Religious Studies (2025), **61**, 828–849
doi:10.1017/S0034412524000027

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Divine authority as divine parenthood

Nicholas Hadsell

Department of Philosophy, Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA
Email: Nicholas_Hadsell1@baylor.edu

(Received 9 September 2023; revised 9 January 2024; accepted 10 January 2024; first published online 21 March 2024)

Abstract

In this article, I argue that God is authoritative over us because he is our divine, causal parent. As our causal parent, God has duties to relate to us, but he can only fulfil those duties if he has the practical authority to give us commands aimed at our sanctification. From ought-implies-can reasoning, I conclude that God has that authority. After I make this argument, I show how the view has significant advantages over extant arguments for divine authority and can help solve other significant problems in philosophy of religion.

Keywords: theistic ethics; morality; ethics of parenthood; authority; holiness

Political philosophers are generally sceptical about political obligation. Many see the standard stories about how states obligate their citizens as false. There is now a significant group of 'philosophical anarchists' in this field, those who believe the state altogether lacks the right to rule (e.g. Simmons 1981; 2000, ch. 6; Green 1988, 220–247; Raz 2009, ch. 12; Huemer 2012).[1] Much of the work in political philosophy is devoted to answering philosophical anarchists with normative theories that answer their criticisms, and the debate has proved to be quite vexing.

Still, the debate about whether the state has the normative power to obligate its citizens is central to political philosophy.

Now, some think of God as an entity like the state. They see God as a legitimate authority who can tell us what to do, obligate us to obey his commands, and hold us accountable for our failures. This idea seems to explain the appeal of 'divine command theory', the view that all our moral obligations are explained in some way by God's commands (e.g. Adams 2002; Evans 2004 and 2014; Baggett and Walls 2011 and 2016; Hare 2015; Flannagan 2021). This view relies on God having the legitimate authority to issue morally binding commands; without that authority, God lacks the power to create these duties:

> [Divine command theory] requires that God possess legitimate authority, so that his commands (or expressed requirements) establish obligations for his human creatures. But it is clear that some normative principle or principles must be the basis of this authority. For a [divine command theory] to be plausible, there must be some reasonable answer to the question, 'Why should a human being obey the commands of God?' (Evans 2014, 64)

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In Evans's view, the question 'Why obey God?' is not prudential (e.g. 'What is in it for me?'). The question is fundamentally normative: how does God have the power to obligate us?[2] What is the explanation of God's legitimate authority over us? If political philosophers are engaged in the problem of political authority, we can call this the *problem of divine authority*. The problem of divine authority is a problem for any theist who believes God has the normative power to generate moral obligations through his commands, regardless of whether divine commands exhaust the moral domain.[3]

In my view, theists have paid too little attention to this problem. Many non-theists (and even some theists) have plausible reasons for thinking that there is no good solution to the problem of divine authority, often for reasons appealed to by the philosophical anarchists (Murphy 2002). This is not surprising: Both the state and God are cases where one party claims authority over another, so the objections to the former will often apply to the latter.[4] The objections have certainly piled on to the case of divine authority (e.g. Murphy 2002; Wielenberg 2016, ch. 2; Huemer 2021, 153).

Without a theory of divine authority that answers these objections, theists are without a coherent story of how God's commands obligate us, a feature most theists want to maintain about God. One goal of this article is to show that the problem of divine authority is still very much a problem.

The other goal of this article is to argue for the following solution to that problem: God's authority over us is explained by the fact that he is *our parent*. God is our parent because the *causal* account of parenthood is true, which is the view that someone acquires parental duties to a child if they are causally responsible for the existence of that child (Porter 2012 and 2014). In virtue of being our parent, God incurs specific duties towards us and certain rights over us that he needs to fulfil these duties. The content of divine duties, minimally, is to treat us consistently with our worth.

However, these duties are not unique to God since everyone has duties to treat one another consistently with their worth (Wolterstorff 2008, ch. 11). The way God's duties are unique is that, in virtue of being causally responsible for our existence as our parent, he has a duty to *enter a relationship with us*.

In typical cases where someone has a duty to enter a relationship with another person, there is usually no barrier. Parents who procreate a child can start rearing their child; friends, given mutual consent, can begin being friends. However, things are different with God: He is *holy*, and we are not.

This means there is something about us – sinfulness, impurity, or some other feature – that God must change before we can have a relationship with him.[5] For God to make this change, he must have the requisite authority to make us suitable for a relationship with him. This authority, minimally, encompasses God's powers to issue morally obligatory commands directed at this change and hold us accountable for our obedience to them.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. First, I sketch an account of what divine authority is. Second, I present my causal account of parenthood that grounds both the duties of procreators to their offspring and God's duties to those whom he creates as duties of *respect*. Third, I describe God's task – which gives him practical authority over us – as one of making us fit for a relationship with him given his holiness. Fourth, I show how my view has comparative advantages over other arguments for divine authority in the literature and how it has important payoffs for other problems in philosophy of religion. (Readers interested in the argument proper should just read up to (and including) the section 'The relational problem of holiness'. The rest of the article consists of objections, comparative advantages, and payoffs of the view.)

Before I begin, let me make one important prefatory comment. While I am a Christian and have developed my view of divine authority with the Christian tradition in mind, what I say here applies to any tradition that sees God as holy, our creator, and our

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ultimate authority. If another tradition denies these three features, my argument either will not work or needs to be tweaked. For now, I assume these three descriptors (i.e. God is holy, authoritative, and our creator) all describe God.

Divine authority

Standardly, there are two kinds of authority: theoretical (or epistemic) and practical.[6] Theoretical authorities give us reasons for belief. The paradigmatic case of a theoretical authority is an expert in a field, someone we might say is an authority on a subject. In this view, Alexander Pruss is an authority on the principle of sufficient reason. If Pruss tells me some fact about the principle, then given his expertise, I have reason to believe that fact. On the other hand, If theoretical authorities give us reasons for belief, practical authorities give us reasons for action. Generally, parents count as authorities over their children in this sense.[7] If I tell my son to clean his room, my telling-him-so gives him a reason to clean his room that is, *ceteris paribus*, decisive.[8]

The problem of divine authority concerns God's practical authority, not his theoretical (or epistemic) authority. Even if God's omniscience gives us decisive reason to believe what he says, it does not necessarily give us decisive reason to *do* what he commands. If God commands us to φ, we can rest assured that φ'ing is the right thing for us to do (Murphy 2002, ch. 2). But this is not sufficient to show God has practical authority because the rightness of φ'ing here is not explained by God's commanding us to φ. For God to count as practically authoritative, the rightness of φ'ing must be at least partially[9] explained by the fact that God commanded us to φ.

Moreover, while practical authority requires a certain kind of control over reasons for action, it does not require merely causal control (Murphy 2002, 15). Bullies, for example, do causally control reasons for action when they threaten to beat students up for their lunch money. However, bullies do not count as practical authorities because the *bully's demand* for lunch money does not explain the rightness of handing over the lunch money. Instead, the reason students should hand over their lunch money is to avoid pain and suffering. But suppose a genuine practical authority commanded a student to hand over their lunch money. In that case, the fact that it is right for the student to hand over the money is at least partially explained by the practical authority's command itself.

There are, of course, ways to alter some features of this account. Natural lawyers will want to say the upshot of an authoritative command is a decisive reason for action explained in terms of acting reasonably or unreasonably, a concept fundamental to their explanations of moral rightness and wrongness. Positivists will deny this in favour of the view that authoritative commands give rise to moral obligations that are not reducible to acting reasonably. For simplicity, I will use the natural law convention of calling the upshot of an authoritative command a 'decisive reason' to obey.

However, readers sympathetic to other traditions may substitute whatever follows from authoritative commands on their preferred conception.

That is practical authority. Our next question is: how does someone acquire this authority over another person? One popular answer is that such authority is acquired through *consent*. Through a contract, I subject myself to the authority of my manager to do what she asks me while on the job.

By signing up with a personal trainer, I place myself under her authority to do a set of exercises while we are in the gym. And so on. But consent is not the only way someone can acquire practical authority. Some of the most significant relationships of authority do not depend on consent at all and make use of some other moral principle. For our purposes, we can consider the moral principles that justify *parental* authority.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The causal account of parenthood

The parent–child relationship is one where parents appear, just in virtue of being a child's parents, to have practical authority over their children. Parents may relate to their children in ways beyond being a practical authority (e.g. as an intimate friend, confidante, etc.). However, they are generally not less than someone who has the standing to tell their children what to do and hold them accountable for their obedience. Most see this as a fundamental feature of the parent–child relationship.[10]

The big question about these relationships is: how do parents acquire this authority over their children? This is *the problem of parental authority*.[11] While the fact that parents generally do have rights is a basic commitment for most people, justifying the arrangement that grants parents the standing to make all kinds of demands and decisions for children is not straightforward.

