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Remembering Alston's 'evaluative particularism'

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Abstract: **William Alston uniquely offers the divine-command theorist his 'evaluative particularism' – the idea that God Himself, the concrete individual, uniquely serves as the supreme standard of (moral) goodness. This allegedly retains God's sovereignty over the moral realm without subverting His goodness or entailing that there are moral principles, the truth of which does not depend on God. However, it is argued that Alston's view faces three initial challenges: justificatory analogies with the two most viable particularist programmes fail; disanalogies between scientific and scriptural data jeopardize the prospect of determining God's relevant essential properties a posteriori; and it harbours problematic entailments regarding (human) moral goodness even if the first two challenges are met.**

William Alston's (1921–2009) contributions to the field – especially, for example, in the areas of religious epistemology and philosophy of language – will influence generations of philosophers. But philosophers as prolific as Alston offer intriguing insights that sometimes go less noticed. So, although Alston's views about religious experience providing evidence for religious belief and how predicates properly apply to God will continue to be the subject of much debate, this essay honours him by recalling his lesser known but innovative contribution to divine-command theory [hereafter DCT] literature. After carefully laying out Alston's self-proclaimed 'suggestions' for divine-command theorists, this essay will proceed to identify challenges for it that remain. This essay thus serves as a call for Alston's followers to meet them, at least insofar as they can be met, thereby building upon the foundation he provided.

The cornerstone of Alston's proposed programme for DCT is eloquently captured in the following:

> We can think of God himself, the individual being, as the supreme standard of goodness. God plays the role in evaluation that is more usually assigned, by objectivists about

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> value, to Platonic Ideas or principles. Lovingness is good (a good-making feature, that on which goodness is supervenient) not because of the Platonic existence of a general principle or fact to the effect that lovingness is good, but because God, the supreme standard of goodness, is loving. Goodness supervenes on every feature of God, not because some general principles are true but just because they are features of God. (Alston (2002), 291–292)

Alston contends that understanding God's relationship to (moral) goodness in this way circumvents perennial Euthyphro-type dilemmas. He thus suggests that his 'evaluative particularism' provides a foundation for a theory in which creaturely moral obligation is grounded in God's commands without subverting God's moral goodness or entailing that there are moral truths independent of God. Some theists – most notably (perhaps) William Lane Craig – have adopted Alston's evaluative particularism for that very reason.[1] But Alston, unlike Craig, never fully advocates DCT (Alston (2002), 283). Rather, Alston only attempts to demonstrate what form DCT should take so as not to fall victim to a Euthyphro-type dilemma (Alston (1991), 303).

The success of Alston's proposed aid for DCT thus hinges upon whether predicates descriptive of (moral) goodness can be adequately understood along particularist lines. Alston believes that analogies with 'being a meter' and natural kind terms like 'being water' are instructive in establishing his evaluative particularism, making his account no less plausible than the more traditional Platonic, or otherwise a priori, account of predicates/properties descriptive of (moral) goodness. However, it will be argued that the justificatory analogies Alston proffers (and furthered by Linda Zagzebski) remain problematic; if these difficulties cannot be explained away, then the explanatory parity Alston (and Zagzebski) seek isn't forthcoming. Alston's followers therefore should accept the charge this essay represents in all earnestness.

'Some suggestions' for DCT

The genesis of Euthyphro's dilemma was obviously pagan. Nevertheless, its grip is still upon traditional theists in the form of objections to DCT. If an act is right merely because God Almighty commands it, then what we find to be permissible or impermissible is seemingly arbitrary; had the Creator of heaven and earth exercised His sovereignty differently, then we might be obligated to steal, maim, and torture. If, however, God commands something of us because it is right, then it appears that moral truth is independent of God, but this is seemingly inconsistent with God's sovereignty. Thus, traditional theists seem left to choose between the dangerous riptides of arbitrariness, in which ethics becomes capricious and non-rational, and the biting reef of secular ethics, in which God's role in determining what it means to lead the good life becomes illicitly thin.

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Some theists are inclined to safeguard God's sovereignty at the risk of ethical arbitrariness; however, Alston begins by reminding them that opting for arbitrariness is a more perilous course than it initially appears. On this account, note that someone is a morally good person just in case he or she regularly follows God's commands.[2] So, we might say that Abraham or Moses is good because each invariably upheld God's will. But this account becomes problematic when applied to God Himself. To say that God is good, on this account, is merely to say that God invariably fulfils His commands (or, perhaps, simply that God approves of Himself).

But recall that God is omnipotent; no logically possible state of affairs is beyond His power. So, opting for arbitrariness is tantamount to the position that whatever God wills and whatever God does is thereby good (or right); however, this falls far short of what theists typically mean by God's (moral) goodness. God's goodness, Alston agrees, is not a matter of His having the ability to do whatever He pleases (Alston (2002), 285). So, perhaps the real danger for theists in accepting arbitrariness is more religious than philosophical: God's power eclipses God's goodness such that He is no longer genuinely worthy of our loving worship and praise. Theists lovingly worship and praise God exactly because He is supremely (morally) good and not because He is supremely powerful. Therefore, opting for the riptides of arbitrariness regarding the dilemma makes God's goodness conceptually empty or otherwise insignificant, and theists thereby have good reason to steer clear of this course.

But all is not lost for the theist, according to Alston. He believes that there is a lesson to be learned from the interlocking objections that DCT renders ethics arbitrary and God's goodness empty: a proper answer to the emptiness objection also provides a defensible answer to the arbitrariness objection. The appeal to God's *essential* goodness is key, as he claims, 'For if God is good in the right way, especially if God is essentially good, then there will be nothing arbitrary about his commands; indeed, it will be metaphysically necessary that he issue those commands for the best' (Alston (2002), 285). Because God is traditionally seen to be essentially good and this entails that God is incapable of any moral failing, it follows that God necessarily commits no blameworthy act. Therefore, it is impossible for God to command us to steal, maim or torture, which entails that God's commands are *not* arbitrary.

