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Worship and threshold obligations

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Abstract: **In this reply to Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa, I defend the possibility of a maximal-excellence account of the grounding of the obligation to worship God. I do not offer my own account of the obligation to worship God; rather I argue that the major criticism (that is raised against maximal-excellence accounts) fails. Thus maximal-excellence can ground an obligation to worship God.**

In 'The grounds of worship', Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa [henceforth 'the authors'] considered various possibilities as to what might ground an obligation to worship God.[1] The authors rejected a number of these, concluding, 'We have examined four accounts of why it might be that we have obligations to worship God, and have argued that none is successful.'[2] Benjamin Crowe replied to the authors, defending grounds of worship. In turn, the authors replied to Crowe.[3]

The purpose of this paper is to defend maximal-excellence accounts of the grounds of worship against the major criticism (of such an account) presented by the authors. By responding to the authors' main criticism of maximal-excellence accounts, my goal is to suggest that a maximal-excellence account (as, e.g., discussed by Crowe) can succeed. Though I do not defend or set out my own maximal-excellence account, I think that it is important to see where the authors' criticism fails. In responding to Crowe, the authors write:

> One of the accounts that we discussed is the maximal-excellence account according to which we have obligations to worship God because of His maximal excellence. We objected to the maximal-excellence account on the grounds that if God's possession of good-making features to a maximal extent generates obligations to worship Him, then it ought to be the case that the possession of these same kinds of good-making features in lesser degrees ought to also generate something akin to obligations to worship. But it seems that possessing virtues of various kinds generates no obligations to worship. We might have obligations to respect and admire those who are more virtuous (powerful, wise, etc.) than ourselves, but we do not appear to have obligations to worship them.[4]

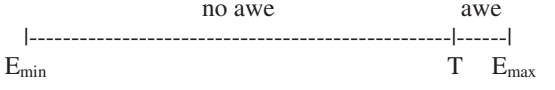
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I suggest that the authors are mistaken in the following sense: maximal-excellence accounts can ground an obligation to worship God without lesser degrees of excellence grounding lesser obligations to worship lesser entities. To see why, I introduce the concept of *threshold obligations* (TOs). A TO is an obligation that arises only when a property is possessed beyond a certain degree. Thus, TOs act not in a continuous fashion, more in a digital (on-off) fashion.[5] Let us consider several examples. I offer these to demonstrate that TOs exist, not to show precisely how a threshold obligation to worship God would be structured.

First, a child refuses to eat his peas at lunch. At 4pm he complains that he is hungry. The parent may have no obligation whatsoever to feed the child, and is perfectly justified in saying, 'You will wait to eat until dinner'. However, if the child were hungry past a certain degree (perhaps where the child is in moderate to severe pain, or where medical problems might arise), then there would be an obligation to feed the child. I am suggesting that the obligation to feed a child is a TO, where the obligation only arises when the child is hungry beyond a certain degree. At low levels of hunger, no obligation is generated.

Let us consider a second, more fantastic example. The Martians invade. They demand that we send the smartest human to Mars to compete in an intelligence contest. If the human wins, Earth will be spared. In such a case, humans must determine who is the smartest and send that person to Mars. Note that though maximal intelligence generates an obligation to go to Mars, lower levels of intelligence do not generate any obligations whatsoever. The obligation to go to Mars only arises when intelligence is possessed past a certain degree, and in this case only when intelligence is possessed to a maximal degree.[6]

I present these examples to suggest that TOs exist. I invite the reader to think of additional examples. The key question then is: Is worship a TO with respect to the property of excellence? That is, does the obligation to worship only arise in the presence of a sufficiently excellent being or object? An analysis of worship suggests that it is a TO. For example, worship has as a component awe. As the authors write, 'Worship also involves affective and emotional attitudes such as awe'.[7] Awe involves strong (overwhelming) feelings, and is properly felt in the presence of the sublime or extremely powerful. Then, as awe is not properly experienced in the presence of lesser beings, and as worship involves awe, worship is not properly experienced in the presence of lesser beings. Consider the following scale of excellence:



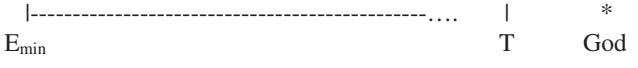
E_{min} is minimal excellence. E_{max} is maximal excellence. T is the threshold of excellence past which awe is the proper response. It follows that worship can only

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occur to the right of T. The important point is that properties can ground an obligation to worship God without lesser degrees of those properties grounding lesser obligations to worship; there is no worship to the left of T because there is no awe to the left of T.

Then, to move towards a more realistic account of worship, note that clearly awe is not sufficient for worship. The Grand Canyon inspires awe, but should not be worshipped. Other excellences are needed (this list may include holiness, goodness, knowledge, power, etc.). In each case, there is a minimum level of each excellence that is needed is order to ground worship. It may also only be proper to worship a person. Then, only persons who are beyond the threshold on every needed excellence should be worshipped. How many such beings are there? I see two ways to answer this question, and neither seems contradictory (at the least, a contradiction would need to be demonstrated). First, perhaps beings such as angels and saints should be worshipped, if such beings are beyond the threshold on all required excellences. The picture that emerges is similar to the picture above,[8] where, on this view, angels and saints would be to the right of the threshold, T.