Philosophers have tried to meet this problem by proposing several moral principles that justify the authority parents exercise over their children, one of which comes from the *causal* account of parenthood that I prefer.[12]

The causal account finds its genesis in Kant. For Kant, procreation is the act 'by which we have brought a person into the world without his consent and on our own initiative, for which deed the parents incur an obligation to make the child content with his condition so far as they can' (Kant 1999, 28). The idea, roughly, is that because procreators are the ones who are morally responsible for their child's vulnerable condition, they are the ones who incur the duties to make sure that child's life goes well (Porter 2012, 66; Puls 2016, 57).[13] This principle is commonplace in other domains, as when someone injures another person in a car accident, the person incurs duties to help the victim and make restitution to them (Puls 2016, 58–59).[14] Just as perpetrators incur duties to make up for the ways they have made their victims vulnerable, so too do causal procreators incur duties to help their children through their vulnerabilities.

Of course, the difference between these two cases is that parental duties are substantially more demanding because children are vulnerable in many ways. Children need their parents to direct them in virtually every aspect of their lives for many years. Children need their parents to make all kinds of educational, medical, social, and other kinds of decisions on their behalf. Even when children get older and become more competent, they still rely on their parents for food, water, shelter, and the like. Parenting is demanding; to do it well, parents need relatively broad discretion over what they may and may not do with their children. If they have a duty to care for their children, they will need the authority to take them to the doctor's office, choose their meals, have them go outside (instead of staying inside all day), and the like. That is to say, if parents are going to fulfil their weighty parental duties, they will need some relatively wide parental rights (Anscombe 1981, 145).[15] Parental authority at least contains all those rights parents need to fulfil these tasks.[16]

Divine, causal parenthood

My central claim is that God counts as a parent in this sense over every human being.

Though procreators are the proximate causes of their child's existence, there is also a significant way in which God is the cause of the child, too. God has created everything, including the procreators and their procreative powers. Scripture, too, has strong evidence that God is in some way intimately involved in our development in the womb (e.g. Jeremiah 1:5). I will not settle on a robust account of how, exactly, God is the cause of our existence. However, I hope the view is intuitive enough for the reader to chart her way of affirming the point.[17]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If this is right, what follows for God's relation to us? If procreators incur duties to their offspring in virtue of being causally responsible for their existences, and God is also jointly causally responsible for their existences, then *a fortiori* God also incurs duties towards the offspring as well. That is exactly my view. The way God has practical authority over us is not a function of his owning us, being able to punish us, or our owing debts of gratitude to him. Instead, God has practical authority over us because he needs it to fulfil the parental duties he incurred when he created us.

Some might balk at the thought of God having duties, let alone *to us*. Classical theists, for example, might object to this proposal because it would either require seeing God as a moral agent (Davies 2006, 88–101; Feser 2009, 125–126; Pouivet 2018, 6) or because it is incompatible with one of God's perfections (Murphy 2017, 70–75). Divine command theorists, too, might object because God having obligations implies that he is subject to an authority above him to whom he is accountable (Alston 1990; Adams 2002, 158) or that God can somehow command himself to do something (Maitzen 2017, 145).[18] Fortunately, there is an alternative account of God's parental authority that at least sidesteps the worry that God cannot have any duties to us.

One duty God might have is a duty to himself always to act in accordance with his character. For example, any action incompatible with love is an action that is off-limits for God to perform in virtue of this duty he has to himself. Now, when God elects to create a person, God creates a highly vulnerable person with various needs. If God were to abandon this person and his needs forever, we might plausibly think that God is not acting lovingly – but, instead, cruelly – in doing this. In fact, we might think the only loving action in this circumstance is for God to (in some way) take care of this person by seeing to it that his life goes well. After all, humans are people with deep worth, and God's creating someone with deep worth and then choosing not to engage with that person might be disrespectful and wrongful (Wolterstorff 2008, 296–299). God, then, incurs an additional duty to himself to take care of the person he created, which means he also needs a certain set of rights over the person to properly fulfil this duty, *even if* that duty is to himself alone. This bundle of rights would constitute God's authority over the person and would be justified in virtue of God's duties to himself rather than to the child.

Once we decide whether divine duties are to God himself or to others, we can ask: what exactly are these duties to do? We have a general idea of what it looks like for procreative parents to fulfil their duties to their children, but it is not forthcoming as to how God would fulfil his parental duties to us. We would think that parents often have duties to prevent certain kinds of suffering for their children. In contrast, God may not (e.g. parents who were somehow capable of preventing their child from dying of cancer might have a duty to prevent this, whereas God may not have this duty *even if* he is omnipotent). So, determining the content of divine duties is admittedly a bit of a mystery to me.

Duties of respect

Nonetheless, we can start with a general duty that everyone has: *Respect others*. I follow Nicholas Wolterstorff and Jean Hampton in thinking that what it is to wrong another person is to treat them disrespectfully, which is to treat them as less than what they are worth. In their view, '*A person wrongs another if and only if (while acting as a responsible agent) she treats him in a way that is objectively. . . disrespectful of* [*that person's*] *worth*' (Murphy and Hampton 1998, 52; author's italics). Wolterstorff offers several clarifications of Hampton's claim: First, disrespect is determined by the victim's *actual* worth and not merely by what she believes her worth is; second, disrespectful actions are often determined by context (e.g. my shaking your right hand may count as respectful in some

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cultures, disrespectful in others); third, disrespect always focuses on some good-making feature of the person (e.g. refusing to bow to a king disrespects him *as king*).[19]

I take it as a primitive fact that all human beings are very valuable, though I am agnostic about why we are valuable.[20] Sufficient for my purposes is the thought that humans are at least valuable enough to where their parents disrespect them if they refuse to enter a relationship with them without good reason (Olsaretti 2017, 72). This idea seems to support the widespread condemnation of fathers who abandon their families as 'deadbeat dads'. Among other things, deadbeats disrespect their children by refusing to have a relationship with them for insufficient reasons (e.g. because they want another life, because children are too much work, etc.).[21] I maintain, then, the following thesis:

> Relationship: If someone is causally responsible for a child's life, they have a duty to enter an intimate relationship with that child. To fail this duty without good reason disrespects the child.[22]

Now, procreation entails the creation of deeply vulnerable persons. While the vulnerabilities are most obvious concerning a baby's physical needs, humans also have deep *relational* needs that stick with them their entire lives. On this score, Olsaretti writes

> To be morally responsible for a child's existence is not only to create a vulnerable creature: it is also to create a vulnerability of a particular kind, due to the fact that in virtue all of an infant's needs, and many of a young child's ones, both immediate and developmental, have a strong relational component. By [this], I mean that the . . . satisfaction of these needs requires that they be met in the context . . . of an ongoing, stable relationship with one or few caring adult persons. (Olsaretti 2017, 74)

This fact is widely granted as a justification for the family – as opposed to some other institution like a *kibbutz* – and supported by work in adolescent psychology (e.g. Gerhardt 2004). The first thought, then, is that persons are vulnerable due to their relational needs.

Moreover, those responsible for the existence of a given person stand in a *non-fungible* relationship with that person. *Their* love and affection for their child is not the same as anyone else's, even if, in principle, an adoptive parent can come along and love the child just as well in their own intimate relationship.[23] This idea is intuitive. For example, if I injure another person through reckless driving, my visiting them in the hospital expresses something differently from, say, my sending a proxy on my behalf. What makes it unique for *me* to visit is that I caused the victim's predicament. If I fail to visit the victim, my failure is plausibly *disrespectful* towards her. I placed this person under a serious need and, without any good reason, I chose not to visit them. I have abdicated my duty to them that I incurred by causing their neediness.

