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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The demand problem in worship

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Abstract

One important debate in the recent philosophy of worship concerns what grounds the obligation to worship God, including whether worship can be grounded in divine commands. I argue that this debate does not adequately address a further question: whether a being worthy of worship can fittingly demand worship at all. Although this question is distinct from the Grounding Problem, its relationship to that problem depends in part on how the obligation to worship is grounded. I further argue that this problem is best understood as a structural tension concerning directed expressive duties, a tension discussed most explicitly in the recent literature on gratitude. After reconstructing the Demand Problem in Gratitude, I formulate the corresponding Demand Problem in Worship and argue that the two share the same underlying structure. I then examine the three strategies proposed for resolving the gratitude case and argue that, even if they succeed there, none can be successfully extended to worship. Applying these strategies to the Demand Problem in Worship either turns out to be impossible or requires revisions that carry substantial theological costs for traditional theism. I conclude that the Demand Problem in Worship is substantially more resistant to resolution than its counterpart in gratitude, thereby exposing a deep tension within traditional theistic understandings of worship.

Keywords: worship; gratitude; directed duties; divine demands; expressive duties

Introduction

Worship occupies a central place in the major religions. Indeed, being worthy of worship is commonly regarded as one of the defining properties of God. Despite its religious significance, however, worship has received surprisingly little sustained attention in philosophy of religion. Only during the past two decades has a growing body of literature begun to examine worship as a philosophical topic in its own right. Much of this recent discussion has focused on the question of what, if anything, grounds the obligation to worship God. In other words, philosophers have asked what makes worship obligatory or provides a sufficient basis for requiring it. Competing answers appeal to divine commands, divine excellence, gratitude, and other proposed grounds (see Bayne and Nagasawa 2007).

This literature, however, leaves a further question insufficiently addressed. Even if we can explain why human beings ought to worship God, can a worship-worthy God fittingly demand worship from them? This question is conceptually distinct from the familiar debate about what grounds the obligation to worship, but it is not entirely independent of that

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debate. Its relationship to the Grounding Problem depends in part on how the obligation to worship is grounded. The question therefore concerns whether a being worthy of worship can fittingly claim, require, or demand the worship owed to him.

I argue that this neglected question gives rise to a distinctive philosophical problem that deserves more explicit attention than it has received. More specifically, I suggest that it belongs to a broader family of structural tensions concerning directed expressive duties, a tension that has received its clearest treatment in the recent literature on gratitude. After reconstructing the Demand Problem in Gratitude, I formulate the corresponding Demand Problem in Worship and argue that, although the two problems share the same formal structure, the strategies proposed for resolving the former cannot successfully be extended to the latter. If successful, the argument establishes the Demand Problem in Worship as a distinctive philosophical challenge for traditional theism, one substantially more resistant to resolution than its counterpart in gratitude.

The grounding problem and the demand problem in worship

Recent discussions in the philosophy of worship have largely focused on the Grounding Problem: what grounds the obligation to worship God? In other words, philosophers have asked what makes worship obligatory or provides a sufficient basis for requiring it. The literature offers a range of answers, which can be broadly divided into two groups. Non-Divine-Command Grounding accounts ground the obligation in considerations independent of divine commands or demands, such as God's excellence or gratitude owed to God. Divine-Command Grounding accounts, by contrast, give a constitutive role to divine commands or demands, holding that God's requiring worship can itself provide the ground of the obligation. The debate over divine command has received particular attention in the literature, but it represents only one way of addressing the broader Grounding Problem.

Brown and Nagasawa (2005) provide the standard formulation of the central objection to the Divine-Command Grounding approach. Their discussion is framed in terms of divine commands. The question, therefore, is whether God's command to worship can appropriately serve as a ground of the obligation to worship. Can God's command to worship provide a reason for worshipping God, or does worship cease to be fitting or genuine when it is performed merely because God commanded it?

