'CAN A PHILOSOPHICAL JUSTIFICATION OF ETHICS BE AUTONOMOUS WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF GOD IN GROUNDING MORAL FACTS?'

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Abstract. Autonomy and ethics are related to each other in complex ways. The paper starts by distinguishing and characterizing three basic dimensions of this relation. It proceeds by arguing for the compatibility of moral realism with a due respect for human autonomy. Nevertheless, supernaturalist moral realism seems to pose a special challenge for the autonomy of ethics as a self-standing normative realm. The paper ends with some considerations on the role of divine authority both in metaethics and in the general theory of value.

'Can a philosophical justification of ethics be autonomous while acknowledging the role of God in grounding moral facts?' Before addressing this question, which was raised at a workshop with the title *Divine Motivation vs. Human Autonomy? Metaethics Between Autonomy and Heteronomy* (and for which this paper has been written), the multiple ways in which it can be understood must first be disentangled. This is due to the fact that autonomy plays at least three different roles in thinking about the problem of how God and ethics might be related to each other:

Firstly, human autonomy is undoubtedly a genuine good that ought to be respected by an adequate religious ethics. But how is human autonomy compatible with a conception of moral norms that grounds itself in the will of another, moreover, omniscient and omnipotent being, i.e. God?

Secondly, whereas in this first role it is *human* autonomy that is at stake, it might be the autonomy of *morals* itself that is cause for concern: Richard Hare for instance claims that the autonomy of morals has become part of the very meaning of the concept of morality: "Ever since Kant, it has been *possible* for people to insist on the autonomy of morals – its independence of human or divine authority. Indeed it has been *necessary*, if they were to think morally, in the sense in which that word is now generally understood." (R. Hare 1992, 30). If Hare's thesis holds true, a theonomic conception of morals must be misguided on conceptual grounds – it is incompatible with how we post-Kantians use the very term 'morals'.

A *third* way of understanding the problem does not ask – unlike the second formulation of the issue – how to defend the *autonomy of ethics* (independently of the concrete form that ethics may take), but rather how an *ethics of autonomy* might be compatible with attributing God a crucial role in the constitution of moral facts. An ethics of autonomy considers moral normativity as being constituted by the self-legislating activity of practical reason; it thus belongs to the constructivist paradigm in meta-ethics, according to which the task of practical reason is not to bring us into contact with an independently existing realm of moral values, but rather to constitute moral normativity by the very activity of determining oneself according to principles that people prescribe to themselves qua rational beings. A theonomic conception of moral normativity seems even more difficult to reconcile with the idea of such an ethics of autonomy than with the idea of the autonomy of ethics: If moral facts are construed by some process which owes its authority to practical reason, there seems no place left for God. After all, a divine will intervening in that process seems to constitute a paradigmatic example of heteronomous interference that threatens to distort the core of moral normativity with external rewards and punishments.

Although these three dimensions of the autonomy-problem should be addressed separately, they are highly intertwined: An ethics of autonomy for instance seems ideally suited to preserve individual autonomy and offers an attractive way of defending the independence of ethics against both human and divine authority. On the other hand, moral realists who reject the constructivist idea of an ethics of autonomy often struggle with the so-called argument from autonomy, i.e. the charge that the existence of an independent realm of moral values necessarily undermines our autonomy as agents. Therefore, the problem exists even before a divine

agent enters the scene, an agent that, according to some versions of supernaturalistic meta-ethics, plays a crucial role in constituting moral reality. The grounding of moral facts in a divine agent seems however to aggravate that problem. In addition, such a supernaturalistic position also stands in tension with the idea of the autonomy of morals itself – instead of being autonomous, moral normativity seems to be swallowed up by divine authority.