Something similar happens in procreation. Parents create a relationally needy child. There are, of course, ways adoptive parents can meet the child's relational needs, but there is something distinct about the *procreator's* failure to meet those needs that can plausibly be viewed as disrespectful towards the child (Moschella 2017, ch. 1; Olsaretti 2017, 75). Unless the procreators have sufficiently weighty reasons – whatever those may be – that justify the procreators placing their children in an alternative childrearing arrangement, children are justified in feeling rejected and disrespected by their parents.[24] They can rightfully feel hurt by the fact that their parents chose to live their lives apart from them.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Divine duties of respect

What does Relationship mean for God? Straightforwardly, since God is causally responsible for our existence, Relationship says he has a duty to enter a relationship with us. I think this is true, but I think the justification for why Relationship applies to God is slightly different from why it applies to human procreators. As I mentioned, babies have deep relational needs to be cared for by parents who love and nurture them. But humans, throughout all stages of their development, have relational needs that are only satisfiable by God himself.

Saint Augustine, for example, famously said that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God himself. Similarly, C. S. Lewis claimed that we have a deep-seated desire that nothing in the world can satisfy, which was evidence that God existed as the only thing that could satisfy it.[25] We do not need to endorse Lewis's argument for theism from this desire to get this point; after all, I have been assuming that God exists. However, the fact that we have a deep-seated desire for something beyond ourselves – something that we recognize nothing purely natural could fully satisfy – is well attested by many people.[26] Given Relationship, God appears to have a straightforward way of fulfilling his duty to us. He satisfies our deepest relational needs by entering an intimate relationship with those he created.[27]

The relational problem of holiness

There is, however, one obstacle to God's entering a relationship with us: God is *holy*, and we are not. The finer details of how God's holiness is an obstacle to his relating to us will depend on how we understand holiness.[28] Plenty of extant accounts of holiness see this attribute in different ways. God's holiness might mean God's divinity (Tillich 1978, 215; Sproul 1985, 38), his being set apart (Harrington 2001, 14–18), his moral perfection (Kant 1999, 4:449), his personality (Jones 1961, 144), or his being the highest possible instance of the highest possible kind of being (Smith 1988, 511–513).[29] God's holiness might also pick out those features God has that make our overwhelming attraction to and separation from God fitting (Murphy 2021, ch. 2 and 2023, 404). I will not take a stand here on a robust account of holiness; instead, I just want to focus on a relatively uncontroversial fact about holiness that is compatible with these accounts: *Our unholiness is a relational barrier between God and us*. Insofar as this is true, we have a problem that only God can solve.[30] Call this *the relational problem of holiness*.

What does the divine solution to the relational problem of holiness look like? Well, holy beings can only relate to holy beings. So, if unholy beings will ever relate to God, God must make them holy. At least in the Christian tradition, God making us holy is a central part of the religious life.[31] Of course, we need not accept the idea that the goal of the religious life is merely to become *morally* perfect; that is a view of holiness under serious scrutiny as of late, and we have already seen that the Kantian view of holiness is only one among several ways of understanding holiness (Murphy 2021, ch. 2). But we can say, minimally, that a fundamental part of the Christian life is God's task of making us into the sort of beings that overcome our weaknesses and vices so we can properly be in a relationship with him. Christians call this process *sanctification*, whereby we become holier through divine assistance. Again, while extant accounts of holiness differ in their finer details, they all seem to converge on our sanctification including an improvement in our characters.

My contention is that God cannot fulfil this task – namely, the task of sanctifying us – without having practical authority over us. If God cannot give us decisive commands and hold us accountable for our compliance with them, then there is no way he will be able to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shape our characters and desires in the ways that they ought to be shaped. This idea may strike those with a high view of divine omnipotence as false. Indeed, we might think God could transform our character through divine fiat. However, I defer to the large group of philosophers of religion who think God cannot override our wills in this way without violating our dignity or insufficiently forming our characters correctly (e.g. Walls 1992; Judisch 2009, 170; Timpe 2018). If these philosophers are right, God cannot merely zap us into holiness; he must engage our wills and form us into becoming holy.[32]

So, God must engage our wills and shape our characters so that we may become holy. He does this by providing a moral education, whether directly through revelation or indirectly through human teachers.[33] To do this, he gives us recognizable, authoritative commands to do the sorts of things befitting of holy people. This is just a standard, Aristotelian sort of moral education where an authority helps her pupil obtain a set of virtues through the pupil's obedience (e.g. Kristjánsson 2015). Perhaps when the pupil matures, she need not rely on a stringent list of rules to guide her conduct because she is so in tune with God's will for her in complex circumstances that she can act without her teacher's assistance. But the goal is for God to form our wills towards holiness through a moral education led by his authoritative commands. Depending on how naturally suited we are to becoming holy, we may not be able to complete this process until sometime in the afterlife (e.g. Walls 2012 thinks libertarian sanctification requires purgatory).[34] But as we progress further and further in our sanctification, we will get closer to the optimal union with God that our final end calls us to.

Contingent or necessary authority?

Now, from here, God may have practical authority in two ways: Either God has practical authority over us *necessarily* or *contingently*. If God is necessarily authoritative over us, then whether he is authoritative does not depend on our willingness or consent to be in a relationship with God. On this construal, God's creating beings with deep relational needs is sufficient to ground God's authority over us. But if God is only contingently authoritative over us, then God's authority will depend on something else (e.g. whether we choose to consent or not). This construal would be a much weaker thesis that most theists – including myself – would reject as paying insufficient respect to God's standing over us.[35] Minimally, it seems strange that there could be a large set of people over whom God lacks authority. Luckily, I think the upshot of my argument is that God *necessarily* has authority over us: When God creates beings like us, he incurs the duty to enter a relationship with us that gives him the authority to make us into fitting participants in that relationship regardless of our consent.[36]

However, we might wonder whether God's necessary authority is compatible with the nature of his task, which requires (in large part) our submission to his will. If sanctification requires our consent, God's authority over us may appear contingent because it depends on our will. Indeed, many Christians believe sanctification requires our free giving of ourselves to God.[37] On this way of thinking, God cannot change us by divine fiat because our changing into new kinds of people necessarily requires an engagement with our wills.[38] While I agree with this view, I do not think this spells trouble for God *necessarily* having practical authority over us. Whether we comply with God's attempts at forming us into this kind of person – that is, whether we freely submit our wills in the way Lewis suggests – does not change whether God has authority.

We can see this by considering *the rebel*.[39] The rebel 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.' If God only has authority over us to make us fitting for a relationship with him, what happens when *the rebel* refuses God and denies that he wants to be in a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relationship with him? In response, I reaffirm a common assumption in various strands of traditional Christian anthropology: every person God creates has the final end of union with God.[40] 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.

If we stick with the parent–child analogy, the rebel is in the position of an especially disobedient child who is still vulnerable and in need of parenting, and the parent has her work cut out for her. Even if a parent somehow knows that her child will always be vicious, she still retains the authority to continue giving authoritative commands to her child. I see the same dynamic occurring between God and us. God may never get the rebel to repent, but he still has the authority to try. And in both cases, disobedience only says something about the authorities' success in achieving their goals, not whether they have the authority to carry out their tasks. So, even if most people fail to submit themselves to God, that says nothing about whether God has authority over them. God's authority only relies on his duty to enter a relationship with us and the nature of the task he must complete to fulfil this duty, even if we end up being rebels.[41]

Is parental authority too different from divine authority?

My account of divine authority is set apart from others because it takes the idea that God has revealed himself to us as our parent very seriously. The natural objection to the account is that divine authority is too different from parental authority for the latter to serve as a coherent model for the former. For example, some claim that parental authority appears to run out throughout a child's lifetime, whereas divine authority should remain constant (Aronson 2022, 17). Locke, for example, famously thought that parental authority only lasted until children developed their faculty of reason (*Treatises* II 59, 67–68; see also Layman 2014, 111).

However, it is not obvious that merely human parental authority disappears in the way Locke and others suggest. Rivka Weinberg, for example, has argued that parents have duties to minimize the risks they have imposed on their child through procreation, and these risks plausibly last (to varying degrees) for the child's entire life (Weinberg 2018, 55). There are good reasons to think that the parental task lasts for a lifetime. However, the way parents fulfil this task will look different depending on their child's development. God's task is especially of the sort that lasts for our lifetimes. His task is to make us *holy*, and unless Wesleyan perfectionism – (i.e. the view that we can become perfectly holy in our antemortem lifetimes) is true, we cannot achieve perfect holiness in this lifetime. So, my view says God's task will last our entire lifetime in a way that pays due respect to the structure of parental authority in standard cases. Just as parental authority lasts for as long as their task remains incomplete, so does divine authority.

