

The Problem of Worship

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Theism is a cluster of views. The first, and the most important of which, is that God exists. Others are that God has all the relevant omni-attributes, that He created the world, and that He communicates with and performs miracles on behalf of humans. There is one additional view that is often overlooked. It is that humans are obligated to worship God. Importantly, this issue of worship is of central importance to traditional theism. And it extends into pagan thought that predates Christianity. Take, for example Epicurus' deployment of the argument from evil:

If god is willing to prevent evil, then he is not omnipotent. If he is able but unwilling, then he is malevolent. If he is able and willing, from whence comes evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him god?

Epicurus' rhetorical question implies that entities deserving the title 'god' must be ones worthy of supreme adoration and devotion. Entities without the omni-attributes fail. St. Anselm of Canterbury, too, held to the same regulative notion, but in his case in arguing *for* God's existence – namely, that God is 'that than which no greater can be thought.' You don't worship something that you think could be better.

The thought that God is the proper object of worship plays a limiting role on how we think about the other commitments in the theistic cluster – if we revise any of the commitments to the point where we contravene the requirement of worshiping God, then we have undone the very heart of theism. Consider the regular objection to the 'God of the philosophers.' If God is a bloodless abstraction, a simple explanatory posit, a point of logic, then why all the prayers, hymns, stories and parables, acts of devotion, and love? For natural theology to be relevant to the lives of believers, it must be relevant to why one *worships* God.

My thesis here is that we *shouldn't* worship God. This is because we shouldn't worship *anything*. A consequence of this, I think, is that we have good reason to believe that God doesn't exist. If there are no proper objects of worship, there is no God. Let's get started.

The first premise, I believe, is relatively uncontroversial, namely, that God is the proper object of worship. Now, putting things *that* way makes me committed (at least informally) to God's existence, and I'm not about to go doing that. But I think we can capture the core of the thought without implication of existence if we make it conditional. So:

(1) If God exists, then He is the proper object of worship.

Now, the question is what exactly it is for something to be a proper object of worship. If it's proper that some entity *x* be worshipped, it may follow that all agents capable of worshipping are *obligated to worship x*. So, if God exists, then humans capable of worshipping (presumably by their rationality and moral agency) ought to worship God. Notice first, we restrict obligations of worship only to agents capable of recognizing the demands – so dogs, cats, and pieces of gum don't have the obligations. We do. Notice also that this is a *strong* requirement, since it makes worship something *required*. Consider the first two commandments – worshipping other gods means that you worship something *unworthy* of worship and you, because of this, fail to worship something that *deserves* worship. The requirement can be weakened, so that it may not be obligatory that one worship at all, but only that if one worships, one ought only worship the proper entities. So here, we have:

- (2) For any object (x), if x is the proper object of worship, then all rational moral agents (those capable of worship) are either:
- a. obliged to worship x, or
 - b. if they worship, are obliged only to worship x.

I think 2a is the dominant view in traditional theology – Satan, for example, does not worship anything and also has all the other commitments about God (his existence, being a creator, all the omni-attributes), but he fails to worship and be properly deferential. That’s his sin. With Satan’s failures, then, we not only get clearer about the obligation *to* worship, but we also get clearer about the obligations *of* worship. Worship is a proper *comportment* toward God, and it seems to come with a variety of elements. Satan is improperly deferential to God – he does not respond appropriately to God’s presence and nature. Additionally, return to Epicurus’ last line – if you do not see God as either willing or able to prevent evil, why call him God? In order to have the right relationship with God, in order to worship Him, you’ve got to think that he has properties that make him worthy of worship. There’s something special about God that makes you want to worship him, and when you worship Him, you are responding appropriately to those properties. If you think He could be improved in one way or another, then you don’t really think He’s God. Finally, worship entails ritual performances that express and strengthen our first two commitments. Acts of worship bring us closer to God so that we may know Him and His plan for us. And these acts are shared so that we may strengthen these commitments in others. So:

- (3) For any rational moral agent (A), if A worships x, A’s worship of x is the joint performance of three acts:
- a. A is unconditionally obedient to x and to the demands that x’s existence and properties place on A,
 - b. A views x as absolutely worthy of worship, and
 - c. A performs rituals or communicative acts expressing 3a and 3b.