According to Brown and Nagasawa (2005), the nature of worship prevents it from being grounded in divine command. They argue that we are incapable of complying with a divine command to worship God merely because God commanded it. Worship, they contend, belongs to a class of attitudes and responses – alongside love, admiration, and reverence – whose nature prevents them from being appropriately grounded in command. A person may perhaps engage in the outward behaviour associated with worship because God commanded it, but genuine worship itself is absent (Brown and Nagasawa 2005, 141–142). As Bayne and Nagasawa put it, 'The phenomenology of worship seems to represent worship as a response to the very being of God, rather than as a response to God's commands' (Bayne and Nagasawa 2007, 478). Hence, worship cannot be grounded merely in the fact that God has commanded it, any more than genuine love for one's father could be grounded merely in the fact that one's father commanded such love. On this basis, Brown and Nagasawa argue that divine commands can neither serve as the sole ground of worship nor plausibly function as one among its grounds (Brown and Nagasawa 2005, 143). Indeed, they maintain that even accepting divine command theory does not by itself explain why worship would be obligatory (Brown and Nagasawa 2005). These claims generated a substantial debate.

Some critics have argued that Brown and Nagasawa rely on an excessively strong interpretation of divine command theory and that weaker versions of the theory can avoid

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these difficulties (Crowe 2007, 469–470; Blaauw 2007, 237–238; Harris 2022, 28). Others have attempted to show that divine commands may still function as one reason among others for worship without undermining its fittingness or genuineness (Blaauw 2007, 238–240). As a result, an extended discussion has emerged concerning whether, and in what sense, divine command can play a justificatory role in worship.

A further question, however, concerns whether God can fittingly demand worship. Here, I use 'demand' to refer to an interpersonal act that places normative pressure on another person to perform an action. Such pressure typically presents the action as required and holds the addressee answerable for failing to perform it. A demand need not take the form of an explicit imperative; what matters is the normative pressure it places on its addressee. The issue is not simply whether worship can be grounded in divine demand, but whether God can appropriately occupy the normative position of one who demands worship and holds people accountable for failing to perform that duty, including through requirements, enforcement, or punishment. I shall call this the Demand Problem in Worship. The problem therefore concerns not only whether worship is obligatory, but whether a being to whom worship is owed can appropriately demand that people fulfil that obligation and hold them accountable for failing to do so.

The relationship between the Grounding Problem and the Demand Problem in Worship is therefore more nuanced than a simple distinction between two unrelated questions. On Non-Divine-Command Grounding accounts, the two problems are more clearly separable. If, for example, worship is grounded in God's excellence or in gratitude owed to God, the obligation may be established without appealing to any divine demand. Whether God can nevertheless fittingly demand, require, or enforce that independently grounded obligation is then a further question. A negative answer to the Demand Problem would not by itself undermine the proposed ground of the obligation, although it would raise a separate problem about God's normative standing to demand worship.

The relationship is closer on Divine-Command Grounding accounts. If God's command or demand is itself supposed to ground the obligation to worship, then an adequate account of that ground should make it intelligible that God can appropriately issue such a demand. Thus, someone who accepts Divine-Command Grounding has reason to address the Demand Problem if that account is to remain plausible. Conversely, if the Demand Problem cannot be satisfactorily resolved, this may provide a reason to doubt that divine command can serve as a ground of the obligation, thereby lending support to the objection advanced by Brown and Nagasawa. Nevertheless, this does not make the two problems identical: the Demand Problem asks whether God can fittingly demand worship, whereas the Grounding Problem asks what makes worship obligatory. The former may therefore bear on the plausibility of one proposed answer to the latter without simply being reducible to it.

Despite its importance, the Demand Problem in Worship has received comparatively little direct and systematic attention in the philosophical literature on worship. The problem is especially pressing within traditional theistic frameworks, in which worship is not merely presented as fitting or admirable but is explicitly commanded by God in some sacred texts and associated with divine judgement, reward, and punishment.[1] Thus, the question is not merely whether theologians or philosophers have attributed a demand for worship to God; some major religious traditions explicitly represent God as commanding human beings to worship him. If such divine commands are genuinely part of the relationship between God and human beings, then whether God is normatively entitled to issue them is a substantive question that cannot be settled simply by establishing that worship is owed to God. For the theist, therefore, the Demand Problem poses a challenge to the coherence of a traditional conception of divine worship. If the Demand Problem cannot be satisfactorily resolved, this may provide atheists with an additional reason to challenge that conception: if the God represented in these traditions commands human beings to worship him, but

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cannot appropriately occupy the normative position of demanding worship, then something important about the traditional conception of God and his relation to worship remains unexplained. An unresolved Demand Problem would not by itself establish atheism, but it could nevertheless add a significant difficulty for the theistic position.