Furthermore, Alston holds that although humankind is bound by moral obligations, God cannot be, because moral obligations are binding upon agents only if they have the ability not to uphold them (Alston (2002), 288–289). Because human persons are free to uphold or to refrain from upholding God's commands, our moral goodness can be a function of regularly obeying the divine will. But because God is essentially morally perfect, He is not bound by any moral obligations, even though He necessarily does what is good (Alston (2002), 287–289). Therefore, God's moral goodness is not to be understood as regularly

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enacting the divine will, and this entails that God's goodness is not rendered empty or insignificant just because God may always enact what He wills.

Alston also believes that God's goodness can be understood (in part) via God's having proper moral reasons for making the commands and, generally, acting as God does, even if God has no moral obligations. He claims that 'generally the moral goodness of doing A, or anything on which that moral goodness supervenes, can be a moral reason for doing A or for requiring someone to do A', apart from whether one has an obligation to do A (Alston (1991), 318). But, as Alston admits, this move seems to set up a new dilemma for the divine-command theorist: is action A morally good to do merely because God decrees it, or does God decree that A is morally good to do because it is *already* morally good? Alston's proposal is to avoid the first horn by holding that 'God's commands are an expression of His perfect goodness. Since He is perfectly good by nature, it is impossible that God should command us to act in ways that are not for the best' (Alston (1991), 317).[3] Therefore, according to Alston, goodness is not dependent on divine fiat; rather, goodness is conceptually prior to any of God's decrees.

Alston admits that the appeal to God's essential goodness is often interpreted to entail that moral goodness is grounded apart from God, leaving theists susceptible to the second horn of the new dilemma. And he agrees that this seems to contradict 'the absolute sovereignty of God; it implies that there are [valuational] realities other than himself that do not owe their being to his creative activity … . He must conform to them and so is not absolutely sovereign' (Alston (2002), 291). Some theists, of course, are content to re-examine divine sovereignty so as to secure God's moral goodness in states of affairs He did not (and could not) bring about. However, some theists are not, and Alston comes to the aid of the dissenters. He maintains that an appeal to God's essential (moral) goodness does not entail that valuational facts must be grounded independently of God. The alternative is his 'evaluative particularism' embodied in the opening quotation. Given this novel account of (moral) goodness, DCT defenders can deny that God's commands are arbitrary but still seemingly preserve God's sovereignty over the moral realm because God *Himself* is the supreme standard of moral goodness.

Alston believes that an objectivist (or realist) about moral goodness need not hold that something is good because it 'participates in' a Platonic essence, or, moral generally, is in accordance with some necessarily true moral principle. He explains: 'We can have general principles, for example, lovingness is good. For this principle is not ultimate; it … does not enjoy some Platonic ontological status; rather it is true just because the property it specifies as sufficient for goodness is a property of God' (Alston (2002), 292). On Alston's 'particularist' account, objective facts about goodness supervene on the divine nature *without* further appeals to any sort of Platonic moral principle or essence. As Alston puts it, goodness supervenes on every feature of God, not because some Platonic or

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otherwise general principles are (necessarily) true, but just because they are features of God. The idea that God Himself is the standard of goodness – Alston's evaluative particularism – is the crux of Alston's aid for the DCT defender.

Reformulated arbitrariness

The novelty of Alston's proposal is rather obvious. But Alston's resultant account of God's goodness is controversial. Questions about it immediately arise: How should we understand God, a particular concrete being, serving as the standard of goodness? In virtue of what does God so serve? In order to avoid grounding God's goodness, as the Platonist would, in truths that do not depend on God, it seems that God must somehow serve as the supreme standard of goodness *apart* from the properties He in fact possesses. It thus seems that God, *qua* bare particular, serves as the ultimate standard for moral goodness. But this in turn seems to reopen the arbitrary objection: Would God serve as the supreme standard of goodness *regardless* of what properties God possesses? If the properties in question do not sufficiently explain God's being essentially good, then it seems that any cluster of properties God might possess could play an explanatory role in determining (moral) goodness.

Alston, to his credit, anticipates this sort of reformulated objection from arbitrariness. He writes:

> God is not good, qua bare particular or undifferentiated thisness. God is good in virtue of being loving, just, merciful, and so on. Where this view differs from its [Platonic] alternative is in the answer to the question, 'By virtue of what are these features of God good-making features?' The answer given by this view is: 'By virtue of being features of God'. (Alston (2002), 292)

But it's not initially clear how this resolves the objection.

It thus seems that Alston exchanges the classic Euthyphro dilemma for a novel one, equally troublesome: on the one hand, if God serves as the supreme standard of goodness regardless of the properties He possesses, then the nature of goodness is arbitrary (either in the candidate chosen or the properties the chosen candidate possesses); on the other hand, if God serves as the supreme standard of goodness in virtue of the properties He possesses, then God's goodness seems to be explained via the existence of general principles that do not depend on God. Alston seeks to avoid the first horn by tackling the second, contending that his objectivist account of (moral) goodness does not commit him to the existence of Platonic general principles. He consequently holds that divine exemplification adequately explains why goodness supervenes on the properties it does: 'The divine nature, apart from anything God has willed or done, is sufficient to determine what counts as good, including morally good' (Alston (1991), 324).

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Not only is divine exemplification sufficient for goodness, on Alston's evaluative particularism, but it is also necessary. Alston writes, 'My visiting a sick friend is a good thing to do because and only because it constitutes an imitation of the divine nature that is appropriate for me and my current situation' (Alston (1991), 324). If God's possessing X wasn't necessary for X's being good, then X could be good even if God doesn't possess it. But this is to countenance the possibility that there are other sources of goodness that do not supervene on the divine nature, thus jeopardizing God's status as the uniquely singular supreme standard of goodness and, in turn, His sovereignty over the moral realm. These alleged additional sources of goodness would presumably be grounded in Platonic or otherwise general principles. Therefore, according to Alston's evaluative particularism, God's possessing property X is a necessary and sufficient condition for X's being good, including morally good, *without* this entailing that 'X is (morally) good' is grounded in some further Platonic-like principle.[4]

Platonic predilections and particularistic predicates

Alston admits his solution to the novel dilemma *seemingly* remains mired in arbitrariness. Is it enlightening to say that person Y is good simply because of her similarity to another person? Does it really advance the DCT position by saying that God is essentially good because God is God? But Alston contends that these sorts of questions have rhetorical force only because of pre-existing Platonic predilections (Alston (2002), 293). Alston believes that grounding goodness in divine exemplification is no less plausible than the Platonist programme of grounding it in the existence of general, necessarily true principles ontologically independent of God. And appeals to self-evidently true principles are cancelled out by appeals to God self-evidently serving as the supreme standard. If the Platonist complains that her opponent simply hasn't considered a relevant principle carefully or impartially enough, the theist can likewise object that his opponent hasn't considered God's status carefully or impartially enough (Alston (2002), 293).

