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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How does God relate to mature rational agents?

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Abstract

Nicholas Hadsell suggests an answer to the question of divine authority. Hadsell agrees with Mark Murphy that it isn't enough to point to divine omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, or our gratitude to God. Hadsell's answer is that God has practical authority over us because he is our parent. Since parents incur duties towards their children, and since the discharge of those duties requires authority, God likewise has authority over us. Hadsell's parental model is the wrong one for understanding God's normative relation to mature rational creatures. It's true that Scripture often compares God to a loving parent, but the dominant and overarching shape of God's dealings with mature moral agents is covenantal.

Keywords: theistic ethics; agency; practical authority; divine authority; covenant

Nicholas Hadsell's 'Divine authority as divine parenthood' suggests an answer to the question of divine authority: what could make it true that God has practical authority over the people he's created (2025)? Hadsell agrees with Mark Murphy that it isn't enough to point to divine omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, or gratitude to God. Those considerations may show that we have powerful reasons to trust, obey, or submit to God. But they don't show that God has practical authority[1] over us; i.e., that he has the standing to issue directives placing us under obligations simply by commanding us (Murphy 2002).

Hadsell's answer is that God has practical authority over us because he is our causal parent (831). I argue this route to divine authority fails. The parental model is the wrong one for understanding God's authority over mature rational creatures. It's true that Scripture often compares God to a loving parent, but the dominant and overarching shape of God's dealings with mature, rational moral agents is covenantal. Covenant is a publicly structured and instituted relation of accountability, obligation, and fidelity. It's something that those party to it can affirm, renew, breach, and repair. It acknowledges that mature rational agents have a distinctive normative status, even in their relations with God. Hadsell invokes considerations associated with parenthood that would require God to authoritatively direct us in ways that will lead to a relationship with him. I argue that this isn't enough to establish divine authority. These considerations may show that we have powerful reasons to covenant with God and submit to his directives. But they don't show that God has the standing to place us under obligations simply by commanding us.

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God is our parent, but I'm not a child

Hadsell argues that God counts as our parent because he is causally responsible for our existence (831). Since parents incur duties towards their children, and since the discharge of those duties requires practical authority, God likewise has authority over us. Hadsell's authority thesis furthermore has it that God has authority over us *necessarily*. More precisely, Hadsell claims that if God creates beings with our interest in and need for relationship with him, then he thereby necessarily incurs a duty to relate to us (845, n. 36). But, because God is holy (and we aren't), in creating us God incurs a duty to sanctify us, making us fitting participants in an intimate relationship with him. And because sanctification requires engagement with our wills, God must have the authority to command us 'regardless of our consent' (835).

But the authority thesis simply doesn't follow from these considerations. I affirm that God is our parent, that we have a deep interest in and need for a relationship with him, and that such a relationship requires our sanctification, which requires God's direction. But God didn't just make us with deep relational needs; he made us as agents. Agents are beings capable, in fairly sophisticated ways, of understanding reasons, deliberating about how to rank them, and deciding for themselves what to do.

These capacities are normatively significant. God didn't have to create creatures with the high-level deliberative capacities associated with human agency. But having created such creatures, it would be very surprising if God would constrain our exercise of them in the way the authority thesis would do. It would be very surprising, having created such creatures, that God would then treat us like children. So even if God's creating us gives rise to a duty to relate to us, and even if that duty requires our moral and spiritual formation, it does not follow that God thereby has parental-style practical authority over us regardless of our consent. That inference is especially doubtful given that the creatures in question are mature rational agents rather than children.

Considerations of agency are normatively significant, I'd argue, even in the case of *the rebel*. The rebel Hadsell considers says, 'I do not want to be made holy, I do not want a relationship with God, and I do not want to do the things God is telling me to do' (835). Hadsell says,

> I reaffirm a common assumption in various strands of traditional Christian anthropology: every person God creates has the final end of union with God. If this idea is true, the rebel does, in her heart of hearts, long for union with God. The rebel's occurrent desires may fog this dispositional desire of hers, and conceptual confusion about what satisfies those desires can occlude this desire, but it is there (836).