One thing to note here about 3a is that devotion to God, for it to be proper, must be *complete*. Relationships with God must be ‘all-in.’ Robert M. Adams notes, “God demands of us the greatest trust, the acceptance of the most complete dependence,” and to resist God’s commands on our own judgment is sin (1987, 22).

I am concerned whether 3a is a reasonable requirement. Is it right to require that moral agents submit unconditionally to the commands of an other? First, let’s remind ourselves that the requirement of worship is restricted to those capable of recognizing the requirement – my cat can’t worship God, because she doesn’t have the intellect or moral agency to do so. We have the requirement precisely because of our rational moral agency, but now see what worship requires: that our rational moral agency is what we must give up (James Rachels makes a similar argument in 1971).

Rational moral agency simply means that you think things through, you do what’s right by your best lights, and that your actions are ones that come from you in the sense that you can be responsible for them. *Integrity* is the moral virtue of embodying the responsible freedom required by rational moral agency. On 3a, it seems that the only theologically acceptable free act we can perform is the act of submitting our lives to God. Actions are done independently of God’s commands, even if they accord with what God commands, are nevertheless failures of obedience.

Perhaps it may help to think of this from the perspective of a life having meaning. A regular thought expressed with regard to human life is that we were made to adore God. St. Anselm opens his *Proslogion* addressing God, and says, “I was made in order to see You” (1979,

111). This requires that we view ourselves as *divine artifacts*, each with a purpose assigned in advance by a maker.¹ We view ourselves as players on a stage made by God for God. Additionally, questioning or resisting the assigned purpose is presumptuous to the point of sinfulness. There are no legitimate places for us to raise our objections to God. He has given us a job. Who are we to question Him? Take God's rebuke to Job when Job seems to chafe at the thought that God could have stopped his suffering: "Who is this whose ignorant words cloud my design in darkness?" and later, "Dare you deny that I am just or put me in the wrong so that you may be right?" (Job 38:2 and 40:7-8). Job, being who he is, keeps his place.

Now, it's one thing to view oneself as an instrument of divine will in the sense that one has taken on the project, shouldered a burden on behalf of something one sees as worthwhile. And it is another thing to view oneself as an instrument because of another's determinations. The first is the view of a free, devoted servant, but the latter is the view of a slave... one who may chafe at his bonds or accept them, but either way is a slave. Insofar as we see the devotion to God in worship as unconditional and determined by our place in creation, our service is more analogous to the latter than the former. So:

(4) Unconditional submission to any authority contravenes the requirements of rational moral agency.

Rational agents do not submit their lives unconditionally to the commands or dictates of others. The requirement that one do so is immoral.

There certainly are conditions and reasons for deferring to or obeying authorities. For example, we submit to the cognitive authority of textbook writers, news reporters, and teachers. We do so on the basis of their knowing things we don't. Additionally, we submit to the institutional authority of police officers, lawmakers, and teachers on the basis of the legitimacy of the institutions they represent. In every case of deference, we defer on the basis of our recognitions that the person to whom we defer has a certain status. Additionally, in these cases of deference, we only defer *conditionally*, we may defer now, but we can always fact check later or voice a complaint. But deference is always dependent on recognizing a feature of whom we defer to that makes the deference necessary. So if we defer to God and worship Him, we must do so on the basis of some special property he has that makes him worthy of deference and worship. Call these properties W-properties. So:

(5) If A is obliged to view x as worthy of worship, then A must have reason to see some property W of x as making x worthy of worship.

Additionally, if there are people who demand our deference and have no credentials, we would not only have no obligation to obey them, we would be positively irrational for obeying them. The man on the street is an authority only with regards to his own opinions, and not much more. By analogy, unless God has some specifiable property W that makes him worthy of worship and deference, we are irrational to worship him. So:

(6) If A has no reason to see any property W of x as making x worthy of worship, then A is obliged not to worship x.

Notice the difference between (5) and (6). (5) is that if you're obliged to worship, you have to have grounds. So if you don't have grounds, *you don't have to worship*. (6) is a much stronger commitment – if you don't have grounds, *you shouldn't worship*.

¹ The term 'divine artefact' is from Kurt Baier's discussion of divine commands and a life's meaning in "The Meaning of Life" (2000, 120).

