral psychology. The Kantian story is a central piece of Kant's seriously asserted moral psychology. But when Rawls proposes to build a moral psychology to assess the likelihood that his ideally just political society would be stable, he has to leave the original position. He proposes 'three psychological laws', about human behaviour that he holds would actually tend to occur in certain social and political circumstances. They are generalizations, of considerable plausibility in my opinion as well as his, and empirically testable in principle, though he does not present actual empirical data in support of them.[3]

According to Rawls' first law, if 'family institutions are just, and ... the parents love the child and manifestly express their love by caring for his good, then the child ... comes to love them.' His second law hypothesizes a person who has acquired attachments and a realized capacity for fellow feeling as predicted by the first law, and is living under social arrangements that are 'publicly known by all to be just'. It predicts that 'this person develops ties of friendly feeling and trust toward others in the association, as they with evident intention comply with their duties and obligations, and live up to the ideals of their station'. Rawls' third law hypothesizes a person who has lived in the favourable conditions, and developed the personal attachments and capacity for fellow feeling that are envisaged in the first two laws. It predicts that 'this person acquires the corresponding sense of justice as he recognizes that he and those for whom he cares are ... beneficiaries of these arrangements'.[4]

[3] In footnotes Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, pp. 402-11, especially p. 403*n*6) cites a wide variety of studies, both armchair and empirical, by philosophers, social psychologists, and educational theorists (notably including Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg). But so far as I am aware, the empirical literature on the subject does not provide decisive confirmation of any such laws.

[4] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp 490-91. I quote this passage from the first edition.

These 'laws' do not describe an individual arriving at a moral stance by a wholly self-generated exercise of pure practical reason and voluntary choice. Rather, they describe a process of moral development, conditioned by social relationships, and involving affective as well as cognitive responses to them. The individual is described as acquiring not a theory, but a sense, of justice. His (or her) willingness to comply with demands of justice, and positively to support just arrangements, is not seen as unconditional commitment to obey a categorical imperative, regardless of consequences, and of whether other people obey it too. Indeed Rawls rejects 'the doctrine of the purely conscientious act ..., that the highest moral motive is the desire to do what is right and just simply because it is right and just'. He rejects as well the view that 'the desire to do what is right because doing this increases human happiness, or because it tends to promote equality, ... [is] less morally worthy'. He regards such doctrines as irrational.[5]

In Rawls' view, rather, the individual's willing support for just arrangements and their requirements is seen as socially motivated. It is motivated by 'love' and 'friendly feeling' for other people who love him or her, or have at least proved themselves reliably benevolent toward the individual. It is also seen as motivated by a perception that the just social and political arrangements have beneficial consequences for the individual 'and those for whom he [or she] cares'. As Rawls states, his 'account of the development of morality supposes that affection for particular persons plays an essential part in the acquisition of morality.' He says the question, 'how far these attitudes are [still] required for ... moral motivation [at a later stage] can be left open', but adds that he would find it 'surprising if these attachments were not to some degree [still] necessary'.[6]

Rawls lays primary emphasis on his belief that persons growing up in loving families and loyally friendly associations in a substantially fair and just society would tend to value very highly the principles of justice prevailing in that society, for the sake of their role in structuring fair and beneficial social relations. The firm will of such people to uphold those principles and comply with their demands would be a crucial support for the stability of the just society that Rawls envisages. I will add that such

[5] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, p. 418.
[6] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, p. 426.

positive valuation of ethical principles can also play a part in constituting a morally important form of individual autonomy.

But before moving on to that point we should take note of a less autonomous, and less warm and sunny, aspect of moral motivation – namely, the awareness of moral obligation as a demand or requirement laid on us by other persons. That there are certain sorts of behaviour that other people will not tolerate is something that we have known since early childhood – something that is involved in knowing, for instance, what a police officer is. And we still know that. None of us, probably, should be too sure that our behaviour would not be affected for the worse if we did not know it. It is a background aspect of our lived moral awareness, our awareness of facts of obligation as social facts.