The Demand Problem in Worship is not entirely unique, nor is it entirely absent from the philosophical literature. Some philosophers have suggested that divine demands for worship may be troubling insofar as they appear connected with vanity, self-exaltation, narcissism, or the desire for affirmation (Aikin 2010, 108–109; Smuts 2012; Cahn 2017, 16). Yet these discussions do not develop the issue as a systematic problem concerning the normative standing to demand worship. I argue that the Demand Problem in Worship is best understood by locating it within a broader literature on directed expressive obligations. In recent years, philosophers discussing gratitude have analysed structurally similar tensions under the heading of directed expressive obligations[2] – obligations that both express fitting attitudes and are, in some sense, owed to another person. Gratitude provides the clearest example in the recent literature. Many philosophers maintain that gratitude is both directed towards and owed to a benefactor, while also insisting that benefactors cannot demand gratitude without undermining something important about it. Recent discussions have therefore attempted to explain how these commitments can be reconciled.

The demand problem in gratitude

The demand problem in worship becomes clearer once we consider a structurally similar debate that has emerged in recent discussions of gratitude. Many philosophers hold that gratitude is not merely an appropriate emotional response to benefaction, but a directed obligation owed, in some sense, to a benefactor. At the same time, however, they also maintain that gratitude cannot appropriately be demanded by its object without undermining something important about it. Recent discussions by Tony Manela (2015a), Adrienne M. Martin (2019), and Romy Eskens (2024) have attempted to formulate this tension more precisely and to explain how these commitments might be reconciled. My aim is not to resolve the debate about gratitude, but to show that it provides a useful framework for understanding a parallel – and, I shall argue, more difficult – problem in worship.

To understand the demand problem in gratitude, we must begin with three highly plausible claims about the nature of gratitude itself. The first is that gratitude is sometimes obligatory. In ordinary moral experience, it seems that beneficiaries are not merely permitted or encouraged to feel gratitude towards benefactors, but are sometimes required to do so. Someone who receives a benefit yet responds with complete indifference or ingratitude seems open to criticism. Philosophers have therefore often treated gratitude not simply as a virtue or ideal, but as a genuine moral obligation. Indeed, some have regarded duties of gratitude as among the most fundamental interpersonal obligations. Kant, for instance, characterizes gratitude as a 'sacred duty' (Kant 1991, 249). The idea that gratitude constitutes a genuine obligation has been so influential that it has been employed as a basis for grounding further duties. In political philosophy, for example, some have sought to ground political obligation in a duty of gratitude to the state (Walker 1988, 1989). Similarly, in philosophy of religion, gratitude to God has been proposed as one possible ground for the obligation to worship God (see Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 304–306). Thus, the first claim is that there exists a duty of gratitude.

The second claim is that gratitude belongs to the class of directed duties. Philosophers commonly distinguish directed duties from non-directed duties by noting that directed duties are owed to particular persons and that their violation wrongs those persons specifically (May 2015, 523). Stephen Darwall describes such directed duties as 'bipolar obligations,' emphasizing that they involve a 'distinctive second-personal authority' and

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a standing to 'address claims and demands and hold accountable' (Darwall 2013, 35–36). In this sense, directed duties place one person in a distinctive normative position with respect to another's conduct. Although the precise nature of this normative position remains contested, one influential interpretation holds that the person to whom the duty is owed possesses some normative standing to demand its performance.[3]

One way to see this structure is to distinguish the content of a duty from the person to whom the duty is owed. A duty may concern one person while nevertheless being owed to another. Suppose, for example, that I promise A that I will assist B. Although the required action concerns B, the duty itself is owed to A, who possesses the standing to complain if I fail to comply. Directed duties therefore involve not merely the requirement that some action be performed, but a distinctive normative relation between persons.