Here is the problem, though. None of the properties traditionally attributed to God amount to reasons to worship Him. I'll run through a list of traditional divine attributes that are W-contenders and explain why they don't work.

The traditional theistic strategy is to start with God's essence entailing his existence. Perhaps the existence of God is a source of His worshipability, or more precisely, the necessity and obviousness of His existence requires our worship. But necessary and obvious truths don't strike me as objects of worship. Truths of mathematics and logic have those properties, but it seems that, except maybe to the Pythagoreans, it's silly to worship numbers and logical constants.

Perhaps we should worship God because of his other essential properties, the *omni*-attributes. Is the omniscience or omnipotence of x a reason to worship x? It certainly is a reason to be impressed, but it's not something that impels worship. In fact, worshipping something for its power, specifically, seems to border on fascism (Bayne and Nagasawa 307). And worshipping something for knowing *everything* seems to contravene my privacy rights – I, frankly, find the idea of a God that knows my innermost thoughts less impelling worship than paranoia.

Omni-benevolence, I think, is a good candidate. But even in this case worship seems excessive. Surely if x is morally superior to us, we should strive to live up to x's example, but worship is a step beyond what is called for. Additionally, it seems we'd still need to judge x to be morally superior to us prior to our devotion to it, and this requires that we use our own judgment to find such a thing. Worship requires that we obey, not judge God.

Omnipresence doesn't look like much of an intelligible W-candidate. Frankly, I find it in worse waters than omniscience. (God, by his essence, never leaves you alone.)

So neither God's existence nor the *omni*-attributes are W-properties. Remember, though, He created the world and us with it. We owe him worship because of what he's done for us – he made all this not only possible, but actual. And he deserves thanks.

Two problems. Thanks does not mean worship. It may be a *really big thanks*, but that is determined by the degree of good God has done for us with creation. It isn't worship, as far as I can see, no matter how big a thanks it is, but how big a thanks does God deserve? Creation is a mixed bag, really. Even if you think that humans deserve to suffer from cancer, or that the Holocaust worked out for the best, or that abject poverty is a necessary evil in a world with human freedom, or that hurricanes, tsunamis, and tornadoes all just come with the territory, surely we would qualify our thanks. "Despite the tornadoes, ethnic cleansing, and flesh-eating bacteria... thanks!" That's enough to make it different from worship.

Maybe we should worship God because he tells us to. The first commandments are at the front for a reason. God clearly takes our worship seriously, so we should, too. But this gets everything backwards – the question is why we should worship God and thereby follow his commands unconditionally. The answer is that He commands us to worship Him. Even if He commands our worship, it's not clear on the basis of what we're supposed to follow his commands.

One thought here may be to begin merging the attributes, especially *omni*-benevolence with the commandments. One may reason: God is *omni*-benevolent, and so a reliable source of moral instruction, and he instructs us to worship him.

I've already argued that there is a moral problem with worship – it undoes an agent's moral integrity. But here, I think, there's another problem. What kind of *omni*-benevolent being *commands* us to worship Him? An analogy might help: Some person may deserve praise,

perhaps because of her generosity. If it turns out she didn't get the praise deserved, and then *demand*ed that her generosity receives the proper recognition, we would be disappointed in this person. She may be generous, but she is *petulant* – her virtues are not complete. The fact that God needs to command us to worship Him seems not only to place him in similar ethical territory as the petulant philanthropist, but it seems to concede that we don't have reasons for worshipping him. Our question is, "Why?" His answer is, "Because I say so." As such, I'm inclined to say that if God commands us to worship Him, we have very good reason not to.

Finally, one may hold that one worships God for the sake of one's redemption, as salvation from sin and an eternity apart from God. In worship, one finds peace, solace, and eventually, eternal reward. Not having that relationship with God reaps a life of pointless toil, disaffection, and ultimately, eternal punishment. These may be very good reasons *to want to worship*, but these cannot be reasons *for genuine worship*. In the same way that I may want to like my neighbors (it'd make the time we live next to each other much better), I cannot like my neighbors on the basis of *that*. There has to be something about *them* that makes me like them, not what my liking them gets me. The same thing should go for worship – you can't get what's in it for you if you do it for what's in it for you. So on the assumption that this is a comprehensive list of potential W-properties, we have:

- (7) If A has reason to see property W of x as making x worthy of worship, then there at least one property that makes x worthy of worship (there must be at least one W-property: divine existence, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, having created the world, having commanded that agents worship it, and dispensing redemption).