This sterner sort of moral awareness is not showcased in Rawls' three laws, but it is by no means absent from his whole account of the 'moral sentiments' and their development. In relation to the stages represented by the first and second laws, in particular, he states that 'parental norms are experienced as constraints', and that at the second stage 'the common sense rules of morality' and 'the moral standards appropriate to the individual's role in ... various associations' are 'impressed on [the individual] by the approval and disapproval of those in authority, or by the other members of the group'.[7] Rawls clearly regards his third stage 'morality of principles' as more autonomous; but (as I read him) it is not exempted from his general account of guilt, which he connects with 'the concept of right', whereas shame is connected with 'the concept of good'. According to Rawls,

> one who feels guilty, recognizing his action as a transgression of the legitimate claims of others, expects them to resent his conduct and to penalize him in various ways. He also assumes that third parties will be indignant with him. Someone who feels guilty ... is apprehensive about the resentment and indignation of others ...[8]

In this way, we may say, awareness of the fact or possibility of guilt, which accompanies our awareness of moral obligation as its shadow, so to speak, expresses our awareness of being required, in various ways, by other persons, to fulfil our obligations.

[7] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, pp. 407, 409.
[8] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, pp. 423-4.

III. AUTONOMY AS INTEGRITY AND AS INDEPENDENT-MINDEDNESS

I return now to my suggestion that we can see a morally important form of individual autonomy in acting from one's own positive valuation of ethical principles, even if one's coming to that positive valuation was in many ways socially conditioned. Here we begin to think about autonomy, not as an aspect of human nature, or a source or explanation of moral obligation, but as a virtue, an intrinsically excellent personal quality, and a source and explanation of moral behaviour.

I did not create myself out of nothing, and I could not have done that. I am a creature of God and a child of my parents. Neither did I create my morality out of nothing, nor could I have done that. My morality has been shaped in various ways by my own thinking, feeling, and acting; but it began with my initiation into an ethical culture that had been developed over many generations. And no doubt it is still much more like than unlike the morality of those with whom I have been most closely associated. Were that not so, our social conflicts would be grievous indeed. It would be ridiculous to aspire to a moral autonomy that would consist in living by a morality of which one is the sole creator, not even influenced by the morality of those other persons whom one respects most highly.

Other ways of living remain, however, that may reasonably be regarded as versions of autonomy and as worthy objects of aspiration. One of them I will call moral integration. It is an ability, and disposition, to govern one's life in accordance with one's own views and feelings, one's own attitudes, aims, and commitments, and especially with those that one values most highly and most persistently. It is an important excellence or strength of character; perhaps indeed it simply *is* strength of character – a trait without which one's moral virtue can at best be sadly limited. Just how virtuous it is to be autonomous in this way will depend, of course, on how virtuous the individual's predominant attitudes, aims, and commitments are. But in acting morally correctly in a way that reflects one's own deepest views and feelings, aims and attitudes, one is certainly more virtuous than one would be in following correct moral principles without much attachment to them, simply as a matter of habit, or social convenience, or safety.

And such deep and integrated commitment to moral views and principles is surely a more durable and reliable source of moral action

than one would be likely to have with a less autonomous style of self-government. That view is supported by common sense, and consistent with contemporary research in social psychology.[9] If a sense of justice is to be strong support of the sort of stability that Rawls argues that his ideally just political society would have, it must inspire motivation that amounts to autonomy of this sort.

Another virtuous version of autonomy that requires discussion here may be called moral independent-mindedness. It presupposes the consistent self-government and centred prioritization of motives characteristic of moral integration, but it involves something more than that: a developed ability and disposition to think for oneself about ethical questions and situations.