Furthermore, Alston supplements his particularist programme by reminding us that some properties (or predicates) are better understood as particularistic rather than Platonic. Alston cites 'being a triangle' as a classic example of the latter, but notes that 'being one meter' as an especially relevant example of the former (Alston (1991), 319–320). He writes:

> What makes this table a meter in length is not its conformity to a Platonic essence but its conformity to a certain existing individual. Similarly, on the present [particularist] view, what ultimately makes an act of love a good thing is not its conformity to some general principle, but its conformity to, or approximation to, God, Who is both the ultimate source of the existence of things and the supreme standard by reference to which they are to be assessed. (Alston (1991), 320).

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Alston thus holds that goodness – the property of being good – is more like being a metre in length than it is being a triangle. He furthermore holds that any claims to the contrary are merely evidence of so-called Platonic predilections, which is tantamount simply to begging the questions against his view.[5]

Paradigmatic problems

Alston does an admirable job of anticipating concerns that his evaluational particularism saddles the theist with an arbitrary and, thus, deficient account of goodness. And he is probably correct that some predicates/properties are best understood as particularist. Nevertheless, Alston's DCT-friendly proposal obviously hinges on whether particularist predicates/properties can do the conceptual work his evaluative particularism requires. There seem to be two variants of particularism relevant to Alston's proposal. From a broadly Kripkean analysis, the first variant might be called the 'contingent a priori' and the second the 'necessary a posteriori'.[6] Of the former, we might say that God serving as the moral exemplar is analogous to how '*that* metal bar' serves as the standard for being one metre in length; however, of the latter, we might say that God so serving is analogous to how '*that* liquid', with a bit of subsequent scientific research, established 'Necessarily, water is H_2O'.[7] Should either uncontroversially establish Alston's account of predicates/properties descriptive of (moral) goodness, then Alston seems correct that the DCT defender avoids Euthyphro-type dilemmas about goodness. However, if it can be shown how neither variant clearly establishes the plausibility of Alston's evaluative particularism, then it follows that the relevant worries about arbitrariness remain, that is, unless alternative explanatory models can be developed.

The first model – the contingent a priori – initially seems preferable to the second, as Alston attests (Alston (2002), 292), because it provides a singular example to set uniquely the relevant standard. *That* metallic bar paradigmatically serves as the criterion for being a metre. To be considered a metre in length, any object must approximate the length of that particular bar. Analogously, in order for an act or person to be (morally) good, acts or persons must approximate God in relevantly appropriate ways. However, the analogy driving the first model quickly breaks down, as Wes Morriston has persuasively argued. Keeping with a Kripkean analysis, the particular bar chosen merely fixes the referent of the term 'meter', but *that* bar doesn't play any significant role is determining the truth-conditions for being a metre long because, presumably, a different metallic bar would have sufficed, or the bar utilized could have been warmer or colder affecting its length (at least minimally) at the time it fixed the referent.[8] Presumably, the truth-conditions for being a metre long were largely grounded in matters of convention; the bar chosen and its length were simply matters of fiat,

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which explains the bar and its length being contingent matters. Morriston sums up:

> The standard meter bar is an unfortunate example. It is completely arbitrary which stick of a certain length we use as our standard for 'being a meter long' … . But Alston does not want to say that … it is similarly arbitrary whether God is deemed to be the ultimate standard of moral goodness. (Morriston (2001), 131)

If the proposed analogy is pressed just a bit more, it becomes clear exactly where it fails Alston's purposes. If God is chosen to fix the referent for the necessary and sufficient source of (moral) goodness exactly as the relevant metal bar was chosen to fix the referent of being a metre long, then the particular being chosen to fix the referent of (moral) goodness – God – doesn't figure into the truth-conditions for being (morally) good, even if God does thereafter serve as the criterion that all things must approximate in order to be (morally) good. In this way, there is nothing interestingly paradigmatic about the (so-called) paradigm. That which fixes the referent says more about the referent-fixer than it does the 'paradigm' chosen. But surely this subverts God's (supreme) goodness and leaves the reformulated arbitrariness objection intact.

Alston anticipates this sort of objection, admitting the limitations of the metre-stick analogy. Zagzebski echoes his admission, stating, 'The meter stick chosen to serve as the standard is arbitrary, whereas it is the reverse of arbitrary that God is the standard of goodness' (Zagzebski (2005), 194). However, both philosophers downplay the significance of the failed analogy. Alston suggests that the mere fact that some predicates are particularistic is sufficient for establishing the plausibility of his view, claiming, 'The example was used because of the respect in which there is an analogy, viz., the role of the individual standard in truth conditions of applications of the term' (Alston (1991), 325–326, n. 15).

But Morriston's objection remains forceful, showing two things. First, it is not sufficient that there merely be particularist predicates; they must be able to do the work Alston intends. The metre-stick analogy, while prima facie offering a paradigmatic individual that other relevant instances must approximate, cannot do the work Alston requires. Second, that it cannot accomplish the requisite work is due to the important difference between providing a criterion that must be approximated in order to achieve class-membership (or the like), and the truth conditions for the existence of that criterion in the first place. The particular metal bar and its length chosen was a matter of convention; it cannot be so with God serving as the supreme standard of (moral) goodness, a point that both Alston and Zagzebski admit.[9]

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Scientific essentialism and moral goodness

The metre-stick analogy may fail in another, but potentially instructive, way. There simply doesn't seem to be any essential properties (or features) associated with establishing the locution 'being a meter long'. That which fixed the referent was grounded in contingent matters of convention. The lack of essential properties seems endemic to the contingent a priori model. However, God is supposed to possess essential properties, among them being essentially good. This is why choosing God as the supreme standard of (moral) goodness 'is the opposite of arbitrary'. Therefore, what Alston's particularist programme needs is a model that allows us to determine essential properties that thereby uniquely standardize class-membership for (moral) goodness without (direct) appeals to a priori considerations. Enter the 'necessary a posteriori' variant.