I think this is little more than an expression of disapproval for the way the rebel exercises her agency (which I share). I think I might even agree with all these anthropological claims.[2] Nonetheless, I don't see how they deliver divine practical authority. The rebel may be wrong, foolish, self-deceived, or alienated from her deepest good. Unless her rebellion arises from an abnormal defect in agency, none of this would deliver to another the standing to obligate her to change paths as a matter of course. Perhaps Hadsell thinks that rebellion is dispositive evidence of insufficient agential powers, but the much safer conjecture is that the rebel is simply in error, as agents often are. She is exercising her agency poorly and so should repent, submit, and enter into a lasting covenant with God. In other words, she has strong reasons to comply with God's directives.

Murphy has suggested the compliance thesis as an alternative to the divine authority thesis (2002, ch. 2). In light of the divine perfections, we all have reason to comply with

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God's directives and even to place ourselves under God's authority. But, in light of our agency, until and unless we do, God doesn't have the standing to create obligations for us simply by issuing a command. This would mean that God has authority over created beings *contingently*.

The upshot of this focus on mature rational agency is that the parent–child analogy is less helpful than Hadsell supposes. It isn't simply that parents have a duty to care for and relate to their children in consideration of having created them. In addition, we ground and explain parental authority by noting that the capacities of their young children haven't developed enough to count as reasonably mature rational agents. Normal adults have, though, even though their capacities are incomparably low compared to God. If that's right, then Hadsell cannot simply move from divine parenthood to divine authority over mature persons because the relevant sense of authority diminishes and even disappears as children naturally develop their agency.

Hadsell anticipates something like this objection when he considers whether 'divine authority is too different from parental authority' (836). There he notes John Locke's view that parental authority lasts only until children develop their faculty of reason. Hadsell replies that it is 'not obvious' that parental authority disappears in this way. He appeals to the thought that parental duties may persist throughout the life of the child, and he argues that God's sanctifying task is especially the sort that lasts a lifetime. But this response trades on an ambiguity between ongoing parental responsibilities and ongoing practical authority. Parents may continue to have duties, concerns, occasions to counsel, and even special standing with respect to their adult children. They don't ordinarily retain the sort of broad practical authority over adult children that they characteristically exercise over their young children. For example, parents worry that their adult children avoid disastrous financial decisions or destructive relationships. They'll advise, warn, direct, and even plead with them to think the matter through more carefully and go a different way. These responsibilities of care and concern can persist long into the child's adulthood. Parents don't, however, retain the standing simply to obligate their adult children as they once did to eat their vegetables or to be home by 9 p.m. Their continuing responsibilities don't amount to a continuing right to rule.

Where something like parental authority survives into adulthood, it's contingent on the adult child continuing to go along with it. Adult sons and daughters may choose to continue deferring to parental guidance. But they may also bring that arrangement to an end, and if they do so with respect and propriety, the parent should have no complaint. What persists, then, is not a default right to rule, but at most a more fragile standing sustained by the adult child's continued endorsement or acquiescence. If that's right, the analogy supports Murphy's position more than Hadsell's. It shows, at most, how authority-like relations over adults may continue contingent on acceptance, not how they bind regardless of consent.[3]

There is a similar gap in Hadsell's claim that sanctification requires practical authority. Even if God has a lifelong interest in our sanctification, and a duty to promote it, it doesn't follow that God has practical authority over mature agents. Teachers, siblings, pastors, and friends may all have important roles in another person's moral and spiritual formation. They may advise, exhort, rebuke, guide, and warn. The persistence and importance of those tasks don't generate the standing to obligate mature persons simply by command. Hadsell's move from 'God must sanctify us' to 'God has authority over us regardless of consent' is precisely the sort of inference Murphy should have taught us to doubt. Reasons to comply, even excellent reasons, don't make for broad discretionary practical authority because we are, as Murphy says, 'in large measure self-directing: capable of coming to an understanding of what reasons for action there are, of assessing the features of those reasons for action

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relevant to deliberation, and of deciding what course of action is to be carried out in light of those reasons' (2002, 1). The parental analogy, once we bring the mature agency of adult children into view, points at most towards contingent authority-like relations, not towards the sort of default standing Hadsell claims for God.