Our moral need for independent-mindedness is underlined by empirical research in social psychology (for example, Stanley Milgram's famous experiments on obedience to authority).[10] A general factor emerging in such research of social psychologists seems to me to have more fundamental significance for a theory of virtue.[11] It has been suggested that 'there is a single thread that runs through social psychology's discoveries of people acting in surprising and demoralizing ways: people's understandings of the world ... are strongly influenced by what they take to be other people's perceptions...'[12] I would add that the empirical evidence suggests that we are similarly influenced by what we take to be other people's expectations. More generally, we are strongly motivated to be, and to seem to be, in tune with our social surroundings, and especially with those around us who seem to have some authority.

That is not a totally bad thing. Such a drive for attunement with those around us is equipment for our multi-dimensional cooperation with each other as social animals. Without it perhaps we would not have been able, for instance, to learn a language. It makes us vulnerable, however, to temptations of social conformity. They are a very important category of moral temptations: Much of the most appalling moral wrong done by human beings occurs in following a crowd to do evil.

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[9] Cf. Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), chapters 8 and 9, especially pp. 130-38.

[10] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (London: Tavistock, 1974).

[11] Here, and in the remainder of my discussion of moral independent-mindedness, I draw at more than one point in my discussion in *A Theory of Virtue*, pp. 153-55.

[12] John Sabini and Maury Silver, 'Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued', *Ethics*, 115 (2005), 535-562 (p. 559).

This is a category of temptations that does not receive its due in traditional lists of the virtues. To deal with temptations of fear, the list has included courage. To deal with temptations of pleasure and physical desire, it has included moderation. What is the virtue of dealing well with temptations of social conformity? We can hardly raise that question without realizing that we do not have a standard answer to it. I suggest that moral independent-mindedness is the virtue we are looking for.

At the heart of this virtue, the habit of thinking for oneself involves a certain critical stance, a readiness to question, particularly in moral matters, one's own opinions and aims, and those of everyone else. At the same time moral independent-mindedness involves an ability and disposition to act with some confidence on conclusions one reaches in one's thinking, even if they do not agree with those of other people. Contrasted with this virtue are vices of deficiency and excess: social conformism, as a deficiency, on the one hand; and an excess of moral self-confidence, or even a contempt for the views and aims of other people, on the other hand.

IV. AUTHORITY, INDEPENDENT-MINDEDNESS, AND GOD

Persons or institutions have authority insofar as they are authorized to act, at their discretion, on behalf of some person, or group or organization of persons, or to decide how those persons will or should act, and treat each other, or what their structures for cooperation, and their policies and practices in relation to other groups, should be. Social groups of large or medium size, and some smaller groups, seem to need to have leaders with some measure of authority in that sense if they are to cooperate effectively and avoid unnecessary conflict. Recognition of authority, and deference to authority, are therefore part of ordinary life in almost every human culture. As we come to understand how our societies work, most of us conclude that it is good to have some people authorized to make certain kinds of decisions on behalf of all of us. And if we start a new organization we will very likely give some individual or group authority to act on its behalf, and to coordinate our cooperative endeavours as an organization.

In recognizing, or bestowing, authority, or in being born and growing up in a society that bestows authority on its leaders, one is apt to acquire obligations to obey or comply with the directions of those in authority.

These may be obligations to those in authority or to other members of the society, or commonly to both. In everyday life we routinely, and often casually, accept obligations of this sort: legal obligations, obligations to comply with the instructions of supervisors at work, obligations to collaborate in accordance with decisions of the organizers of a conference in which we participate, or the coach of a team to which we belong, or the conductor of a band in which we play or a choir in which we sing.

Can we be independent-minded in our acceptance of these obligations? It may seem that we cannot. The middle of a concert or a football game hardly seems the right time for a critical stance, or a readiness to question the direction of the conductor or the commands of the coach. More to the point, the middle of a combat operation or a violent crime scene may well seem not to be the right place for a soldier or a police officer to question critically the command of a superior officer. Yet in some situations of those types, those in authority have certainly issued orders that morally ought not to have been obeyed. Clearly there can be a tension between our ordinary and usually justified, or even urgently needed, deference to established authority, and our need for independent-mindedness as a barrier to stop us from immoral obedience to immoral directives that may come from people in authority.