Of the three respects in which autonomy takes center stage in ethics mentioned above, it is certainly the first that is the hardest to give up. A theonomic conception of ethics might very well join non-naturalist moral realists in rejecting the constructivist approach of an ethics of autonomy. At the least, it might qualify the idea that ethics itself has to be an autonomous normative sphere. But it nonetheless needs to show why it does not require the sacrifice of human autonomy: Not just for substantive moral reasons – a benevolent God seems to owe our autonomy due respect – but also because the idea of addressing autonomous agents seems to be part and parcel of moral normativity itself. A theory that disregards this constraint would hardly count as a theory of moral normativity at all. It is no coincidence that philosophers like James Rachels have taken human autonomy as the starting-point for an argument that is meant to prove the nonexistence of God. The idea is that any being who fills the role of being God is necessarily worthy of worship. This in turn requires total subservience on the part of God's creatures. Being subservient in this way however, as Rachels argues, is incompatible with the concept of an autonomous agent (cf. Rachels 1971, 325-337).[1] It goes without saying that sacrificing the autonomy of moral agents is not a promising way to refute such an argument.

In what follows I will make some tentative suggestions as to how to sort out the complicated issues that make up the three-dimensional problem just outlined: In a first step, I am going to argue that a moral realism which considers moral values as entirely independent from human attitudes is compatible with human autonomy. There is thus no need to embrace an ethics of autonomy as the only way to accommodate human autonomy. Nonetheless, there might of course be other reasons for a constructivist ethics of autonomy that are beyond the scope of this paper. For instance, it might be argued that constructivism carries less metaphysical baggage than moral realism since it avoids commitments

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[1] For a critical discussion of this argument see Quinn 1973.

to evaluative or deontic facts and is therefore not subject to Mackie-style arguments from queerness. But even if it can be established that moral realism in general respects human autonomy, the claim that supernaturalistic versions of moral realism are also exempt from the criticism needs a separate defense. In a second step, I will explore the stance a theist should adopt towards the autonomy of ethics-thesis. As will be shown, both adopting and rejecting this thesis comes at a considerable price. I will conclude with some suggestions regarding the role divine authority should play in the theory of value and in meta-ethics. Addressing that issue will require introducing some further distinctions concerning the kinds, sources and scope of divine authority.

I.

An influential argument against moral realism (especially popular among those who, like Kantians or Neo-Kantians, subscribe to an ethics of autonomy in the sense defined above) claims that acknowledging the existence of evaluative or deontic moral facts completely independent of human attitudes (be they rational or orectic ones) *ipso facto* undermines human autonomy. But why think that? One might argue that subjecting human will to any authority that is not the product of rational self-legislation is incompatible with human autonomy. But such an argument fails for various reasons:

Firstly, it just restates the constructivist position and therefore begs the question against the realist. In areas besides morals, we are ready to acknowledge the existence of truths not of our own making without feeling compromised in our autonomy. As Russ Shafer-Landau memorably puts it: "It is not a restriction on autonomy that one can't make two and two equal five." (Shafer-Landau 2003, 44). One might be tempted to protest that this analogy downplays a crucial difference between truths in, say, mathematics or geology on the one hand and moral truths on the other. Unlike moral truths, mathematical facts are not intrinsically normative, as they do not imply reasons for action and thus do not impinge on our will. We are not allowed to *believe* anything incompatible with those facts, but it is up to us which practical attitudes we adopt towards them. The case of moral truths is different: They do seem to make normative demands on us that constrain our autonomy

from the outside. In response the realist may admit that our autonomy is constrained by external normative truths, but deny that this undermines in any way human autonomy. Quite to the contrary: autonomy seems to be enabled by those constraints. Rather, what is paradoxical is the constructivist program according to which human beings generate normative truths that are binding on those very same agents whose rational activity is responsible for their existence.

Secondly, in response to such a rejoinder one might argue in the spirit of Richard Rorty that realism in all its forms is authoritarian. Rorty explicitly highlights the close link between "the idea that truth is a matter of correspondence to the intrinsic nature of reality" and "the idea that morality is a matter of correspondence to the will of a Divine Being." (Rorty 2006, 257). According to Rorty, realism in all its forms should be replaced by the guiding idea of solidarity among human beings. Yet this Rortyean thesis is much too strong. Some forms of realism might indeed be authoritarian, for instance if they imply the existence of an inscrutable realm that exceeds our epistemic reach and is nonetheless making demands on us which we will never even be able to know. Admitting the existence of an outside reality not of our own making on the other hand seems – far from being a figment of misguided philosophical imagination – part and parcel of our common sense approach to reality. As John McDowell puts it: "Acknowledging a non-human external authority over our thinking, so far from being a betrayal of our humanity, is merely a condition of growing up." (McDowell 2000, 120).[2] Why should it be different in the case of moral truths? In addition, even a Kantian proponent of an ethics of autonomy will find Rorty an uncongenial ally: Insofar as it relies on the authority of practical reason, a Kantian constructivism strikes Rorty as being just as authoritarian as a moral realism relying on the existence of independent moral facts.