How does an omnipotent being get practical authority?

Some mature rational agents do fall under God's genuine authority. They do when they agree: when they covenant with God, submitting to his rule-making authority in a way that gives rise to a duty to obey. Scripture provides the clearest illustrations of this answer to the authority question.

Hadsell invokes Scripture to motivate the parental model. He 'takes the idea that God has revealed himself to us as our parent very seriously' (836) and in defending divine causal parenthood, cites Jeremiah 1:5 (831). But here I argue that covenant emerges as a more illuminating framework for understanding how God comes to occupy a position of authority over people.[4] In Scripture, when God issues requirements and directives to people, he doesn't simply invoke his parenthood. Instead, God's rules are presented in the context of an established covenant.

This matters because the imagery of God as our parent and the formal device of a covenant reveal different things about God and his connection to us. The image of God as father illuminates divine care, concern, beneficence, discipline, and intimacy. But when God covenants with us, he acknowledges that we are self-determining agents. For example, Daniel Elazar writes about the Israelites at Sinai that 'because they are humans who must consent, they cannot accept unilateral declarations. No consent. No covenant' (1998, 169). Covenant is the framework within which obligation, accountability, promise, law, blessing, curse, office, and mediation are publicly organized in his dealings with people. And, as the previous section suggests, if the issue is practical authority over mature rational agents, covenant is more illuminating than parenthood because it frames obligation and accountability in a way that takes their agency seriously.

Hadsell, however, reports that 'it seems strange that there could be a large set of people over whom God lacks authority' (835). Why, though, should that seem strange? On a covenantal model, it is exactly what we should expect and, in fact, what we see. To establish the Sinaitic covenant

> the LORD called out to [Moses] from the mountain, saying, 'Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and shall you tell to the Israelites: You yourselves saw what I did to Egypt, and I bore you on the wings of eagles and I brought you to Me. And now, if you will truly heed My voice and keep My covenant, you will become for Me a treasure among all the peoples, for Mine is all the earth. And as for you, you will become for Me a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites' (Ex. 19:3–6).

How do they respond? Will they agree?

> And Moses came and he called to the elders of the people, and he set them all these words that the LORD had charged him. And all the people answered together and said, 'Everything that the LORD has spoken we shall do. And Moses brought back the people's words to the LORD' (Ex. 19:7–8).

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Later,

> Moses came and recounted to the people all the LORD'S words and all the laws, and the people answered with a single voice and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do ....' And Moses wrote down all the LORD'S words .... And he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do and we will heed' (Ex. 24:3–4, 7).

These rules applied to the Israelites contingent on their agreement.[5] That is, they could have said 'no thanks'. What about folks who weren't there because they weren't born yet? Does covenantal authority carry forward by simple ancestry because of that initial affirmation at Sinai? Scripture doesn't present it that way. Instead, the founding covenant is renewed and reaffirmed across successive generations: on the plains of Moab before entry into the Promised Land (Deut. 29), at Shechem with Moses's replacement Joshua (Josh. 24), when the monarchy was established with Saul's coronation (1 Sam. 12), as well as various times the prophets called the Israelites to repentance and reform after a season of covenant breaking (e.g., 2 Kings 11:17), and even after the Babylonian Exile (Neh. 8–10). Furthermore, between these exceptional occasions of formal renewal, parents are charged with instructing their children in the covenant (Deut. 6:7). Every sabbatical year during the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles), the entire covenant would be read in the assembly of all 'the people, the men and the women and the little ones and your sojourner who is within your gates, so that they may hear and so that they may learn, and they will fear the LORD your God and keep to do all the words of this teaching' (Deut. 31:12).

The picture we get, then, is neither an individualistic nascent liberalism nor a simple once-and-for-all hereditary transmission. The covenant, once initiated, is sustained by repeated public renewal, instruction, and uptake across generations. It's nevertheless limited in scope, and in context there is nothing especially strange about that. On this picture, most people don't stand under God's comprehensive practical authority because they haven't entered a covenant with him. Israel stands under the Sinaitic covenant. Other people groups don't thereby stand under the full range of Sinaitic requirements.[6] For example, God's dietary laws didn't apply to the surrounding people groups, only the Israelites, and not even the aforementioned 'sojourner who is within your gates' as we see in Deut. 14:21. This is not an embarrassment for divine authority. On this picture, God's authority is mediated through a publicly intelligible, rule-governed accountability relation that treats people as agents rather than children who can be bossed around.