I have suggested that the virtue of independent-mindedness can be seen as a mean between vices of too much and too little deference to the views and aims of other people. The quantitative form of the expressions 'too much' and 'too little' could mislead us here, however. The question that the virtuously independent-minded person must always keep at least in the back of her mind is not how much deference, or obedience, is too much, and how much is too little, but in what cases deference is owed, and in what cases obedience would be wrong. But the independent-thinking person needs not only to seek right answers to the latter questions; she also needs to give unhesitating obedience to authoritative directives when that is right and urgent, while retaining a sensitivity that would bring the critical stance rapidly into play if an immoral directive were given. Such a sensitivity might well be an aspect of autonomy as moral integration. And it might help to have thought in advance, in a cool hour, about what sorts of command it would be morally wrong to obey.

Here, since our topic is autonomy and theological ethics, we may turn our attention to God's authority and God's commands. First I will sketch a line of argument I have developed more fully elsewhere,[13] in support

of the view that a grounding of moral obligation in God's authority and God's commands can support the social demand character of the obligation, and at the same time can support its objective validity more adequately than any merely human demands can. Then I will reflect at greater length on the question whether there is any place for the virtue of independent-mindedness in our relation to God's authority and God's commands.

The notion of divine commands plainly applies to God an analogy drawn from human institutions. A conjectural history of the conception of moral obligation might begin with social practices of commanding and obeying, and associated roles of authority. These practices will have involved a conception of obligation, though probably not a fully moral conception at first. For initially no distinction may have been drawn between what is required by human authorities and what is truly, objectively, or morally required.

At some point, however, it will have been realized that actual human social requirements are often not good enough to constitute an adequate basis for moral obligation. Experiences of conflicting social demands, and abuse of authority, inspire thoughts of a moral demand that may be superior to the demands of human authorities. Belief in superior personal powers or gods, with whom we may be seen as having a social relationship of some kind, suggests the obvious hypothesis as to the source of such a superior demand. Thus a divine command theory of the nature of moral obligation might arise as an idealized version of a social requirement account of the matter. I suspect that this conjectural history approximates the actual history of the conception of moral obligation in more than one society.

My argument continues with reflection on the question, what reasons should move us to comply with God's directives. I do not begin with, nor even include as a reason, the consideration that God is supremely powerful and can force us to obey, or can punish us for disobeying and reward us for obeying. That would be the wrong sort of reason to motivate an autonomous obedience. Like the reasons that Rawls proposes for supporting principles of justice, the reasons on which I wish to focus here are reasons for valuing social bonds – in this case a social bond or relationship with God.

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[13] Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 11.

Developmentally, in Rawls' account, the first reason for valuing a social relationship is that it is a relationship to someone who is good to us. The child comes to love the parents because they 'love the child and manifestly express their love by caring for his good'. Similarly, if God is our creator, if God loves us, if God gives us all the good we enjoy, if God has made a covenant of faithful friendship with us, if God has become incarnate and even died for us to be our friend, to rescue us from our own perversity, to bring us to the greatest good – those are all among the reasons that theistic religion has found for valuing our relation to God. It is no accident that the Ten Commandments, in the Bible, begins with the reminder, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Exodus 20:2).

A second type of reason for valuing a social relationship is admiration for one's partner in the relationship. '[M]oral exemplars, that is, persons who are in various ways admired and who exhibit in high degree the ideal corresponding to their position' play a part in Rawls' account of our valuing just relationships.[14] This type of reason obviously plays a part in devotion to God. God is conceived as the most perfect, intrinsically the most excellent and admirable being. That is a central theme – I think the central theme – of theistic worship as such. I would push that theme further, into metaethics. Classic theistic philosophical traditions have ascribed to God the role assigned to the Form of the Good in Plato's Republic: the role of the Good itself, the exemplar and standard of excellence by which all other intrinsic excellence is objectively measured.[15]