Another candidate reason to reject divine authority as parental authority is that the scope of divine authority seems much wider than parental authority (Aronson 2022, 18). Whereas God seems able to command various ritual sacrifices, it seems implausible that parental authority allows human procreators to demand these sorts of actions of their children (Aronson 2022, 18). But my account defines God's task as making us *holy*, which is seemingly much more demanding and robust than the one merely human procreators have for their children. Minimally, human procreators appear to have duties to provide for their children's basic material needs and help them become virtuous in an important set of ways. However, holiness seems like a task only God is fitted to fulfil, even though human procreators may play a supplemental role in making their children holy. The difference in tasks for each kind of parent provides a plausible explanation of why the scopes of authority have different sizes.[42]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Comparative advantages

I now want to show how my argument solves or avoids many problems characteristic of other arguments for divine authority. Let me start with two quick rejections of common (but false) arguments for divine authority; after these, I will move on to more substantive arguments in the literature.

Omnipotence and omniscience

First, my argument denies that God is authoritative over us because he has the power to punish us – this would only get us merely causal control of reasons for action (Baggett and Walls 2011, 34; Huemer 2021). In my view, God has the right to hold us accountable for our obedience to his commands, but such a right is not the explanation why God has authority over us. Second, my argument denies that God is authoritative over us because he is omniscient and therefore knows what is good for us to pursue – this would be merely theoretical authority (Murphy 2002, ch. 2). I affirm God's omniscience. This perfection ensures that God will never lead us wrong in his attempts to make us holy. But again, omniscience plays little role in my argument for why God has authority over us.

Gratitude

Now for the more substantive arguments. God might be authoritative over us in virtue of the infinite debt of gratitude we owe to him (Evans 2014, 64). Given that children are generally under debts of gratitude because of the goods parents have given them, we are under an infinite debt of gratitude to God since he is the beneficiary of every good we have. But the upshot of this argument is something other than divine authority. Arguments for divine authority from gratitude only grant God authority over us *contingent* on whether we act on appropriate expressions of thanksgiving. Gratitude gives us a powerful reason to submit to God's authority, and we would be acting like ingrates if we refused to act on this.

Nonetheless, it does not follow from merely possessing this powerful reason that we are under God's authority (Murphy 2002, 118). Compare: gratitude might require me to give my friend my baseball card collection after she saved my life, but the collection is not hers until I transfer the collection over to her (Murphy 2002, 118). Until I give away my collection to my friend or until I submit myself to God's authority, I am only acting like an ingrate. This is certainly an indictment of my character, but the indictment is not explained by someone having practical authority over me in these cases. My argument, however, does not face this problem. Whereas arguments from gratitude can only grant God contingent authority, my argumentative upshot is that God necessarily has authority over us regardless of whether we appropriately respond to his goodness. God has a parental duty to us and acquires the practical authority over us to fulfil this duty, and nothing about this process obtaining relies on whether we recognize or submit to it.[43]

The highest good

Another argument is that God might be authoritative over us because a relationship with him is our highest good, and following God's commands will enable us to flourish (Evans 2014, 65).[44] But this is insufficient for the kind of divine authority I am after. Suppose we know of a personal trainer who would overwhelmingly change our lives for the better if we submitted to his authority. From this fact alone, though, it would not follow that the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

trainer is authoritative over us (Darwall 2013). This argument only proves that submitting to the trainer's authority would be good for us, but it fails to establish that the trainer's say-so can generate reasons for action for us.

Similarly, from the mere fact that submitting to God's authority would be good for us, it does not follow that we are, therefore, under God's authority.

David Baggett and Jerry Walls make a similar argument, though they appeal to all of God's perfections as a reason to think God has authority (2011, 122–123). They write, 'In view of his nature as a perfect being, there are no good grounds for doubting his authority . . . If all rational withholdings are blocked, we ought to accept God as an authority' (Baggett and Walls 2011, 123). But there are two ways of reading the upshot of this argument. The first is that since God is perfect, he is authoritative over us. But this does not follow unless authority is among God's perfections or authority is entailed by God's perfections, and there are good reasons to reject both possibilities (Murphy 2001). The second way of reading this upshot is what I think follows: God's perfection means we have good reasons to accept him as an authority over us for our good, and we would be acting unreasonably if we failed to do so. But that is not the same thing as claiming that God, in virtue of being perfect, is authoritative over us. Instead, all Baggett and Walls have proven is that God's perfection gives us reason to submit to God's authority. They have not proven, however, that God is, therefore, authoritative over us. There is a gap they must fill in. My argument does not rely on God being our highest good (even though it certainly does not deny it). Sufficient for my purposes is that God has a task and the practical authority to fulfil it.

Property rights

The last argument is that we might be under God's authority because we are his property (Evans 2014, 65–66). Just as Locke thought (under certain conditions) we own something when we mix our labour with it, we might say God owns *everything* in virtue of creating all things *ex nihilo* (Evans 2014, 66). The main reason this argument is unsuccessful is that ownership-rights do not entail practical authority over what is owned. At least on the Lockean picture Evans is drawing from, all that follows from the fact that I am God's property is that 'no one may take me from God or otherwise prevent God from doing as he likes with me unless God grants permission' (Layman 2014, 108).[45] To get divine authority, though, we would have to pair the Lockean account of property ownership with another normative principle that would generate duties of obedience upon the possessed.[46] My view does not rely on God owning us (even though Locke – the paradigmatic causal theorist about parenthood – seems to have thought this). God's authority over us starts not with a *right* (like the property account does) but a *duty*. Given Relationship, our worth requires God to enter an intimate relationship with us. Downstream from this duty comes God's rights as a practical, parental authority over us that is aimed at making us holy persons capable of a relationship with him.[47]

Payoffs

In this last section, I show how thinking of divine authority as parental authority has significant payoffs for other problems in philosophy of religion that are not directly about the problem of divine authority.

The problem of abhorrent commands

My argument solves the worry that God could abuse his authority to give morally abhorrent commands. Some have objected to divine command theory that it implies we would

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have a moral obligation to do something vile if God commanded it (Antony 2009, 71). The general reply to this objection is that God's necessary goodness precludes him from ever commanding anything inconsistent with his goodness (e.g. Evans 2014, 92). But this reply seems only to kick the problem back: even if God would not command some morally abhorrent action, 'divine command theory still implies the counterfactual that, if God did command us to [do a vile action], then we would have a moral obligation [to do so]. That is absurd' (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009, 106; also Wielenberg 2005, 41–43, 48–49).[48] For these critics, one desideratum of our theistic ethics is that God necessarily – that is, in all possible worlds – will not command abhorrent actions, which is something divine command theorists seem unable to guarantee.

Some divine command theorists have advanced a *tu quoque* reply to this objection. That is, any normative theory – divine command theory, natural law, and the like – that counterfactually requires us to do something morally abhorrent does not change the moral status of that action (e.g. Pruss 2009, 437–439). So, the problem of counterfactual, morally required abhorrent actions is a problem for every normative theory and is not unique to divine command theory. If critics of divine command theory were to reject divine command theory because of this counterfactual, they would be proving too much by having to reject virtually every other moral theory. There is, however, a good amount of pushback against divine command theorists who have taken this route (e.g. Choo 2019, 375–376; 2023). Perhaps divine command theorists have overestimated just how many companions in guilt they really have.

One nice feature of my account, then, is that it offers a different way of solving this problem without relying on such a controversial solution. On my account, God's authority is strictly limited to those commands that will make us into beings fitting for a relationship with God. This is because God's authority over us is *only* to fulfil the task of making us holy; there is no other purpose for divine authority over us. Therefore, morally abhorrent commands – the sort of commands that would make us unfit for a relationship with a perfect God – are ruled out as possibilities for God.

He may only use his authority to make us holy, and commands not aimed at this end are not authoritative over us in all possible worlds. To those who object to there even being a *counterfactual* where God could rightfully command a morally abhorrent act, I deny the counterfactual. Any command not aimed at our holiness is not something God could rightfully give.

The problem of political authority

Philosophical anarchists think there is no good argument for why the state has a right to rule. Nonetheless, it seems to most people that the state is legitimate. Tyler McNabb and Jeremy Neill (2019) have argued that these two facts – namely, there are no good secular arguments for political authority and the common seeming that the state is nonetheless legitimate – provide the foundation for an argument for theism from political authority. Suppose all secular arguments for political authority are implausible, and a theistic explanation of political authority – namely, one where God authorizes states to act in certain ways – is significantly more plausible. In that case, we have reason to think God exists and substantiates the widespread seeming that the state does have authority.