Thirdly, even if one eschews such a sweeping, Rortyean critique of realism in *all* of its forms, one might still insist on the special threat to autonomy that is posed by independent *moral* truths. But here again the realist might turn the tables on his opponent. On the one hand, autonomous decisions seem to presuppose some constraints that

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[2] For a critical discussion of the "Rortyean argument from autonomy" against realism see Stern 2012, 126-129.

guarantee their own rational intelligibility as opposed to mere acts of whim. On the other hand, moral realism rightly understood leaves ample breathing space for autonomy: It is by no means relegated to a purely epistemic role in finding out about moral truths;[3] a moral realist is not *ipso facto* committed to the idea that, for instance, the truth of each and every all-things-considered moral judgment is already fixed by an independent moral reality. There might be moral ties, incommensurability between different values etc. which provide considerable challenges for the exercise of human autonomy. Claiming that our own autonomously selected moral commitments exhaust the realm of ethical truths would of course once again simply beg the question at stake.

In conclusion, the argument from autonomy against moral realism ultimately fails. There is no need to embrace an ethics of autonomy as the only meta-ethical position able to accommodate proper respect for autonomy. As mentioned above however, there might of course be other independent reasons to opt in favor of Kantian constructivism instead of an ontologically more demanding moral realism.[4]

II.

How should a theonomic ethics respond to the autonomy of ethics-thesis? First, I will consider how moral realism deals with this worry and then I consider the special case of supernaturalist moral realism.

Non-naturalistic moral realism seems ideally suited to account for the autonomy of ethics. After all, it claims that moral facts do simply exist, even though they might supervene upon facts of some other kind (either natural or supernatural). Ontologically speaking, those facts are *sui generis*. The wrongness of lying might prove just as metaphysically primitive as the basic truths of logic. Those brute moral facts would then neither be amenable nor in need of a reduction to something non-moral.

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[3] Shafer-Landau rather misleadingly suggests this when he writes: "In such areas [i.e. where truths are not of our own making], our autonomy, well utilized, consists in discerning the paths to gaining such truths, rather than in creating it." (Shafer-Landau 2003, 44)

[4] According to Korsgaard moral realists miss the point of moral problems in the first place by turning ethics into "a theoretical or epistemological subject" (Korsgaard 1996, 44). As a consequence, they have to shoulder an ontological burden that inevitably invites Mackie-style arguments of queerness.

Within such a framework, the autonomy of ethics comes as little surprise.

What about a supernaturalist version of moral realism? At first glance, such a position seems hard to reconcile with the autonomy of ethics. If evaluative properties like goodness and badness or deontic properties like rightness and wrongness are given a supernaturalist interpretation – the property of goodness might be considered identical with the property of resembling God (cf. Adams 1999, ch. 1), the property of wrongness identical with being contrary to the commands of a (loving) God (cf. Adams 1987a, 133-142) – then ethics seems to have lost its autonomy. But is the autonomy of ethics something one should try to preserve in the first place? That seems to me rather hard to say since there are good arguments on both sides:

On the one hand, the phenomenology of moral experience seems to support the autonomy of ethics-thesis: Some things like pain strike us as intrinsically good or bad and others like lying or torturing as intrinsically wrong – "intrinsically" meaning here *in virtue of their intrinsic, non-relational properties*. But "resembling God" or "being commanded by God" are paradigmatic examples of relational properties. Of course, there might be cases of normative overdetermination: lying might be wrong both in itself and because of its being forbidden by God's commands, where either of the two is sufficient to make it wrong. Common sense, however, is likely to insist that there is simply no need to add such a supernaturalistic story to the picture; it seems to be a superfluous add-on to moral experience.[5] Even worse: Providing such a supernaturalistic account of the ontology of normative truths seems not only dispensable, but might even distort their normativity. That lying is wrong might provide not only sufficient reason for refraining from doing so, but might also provide the *only* legitimate moral reason against lying. That lying violates God's commands and is likely to be punished by him might be a perfectly respectable prudential reason, but rather doubtful as a moral one.