Indeed, on this model, essences are not identified a priori, but only after a posteriori investigations. The classic example is water. Initially, language users (us) possessed a superficial but functionally apt grasp of water, which facilitated our picking out parcels of water from non-water objects. This may have fixed the referent for 'water', but its essence, or true nature, remained hidden. Its true nature was uncovered by science. And repeated successful scientific exploration allows us to rely confidently on the scientist to determine the essences of all natural phenomena. These experts have final say in informing us about the 'true nature' of natural phenomena (Zagzebski (2005), 187).

Analogously, we might be able to say that a good person is someone like *that* – directly referring to Gandhi or Mother Theresa – but leaving it an open question which of their properties is essential to their (moral) goodness. And if the analysis of the relevant (morally) good properties relied upon God as the paradigmatic exemplar of moral goodness, then only an exploration of the divine can determine what those properties are. According to Zagzebski, 'Something is more or less good to the degree it approximates the goodness of God, the perfectly good being … . Ordinary human exemplars are an infinite distance from God, but sufficient to give us the idea of what good is for most of the purposes of practical life' (Zagzebski (2005), 195).

To appreciate fully the potential benefits of the necessary a posteriori model, recall that Alston's evaluative particularism entails that divine exemplification is at least sufficient for (moral) goodness. Alston's evaluative particularism thus entails that *whatever* property God happens to possess thereby becomes a candidate for underwriting moral goodness. This again *seems* to lead back to arbitrariness about (moral) goodness, because it allegedly entails that if God – as the paradigmatic exemplar of goodness – were cruel and vindictive, these divine properties would be constitutive of (moral) goodness. If God serves as the exemplar of goodness irrespective of the properties He in fact

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possesses, as Alston's non-Platonic programme affirms, then this entailment is unavoidable.

True, this entailment *seems* prima facie implausible. It might be wondered why couldn't Alston simply hold that the being we are trying to conceive of here – a vindictive and cruel Creator of heaven and earth simply cannot be God? But this escape route seems impeded by the strictures of Alston's particularist (and non-Platonic) programme. In order to assert confidently that the being in question *cannot* be God, we must have rather extensive knowledge of God's essence a priori, or at least more than can be had if (moral) goodness is supposed to be determined a posteriori. Therefore, the basic problem remains: How can exemplifying maximal love and justice, on the one hand, but exemplifying cruelty and vindictiveness, on the other, equally serve as plausible candidates to underwrite moral goodness?

The necessary a posteriori model potentially provides Alston with an intriguing response to worries about arbitrariness. Consider the following. When language users stipulate that water is whatever the stuff in this glass happens to be, in some sense it is arbitrary – that is, epistemically undetermined – what the term 'water' actually refers to, at least in terms of the essential properties that get attached to that term. But the stuff in the glass ostensibly referred to nevertheless has (yet to be identified) essential properties. Had the term 'water' been used to fix the referent of a different liquid, then the essential properties of water would (undoubtedly) be different from H_2O. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the essential properties of (the stuff we now call) water are arbitrary. The stuff in the glass has essential properties; the only factor that *appears* arbitrary is which term gets fixed to which liquid (or some such).

This very entailment clarifies how Alston's evaluative particularism benefits from the necessary a posteriori model. Consider how, analogously, it might be argued that the particular entity we call 'God' – how we fixed the referent of that term – could have had different essential properties from those that God in fact has (assuming the being ostensibly referred to has essential properties). Among these essential properties presumably are those that underwrite (moral) goodness. In some sense, then, the properties constitutive of (moral) goodness could have been different, but it doesn't obviously follow that the (essential) properties underwriting (moral) goodness are arbitrary. Those properties, whatever they are, are essential to the being we call 'God'. Consequently, Alston might be able to retain God's status as supreme standard of (moral) goodness *irrespective* of whatever configuration of essential properties get attached to 'God'.

In this way, a property is (morally) good just in case 'God' turns out to possess it, and if God doesn't in fact possess it, it cannot serve to underwrite (moral) goodness. So, there is a sense in which God is essentially good, and God's being essentially good allows for the possibility that other acts/agents are (morally) good – *without* appeals to Platonic essences or a priori principles, all of which

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seems consistent with the idea that if God doesn't exist, then nothing is (morally) good.

It must therefore be admitted that understanding Alston's evaluative particularism along necessary a posteriori lines does provide an interesting way to circumvent the reformulated arbitrariness objection. It should also satisfy DCT defenders, as divine exemplification alone provides the standard of moral goodness; when identifying moral goodness, we need look no further than God. However, it also represents a sweeping revision of how we recognize and understand the divine. For this revisionary model to work, God must simply be *that* being, analogous to how the standard metre-stick is *that* bar (except with unknown essential properties), or how paradigms of water are those in *that* glass. Furthermore, our understanding of God must be devoid of any interesting or substantive a priori considerations about God's nature, at least with respect to (moral) goodness.

A priori considerations about what God is like (via perfect-being theology) will impinge upon a posteriori explorations of the divine; the way in which we pick out God, at least in terms of His goodness, must be independent of already knowing what God's (essentially good) properties are. Therefore, there must exist a posteriori means by which the essential properties of *that* being can be discovered in ways analogous to how scientists discovered the essential properties of 'water'. Zagzebski sees this required analogy clearly. She writes,

> Now if God is the supreme exemplar of goodness, there is an analogue to the empirical investigation of water. That is Revelation … . What the [divine command] theorist should do, I suggest, is to begin with exemplarism and let the issues about what makes God good … be settled by investigation of the exemplar's revelation of himself. (Zagzebski (2005), 196)

Just as the natural world provides the scientist with the data from which to determine the essential properties of natural kinds, Zagzebski believes that scripture provides the DCT defender data from which to determine the properties essential to underwriting human (moral) goodness.