However, the problem with this argument is that it is incomplete. The argument says the state is authoritative because God authorized it, but it does not tell us how God has the authority to authorize the state. Moreover, McNabb and Neill's brief justification for divine authority is unsatisfactory. They write, 'God does not need our permission in order to have authority over us. He has that authority just in virtue of being the world's creator' (2019, 5). But we have just seen that there is plenty of pushback against property-rights

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

arguments like these in the literature. This is especially poignant in McNabb and Neill's case, as they co-sign Michael Huemer's arguments against political authority, yet Huemer himself explicitly denies the argument for divine authority they endorse.[49]

So, we have an argument for political authority that needs to be completed. The proposal I offer here rounds off the argument in a way that should convince those wrestling with the problem of divine authority. Rather than relying on tendentious parts of the natural law tradition (or any of the other arguments I have surveyed in the previous section), my view thinks of God's authority over us as a legitimate parental authority. The problem of political authority can now be kicked back to the problem of divine authority satisfactorily for philosophical anarchists like Huemer.

Moreover, if McNabb and Neill are correct that political authority is authorized by God 'from above', so to speak, then we have a better understanding of what the job of political authority is (Wolterstorff 2014). When we think about *political* authority – the paradigmatic kind of practical authority – every account starts with the same question: how do states become authoritative in the first place? The answer to this question usually provides the foundation for the rest of the story. If, for example, political authority is acquired by the consent of the governed, then the scope of the authority is likely to be limited to doing only those things to which the governed consent. If God's task is to make us holy, then his authorization of states to govern us should have something to do with making us holy. That does not necessarily mean these states will be anti-liberal; in fact, there are powerful reasons for thinking that liberal democracy is what we should expect if God authorizes states in this way (Wolterstorff 2016). But because God may only use his authority over us to make us holy, the story about how states become authoritative through his authorization should have something to do with our holiness.

The duty to love God

William Bell and Graham Renz (forthcoming, 2) have recently argued that there is no moral obligation to love God. Their reasoning, in short, is that 'relationships of intimacy should not be morally imposed, via duties and obligations, upon autonomous beings'. In their view, this common-sense principle governs all interpersonal relationships. For example, from the fact that Bob loves Alice, it does not follow that Bob has a right to Alice's reciprocated love.[50] Or, because I have sacrificed a great deal for you, it does not follow that I have a right to some expression of gratitude on your part. Your choosing not to thank me may show you as an ingrate, but you do not violate my rights just by acting like a bad person. The same sort of dynamic happens with God: from the fact God has a deep interest in a relationship with us, 'it would be a leap of logic to conclude from this fact that God has a *right* to human beings' seeking a union of love with him' (Bell and Renz forthcoming, 5). Our refusing such a relationship may show us up as vicious, but God does not have a right to our entering the relationship. Therefore, the authors conclude that there is no duty to love God. If this is true, most traditional theists are mistaken in the widespread belief that we have a moral obligation to love God.

But my view offers a way around this critique that salvages this widespread belief. God's task, again, is to make us holy so that we may be in a relationship with him. This gives God the practical authority to command us to do whatever we need to do to become holy. One minimal requirement of becoming a holier person is to love what is good. If classical theism is true, then God *is* perfect goodness, and everything else good is only so through participation in God's perfect goodness. From this, it follows that a minimal requirement for becoming a holier person is to love God. And since God has the authority to command us to do something only if it will make us holy, it follows that God has the authority to command us to love him.[51] Christians believe God has done just that by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

giving the first and greatest commandment, that we should love God with all our being (e.g. Matthew 22:36–40).

Bell and Renz, however, might demur.[52] They may object,

> Your view relies on a teleological account of duties, one where we have a moral obligation to love God because union with him is our final end (Bell and Renz forthcoming, 8). But we explicitly reject this view because it only gives us prudential reasons to love God, not the moral reasons we need to get a distinctively *moral obligation* to love God. On our deontological account, moral duties will perfectly correspond to moral rights (forthcoming, 3). So, it is not enough to show that loving God would be good for us because it fulfils our nature; more than this, we need to show that our duty to love God correlates with some right that God has against us. If your argument does not have this deontological conception of duties in mind, then your argument is not a solution to the problem we are raising.

In response, I have several things to say. First, while I deny my view relies on this account of duties, I understand why the objector thinks otherwise. After all, the fact that our final end is union with God plays an essential role in my account, which makes it easy to read this as the claim that we have a duty to pursue union with God *because* such a union will fulfil our nature. Still, this role differs from the final end's role in my argument. Instead, our final end's role in my argument is grounding God's parental duty to relate to us: God has created us with this final end, so he acquires a parental duty to see to it that we can fulfil it on pain of disrespecting us. So, our final end grounds God's duties to relate to us, not necessarily our duty to relate to him.

Second, I do not mean for my argument to rely on the kind of teleological duties Bell and Renz speak of; in fact, I have good reasons for trying to avoid those duties altogether. After all, I reject arguments for divine authority from God being our highest good because it seems to presuppose this account of duties: even if our submission to God would be very good for us because it fulfils our nature, it does not follow from this that we are therefore under God's authority. I try to close the gap between what is good for us and what is required of us by arguing that God has the rightful authority to issue morally obligatory commands to us aimed at our holiness, which means we have a correlative duty to obey those commands. In closing this gap, we do not need to worry about facts about our nature-fulfilment. Additionally, I affirm that everyone – even God – is obliged to respect others, and I say nothing about the fulfilment of our natures that would explain why this duty holds. This is especially important since God does not (necessarily) share our human nature, yet he has the same duty of respect as we do. So, I do not mean to ground the duty of respect in fulfilling some part of human nature.

But third, even with these considerations, I still intend my account to be able to accommodate both deontological conceptions of duties and the kind of duties Bell and Renz reject. We can see this by replacing my explanation of the duty of respect from an earlier section with that of other competitors. There are several possible meta-ethical explanations of how duties come about:

> (1) Natural lawyers might say our duties are grounded in facts about what fulfils our natures so that we have a moral duty to φ if φ'ing fulfils an integral part of our nature.[53] (2) The Wolterstorffian account (that I have endorsed in this article) begins with facts about our value and works up from there to norms restricting how we are supposed to respond to those values (2008, 296–297). This is a *value-first* meta-ethic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

where value is the fundamental normative concept that grounds all our other downstream normative concepts (Wodak 2020).

But there is, lastly, (3) the reasons-first view, one where 'the only fundamental elements of the normative domain, other notions such as good and ought being analyzable in terms of reasons' (Scanlon 2014, 2; quoted in Wodak, 2020, 49). On this view, our other normative notions (e.g. value) are downstream from the existence of reasons (Wodak 2020, 49). With this Reasons First framework in mind, we can explain why we have a duty to respect others by relying on our reasons. Because humans are reasoning creatures, we must treat them as such – that is, we are required to respect them – by acting on justifiable reasons (Scanlon 1998, 177–178; Wong 2020, 262).[54] If this is correct, then perhaps God's abandoning us counts as disrespectful, *not* because he is treating us as less than we are worth, but because he is failing to act on reasons that are justifiable to us.

Alternatively, perhaps our disobeying God is disrespectful because we cannot do so while acting on reasons justifiable to any other rational agent.

I think the Wolterstorffian story is true, and I have my own independent reasons for rejecting the natural lawyer and Reasons First explanations. Nonetheless, my argument does not strictly require the Wolterstorffian story. The natural lawyer can explain God's duty of respect by some fact about God's nature or our duty of respect by some fact about the fulfilment of our nature. Similarly, the Scanlonian Reasons-Firster can ground the duty of respect in the existence of the reasons we have. Either way, the duties of respect I rely on in this argument will play the same role: They will require God to give us the chance to relate to him. However, the cost of substituting the Wolterstorffian view with one of these conceptions is that the argument may lose out on its advantages over other extant arguments for divine authority. Especially if we use the natural lawyer's view, the argument no longer avoids the error of the 'Highest Good' argument for divine authority in the previous section *and* fails to address Bell and Renz's argument. So, while I reject the natural law view because it is too costly, readers who do not share these concerns are free to accept the view and plug it into my argument.