On the other hand, claiming ethics to be autonomous seems not just a key *strength* of non-naturalistic moral realism (as it fits so well with

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[5] For such an account of goodness see Adams 1999, 28-38. Erik Wielenberg in his review of Scott A. Davison's book *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything* correctly points out that a theory like Adams's is hard to reconcile with the independently plausible idea that some things beside God are simply intrinsically good or bad, quite independently of how they are related to other things including God. (Wielenberg 2012,145)

moral experience), but also its crucial *weakness*. The idea here is that moral values or norms are (unlike, for instance, logical truths) unlikely candidates for the status of brute, ontologically primitive facts. Moral truth seems to be in desperate need of *external* grounding (if moral truth is not to be abandoned in favor of non-cognitivist or error-theoretical positions in meta-ethics), and theism might be able to provide such grounding. If theism were the *only* candidate able to do the trick, the objectivity of moral claims could even serve as the starting point of an argument for the existence of God. Some philosophers, for instance William Lane Craig, consider the moral argument for the existence of God as "the most effective" argument for theism (quoted in Wielenberg 2009, 23). It is of course a hotly debated issue as to whether such an argument – even if one accepts its premise, i.e. the objectivity of moral truths, and in addition accepts that moral objectivity is in need of an external grounding – is likely to succeed. In any case, as a minimal requirement, God's existence needs to be a more plausible candidate for the status of a metaphysically primitive, brute fact than the existence of moral values; one reason to think so might be that the existence of God, unlike that of moral values, is metaphysically necessary.[6]

Besides the alleged need for an external grounding of ethical normativity, there might be a further reason for rejecting the thesis propounding an autonomy of ethics that derives from theism itself: Although the autonomy of ethics is, as has been shown above, compatible with the autonomy of finite human beings, it seems harder to reconcile with a divine person who is not just autonomous but also omnipotent. As Robert Johnson puts it: "The value that provides a reason for God to love it would be a constraint on God's love in the sense that God must respond to reasons provided by the value of things or else fail to have the requisite response" (Johnson 2007, 140). For many theists, even such a normative 'must' undermines God's omnipotence. Divine Command-theories that reject the autonomy of ethics-thesis avoid the problem of limiting God's omnipotence by making moral values and norms constitutively dependent on God's will. Although even according to

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[6] As against such an asymmetry-thesis, Erik Wielenberg for instance argues that there is perfect parity between theists and moral realists: "To ask of such facts [i. e. basic ethical facts], 'were do they come from?' or 'on what foundation do they rest?' is misguided in much the same way that, according to many theists, it is misguided to ask of God, 'where does He come from?' or 'on what foundations does He rest?' The answer is the same in both cases: They come from nowhere [...]." (Wielenberg 2009, 26)

the divine command theorist, God's will might be constrained from the inside (i.e. by God's nature, in particular by his attribute of goodness), there is no external constraint on God's will exercised by an independent normative authority.

The theist cannot have it both ways: If he accepts the thesis of an autonomy of ethics and thus admits the existence of moral truths independent not just of human but even of divine attitudes, then he has to deny himself moral arguments for God's existence: Moral reality cares for itself and is not in need of any constitutive activity on God's part (God might of course lend a helping hand as a moral teacher, for instance, thus facilitating epistemic access to moral reality by revealing it to less than omniscient human beings). Furthermore, the theist has to show that not only finite human autonomy but even divine omnipotence is compatible with the existence of such an independent moral realm. If, however, the theist denies the autonomy of ethics-thesis, he escapes this twofold burden of proof, but at the price of facing another challenge. The dependence of moral truths on God (either on His essence or on His will) seems (i) to fit ill with the phenomenology of moral experience and (ii) poses serious problems for theism itself:

Ad (i): As already mentioned, moral phenomenology seems hardly transparent to the existence of a divine being playing a constitutive role for moral normativity. A statement like John Hare's at the outset of his theistic account of metaethics, "We want to say that value is created by God and is there whether we recognize it or not" (J. Hare 2001, ix), will not find the approval of someone not already committed to theism. The disvalue of pain for instance just seems to be there whether we recognize it or not, *and* it seems to be independent of God's creative activity (He might have created pain, but not the disvalue of it as part of a distinct act of creation in addition to the first one).