Two initial explanatory challenges

It seems that Alston's particularist programme faces worrisome objections on two fronts. First, some will object to the way in which it is allegedly justified. Do the analogies with Kripke's scientific essentialism (via the necessary a posteriori model) hold up under scrutiny? Two initial challenges present themselves. But even if challenges on the first front can be met, and a clearly effective explanatory model for Alston's particularist programme emerges, some might object to the resultant view of (moral) goodness. Does God serving as the sole

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supreme standard of goodness leave us with a strained view of goodness? One initial challenge from this second front presents itself.

First, if Alston's evaluative particularism requires the necessary a posteriori model, then although it steers clear of a priori considerations (or Platonic essences) descriptive of moral goodness, it seems Alston is forced to give up a uniquely singular, paradigmatic standard-setter. Note that any parcel of water (as *that* stuff in the glass) would suffice to set the (necessary) a posteriori standard. *Any* parcel of what we now call 'water', insofar as it is composed of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, is equally an instance of its natural kind; there is no singular and uniquely perfect example of water set apart from others, and inclusion into its natural kind doesn't admit of degrees (except, perhaps, from other impurities it may contain). Therefore, keeping with the analogy, any exemplar of (moral) goodness would effectively suffice set the relevant standard, with no conceptual room left for a uniquely singular paradigmatic example.

But reconsider Zagzebski's contention that exploration into the properties essential to the moral goodness of human exemplars will ultimately involve God. This prediction is unexpected if moral goodness was analogous to natural kinds; insofar as goodness is akin to natural kinds like water, *any* exemplar (or paradigm) would suffice in determining the properties essential to moral goodness. Thus, it very well may be that any required empirical analysis into moral goodness could be completed without essential reference to God or any uniquely singular paradigmatic standard-setter. Claims to the contrary seem to be a case of special pleading, at least given the necessary a posteriori model of determining natural kinds (or terms that are supposed to function like natural kinds).

All of this presumably explains why Alston favours the metre-stick analogy in the first place: it clearly offers a (singular) paradigmatic standard-setter. But to establish the plausibility of relying on God – *that* being 'over there' (or some such) – to serve as the uniquely supreme standard of (moral) goodness by which all other acts/agents can only be good insofar as they approximate him, seemingly requires a priori knowledge of that being's nature. Otherwise, why choose God? Moreover, this reverts back to the Platonic position that God is so chosen because of His being maximally or perfectly loving and just, whereby those properties are constitutive of moral goodness. Therefore, in order for analogies with natural kinds to do the work Alston's evaluative particularism requires, it must be made clearer why God alone paradigmatically serves as the supreme standard of goodness by which all other acts/agents are evaluated, without this presupposing a Platonic (or otherwise a priori) account of goodness.

Alston's evaluative particularism therefore seems to face a new dilemma: Alston's particularist programme is justified on the 'contingent a priori' or 'necessary a posteriori' model. If the first, then, although reference can be made to paradigmatic exemplars, they play no significant role in determining the

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truth-conditions for establishing the relevant criterion established. If the second, then although the essential properties of the paradigm can play a role in establishing the truth-conditions of the relevant kind, there is no conceptual role left to be uniquely played by a singularly paradigmatic exemplar in determining those essential properties. Therefore, because Alston's particularist programme requires a singular paradigmatic exemplar uniquely to determine the essential properties of the relevant kind, it follows that his particularist programme remains unfounded. This new(est) dilemma must be resolved before Alston's particularist programme can successfully aid the DCT defender.

The second challenge on this front is grounded in the disparity between scientific and scriptural 'data'. We readily allow scientific experts to determine the essences of natural kinds for the rest of us (language users). This is due to science's unrivalled success in establishing consensus about such matters, which in turn is grounded in developing tried and true methods to garner it. Simply put, scientists are the natural phenomena investigative experts. But what kind of expert shall we rely on to determine the essence of moral goodness? The scientist seems of little help here with Hume's is/ought gap looming. Assuming some form of moral realism, as Alston's evaluative particularism does, it seems that ethics is an autonomous domain. Thus keeping with the scientific essentialism analogy, we require the services of an ethics expert, who would presumably depend on tried and true methods to discern moral truths. What might this mean given Alston's particularist (and non-Platonic) programme?

One suggestion is to turn toward experts at deciphering scripture. This is certainly consistent with Zagzebski's contention that 'Through Revelation we find out the traits of God's character … . What the [divine-command] theorist should do, I suggest, is to begin with exemplarism and let the issues about what makes God good … be settled by investigation of the exemplar's revelation of himself' (Zagzebski (2005), 196). It should be clear by now that cavalierly 'beginning with exemplarism' is problematic. But Zabzebski's suggestion is contentious for other reasons, beginning with her procedural assumptions about scripture.

Various troubling disanalogies between scientific and scriptural 'data' immediately arise. When scientists investigate the data of natural phenomena, they do so with well-worn procedures – the scientific method. The scientific method produces results that are indisputable, but if some dispute remains, the lingering debate is amendable to future trials and testing. In this way, scientific procedures are self-correcting and refining, which explains why science achieves a great deal of convergence in its findings. There simply is no analogous convergence among biblical scholars in terms of how best to interpret scriptural data. This neither belittles biblical scholarship, nor entails that scripture can mean whatever an individual wants it to. But if there is no convergence among scriptural experts about what the data show, then its unclear whether the experts are in a position to

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determine definitively which properties are essential to the moral goodness of human exemplars; moreover, it's unclear whether we language users should unreflectively trust their findings.

Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the 'data' of scripture has been tainted by human hands in ways that scientific data cannot be. Bart Ehrman argues this case persuasively.[10] He claims that, given the centuries of reproducing scripture by hand, 'these copies all differ with one another, in many thousands of places … . Possibly it is easiest to put it in comparative terms: there are more differences among our manuscripts that there are words in the New Testament' (Ehrman (2005), 10). Apart from the unintentional tainting of scripture, Ehrman also describes cases where the 'data' seem to have been simply 'cooked' to fit pre-existing beliefs or interests of the scribes copying them.