Gratitude is commonly understood to have precisely this directed structure. Gratitude is not merely an appropriate appreciative response in the abstract; rather, it is gratitude owed to a benefactor in virtue of the benefactor's benefaction.[4] Failing to feel or express gratitude therefore seems not merely morally deficient in an impersonal sense, but deficient specifically in relation to the benefactor. If gratitude is indeed a directed duty, the benefactor appears to occupy a distinctive normative position with respect to its performance. Although philosophers disagree about how this position should be analysed, it is natural – at least initially – to think that it involves some standing on the part of the benefactor to demand the gratitude owed to them. As we shall see, it is precisely this seemingly plausible thought that generates the demand problem in gratitude.

The third claim is that benefactors generally lack the normative standing to demand gratitude from those they have benefited. Imagine someone who has done you a favour and, immediately afterwards, insists that you thank them, rebukes you for failing to do so, or reminds you that gratitude is something you owe them. Even if gratitude is genuinely owed, there is a powerful intuition that such a demand is inappropriate. The precise explanation for this intuition remains contested. What is difficult to deny, however, is the intuition itself: something seems to have gone wrong.

This intuition has long been recognized in philosophical discussions of gratitude. Fred Berger, for example, observes that although gratitude may indeed be obligatory, 'we do not feel at ease in saying it is something owed the grantor in the sense that he has a right to demand it' (Berger 1975, 300). He goes on to suggest that such a demand makes the benefaction itself appear 'something less than a show of benevolence' (Berger 1975, 300). This intuition is by no means unique to Berger (see, e.g., Weiss 1985, 492; Card 1988, 120).

Each of these three claims is highly plausible. Yet, as recent discussions of gratitude have shown, they are difficult to reconcile. The central tension articulated by Manela (2015a) and further developed by Eskens (2024) may be formulated in terms of the following three claims:

(1) Gratitude is sometimes obligatory.
(2) Gratitude is a directed duty owed to a benefactor.
(3) Benefactors lack the normative standing to demand the gratitude owed to them.

Together, these three claims generate what I shall call the Demand Problem in Gratitude. The tension arises because if gratitude is both obligatory and directed towards a benefactor, it is natural to suppose that the benefactor possesses some standing with respect to its performance. Indeed, one influential interpretation of directed duties understands such standing in terms of a claim-right, or at least a standing to demand performance. Yet the third claim denies that benefactors possess any such standing. The philosophical challenge, therefore, is to explain how these three claims can be jointly maintained.

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As I shall argue in the following section, worship gives rise to a structurally parallel problem. By reconstructing the problem in this way, we are in a position to evaluate whether the principal strategies proposed in the gratitude literature also succeed in the case of worship.

The demand problem in worship

The structure identified in the case of gratitude invites the question whether a parallel problem arises in worship. Although gratitude and worship are different normative phenomena, they appear to share several features that are directly relevant to the present discussion. Both are commonly understood as responses to perceived excellence or to benefaction, rather than as arbitrary attitudes. Both are commonly regarded as obligations rather than merely supererogatory or optional. And both are plausibly understood as directed obligations – gratitude is owed to a benefactor, while worship is owed to God. If these parallels are genuine, then the very same question that arises in the case of gratitude should also arise in the case of worship.

The first claim is that worship is obligatory. Unlike the discussion of gratitude, where the present argument required only the modest claim that gratitude is *sometimes* obligatory, the corresponding premise in the case of worship is significantly stronger. Within the major theistic traditions, worship is generally regarded not as merely fitting, reasonable, or supererogatory, but as a fundamental obligation owed to God. As Bayne and Nagasawa observe, most theists endorse some version of what they call the Obligation Thesis, according to which theists are obligated to worship God (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 303).