Ad (ii): Whereas acknowledging the existence of standards independent of God's essence or His will might compromise His omnipotence, *not* acknowledging such standards might compromise His supreme goodness. Living up to some arbitrarily self-imposed standards does not seem sufficient for laying claim to such an attribute. So even apart from saving the appearances of moral phenomenology, a theist has excellent reasons to keep moral normativity at least sufficiently independent from God so as to save the intelligibility of 'goodness' as one of His key attributes.

III.

Nearly all of the issues mentioned in the last section of this paper are the subject of intricate debates in contemporary metaethics and/or the philosophy of religion. My goal was not to solve those issues, but to provide the outlines of a dialectical framework in which their respective positions and complex interrelations become easier to focus on. In conclusion, let me offer some suggestions as to the role that should be attributed to divine authority in the theory of value and in metaethics. Before addressing this problem, some distinctions concerning (i) various *kinds* of divine authority, (ii) its exact *sources* and (iii) its *scope*, i.e. the area in which it is supposed to be exercised, are in order.

Ad (iii): As to the *scope* of divine authority, it might either cover the normative realm as a whole, or it might be restricted to certain parts of it. But how to justify making such distinctions within the normative realm? Two ways of carving up the normative realm recommend themselves in the present context: the first one according to whole *categories* of normative items, the other one according to the *content* of normative claims.

As to the first method, Elizabeth Anscombe, in her paper *Modern Moral Philosophy,* famously argued that deontic notions like 'morally right or wrong', 'moral oughts' or 'moral obligations' presuppose a divine law-giver.[7] In that respect, they are quite unlike aretaic notions like 'courageous' or 'temperate' that might lend themselves to an account that is based on the intrinsic normativity of human nature which is independent of any legislative act. Even if one hesitates to accept a sweeping thesis like Anscombe's, one has to admit that even non-theistic contemporary theories like Stephen Darwall's suggest that it takes a special, inter-personal (or, in Darwall's lingo, second-personal) framework to make sense of key deontic categories such as obligation. Stepping on the foot of one's fellow commuter might, according to Darwall, give one a "state-of-the-world-regarding" reason for removing one's foot and to bring the pain of the fellow commuter to an end (Darwall 2006, 5-10). This kind of reason however is quite distinct from the "second-personal" reason, which puts one under the authority of the person whom one has made to suffer. By harming y, x has conferred a special kind of authority to y;

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[7] Cf. Anscombe 1958, 176: "Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as law-giver."

he is obliged to make amends to y as opposed say to turn the world into a better place by removing twice as much pain as that felt by y, but leaving his foot where it is. By presupposing such an intersubjective framework, the realm of deontic categories – quite unlike evaluative categories – might be non-arbitrarily singled out as special within the overall normative realm, and might lend itself to a theistic interpretation in a way that does not apply to intrinsic values or disvalues.

As to the second method, one might take the *content* of normative claims as one's starting point and distinguish for instance between non-religious und religious moral duties. Religious moral duties might in some way or other refer to God either directly as the object of duties of, for instance, devotion or gratitude, or indirectly insofar as, for instance, the violation of places or items dedicated to God might be a special offence (*sacrilegium*) on top of being merely, say, a run-of-the-mill sort of burglary.