He informs us of early variants of the Gospel of St Mark. Some versions of this gospel (including the Codex Bezae) at 1.41 have Jesus 'becoming angry' at the leper's request to heal him, but others have Jesus 'feeling compassion' for the man's afflictions. Because the Greek words for these phrases are quite dissimilar, it seems that the variants cannot be explained by mindless errors of transmission. So, what explains the discrepancy? Ehrman suggests, 'The question to be asked is this: which is more likely, that a scribe copying this text would change it to say that Jesus became wrathful instead of compassionate, or to say that Jesus became compassionate instead of wrathful?' (Ehrman (2005), 134–135). According to Ehrman, it stands to reason that scribes, who were invariably Christians, would prefer the text to be non-problematic and simple to understand. Thus, he concludes, that Jesus 'becoming angry' was likely the original phrase (Ehrman (2005), 135–136). But Ehrman's extended analysis of why Mark was changed proves particularly disconcerting for the particularist programme:

> One of the constant points of debate between pagan critics of Christianity and its intellectual defenders had to do with the deportment of Jesus … . The question was whether Jesus behaved in such a way as to justify thinking of him as someone of that sort [the Son of God], or whether, instead, his attitudes and behaviors eliminated [that] possibility … . By this period it was widely believed among pagans that the gods were not subject to the petty emotions and whims of mere mortals, that they were, in fact, above such things … . In this story about Jesus and the leper, however, there is no very obvious reason for Jesus to be angry. (Ehrman (2005), 200–201).

Ehrman, therefore, understands scripture to be shaped by a priori considerations of what divine beings must be like. If such assumptions have shaped scripture, then it seems impossible for it to provide the particularist with the kind of source data she requires to determine independently God's essential attributes a posteriori. The 'angry Jesus' example shows that scriptural depictions of the divine are not devoid of substantive a priori considerations about God's nature, including those with respect to (moral) goodness. Therefore, before Zagzebski's

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suggestion can get off the ground, much more work needs to be done in defending the analogy between scientific and scriptural 'data'.[11]

A third initial challenge about goodness

On the second front, Alston's contention that divine exemplification is a necessary and sufficient condition for a property to be (morally) good seems to face difficulties on both requirements. Recall that Alston believes that God is the uniquely supreme standard by reference to which all things are to be assessed, and that goodness supervenes on every feature of God. Thus, applied generally, it prima facie follows that something – presumably *any*thing – is better the more closely it conforms to the divine nature.

For example, note that God is (essentially) non-physical. God presumably possesses this property in virtue of being existentially secure. Moreover, in virtue of being non-physical, God possesses the further properties of being without biological life, mass-less, and genderless. If goodness supervenes on every feature of God and things are assessed in terms of their resemblance to God, then it is tempting to conclude that it would be a good thing for us to strive to be more like God in these respects. However, it seems completely incoherent to claim that we should follow God in becoming more biologically lifeless, mass-less, or genderless. It seems pretty clear that any real attempt at these will prove to be more harmful to us than beneficial. Indeed striving to be like God with respect to the first would be tantamount to suicide, which is (invariably) an *undesirable* state of affairs. But it is difficult to imagine that Alston didn't foresee this obviously implausible entailment. So, although this example does cast some doubt on whether divine exemplification, all by itself, is sufficient for a property's being good to have, it may simply be an indication that Alston's evaluative particularism, walking the fine conceptual line that it does, must be interpreted with care.

An initial interpretive suggestion is that we must take into account the kind of thing that is attempting to imitate God. In this way, we can interpret Alston as anticipating the crude objection from divine immateriality, as he writes, 'One who takes God to be the supreme standard of value must hold that our actions, our characters, or anything else in the world are good to the extent that they imitate or approximate the being of God in whatever way is appropriate to their position in creation' (Alston (2002), 295). God is indeed 'radically other' exactly in terms of His being omnipresent, everlasting, and existentially secure (among other characteristics). So, why think that it would be good that we, as finite, embodied creatures, strive to be more like Him in *every* way? How can it be beneficial for finite embodied creatures to become more like something that we, necessarily, are not, namely divine? Thus, it cannot be good that embodied creatures imitate God in every way, but only in ways that would be appropriate

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given our position in creation. So, we needn't worry about the goodness of risking suicide in the attempt to approximate God's immateriality.

The intuitive plausibility of this rejoinder is strong. However, it uncovers deeper concerns about Alston's contention that divine exemplification is a necessary and sufficient condition for creaturely goodness. Alston's view entails that if God doesn't exemplify a property, it cannot be good to possess or to approximate. This entailment becomes problematic with respect to moral properties which God cannot exemplify, most notably (perhaps) being courageous.

Courage is, or at least can be, a moral virtue for human persons. However, because being courageous requires (roughly) focused effort in the face of adversity when the resulting outcome is uncertain, it is very difficult to see how the omnipotent, omniscient, and existentially secure Creator could be courageous. God's omnipotence entails that all activity is effortless, and God's omniscience entails that no outcome is uncertain to Him. Perhaps the best alleged example of courage on God's part is creating free creatures. However, neither the Calvinist nor Molinist has grounds for deeming God courageous. The matter is a bit more controversial for the open theist, but because open theists typically go out of their way to explain how God's extensive knowledge of probabilities renders any outcome virtually certain, we remain hard pressed to deem God courageous for any endeavour, including the decision to create free creatures.[12]

It thus follows on Alston's account that being courageous cannot be a good property for us to possess or approximate. But this is simply implausible, and proves to be a serious counter-example to his view. Since it is, or at least can be, a good thing for us to be courageous, it follows that there are other sources (or grounds) of goodness besides divine exemplification. The counter-example from courage doesn't seem to be a mere anomaly on Alston's view. Others quickly come to mind, including expressing gratitude to benefactors and experiencing Aristotelian friendship. God has no benefactors and so He cannot express gratitude; God has no peers in terms of virtue/excellence and so He cannot participate in Aristotle's highest form of friendship. On Alston's view, then, it therefore follows that neither courage, gratitude, nor Aristotelian friendship can be (morally) good.[13]