The second claim is that worship, like gratitude, is a directed duty. Worship is not merely something that ought to be performed in the abstract; rather, it is owed to a particular object, namely God. Moreover, both gratitude and worship are expressive in character. Their fulfilment essentially involves expressing an appropriate evaluative attitude towards their respective objects. Worship exemplifies this structure in a particularly clear way. As I have argued elsewhere (Abbasnejad 2026), worship consists of interconnected cognitive, affective, and performative elements. It therefore concerns our beliefs, attitudes, and emotions, as well as forms of performance or expression, and cannot be reduced to any particular belief, feeling, or action, such as mere praise or gratitude. The performative dimension is significant because its function is to express the cognitive and affective attitudes constitutive of worship. Worship therefore essentially involves expressing an appropriate evaluative attitude towards God. This immediately raises the question whether such an attitude, or its expression, can appropriately be demanded by the very being towards whom it is directed. In this respect, worship closely resembles gratitude. Both are paradigmatic cases of directed obligations whose fulfilment essentially involves expressing an appropriate evaluative attitude towards the very object to whom the obligation is owed.

The third claim is that God lacks the normative standing to demand worship from human beings. At first sight, this claim may appear surprising. If worship is indeed obligatory and owed to God, would it not follow that God may appropriately require or demand it? Yet there is a powerful intuition that something has gone wrong. Consider again the earlier case of gratitude. A benefactor who insists, immediately after conferring a benefit, 'You ought to thank me', strikes us as having done something normatively inappropriate. The demand itself seems to alter our evaluation of the benefactor's act, even if we cannot immediately explain why. A remarkably similar intuition seems to arise in the case of worship. Suppose that God were to insist, 'You must worship me', or were to threaten punishment for those who refuse to do so. Even if worship were genuinely owed, many people find something morally unsettling about such a demand itself. The concern is not simply that demanded

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worship might become less sincere or less valuable. Rather, the very act of demanding worship appears, at least initially, difficult to reconcile with the kind of being that would be worthy of worship.

A similar intuition can also be found in the contemporary literature on worship. Although the concern has rarely been formulated as a single philosophical problem, some authors express unease about the idea that a being worthy of worship would appropriately demand worship. Some argue that it is difficult to see why a perfectly benevolent being would command worship at all, comparing such a demand to a generous person who diminishes the moral significance of his own generosity by insisting on receiving the praise he deserves (Aikin 2010, 108). Others suggest that commanding worship would itself undermine worship-worthiness (Smuts 2012, 222). Still others maintain that the very desire to be worshipped appears morally suspect or indicative of some defect of character (Cahn 2017, 12). Although these authors explain the problem in different ways, they converge on a common intuition: there is something *prima facie* problematic about a worship-worthy being demanding worship.

The three claims just discussed are each independently plausible. Yet, when taken together, they generate a tension similar to that identified in the case of gratitude. The parallel may be formulated as follows:

(1) Worship is obligatory.
(2) Worship is a directed duty owed to God.
(3) God lacks the normative standing to demand the worship owed to Him.

Together, these three claims generate what I shall call the Demand Problem in Worship. The difficulty arises because if worship is both obligatory and directed towards God, it is natural to suppose that God possesses the normative standing to demand its performance. Indeed, one influential account of directed duties identifies such standing with a claim-right, or at least a standing, to demand compliance. Yet the third claim denies precisely this conclusion. The philosophical challenge, therefore, is to explain how all three claims can be maintained simultaneously.

At first sight, this problem closely parallels the Demand Problem in Gratitude. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether the strategies developed to resolve the latter can also resolve the former. In the following section, however, I argue that although the two problems share the same formal structure, the solutions proposed in the case of gratitude cannot be successfully extended to worship. It is precisely this asymmetry that, I argue, makes the Demand Problem in Worship significantly more difficult to resolve.

Why the demand problem in worship is more difficult to resolve

Thus far, I have argued that worship gives rise to a problem that is structurally parallel to the Demand Problem in Gratitude. At the level of diagnosis, the two cases appear similar. The more important question, however, concerns the available solutions. Even if the Demand Problem in Gratitude can be resolved, it does not follow that the same strategies can resolve the corresponding problem in worship. I shall argue that they cannot. Indeed, it is precisely at the level of possible solutions that the symmetry between gratitude and worship begins to break down. For this reason, I argue that the Demand Problem in Worship is considerably more difficult to resolve.