Beyond these meta-ethical worries, my view also better explains our duty to love God than other current views. For example, John Hare argues that our duty to love God is a necessary fact that is 'known to be true just by knowing its terms' (2015, 17). In Hare's view, the idea that we have a moral duty to love God is a fact that is analytically true from the fact that God is our highest Good and that we should love what is good. But others have rightly objected that Hare does not explain why we have a duty to love what is good (e.g. Choo 2019, 377). This is a problem, as divine command theorists like Hare argue their view is preferable to rival meta-ethical theories because divine command theory's explanation of moral obligations is explanatorily better than, say, a secular moral realism that claims moral obligations are just irreducible features of reality (e.g. Shafer-Landau 2003; Wielenberg 2016; Huemer 2021). But once we include that God's task is to make us holy and his authority is circumscribed to accomplish this task, the explanatory lacuna is filled. We have a duty to love what is good because doing so is a necessary part of our becoming holy, something we have a duty to do to enjoy a union with God.[55]

Conclusion

I have argued that seeing God as our parent solves the problem of divine authority and has significant payoffs for other parts of philosophy of religion dealing with theistic ethics. If God is our ultimate cause, he has a duty to be in a relationship with us. But because we are unholy and God can only relate to holy beings, he must have the practical

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

authority over us necessary to fulfil this duty. Since God does have this duty to us, he also has the practical authority over us to make us holy.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Anne Jeffrey for her insightful guidance on the main argument behind this article and for reading every previous draft of it. Thanks also to my friends who gave me especially helpful input on this article at the Baylor Philosophy Department's weekly colloquium and the 2023 annual Evangelical Philosophical Society meeting. In particular, I thank Alex Pruss, Todd Buras, Harrison Lee, Joel Chopp, Nicholas Noyola, and Adam Lloyd Johnson for helping me think through my argument at these presentations. I am also grateful to Mark Murphy, Jonathan Rutledge, and Jordan Wessling for the helpful feedback they offered me over email. And, of course, I thank both reviewers who not only offered great feedback that improved the article but also offered incredibly kind words of encouragement in their reports.

Notes

1. I compiled these cites from Tom Christiano's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on 'Authority' (2020).
2. This is essentially Christian Korsgaard's 'normative question' from Korsgaard (1996, 16).
3. This problem was first introduced in print by Mark C. Murphy in 2001. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me tidy up this section.
4. This point is observed by Mark Murphy in an unpublished paper, 'The Fundamentality of Authority'.
5. I follow many others in assuming God is holy (e.g. Aronson 2022 and Murphy 2021) even though I recognize that there has been some pushback to his idea (e.g. Bayne and Nagasawa 2006).
6. I use 'theoretical' authority to stick with the terminology used in mainstream political philosophy (e.g. Christiano 2012, 1.1), but it's worth pointing out that many philosophers of religion have begun referring to this sort of authority as 'epistemic' after Linda Zagzebski's *Epistemic Authority* (2015). I will use 'theoretical authority' in this section, but I see these two labels as interchangeable.
7. Although some argue that children generally have no moral duties to obey their parents. See Simmons (2005, 135) and (1992, ch. 4.2).
8. R is a decisive reason for A to φ iff A's failing to φ ultimately counts as unreasonable (Murphy 2002, 158).
9. There might be other reasons that make φ'ing right, and it's not my intent to say that practical authority requires the command to be the only reason. This is Murphy's *constitutive* condition on practical authority (Murphy 2002, 11).
10. Though there are a few dissenters. For example, A. John Simmons thinks children generally have no moral duty to obey their parents. See Simmons (2005, 135) and (1992, ch. 4.2). I assume that Simmons and dissenters like him are wrong here.
11. As Serena Olsaretti puts it, this is 'the problem of how to justify granting parents rights over children – rights which, compatible with some of the children's interests being respected, are quite extensive, conferring on parents the authority to make many weighty decisions for their children' (Olsaretti 2017, 59).
12. For a good overview and critical discussion of these principles, see Millum (2018, ch. 2).
13. I bracket cases where procreation is unintentional because I'm not sure what Kant has to say about these. But I do think the scope of intentional procreation, for Kant, is at least wide enough to include cases of intentional sexual intercourse (Puls 2016, 56). Since God is not capable of accidentally creating us, I don't think we need to worry about this issue.
14. Two additional notes about this analogy: First, this analogy does not mean that I view the act of procreation as injuring the child; I just want to communicate that responsibility for another person's vulnerability results in certain duties. Second, Anca Gheaus (2018 and 2021) has argued that this analogy only entails the perpetrator's duty to make sure the victim is cared for, not a duty to do the taking care of. This is a serious problem for the causal account I'm arguing for, but I bracket it for now because it's not a relevant problem when applied to God.
15. '[T]hose who have and carry out the task of bringing up children quite generally perform a necessary task. It cannot be done without the children's obedience. So those people have a right to such obedience' (Sproul 1985, 145).
16. Thus, my view is close to the view of Brighouse and Swift 2014, where parents act as fiduciaries of their children. But I doubt parents are *merely* fiduciaries, since I deny they have duties of loyalty that are common in fiduciary relationships that require parents to act *solely* on their child's interests. See Altman (2023b) for a development of this argument.
17. I personally endorse Locke's view, where parents only count as occasions for God's creating of a particular person. See Franklin-Hall (2012) for an exposition of this idea.
18. I get these citations from Page (2019).
19. Wolterstorff (2008, 297–300).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

20. There is great debate about what makes us valuable. Hobbes thought humans are instrumentally valuable, Kant thought we were instrinsically valuable in virtue of our rational capacities. Perhaps we are valuable by excellently possessing a set of capacities or performing a set of actions. Maybe we are valuable because we are desired by God. I am agnostic about whether any of these are true, but see Rasmussen and Bailey (2020) for an interesting proposal about how we might be infinitely valuable.

21. See Brake (2010) for an interesting discussion about deadbeats.

22. This thesis is inspired by Olsaretti (2017, 73). Some might worry Relationship under-describes the relevant causes of a child's existence and can implicate non-parental parties (e.g. IVF doctors). I won't address this worry here but see Porter (2014) for a critical response to this objection that I basically endorse.

23. Again, Olsaretti claims that 'By dint of being morally responsible for a child's existence, the parents now stand in a position such that *their* entering a relationship with the child, or not entering it, expresses something different from what other adults' entering or not entering that relationship expresses' (Olsaretti 2017, 74).

24. There is debate about which reasons would count as good enough for procreators to give their children up for adoption. One is that the procreators, among those willing to raise the child, would not optimally meet the child's interests. This is the *Best Available Parent* account of parenthood that has gotten popular as of late. See Gheaus (2021), Vallentyne (2003), and Dwyer (2021) for defences of the view. See Altman (2023a, 2023b), Walters (2022), and Shields (2022) for recent criticisms.

25. For a good discussion of Lewis on this score, see Buras and Cantrell (2018).

26. For Aquinas, see I-II Q3 A8; for Edwards, see 'The End for Which God Created the World'. See also the Westminster Catechism, where 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.' See Boersma (2018) for a book-length discussion on the final end of humans in the Christian tradition. Non-theists also appear to observe this desire (e.g. Dworkin 2013), and the atheistic existentialists seem to attest to something close to it as well. I suspect most people recognize that this desire exists; detractors usually deny that it entails theism or anything that could satisfy it. But this is not a problem for our purposes: we are assuming God exists, that he is the one who created us with this deep relational need, and that he is the only one who can satisfy it.

27. This dynamic is much cleaner than the one between merely human procreators and their children since many believe children have relational needs that anyone can fulfil and are not merely limited to the procreators. For example, Archard 2010 argues that causal procreators have duties to ensure someone parents the child, *not* that they must parent the child themselves. This appears to imply that relational needs of children are perfectly fulfillable by others besides the causal procreators. There's lots of debate over whether this is, in fact, true. Velleman (2005), Moschella (2016), and Olsaretti all argue in their own ways that procreators have a unique role in the parent–child relationships, while Haslanger (2009) and Rulli (2016) offer reasons to deny this. Luckily, if I can maintain God is the only one who can meet our deep spiritual needs, I don't have to address this debate.

28. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me make clear that I am just following extant accounts of holiness in the literature. Without this, I think what I have to say about holiness would have been left amorphous and unclear.

29. See Murphy (2021, ch.1) for an excellent discussion of all the above accounts, along with these citations.

30. While Murphy's account of holiness is compatible with my view, what Murphy thinks follows downstream from holiness with respect to divine agency will part ways with what I say next. In particular, the *holiness framework* of divine action is squarely incompatible with my view that God has a duty to overcome this relational barrier between us. On the *holiness framework*, God only acts for our good on contingent, justifying reasons of love (Murphy 2021, ch. 6). I do not have the space here to engage with that framework, but see Yadav (2023) and Rutledge and Wessling (2023) for some compelling critiques of Murphy's view.