A third type of reason for accepting requirements laid upon us in a social relationship is that we recognize the requirements themselves as good, either intrinsically in themselves or as reasonable in view of beneficial consequences that they have. Thus Rawls' 'third law' envisages a person coming to honour the requirements imposed by a just political order 'as he recognizes that he and those for whom he cares are ... beneficiaries of these arrangements'. Similarly, in accepting God as the supreme moral authority it is crucial (and normally believed) that God's commands spring from a design and purpose that is good, and that the behaviour that God commands is not bad, but good, either intrinsically or in its effects.

[14] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, p. 413.

[15] A view of this type is defended in Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, especially chapters 1 and 2.

Against that background, we must raise the question whether there is a place for autonomy as independent-mindedness, and its critical stance, in relation to God's moral authority. I believe there is. Except insofar as theists are engaged with doubts about their faith, their independent-mindedness will not normally be manifested in questioning whether it is right to obey God, or entertaining the thought that perhaps they ought to disobey God. But that leaves plenty of room for critically questioning whether commands that are alleged to be God's really are from God, or whether they have been correctly interpreted and understood.

Independent-mindedness of this sort seems to me to be a requirement of theism. A temptation that is hardly separable from religion is that of idolatry – specifically, of failing to distinguish one's own religion from God. Idolatry is misidentification of God.[16] Avoiding it requires independent-mindedness. It also requires balancing independent-mindedness with openness (reflective rather than unreflective openness) to influence of criticism from others. Both of these, therefore, have a part to play in devotion to God.

V. AUTONOMY AND LOVE[17]

The divine command theory sketched above is not a complete theological metaethics. It gives an account of only one of our central moral concepts – that of moral obligation. The rationale I have given for it plainly presupposes other ethical concepts for which I do not think it would be plausible to give an account in terms of commands (God's or anyone else's). Specifically, it presupposes concepts of value – specifically, of what is beneficial, or good for a person, and of intrinsic excellence which is worthy of admiration (or of worship, in the case of supreme excellence). In trying to develop a complete theological ethics and metaethics, in fact, I would not begin with divine commands but with God as the supreme Good and the standard of all other intrinsic value. In such a theological ethics, obedience to divine commands has a place, but is not the most central human response that is sought. The central response is worship, or more broadly, love.

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[16] Cf. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, pp. 209-13.

[17] In much of section 5 I am remapping ground covered in parts of my paper on 'Christian Liberty', in Thomas V. Morris (ed.), *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 151-71.

Jesus is famously quoted as identifying two commandments in the Hebrew Bible as the most important of all. 'The first is, "... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."'[18] The content of these commands stands in a somewhat paradoxical relation to their imperative form. Love may indeed be demanded, but where love is at the centre of a life, the role of obedience to commands must be limited. For obedience and love compete with each other as motives. Where obedience is my motive, it focuses my attention on my own action and its conformity or nonconformity with a command. But where love is my motive, it focuses my attention on the object of my love. Perhaps the objects of those motives may coincide, if the object of love is a command. But in loving God or one's neighbour, the object is presumably much more than any command.

No doubt we have obligations, and no doubt they are needed. But obligation that is morally compelling has its home in personal relationships. And in those personal relationships there are bonds that are prior, motivationally, to the obligations. There are 'attachments' or 'affection for particular persons', as Rawls puts it, or 'love' as we might say in a theological ethics.

In the 'farewell discourse' in the Gospel according to John (15:12-15), Jesus is reported as saying to his disciples,

> This is my commandment, that you love each other as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you.

Then he adds,

> I no longer call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.

In those words being friends of Jesus – and no doubt, by implication, friends of God – is linked with obeying a version of the command of neighbour-love. And in almost the same breath being friends of Jesus is linked with not being slaves – not being slaves of Jesus, at any rate, and by implication, I think, not being slaves in relation to God. And in relation to God, being friends rather than slaves is linked with knowing, through Jesus, what God is doing. I find this concatenation of ideas very suggestive for our topic.