Ad (ii): As to the *sources* of divine authority, all I can do here is point to some of the relevant options in the present context without being able to comment on their respective plausibility or importance. One might consider God's essence as constitutive of evaluative properties like goodness (by resemblance of finite entities to God, for instance) and his will as constitutive of deontic properties. In the latter case, it is still a hotly debated issue whether x's being morally obligated to phi depends on God's actual command that x phis or on God's willing that x be morally obligated to phi or just on God's willing that x phis.[8]

Ad (i): As to the *kinds* of divine authority, I suggest distinguishing between *epistemic*, *motivational* and *constitutive* authority. God's epistemic and motivational authority may be passed over without further comment in the present context. Suffice it to say that both kinds of authority are easily compatible with acknowledging the autonomy of ethics: God as omniscient has of course unique access to all ethical truths; he is familiar with the subvenient basis of such truths, with the ethical principles and the supervenience relations that apply in the moral field. God as a benevolent being might be expected to guarantee suitable epistemic access to those truths even to finite human beings; creating human beings but depriving them of access to at least fundamental moral

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[8] For a critical discussion of those three options see Murphy 1998; Murphy himself argues in favor of the third option.

truths seems hardly compatible with Divine benevolence (the epistemic consequences of the self-inflicted Fall are of course another matter).

From a human point of view, however, God's authority is not confined to that of the teacher of moral truths; *qua* creator and judge of all things he carries a special motivational authority: Human beings will feel the motivational pull to obey God's commands even if their content is in itself sufficient to motivate them to act accordingly. Overdetermination seems possible if not required in such cases and threatens human autonomy in no way. As Robert Adams puts it (using a term originally coined by Paul Tillich): "The theonomous agent, in so far as he is right, acts morally because he loves God, but also because he loves what God loves. He has the motivational goods both of obedience and of autonomy" (Adams 1987b, 126).[9]

What about God's *constitutive* authority towards normative truths? It is here that the key challenge to the autonomy of ethics is located.[10] Let me conclude with four rather dogmatic theses on this crucial issue:

First of all, I think there are some basic axiological truths that are both necessary and not determined by either God's will or his essence. As mentioned above, any account of goodness incompatible with the idea

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[9] This however leaves open the question of how both kinds of motives are related to each other: Is it that the acting from an explicitly theological motive takes normative precedence (a possibility discussed by Robert Audi 2007, 130); or is it a mark of the truly virtuous agent that the question of precedence actually never poses itself in the first place, since both motives always work in tandem?

[10] At this point it is of course the Euthyphro-dilemma that looms large: Is something right because God commands it (then God seems open to the charge of acting arbitrarily and we lose our grip on goodness as an attribute of God Himself) or does God command it because it is right (then God's omnipotence seems to be severely limited)? Audi's recent proposal to reject both horns of the dilemma actually strikes me as of little help: Audi argues that "God commands certain acts not because they are right but (at least in part) because of why they are right; i.e., because of the elements in virtue of which they are the right thing to do." (Audi 2007, 126) Thus God does not command something because it is obligatory – what makes him command it is the subvenient basis that grounds its being obligatory; nor does his commanding it make it obligatory – it is the subvenient basis that makes it so. Now, first of all, it would hardly be much of a relief to the defender of divine omnipotence to learn that is not normative reality itself that puts limits on God's omnipotence but the subvenient base properties on which that reality supervenes. Second, it seems mysterious why God should issue his commands not in virtue of their being right but because of those subvenient properties; these might be responsible for some commanded acts being right; but what recommends them for being commanded in the first place quite is obviously their normative status itself, i.e. that they are right, not those base-properties.

that at least some finite things have intrinsic worth, which supervenes on their non-relational properties and is thus independent of the relation in which they might stand to God, strikes me as implausible: It both distorts our sense of what is good or bad about instances of, say, pleasure and pain, and it leaves one puzzled as to whether any clear sense is to be made of an intrinsic goodness thus monopolized by God.

Second, the same goes for basic moral truths: Rossian *prima facie*-duties such as the prohibition of lying or the duty of reparation after having harmed someone are not in need of recourse to a divine authority in order to ground their normative force. *Pace* Anscombe, it is very well possible to believe in those deontic moral truths without presupposing a divine law-giver just as it is possible to have laws of geometry without considering them as the outcome of some legislative activity. This is of course bad news for someone who puts high hopes in the moral argument for the existence of God. Obligations like those of reparation might even constitutively presuppose interpersonal relations (unlike axiological truths that simply state for instance the badness of pain), but it does not take a divine law-giver to make such a relation possible: the person harmed and the person responsible for the harm will do perfectly for the job.