Nevertheless, such apparent counter-examples are ironically instructive in ways similar to Alston's initial rejoinder from creaturely approximation. Each relies on the idea that goodness must supervene (at least in part) on the characteristics of the thing striving to become good (or better). This fact again calls into question Alston's contention that divine exemplification is (all by itself) sufficient for a property's being (morally) good. Recall Alston's qualifier that we are not morally deficient because we are unable to imitate God in every way, even if God is the supreme standard of goodness and all things are to be assessed with respect to God. But this qualifier is not descriptive of the divine nature in any obvious way, even though it is descriptive of goodness with respect to imitating God. It

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thereby seems tantamount to accepting the truth of a Platonic-like principle that (in part) shapes the realm of moral goodness. But by adopting such principles, it seems to follow that goodness is not merely supervenient on God's characteristics; it also supervenes on the nature of the creatures seeking to imitate God. This seems to jeopardize Alston's view and bolsters the third challenge that his evaluative particularism leaves us with a rather strained (or perhaps wooden) interpretation of (moral) goodness.

The charge to particularists

Although we'll never know for sure, Alston would no doubt have rejoinders for these initial challenges. Regarding the first, could Alston avoid the contingent a priori and necessary a posteriori dilemma by appealing to Kripke's essentialism about proper names (Morriston (2001), 134)? The idea (roughly) is that via empirical investigation we can discover the essential properties of any named person; Richard Nixon just is the organism descended from a particular sperm and particular egg, and, seemingly, can be identified across possible worlds as such. But how would this apply to the person of God? God's existence doesn't depend on anything, especially a human sperm or egg. Apart from that, of what does Nixon (or whoever) serve as a standard? This isn't merely a point about the former President of the United States, but a more general one about proper-name essentialism. Can appeals to it provide the requisite standard of (moral) goodness without being supplemented by the contingent a priori or the necessary a posteriori models, or (perhaps more likely) a return to Platonic or otherwise a priori principles?

Regarding the second, could Alston appeal to the experiential reports of divine mystics rather than scripture as a means of determining God's essential characteristics a posteriori? Given his influential work in the epistemology of religious experience, he would undoubtedly be sympathetic to this rejoinder (even if it didn't occur to him in his 2005 response to Zagzebski). But what of conflicting experiential reports among the mystics? Given such conflicts, are (alleged) mystical experiences evidence for non-mystics? Many still follow William James in claiming that they are not. If so, then the analogy to scientific essentialism (via the necessary a posteriori) again breaks down.[14]

Regarding the third, could Alston argue that any alleged counter-example about human (moral) goodness be explained away by relying on other traits God possesses? After all, cases involving courage are invariably driven by agents acting from other motives like love, loyalty, or kindness. This can be granted; however, *some* loving acts are nevertheless dangerous or difficult for agents even if some are not, leaving the objection intact.

These initial challenges for Alston's particularist DCT programme therefore certainly seem significant, and well worth the attention of Alston's followers.

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Perhaps the likes of Craig and Zagzebski can somehow ultimately meet them, thereby continuing Alston's foundational work. In the process, they should also address the suspicion of arbitrariness that still lingers about Alston's non-Platonic platform. Although it's true that which properties get fixed to the term 'God' is no more arbitrary than which properties get fixed to 'water', the properties (themselves) in virtue of which God is good – those that thereby underwrite human (moral) goodness – certainly seem to remain unduly arbitrary. How could God's (essential) goodness *not* be a matter of His being maximally loving and just? If only that troublesome intuition could be explained away, a great service would be done to Alston's unique particularist approach to Euthyphro's dilemma.

Could Alston's followers do so (in part) by distinguishing between God (Himself) uniquely serving as the ultimate standard of (moral) goodness and God's (essential) nature serving as the ultimate standard of (moral) goodness? This move would abate worries about arbitariness, but it is also tenuous; it seems to embrace Platonism about goodness (goodness supervenes on the relevant properties God possesses), thereby subverting the very particularism Alston wishes to establish.[15] Thus they must meet the three initial challenges and deflect charges of arbitrariness while keeping Alston's particularism secure. Should that accomplishment include a coherent account of a kind-defining singularly paradigmatic exemplar, the relevant essential properties of which are known a posteriori, then William Alston will assuredly influence future generations in yet one more sub-field of philosophy.[16]