[18] Mark 12:28-31, quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18.

If we seek a word in the New Testament that corresponds with our word 'autonomy', we might think first of 'freedom', '*eleutheria*' in Greek. This word had less individualistic connotations in the social context of the New Testament than 'freedom' does in much of our discourse. It did imply exemption from some types of social constraint; but more fundamentally it signified a social position. The free person, the *eleutheros* in the literal sense, was precisely a person who was not a slave – who was not owned by a master, as a horse or a plough might be owned – someone who did not belong to another person in that way.

To want someone as a friend is also to want him or her to belong to you, but in a very different way. Friends want to have claims on each other, which will constrain their choices in some ways. But friends, as such, are less interested in controlling each other than in sharing in each other's being themselves, speaking their own minds and acting in their own integrity.

Friends share. They share things; they share experiences; they exchange thoughts and feelings; they share projects. A friendship itself is indeed a shared project. This brings us back to John 15:15. Why is it that God's friends are to know what God is doing? The point, I take it, is that whereas God's slaves, if God had slaves, would only need to know what God told them to do, God's friends are to share projects with God. And if they are to enter into God's projects and make them their own, they need to understand the projects, so as to recognize what will and won't serve to fulfil them.

In the text I have quoted, Jesus tells his disciples that if they do what he commands them, they are his friends. They enter into a common project with him. And the command he gives them is that they are to love each other. The common project is love. They are to enter into God's project by loving what God loves. And Jesus offers them understanding of the project. They are called, not to blind obedience, but to vision – called to understand what God is doing, and discern what they can do to participate in the project.

What Jesus asks from his friends in these sayings is something like what I called 'moral integration' in section 3. In this case it is an integration centred in love. God's love for people is to become their love for people too; their lives are to cohere with that love as a central and controlling value. Their action is to flow from their own loving, and from their own discerning how that love may be fulfilled. Yet that is not

to be separate from their entering into God's love, and understanding what God is doing.

I used to speak of 'theonomy' in this connection, quoting Paul Tillich's formulation, that 'Theonomy asserts that [God's] law is, at the same time, the innermost law of man himself, rooted in the divine ground which is man's own ground'.[19] I said that the ideal proposed in these sayings from John's Gospel 'is not one of heteronomous subjection to a law whose motives are alien to the human agent; it is an ideal of theonomous permeation of the human faculties by the Spirit of God, so that the human agent comes to love what God loves and to see ethical priorities as God sees them'. Much of that formulation still seems to me apt. What is envisaged in the sayings is loving what God loves (loving it for its own sake, as well as for God's sake) and seeing ethical priorities as God sees them. And those motives are not to be alien to the human agent. They are to be the human agent's own deepest motives. But I now think it was misleading to use the term 'theonomous' here. For the motive whose possibility I wish to affirm in this context is not a law – not even an innermost law in the agent – but simply a love.

For the same reason perhaps 'autonomy' also is not the best term to use in this context. It carries connotations – or even implications – of law (*nomos*), which are certainly intended in a Kantian context. But the focus in the Jesus sayings of John 15:12-15 is not on government of lives by laws or rules, but motivation of lives by love. Laws and rules certainly have their place in human life. Societies need them for social peace and cooperation. And personal rules and principles can help us individually to resist temptations and live more productively. They can play a part in the virtue of consistency and living by one's own deepest values that I call moral integration.

To speak of a moral integration centred in friendship with God and with other friends of God, however, is to speak of something more than principled self-government. It is to speak of a system of loves that imprint their own organization on one's life – an organization of motives and not primarily of rules or laws. It is like principled self-government in engaging and drawing out what is central to one's selfhood. Friendship requires engagement and expression of the selfhood of each of the friends. But that involves much more than rules or laws.

[19] Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, abridged edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 56-57; and Adams, 'Christian Liberty', p. 157.