The existing responses to the Demand Problem in Gratitude can, for present purposes, be grouped according to which of its three constituent claims they modify or reject. On this basis, three broad strategies may be distinguished. The first rejects the claim that gratitude is genuinely obligatory. The second preserves that claim but weakens the connection

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between directed duties and the standing to demand their performance. The third accepts both preceding claims but rejects the claim that expressive duties are, as such, undemandable. In what follows, I argue that none of these strategies can be successfully extended to the case of worship. If this is correct, the Demand Problem in Worship is substantially more resistant to resolution than its counterpart in gratitude.

Denying obligation

The first family of responses rejects the first claim of the Demand Problem by denying that gratitude is genuinely obligatory. On this view, gratitude is better understood as a virtue, an ideal, or an admirable disposition than as a duty. Since there is no obligation to be grateful, there is likewise no need to explain why benefactors lack the standing to demand gratitude. The apparent tension disappears because the first claim is rejected.

A version of this strategy is developed by Christopher Wellman. Wellman begins from a widely shared intuition already noted by Berger and Card: benefactors do not possess a claim-right to gratitude. He then argues that this intuition has more radical implications than is usually recognized. As he writes, 'our recognition that there are no rights to gratitude signals that there can be no duties of this type either' (Wellman 1999, 289). His reasoning is that gratitude, unlike paradigmatic imperfect duties such as beneficence, is directed towards a particular person rather than left to the agent's discretion. Consequently, if gratitude were genuinely obligatory, it would generate a corresponding claim-right in the benefactor. Since benefactors plainly lack such a right, gratitude cannot be a duty after all.

Accordingly, the demand problem is dissolved rather than resolved. Instead of attempting to reconcile the three claims, this strategy abandons the first one by treating gratitude as something morally valuable but ultimately beyond the domain of obligation.

Whether this strategy ultimately succeeds in the case of gratitude need not concern us here. My concern is not with the adequacy of Wellman's account of gratitude but with its applicability to worship. Even if this strategy successfully dissolves the Demand Problem in Gratitude, it is considerably less satisfactory as a response to the Demand Problem in Worship.

Unlike the case of gratitude, abandoning the obligation to worship would require a substantial revision of traditional theism. As Bayne and Nagasawa observe, the majority of theistic traditions endorse what they call the Obligation Thesis, according to which human beings are obligated to worship God (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 303). Indeed, Bayne and Nagasawa argue that the issue is so fundamental that the inability to justify an obligation to worship may itself ground an argument against the existence of God: if God exists, then human beings are obligated to worship God; if no such obligation can be established, then this counts against God's existence (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 311–312).

The cost is not merely theoretical. If worship were no longer obligatory but merely reasonable, admirable, or supererogatory, many familiar features of theistic religion would lose their normative foundation. Divine rebuke, blame, punishment, and accountability for failing to worship would become difficult to justify. A perfectly just God may appropriately hold human beings accountable only for violating genuine obligations; it is far less clear how God could justifiably condemn persons for failing to perform what is merely optional or supererogatory.

The asymmetry is therefore clear. In the case of gratitude, denying that gratitude is obligatory may be accepted as a revisionary but coherent account of the phenomenon. In the case of worship, however, the same move comes at a far higher theological cost. It therefore fails to provide an adequate resolution of the Demand Problem in Worship.

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Revising directedness

The second family of responses accepts both the obligatoriness of gratitude and the intuition that benefactors lack standing to demand it. Rather than rejecting either of these claims, it seeks to dissolve the Demand Problem by revising our understanding of the second claim. Notably, no prominent participant in the recent debate simply denies that gratitude is directed. Such a move would carry considerable theoretical costs, since gratitude is paradigmatically directed towards a particular benefactor rather than owed impersonally. Instead, contemporary discussions have largely proceeded by retaining the directed character of gratitude while weakening or refining the normative implications traditionally associated with directed duties. The central idea is that although gratitude is indeed owed to a benefactor, being owed gratitude need not automatically confer a full claim-right to demand its performance.