I've argued here that none of those properties are reason to worship, so:

- (8) There are no properties W sufficient to make any x possessing them worthy of worship. (There are no W-properties)

What follows from 7 and 8, again, on the assumption that my argument here is exhaustive of the most plausible candidates for W-properties, is:

- (9) *Therefore*, there are no W-properties any A may reasonably see as making any x worthy of worship (from 7 and 8).

What follows, then, is not only that, given we can't find W-properties, *we don't have an obligation* to worship God, but it also follows that *we shouldn't* worship God.

- (10) *Therefore*, A is not obliged to hold any object to be worthy of worship (6 and 9).

- (11) *Therefore*, A is obliged not to hold any object to be worthy of worship (7 and 9).

A final point about the rituals of worship. If we take the overt private or public acts of worship to promote *further* acts of worship, then given that we shouldn't worship God (on 11), even the rituals themselves, because of what they enact, are wrong. On analogy, we shouldn't engage in speech acts that promote slavery, because slavery is wrong. We shouldn't promote believing things for which we have reason to believe false (if we promoted the belief that George Washington was really an alien), because the evidence runs against them. So:

- (12) Agents are obliged not to engage in communicative acts promoting the contravention of moral agency or commitments to views with no rational grounds.

We are obliged to not undermine rational agency. In fact, I think that we are obliged to promote it as well as we can. As a consequence of (4) and (11), it follows that overt acts of worship are acts that promote the contravention of our moral agency and promote beliefs with no rational support. As a consequence:

- (13) *Therefore*, agents are obliged not to worship any entity. (From 3, 4, 11, and 12).

In conjunction with premise 2, we can see that if we are not obliged to (and obliged not to) worship any entity, there are no proper objects of worship:

(14) *Therefore*, there are no proper objects of worship (from 2 and 13).

And so no God:

(15) *Therefore*, God does not exist. (from 1 and 14).

There are, I think, some places where traditional theism can be salvaged, but more work needs to be done. The concept of worship deserves further scrutiny. Does worship require obedience? If it requires obedience, does it require complete obedience? My answers here have been affirmative, but I may be wrong. Worship may be purely expressive and nothing more – one’s love for the creator has a proper outlet. One *communes with*, instead of *takes orders from* God. This seems plausible, but it does render the status of God’s commands and one’s obligation to God questionable. Additionally, it also makes the requirements of exclusivity of worship (you *only* worship God) a puzzle – if worship is merely the expression of supreme love and devotion, what’s so wrong about having those attitudes toward idols, too? Only if worship has what you might call a *service element*, as far as I can see, can the exclusion of idols make sense.

Another objection may be to say that just because we can’t name any W-properties that would make God worthy of worship, it doesn’t mean He doesn’t have any. The thought may go: God is the proper object of worship, so he has W-properties. We don’t know what they are, so we, instead of inferring that He doesn’t have them, should adopt a more intellectually modest attitude. Mysticism or negative theology then arrive on the scene. Moses Maimonides makes exactly this sort of argument for a negative theology in *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

God, may he be exalted, cannot be apprehended by the intellects, and ... none but He Himself can apprehend what He is, and that apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him. (1963, I. 59)

Maimonides argues for this conception of God precisely in order to maintain the requirement of worship. Though I don’t see how it works – if we can’t say why x is worthy of worship, I’m not sure whether we can legitimately worship x. I suppose the premises mainly at issue here are 8 and 9 – the thought behind them runs: one has an obligation to worship something if and only if one can determine that it has a W property. For me, the obvious rightness of this sort of principle derives from a background principle of reason, sometimes called ‘evidentialism’:

(E) One should proportion one’s commitments to the strength of one’s reasons.

This principle, however, is a hotly contested one, especially in matters of religious commitment. Faith and what people are impelled to believe on its basis are taken to be counter-examples to E. This is a useful trump card to be played, and a discussion of faith itself will take us beyond the scope of this paper. However, I should note that faith in *anything else* on the basis of no reasons at all is often called ‘blind faith.’ It gets special reverence in religious contexts, but is a term of contempt in politics and interpersonal relationships, because its results are regularly disastrous.

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