Third, even if God Himself figures in the content of some deontic moral truths (for instance in that we owe gratitude and love to our creator), it does by no means follow that those truths have to be constitutively dependent on Him. If for instance Duns Scotus is right, there is no possible world in which even God could will us to face Him with ingratitude or hatred.[11] It will therefore not do to consider necessary deontic moral truths like these – even if they have God as their content – as constitutively dependent on God (quite unlike truths that concern inter-human relationships that Duns Scotus considers as merely contingent).

Fourth, some deontic moral principles are indeed constitutively dependent on God's authority. If God has created the universe and keeps it in being at every single moment, then He does have the necessary

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[11] Cf. Duns Scotus's interpretation of the first table of the Decalogue which contains our duties towards God: "So the commandments that tell us to love God have the kind of necessity required for natural law in the strict sense, but the commandments that tell us how to love our neighbor do not. They are extremely fitting Scotus says, but still contingent." (J. Hare 2001, 67)

authority to make some demands on His creatures – just like a human legislative body might be authorized to make its subjects drive on the left side of the road. So there is room for divine discretion. A classical example is the rules of worship: Why is it that the God of the Old Testament detests graven images in His worship? Even if there is no satisfactory theological explanation of the reasons God might have for this, it is certainly up to Him to determine which kinds of action are suitable to embody attitudes of devotion towards Him.

Where does all this leave us with respect to the three dimensions of the autonomy-problem distinguished above? *Firstly*, there is no reason to accept an ethics of autonomy as the only way to pay due respect to human autonomy; this holds independent of any theistic or anti-theistic assumptions. *Secondly,* ethics is mostly autonomous – not just key evaluative truths, but also deontic ones. Even many of the normative facts that cover the relationship between God and human beings are necessary and constitutively independent of any divine attitude towards them. *Thirdly,* the autonomy of ethics thus understood does not undermine God's omnipotence: (i) As 'companions in innocence'-style arguments show, necessary truths in areas other than morals do not restrict God's omnipotence: Necessary moral truths put as little limits on divine omnipotence as the *modus ponens* or truths of geometry do. (ii) In addition, even those necessary moral truths do not necessarily subject God to an *external* constraint: They might be part of his nature. Hence there is, as Kant already held for the 'Holy Will', no conceptual space for putting God under an *obligation*. Violating moral rules would simply be inconsistent with the divine character/nature. Since there are not even potentially counteracting forces in God's nature (like unruly inclinations or desires in the case of human beings), the very idea of moral demands putting pressure on God's will and thus undermining his sovereignty proves incoherent. (iii) It is well within the rights of God to issue moral laws purely out of his discretion: In this He is not acting arbitrarily. As much as an act of human legislation is only valid if backed by the authority of the legislative body to pass such legislation, God's authority to impose moral demands on human beings is not merely a function of His Omnipotence, but is grounded in His role as for instance Creator and Sustainer of all things. Just as the office of being fire-warden gives one the authority to oblige other people to leave their houses or even tear them down to prevent the fire from spreading, God's unique position towards

humanity is the source of legitimate moral obligations as opposed to pure, autonomy-undermining compulsion.

Acknowledging the autonomy of ethics to the extent suggested above is not only compatible with divine omnipotence, it has the additional advantage of buffering human autonomy against divine pressure. Moral demands are either obligatory in themselves (which is the case for most of them), or they are constituted by the exercise of God's legitimate authority. God could, of course, make the moral order and His own role as an omnipotent judge of all human beings so epistemically and motivationally overwhelming that there would be little room left for human autonomy. But this would in turn be incompatible both with God's nature and with His basic interest in free human beings who are able to freely cooperate with God in realizing His providential intentions. This corresponds to our deeply held moral convictions: Human beings have the responsibility to find out about their moral obligations, to think through their implications and to creatively apply them to new situations. They are even free to resist submission to the moral order both in its autonomous and its theonomic dimensions. But *not* resisting submission to rightful authority is not in the least less autonomous – indeed it is the rational way to respond to the normative demands that both created and uncreated divine reality makes on us.

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