If that's right, then the covenantal model affects not only the scope of divine authority but also the sort of authority in view. The parental model naturally suggests discretion to issue particularized directives for the sake of a child's good. I might tell one daughter that she has to finish her homework at the kitchen table before going outside, while leaving her older sister all kinds of discretion. The difference may reflect nothing more than the fact that one is easily distracted and the other is a bit more reliable. This is perfectly ordinary parenting. But it shows that parental authority is not merely the enforcement of a set of established norms, but the power to impose child-specific directives for the sake of formation. This is appropriate where the subjects lack full maturity. A model more fitting for rational agents is one in which authority is mediated through general and impartial rules, which they have had the chance to consider, grounded in promises and agreements. Parental imagery beautifully illustrates divine intimacy and human dependence. Covenant better accounts for obligation and relations of accountability.[7] Though Hadsell emphasizes

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that divine authority is limited by the aim of sanctification, without this covenantal, rule-like structure, his account still leaves too much room for the sort of supervisory authority that can undermine mature rational agency.

Conclusion

Hadsell's solution to the problem of divine authority relies too heavily on the parent–child analogy and too little on the covenantal patterns through which God is so often presented as relating to people. If we take human agency seriously, parental authority over children no longer provides the right comprehensive model for God's normative relations to beings like us. The idea isn't that God only relates to us covenantally or to deny the significance of parental imagery in either philosophical theology or Scripture. I have only argued that practical authority over mature rational agents is better understood covenantally than as an incident of divine parenthood. Nor does this make divine authority a matter of historical accident. The Hebrew Bible presents the Sinaitic agreement as an ordered arrangement sustained by instruction and renewal across generations. It's plausible, and often taught, that anyone can respond to the call from God and make the relevant affirmations (or not). When we focus on how obligations are established and publicly mediated, and how mature agents can stand under divine rule without being reduced to children, a covenantal framework is the more illuminating model.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. Or, more simply, authority. I'll alternate between the two in what follows.
2. Especially with the qualifiers 'may' and 'can'. Hadsell cites Aquinas (I-II Q3 A8), Jonathan Edwards ('The End for Which God Created the World'), and the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q1), among others.
3. In footnote 41 (845), Hadsell argues that responsible rejection is 'not necessarily sufficient' to terminate parental authority, because some precocious minors may be as developed as many 18-year-olds and yet we won't deny their parents' authority. But this reply doesn't affect my point, which isn't that any reasonably mature child can terminate parental authority. My point is that once someone is a mature adult agent, what remains of parental standing is usually contingent on the adult child's continued acceptance. Hadsell's example of unusually precocious minors does not really touch that. It only shows that there may be borderline cases where agency matures before the law or social practice recognizes full independence, which is consistent with my point.
4. Scholars do not enumerate the biblical covenants in the same ways, but common lists include the Noahic, Abrahamic, Sinaitic/Mosaic, Davidic, and priestly/Levitical covenants. Many Christian theologians also add the creation/Adamic and New covenants and treat covenant as a significant structuring device in the biblical canon.
5. In addition to Elazar, see Michael Walzer: 'The laws were binding only because they had been accepted by the people. Rabbinic writers are especially clear on this point' (2012, 5). Also, Berman (2011), ch. 1; Bullinger (1534); Lomasky (2011); and Swan (2019).
6. There are, of course, passages in Scripture where it appears that God imposes a covenant or norm unilaterally and universally. That seems to be the case in Genesis 9 where God announces to Noah and his sons that he will demand an accounting for human life taken. But a basic no-killing rule is something that all already have reason to treat as obligatory. See Swan (2024).
7. Scripture often illustrates this with an analogy to the covenant of marriage. Isaiah says explicitly, 'your Maker is your husband' (54:5). See also Hosea 1-3 and Ezekiel 16, among many other examples. Thanks to Livia Meinz for suggesting this.

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