31. For a good discussion, see C. S. Lewis' chapter 'Making New Men' in Lewis (2017, 198–199).

32. There are compatibilists who deny this problem and there are those who believe free will is not valuable enough to keep God from zapping us into holiness (e.g. Adams 2000). For the sake of argument, I assume these views are false.

33. Hans Boersma argues that conceiving of God as a teacher who prepares us for full union with him is not new. Since the second century, theologians like Irenaeus thought of God as a teacher who trains us to acquire divine virtues and become more like God (Boersma 2004, 127–128; 2018, 388). John Calvin also used this analogy, one where God reveals himself to us while accommodating our antemortem weaknesses and infirmities that will be rectified in the eschaton (Boersma 2018, 261–265).

34. Are the duties God can generate enforceable, namely, duties that God can pressure us to fulfil through some sort of compulsion (Eskens forthcoming, 4)? That depends on empirical details about what God needs to sanctify us. If he can sanctify us by pressuring us to fulfil our duties through mere demands (i.e., on Eskens' view, pressuring us via an address that has the threat of a blaming response should the duty-bearer refuse), then his commands do not need to be enforceable. But if divine duties need enforceability given some fact about our

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

constitution, then ought-implies-can requires they are enforceable. That's not a debate I intend to settle here, but I want to at least set out the theoretical options. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this point.

35. Mark Murphy is an exception to this thought, as he concludes God only has practical authority over us that is contingent on our submission to him. See Murphy (2002, ch. 7).

36. Actually, I am speaking a bit fast and loose with the kind of 'necessity' I have in mind when I claim God necessarily has practical authority over us. My view is: if God creates beings with our value and need for a relationship with him, he necessarily incurs a duty to relate to us. The antecedent has contingent features insofar as God did not have to create us, or God did not have to create creatures like us. But once those contingent things obtain, the rest of the conditional follows. Thanks to Todd Buras and Alex Pruss for helping me clarify this.

37. What [God] is watching and waiting and working for is something that is not easy even for God, because, from the nature of the case, even He cannot produce it by a mere act of power . . . It is something [we] can freely give Him or freely refuse to Him. Will [we], or will [we] not, turn to Him and thus fulfill the only purpose for which [we] were created? [Our] free will is trembling inside [us] like the needle of a compass. But this is a needle that can choose. He can help it to do so. He cannot force it. He cannot, so to speak, put out His own hand and pull it into the right position, for then it would not be free will any more. Will [we] offer [our] natures to God? (Lewis 2017, 211–212)

38. I agree with Lewis, but it is worth noting that this idea is rejected by several notable philosophers of religion. Adams (2000), for example, has argued that God's overriding our wills to perfect us is no more impermissible than a mother overriding her toddler's will when she changes the toddler's diaper.

39. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection, and thanks to Anne Jeffrey for helping me think through it.

40. See note 26 for a brief survey of this view's historical pedigree.

41. Here is a nearby objection: If we all recognize a point in a person's development when they can responsibly reject a relationship with their parents *and* that rejection is sufficient to terminate parental authority, then our responsible rejection of God can also terminate his authority over us. I have two replies. First, the responsible rejection of one's parent is not necessarily sufficient to terminate that parent's authority. For example, there are a surprising number of precocious children who are as developed as many 18-year-olds and can essentially meet all the same standards of moral responsibility that these 18-year-olds can. Still, we do not normally revoke those children's parents of their authority when the children reject their parents (for more, see Franklin-Hall 2013). Second, while I do not share this view, some think it's *impossible* to responsibly reject God (e.g. Adams 2000). If this is true, then even if our responsible rejection of our human parents terminates those relationships, it does not follow that we have the ability to terminate God's authority over us. This is not an option I endorse, but it is an option.

42. There are other objections to modelling God's authority on parental authority that I do not have the space to entertain here. The Reformed tradition denies God is a parent of every creature because it takes the doctrine of divine adoption seriously, where only God's followers count as God's children (e.g. Calvin, *Institutes,* 3.20.36; Hart 2016: section 5).

Others argue that God being the parent of everyone requires an undesirable, flat love that is not befitting of God (Jordan 2012, 60, 68). Kelly James Clark argues that divine parenthood does not require God to have the same obligations human parents have to their children. I think this view is compatible with my proposal because I allow the content of divine parental duties to differ from human parental duties (Clark 1995, 60). Thanks to Jordan Wessling for bringing this literature to my attention.

43. However, see Eskens forthcoming for an interesting argument for enforceable duties of gratitude. If Eskens central argument is correct, then the argument from gratitude to divine authority might be in better shape than I suggest here.

44. While I will say in the last section that my argument is not necessarily incompatible with the natural lawyer's explanation of duties, I should say here that my rejection of 'The Highest Good' argument for divine authority is a spot where I give an independent reason for rejecting that explanation of duties. There is nothing about our submission to God being the fulfilment of our natures that makes it the case that God is therefore authoritative over us, but that might not be the case if the natural law view (as I describe it in the last section) is true. So, if the natural law view is correct, then perhaps both my argument – once we swap out the Wolterstorffian view with the natural law story – and this one are correct and the case for divine authority is over-determined.

45. As I'll discuss later, Michael Huemer (2021, 153) has also offered an objection to this argument from the evil god hypothesis. Theists might balk about the possibility that a perfect being could be evil like Satan; to them, I refer back to my criticisms of the argument from the highest good or divine perfection.

46. See Layman (2014, 108–110) and Murphy (2002) for further objections to this argument.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

47. One last view that my argument has an advantage over is Cole Aronson's Darwallian argument for divine authority from holiness (2022). I take no stand on whether Aronson's argument is successful; for all I know, God's holiness might give us multiple ways to argue for his authority that are mutually consistent with one another. Nonetheless, I want to point out that Darwall's account of authority is far from enjoying a consensus among philosophers. For example, Mark Murphy points out how Darwallian authority wrongly implies that immoral actions are only wrong until an appropriate authority demands we not perform them (Murphy 2011, 168). I do not know whether Murphy's criticism is correct, but I do know that my argument for divine authority does not inherit the problem he points out. My view is compatible with a pluralist account of moral obligations where some action can be morally obligatory due to an authoritative demand or something else (e.g. the natural features of the action). So, if others follow Murphy's suit in rejecting Darwallian accounts of authority, my argument is a way still to get divine authority with an appeal to holiness.
48. I get these cites from Evans (2014).
49. 'So what if He made us? What if you found out that you were actually created by Satan – would that show that you are morally obligated to obey Satan's will in all things? Certainly not. I'm not trying to be difficult. I simply do not see why it's supposed to be right to obey God, even if there is such a person' (Huemer 2021, 153).
50. Though see Altman (2023a, 274) for two possible counterexamples to this principle.
51. Some have objected that we cannot have duties to love because duties attach to things we can will and love is not something we can will (Kant 1999, 161; Taylor 1970, 252–253). I think several philosophers have already shown that this objection relies on a tendentious account of love, especially since love plausibly does engage our wills. See Liao (2015, ch. 4) for what I think is the most robust and devastating treatment of this objection.
52. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify how I understand these duties, and thanks to Anne Jeffrey for helping me navigate the meta-ethics literature to give a reply.
53. This is how I understand Bell and Renz when they speak of teleological duties: 'human beings have an obligation to love and worship God because communion with God is the final end of humanity. To act against God's calling is to act against one's human nature, to deny one's telos' (Bell and Renz forthcoming, 8).
54. Scanlon's view does rely on facts about our nature – namely, that we are reasoning beings – but he does not ground duties in whatever *fulfils* our natures. This fact keeps it distinct from the sort of teleological duties *qua* nature-fulfilment Bell and Renz discuss.
55. My view also has an explanatory stopping point because every normative explanation does – we can keep just asking 'Why?' *ad nauseam*. But some moral explanations have better stopping points than others. See Wielenberg (2016, 53–55) for why accounts of theistic ethics need not ground *every* ethical fact they posit.