Let us consider a second, more standard, view, one that makes it obligatory to worship only God. Note that there is no 'step down' from God. A being identical to God but who knows, e.g., one less proposition, does not yield a slightly lesser being than God; rather such a being does not compare favourably to God at all, lacking perfection and simplicity. The picture that emerges is different from that above:[9]



Excellence can grow without bound to the left of T, just as the finite positive integers grow without bound. But God is infinite, perfect, and simple, which is radically different than any finite entity. The threshold, T, thus separates God and all other beings; only God deserves worship. Crowe suggests, following Gregory of Nyssa, that 'the beauty and goodness of God are incommensurably superior to those of created things, to the extent that they no longer really constitute the same properties'.[10] I suggest that the importance of the incommensurable superiority of God is not that the properties of God differ from the properties of lesser beings; rather the importance of the incommensurable superiority of God (in the context of worship) is that God is clearly beyond the threshold, T, where worship is obligatory (on either picture, above).

Shifting gears away from maximal-excellence accounts, note that when the authors consider creation-based groundings of the obligation to worship God, they write, 'If our dependence on God gives us an obligation to worship God, it ought to follow that our dependence on our parents, our friends, and family, even our society will generate obligations to worship these individuals.'[11] But by

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recognizing TOs, we see that this conclusion does not follow. Massive (or, total) dependence can ground an obligation to worship without lesser degrees of dependence grounding lesser obligations to worship. Thus, it important to recognize and understand TOs whether one wishes to defend a maximal-excellence account or a creation-based account of the grounds of the obligation to worship God. Crowe finds these two accounts 'more attractive than the others'.[12] In this paper, I have suggested that Crowe's arguments (and, especially, his defence of maximal-excellence accounts) are not undermined by the authors' main response to his arguments.

To conclude, the authors write, 'we have obligations to worship God if and only if we have obligations to worship those human beings who possess these good-making features'.[13] By arguing that worship is a TO with respect to excellence, I have argued that the authors' claim is false. I thus hope to have undermined a major criticism that the authors raised against maximal-excellence accounts. Maximal excellence can ground an obligation to worship God without lesser degrees of excellence grounding lesser degrees of obligation to worship. And I see nothing incoherent in thinking that true worship only arises in the presence of a maximally excellent (moral, good, holy, knowledgeable, powerful, etc.) being, that is, God.[14,15]

Notes

1. Tim Bayne & Yujin Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship', *Religious Studies*, **42** (2006), 299–313.
2. *Ibid*., 312.
3. Benjamin D. Crowe 'Reasons for worship: a response to Bayne and Nagasawa', *Religious Studies*, **43** (2007), 465–474; Tim Bayne & Yujin Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship again: reply to Crowe', *Religious Studies*, **43** (2007), 475–480.
4. Bayne & Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship again', 477.
5. Though once the obligation is present (on), it could certainly come in degrees, and so it may be more accurate to say that TOs act in a hybrid fashion, that is, both digitally and continuously.
6. A third, and very contentious example, might be affirmative action. Assuming that affirmative action can justly operate on a group level, and assuming that past wrongs are what justifies affirmative action, it might be the case that the past wrongs must rise to a certain level to generate an obligation to some form of affirmative action. That is, it may be the case that groups that were only slightly wronged in the past do not deserve slight affirmative action policies, but rather none at all. The point is that the obligation to affirmative action may be a TO with respect to past wrongs. Again however, I recognize that this is a very contentious example, with a host of issues that will not be addressed in this paper.
7. Bayne & Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship', 300.
8. Though worship would replace awe. I discussed awe to illustrate one simple example as to why worship is a threshold obligation, namely: because awe is not present to the left of T, worship cannot be present of the left of T. But again, certainly awe is not sufficient for worship.
9. Note that the picture may be more complicated, in that the being identical to God but knowing one less proposition may be greater than any finite being, and still far less than, or not comparable to, God. That is, we may need other sections in the picture. But the important point is that God is alone on the right, and the sole being to the right of T.
10. Crowe 'Reasons for worship', 472.
11. Bayne & Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship', 306.

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12. Crowe 'Reasons for worship', 468.
13. Bayne & Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship again', 478.
14. One last point: the authors considered whether we would be obligated to worship a duplicate of God, asking, 'would [it] be obligatory to worship God*, if, *per impossible*, God* were actual[?]'; Bayne & Nagasawa 'The grounds of worship', 308. I admit that I have little idea how to reason in such a *per impossible* setting. Perhaps compare: if, *per impossible*, $2+2=5$ and $2+2=4$, would it be rational to trade 2 doughnuts and 2 doughnuts for 5 doughnuts? In these *per impossible* settings, I have trouble beginning to reason.
15. Finally, I thank an anonymous referee for the journal and Professor Peter Byrne for valuable feedback and suggestions.

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