One influential version of this strategy is developed by Manela (2015a). He argues that the Demand Problem arises only if every directed duty is assumed to generate a robust claim-right in the person to whom the duty is owed. He rejects this assumption by distinguishing between perfect and imperfect rights. A perfect right entitles its holder to demand performance of the corresponding duty. An imperfect right, by contrast, does not confer such standing to demand, while nevertheless placing its holder in a distinctive normative position with respect to the duty's fulfilment. According to Manela, gratitude generates only an imperfect right. As he puts it, although 'benefactors do not have standing to demand gratitude', they nevertheless 'have special standing to *remonstrate* with beneficiaries in its absence' (Manela 2015a, 152). Benefactors therefore cannot demand gratitude as something to which they are entitled, yet neither are they normatively situated in the same way as complete strangers. Rather, they occupy a distinctive normative position that permits certain reactive attitudes without amounting to a full claim-right to demand performance. In this way, Manela preserves the directedness of gratitude while denying that directed duties invariably generate a perfect right to demand performance.[5]

A different version of the same strategy is developed by Adrienne Martin (2019). She likewise seeks to preserve the directedness of gratitude while avoiding the conclusion that benefactors possess an ordinary claim-right to demand it. She argues that Manela's distinction between perfect and imperfect rights ultimately fails to explain the beneficiary's distinctive normative position. In Martin's view, a benefactor is not entitled to *demand* gratitude or to determine precisely how it should be expressed. Nevertheless, the benefactor does occupy a distinctive normative position that permits more limited forms of normative guidance. As she puts it, 'the benefactor can legitimately direct the beneficiary only to adopt or maintain the broad end of being grateful' (Martin 2019, 75). The beneficiary therefore remains free to determine the particular manner in which gratitude is expressed.

Despite their differences, Martin and Manela share the same underlying strategy. Neither denies that gratitude is directed; rather, both attempt to weaken the normative implications of directedness. The aim is to preserve the second premise of the Demand Problem while avoiding the conclusion that directed duties necessarily confer a full right to demand their performance.

The foregoing proposals preserve the directedness of gratitude while revising the authority associated with it. A different version of the same strategy revises not the authority attached to directed duties but the underlying theory of directedness itself. Contemporary discussions of directed duties are commonly organized around two major accounts:

> Will (or Control) Theory: A duty is directed to a particular person because that person possesses a distinctive measure of normative control over the duty. The person to

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> whom the duty is owed occupies a special normative position with respect to its performance, typically involving powers to waive, enforce, demand, or otherwise control the duty (Sreenivasan 2010, 482; May 2015, 525).

> Interest Theory: A duty is directed to a particular person because it exists for that person's benefit or serves that person's sufficiently important interests. On this view, directedness is explained not by the right-holder's normative control but by the fact that the duty protects or promotes the interests of the person to whom it is owed (Sreenivasan 2010, 484; May 2015, 528–529).

The inference from directedness to standing to demand arises most naturally within the framework of Will Theory, where directed duties are understood in terms of normative authority. If Interest Theory provides the better account of directed duties, however, that inference becomes considerably weaker. One might therefore propose that the Demand Problem is best addressed not by weakening the authority associated with directed duties, but by replacing the will-theoretical conception of directedness with an interest-theoretical one.

At this stage, the crucial question is not whether the foregoing strategies successfully resolve the Demand Problem in Gratitude. I leave that issue open. My claim is more limited for the present argument: even if these strategies provide satisfactory resolutions of the Demand Problem in Gratitude, they do not provide satisfactory resolutions of the Demand Problem in Worship.

Consider first the strategies developed by Manela and Martin. Despite their differences, both attempt to preserve the directedness of the relevant duty while weakening the normative authority associated with it. Manela does so by distinguishing imperfect rights from perfect rights; Martin does so by replacing claim-rights with a more limited form of personal normative expectation. In both cases, the underlying idea is that the person to whom the duty is owed lacks authority to determine precisely how the duty must be performed.