References

Adams MM (2000) *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 1st edn. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Adams RM (2002) *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, 1st edn. New York: Oxford University Press.
Alston W (1990) Some suggestions for divine command theorists. In Beaty M (ed.), *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 303–326.
Altman S (2023a) Why parents' interests matter. *Ethics* 133, 271–285.
Altman S (2023b) Are parents fiduciaries? *Law and Philosophy* 42, 411–435.
Anscombe E (1981) On the source of the authority of the state. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, Vol. 3. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 130–155.
Antony L (2009) Atheism as perfect piety. In Garcia RK and King NL (eds), *Is Goodness without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 67–84.
Archard D (2010) The obligations and responsibilities of parenthood. In Archard D and Benatar D (eds), *Procreation and Parenthood: The Ethics of Bearing and Rearing Children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 103–127.
Aronson CS (2022) The claim of holiness. *Journal of Analytic Theology* 10, 1–20.
Baggett D and Walls JL (2011) *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Baggett D and Walls JL (2016) *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Bayne T and Nagasawa Y (2006) The grounds of worship. *Religious Studies* 42, 299–313.
Bell WL and Renz G (forthcoming) Why there is no obligation to love God. *Religious Studies*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000021
Boersma H (2004) *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic.
Boersma H (2018) *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic.
Brake E (2010) Willing parents: a voluntarist account of parental role obligations. In Archard D and Benatar D (eds), *Procreation and Parenthood: The Ethics of Bearing and Rearing Children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 151–177. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590704.003.0007

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Brighouse H and Swift A (2014) *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*, 1st edn. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Buras T and Cantrell M (2018) C. S. Lewis' argument from nostalgia: a new argument from desire. In Walls JL and Dougherty T (eds), *Two Dozen (or So) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 356–371.
Choo F (2019) The prior obligations objection to theological stateism. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 36, 372–384.
Choo F (2023) Conversational implicatures cannot save divine command theory from the counterpossible terrible commands objection. *Religious Studies* 59, 852–858.
Christiano T (2020) Authority. In Zalta EN (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2020. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Available at https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/authority/.
Clark KJ (1995) I believe in God the Father, almighty. *International Philosophical Quarterly* 35, 59–69.
Darwall S (2013) *Morality, Authority, and Law: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics I*, 1st edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Davies B (2006) *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 1st edn. London: Continuum.
Dworkin R (2013) *Religion without God*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Dwyer JG (2021) Deflating parental rights. *Law and Philosophy* 40, 387–418.
Eskens R (forthcoming) *Expressive Duties are Demandable and Enforceable*. Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics 14. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Evans CS (2004) *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Evans CS (2014) *God and Moral Obligation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Feser E (2009) *Aquinas*. Oneworld Publications.
Flannagan M (2021) The psychopath objection to divine command theory. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, 1–8.
Franklin-Hall A (2012) Creation and authority: the natural law foundations of Locke's account of parental authority. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 42, 255–279.
Franklin-Hall A (2013) On becoming an adult: autonomy and the moral relevance of life's stages. *Philosophical Quarterly* 63, 223–247.
Gerhardt S (2004) *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*. London: Routledge.
Gheaus A (2018) Biological parenthood: gestational, not genetic. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96, 225–240.
Gheaus A (2021) The best available parent. *Ethics* 131, 431–459.
Green L (1988) *The Authority of the State*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Hare JE (2015) *God's Command*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Harrington H (2001) *Holiness: Rabbinic Judaism and the Graeco-Roman World*. London: Routledge.
Hart MJ (2016) Calvinism and the problem of hell. In Alexander DE and Johnson DM (eds), *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, pp. 248–272.
Haslanger S (2009) Family, ancestry and self: what is the moral significance of biological ties? *Adoption and Culture* 2, 91–122.
Huemer M (2012) *The Problem of Political Authority: An Examination of the Right to Coerce and the Duty to Obey*, 1st edn. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
Huemer M (2021) Groundless morals. In William LC, Wielenberg EJ and Johnson AL (eds), *A Debate on God and Morality*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 149–165.
Jones OR (1961) *The Concept of Holiness*. Crowns Nest, Australia: George Allen & Unwin.
Jordan J (2012) The topography of divine love. *Faith and Philosophy* 29, 53–69.
Judisch N (2009) Sanctification, satisfaction, and the purpose of purgatory. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 26, 167–185.
Kant I (1999) *Metaphysical Elements of Justice: Part I of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Ladd J (trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
Korsgaard CM (1996) *The Sources of Normativity*. O'Neill O (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kristjánsson K (2015) *Aristotelian Character Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Layman D (2014) Accountability and parenthood in Locke's theological ethics. *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31, 101–118.
Lewis CS (2017) *Mere Christianity*. London: William Collins.
Liao SM (2015) *The Right to Be Loved*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Maitzen S (2017) Perfection, evil, and morality. In Sterba JP (ed.), *Ethics and the Problem of Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 141–154.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

McNabb T and Neill J (2019) By whose authority: a political argument for God's existence. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, 163–189.
Millum J (2018) *The Moral Foundations of Parenthood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Moschella M (2017) *To Whom Do Children Belong? Parental Rights, Civic Education, and Children's Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Murphy MC (2001) Divine authority and divine perfection. *Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49, 155–177.
Murphy MC (2002) *An Essay on Divine Authority*, 1st edn. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Murphy MC (2011) *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Murphy MC (2017) *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*, 1st edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Murphy MC (2021) *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Murphy MC (2023) Précis of divine holiness and divine action. *Journal of Analytic Theology* 11, 404–410.
Murphy JG and Hampton J (1998) *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Olsaretti S (2017) Liberal equality and the moral status of parent–child relationships. In Sobel D, Vallentyne P, and Wall S (eds), *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, vol. 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198801221.003.0004.
Page B (2019) Wherein lies the debate? Concerning whether God is a person. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 85, 297–317.
Porter L (2012) Adoption is not abortion-lite. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 29, 63–78.
Porter L (2014) Why and how to prefer a causal account of parenthood. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 45, 182–202.
Pouivet R (2018) Against theistic personalism: what modern epistemology does to classical theism. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, 1–19.
Pruss A (2009) Another step in divine command dialectics. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 26, 432–439.
Puls H (2016) Kant's justification of parental duties. *Kantian Review* 21, 53–75.
Rasmussen J and Bailey AM (2020) How valuable could a person be? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103, 264–277.
Raz J (2009) *The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Rulli T (2016) Preferring a genetically-related child. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 13, 669–698.
Rutledge JC and Wessling J (2023) God of holy love. *Journal of Analytic Theology* 11, 437–456.
Scanlon T (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Scanlon T (2014) *Being Realistic About Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Shafer-Landau R (2003) *Moral Realism: A Defence*, 1st edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Shields L (2022) Won't somebody please think of the parents? *Ethics* 133, 133–146.
Simmons AJ (1981) *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Simmons AJ (1992) *The Lockean Theory of Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691037813/the-lockean-theory-of-rights.
Simmons AJ (2000) *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Simmons AJ (2005) *Is There a Duty to Obey the Law?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
Sinnott-Armstrong W (2009) *Morality Without God? Philosophy in Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Smith Q (1988) An analysis of holiness. *Religious Studies* 24, 511–527.
Sproul RC (1985) *The Holiness of God*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.
Taylor R (1970) *Good and Evil*. New York: Macmillan.
Tillich P (1978) *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. London: SCM Press.
Timpe K (2018) 'Upright, whole, and free': eschatological union with God. *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 2, 60–76.
Vallentyne P (2003) Rights and duties of childrearing. *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 11, 991–1009.
Velleman JD (2005) Family history. *Philosophical Papers* 34, 357–378.
Walls JL (1992) *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, 1st edn. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
Walls J (2012) *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Walters J (2022) The best available parent and duties of justice. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 23, 304–311.
Weinberg R (2018) The endless umbilical cord: parental obligation to grown children. *Journal of Practical Ethics* 6, 55–72.
Wielenberg EJ (2005) *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wielenberg EJ (2016) *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, 1st edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wodak D (2020) Who's on first? *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 15, 49–71.
Wolterstorff N (2008) *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wolterstorff N (2014) *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wolterstorff N (2016) *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*. Cuneo T (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wong B (2020) Why should I respect you? A critique and a suggestion for the justification of mutual respect in contractualism. *Philosophical Forum* 51, 261–278.
Yadav S (2023) All shall love me and despair! *Journal of Analytic Theology* 11, 457–469.
Zagzebski LT (2015) *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cite this article: Hadsell N (2025). Divine authority as divine parenthood. *Religious Studies* **61**, 828–849. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press