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Notes

1. For Craig's views see Garcia & King (2008) and Craig & Sinnott-Armstrong (2004).
2. This is the standard interpretation of goodness, but it might be more controversial than it first appears. After all, the standard account arguably represents a morally significant truth that, if true, seems so apart from God's decree. Thus, DCT defenders may be forced to accept that being morally good is simply to receive divine approbation (even if this is consistent with the existence of morally good persons who act contrary to God's commands).
3. Alston seems to acknowledge that this may entail a sort of divine nature view of DCT such that God's commands are simply expressive of His perfect nature. He also suspects that some DCT defenders might balk at this entailment because it cuts God's causal role in shaping human moral obligation rather thin; Alston (2005), 205. Zagzebski's article addresses this issue and offers a novel approach (one that Alston countenances in his response) that may be more DCT-friendly; Zagzebski (2005), 196–197.
4. Craig clearly believes that Alston's view harbours this entailment. He argues that there are objective moral values if and only if theism is true; Craig (2008), 29–33, 36–38, 40–42, 44–45. Moreover, Craig writes, 'Atheistic moral realists affirm that moral values and duties do exist in reality … but they insist that they are not grounded in God. Indeed, moral values have no further foundation. They just exist. I must confess that this alternative strikes me as incomprehensible'; Craig & Sinnott-Armstrong (2004), 19.
5. Alston bolsters his particularist programme by reminding us of the important role exemplars play in refining our artistic, musical, literary, and moral sensibilities, and that exemplars most effectively account for the agently internalization of moral standards; Alston (1991), 322–323. Furthermore, Alston believes that theists have reason to prefer God's essential goodness via His evaluative particularism rather than the Platonic conception. He writes, 'On the Platonic view God will "consult" the objective principles of goodness … and see to it that his actions conform thereto. On my particularist view God will simply act as he is inclined to act … in accordance with his character, and that will necessarily be for the best. No preliminary stage of checking the relevant principles is required'; Alston (2002), 292.
6. See Kripke (1980). There might be a third variant, what might be called proper-name essentialism, which will be broached later in the essay.
7. To be fair, although Alston does cite 'dog' as a 'biological kind term', he also refers to 'game' and 'religion' as 'family resemblance terms'. He refers to family resemblance terms, it seems, in order to express the idea that some class-terms apply 'not on the basis of a list of defining properties but on the basis of similarity to certain standard examples'; Alston (2002), 292. However, it seems that his particularist project is better suited to the proffered dichotomy if only because natural kind terms on a Kripkean analysis have more of an objective (or realist) basis than do family-resemblance accounts, which invariably suggest nominalism.
8. Morriston is among those who note the irony that a metre is no longer represented by the distance between two scratches on a platinum-iridium bar; Morriston (2001), 130, n. 8. The irony of this will become clearer as the essay progresses.
9. Zagzebski claims the analogy fails because 'God is both the ultimate standard and the source of good. The standard meter stick is certainly not the source of other meter sticks even if it is the standard'; Zagzebski (2005), 194. But, given Morriston's argument, it seems that this isn't the core of the problem. Zagzebski doesn't seem to be aware of Morriston's article; she doesn't refer to or cite it at all. Consequently, her reliance on the metre-stick example (Zagzebski (2005), 194–196) in fleshing out Alston's evaluative particularism seems to be sometimes misleading. Morriston, for his part, proffers that the metre-stick analogy be dropped altogether; Morriston (2001), 131–132.
10. Ehrman is emerging as a highly influential and prolific biblical scholar; however, not surprisingly, he does have his detractors. This fact only emphasizes the point from the previous paragraph. Is Ehrman a 'scriptural data expert' or not? If not, then it seems no-one is, but who should we language users subsequently trust to discover the properties essential to human (moral) goodness? If he is, then there is good reason to believe that scripture has been tainted by human hands. Finally, the insight about tainting scriptural data can seemingly remain neutral on (much of) the contentious issue of biblical inerrancy. Even if the original manuscripts were error-free, the copies that survive – the data from which the experts are to discern the properties essential to (moral) goodness – have been altered, hampering our a posteriori knowledge of God's essential properties.

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11. An additional qualm to the necessary a posteriori approach is worth mentioning. There are various morally controversial biblical stories: God sends the she-bears to maul forty-two children for calling Elisha 'baldy' (2 Kings, 2.23–25); God kills people for complaining about the meal Moses serves (Numbers, 21.4–6); God countenances the prohibition against women speaking in church and sexism generally (1 Corinthians, 14.34–36). Many theists hold, *on a priori grounds*, that such passages do not accurately represent the divine. However, the particularist programme seems to entail that reading a priori considerations into the scriptural data can only run foul of the a posteriori work to do. Thus, the particularist programme will present many theists with troubling difficulties about how to approach scripture. But this only leads to a deeper worry.

    The necessary a posteriori model is consistent with our radically misunderstanding the true nature of moral goodness, just as we (language users) radically misunderstood the true nature of water or light. Should a posteriori explorations into the divine personage reveal findings radically at odds with entrenched (probably a priori) moral intuitions, the theist might (again) be hard pressed in determining which position to adopt. Coming to believe that neither constituent of water is wet or that light is the combination of all colours (and a particle or a wave depending on how you measure it) is one thing; coming to believe that justice is served even if punishments radically exceed the relevant infraction, or among permissible acts is wilfully killing innocent women and children, is something else entirely. And given the fact that the community of bible scholars – the requisite particularist 'data-experts' – radically diverge about their findings, accepting Alston's evaluative particularism may come at an unacceptably high price for many theists.
12. William Hasker says this about God's venture in creating libertarianly free creatures: 'We certainly should not underestimate the tremendous resourcefulness of God in adapting his responses to human actions … so as to achieve his wise and loving purposes. But even if it is possible, on the open view of God, for all human beings without exception to reject salvation, still this might be overwhelmingly improbable – so improbable that the risk of such an outcome is negligible'; Hasker (1994), 153. To adapt one of Hasker's analogies, God's decision to create free creatures is about as courageous as my choice to walk into an unfamiliar room when I know that it is possible for all the oxygen molecules to become concentrated in the far corner, leaving the rest of the room inhabitable.
13. Alternatively, the argument presented here could be recast as not entailing that there is no sense in which these values (or virtues) apply to (or are grounded in) God, but rather that the values mentioned, which clearly are values, cannot be grounded in God the way Alston's evaluative particularism requires. Therefore, either courageousness, expressing gratitude to benefactors, or experiencing true friendship is never (morally) good to exemplify, or Alston's evaluative particularism does not provide an adequate account of goodness, including moral goodness. But because it seems likely (to say the least) that courageousness, expressing gratitude to benefactors, or true friendship can be (morally) good to exemplify, it seems unlikely that Alston's view provides an adequate account of (moral) goodness. Therefore, at best, Alston's evaluative particularism leaves us with a strained (or wooden) interpretation of (moral) goodness.
14. For a very careful study of the worries facing Alston and his followers regarding the epistemology of religious experience, see Fales (1996) and (1996a).
15. Morriston also doubts the success of this move. He contends that by relying on God's (essential) nature to secure God's unique status as the ultimate standard of moral goodness, 'we might as well revert to Platonism, and simply say that maximal love and justice are themselves the ultimate standard. In which case, we are back to saying that some of the properties that make up God's nature – and not God himself – constitute the true standard of moral goodness'; Morriston (2001), 132.
16. Work on this project began under the auspices of the (now defunct) UW-Colleges/UW-Madison collaborative research grant programme. I am indebted to Professor Keith Yandell for his involvement in it (and for so much more). I am also grateful to those who have read and commented on drafts: Tim Dunn, Bill Schneider, Matt Davidson, Christina Van Dyke, Evan Fales, Alan V. White, and especially Dan Putman.

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