This strategy is considerably less plausible in the case of worship. Traditional theism typically attributes to God a far stronger normative authority than either Manela's imperfect right or Martin's normative expectation allows. God is ordinarily understood not merely as hoping for, expecting, or expressing disappointment at the absence of worship, but as possessing genuine authority to require it and to hold human beings accountable for failing to render it. Accordingly, adopting either proposal in the case of worship would require a substantial revision of the traditional conception of divine authority. Martin's proposal illustrates the point particularly clearly. On her account, the beneficiary retains broad discretion over how gratitude is to be expressed, since the benefactor may legitimately require only the general end of gratitude. By contrast, within the major theistic traditions, worship is not ordinarily presented as an end whose realization is left largely to the worshipper's discretion. Rather, revelation typically specifies, often in considerable detail, the attitudes, practices, and forms through which worship is to be expressed. Whether or not this theological picture is ultimately correct is beside the point. The point is that Martin's proposal can resolve the Demand Problem in Worship only by replacing a central feature of traditional worship with a substantially weaker conception of God's normative standing.

The same conclusion applies to the proposal of replacing Will Theory with Interest Theory. I do not wish to enter the broader debate over which theory offers the better general account of directed duties. Nor is it necessary to determine whether Interest Theory successfully resolves the Demand Problem in Gratitude. The present point is narrower. Even if Interest Theory proves superior in those contexts, it cannot plausibly explain the directedness of worship.

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The reason lies in a widely accepted theological commitment shared across the major monotheistic traditions: God is perfectly self-sufficient and cannot be benefited by human action. Human worship neither adds to God's perfection nor promotes God's interests. If this principle is correct, then the central explanatory idea of Interest Theory – that directed duties protect or promote the interests of their objects – cannot account for why worship is owed to God. Worship is undoubtedly directed towards God, yet it is not directed towards him because it advances his interests. The very feature that makes Interest Theory attractive in ordinary interpersonal cases therefore prevents it from explaining the directedness of worship.

Consequently, even if abandoning Will Theory weakens the inference from directedness to demandability in ordinary cases such as gratitude, the same strategy cannot resolve the Demand Problem in Worship. For the theory itself lacks the resources to explain why the duty of worship is directed to God in the first place.

Denying the undemandability intuition

The third family of responses leaves the first two claims of the Demand Problem untouched and instead challenges the third. Rather than denying that gratitude is obligatory or revising the nature of directed duties, it rejects the assumption that expressive duties are, as such, undemandable. On this view, there is no general normative principle preventing the object of a duty from demanding the performance of an expressive duty. Instead, the widespread intuition that expressive duties are undemandable is taken to rest on no compelling justification.

The most systematic defence of this strategy is offered by Romy Eskens (2024). She argues that the widespread intuition that expressive duties are undemandable has rarely been supported by explicit argument. Rather than simply rejecting that intuition, her aim is to identify the considerations that might be thought to justify it and to examine whether they succeed. She reconstructs four candidate arguments that could explain why expressive duties appear resistant to demand and argues that none establishes such a general conclusion. If her analysis is correct, then the common intuition against demanding expressive duties lacks an adequate philosophical foundation.

I do not challenge Eskens's analysis on its own terms. It may well be that her criticisms successfully undermine these arguments in ordinary interpersonal cases such as gratitude and apology. My claim is more limited. Even if the intuition against demanding expressive duties cannot be sustained in general, it does not follow that worship is appropriately demandable. Worship differs from the interpersonal cases on which Eskens focuses in several normatively significant respects. Accordingly, I argue that the very considerations Eskens dismisses in the context of gratitude regain their force in the case of worship, once the object of the duty is God.

I consider the two arguments most relevant to the present discussion and argue that Eskens's objections fail in the case of worship. Consequently, even if they resolve the Demand Problem in Gratitude, they fail to resolve the Demand Problem in Worship.

Eskens first examines what she calls the Value Argument. According to this line of thought, expressive duties derive an important part of their value from being performed out of the agent's own motivation rather than in response to external demands. Consider the case of apology. If someone apologizes only after being pressed by the victim, many regard the apology as less valuable than one offered before any demand was made. Eskens argues that discussions of gratitude, forgiveness, and apology all reflect this underlying intuition: demanding an expressive duty threatens the value of its fulfilment (Eskens 2024, 211–214).

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Eskens rejects this argument by claiming that it proves too much. She argues that demands do not necessarily replace an agent's internal motivation with an external one. In many cases, the relevant motivation is already present, but the agent fails to act because of fear, shame, anxiety, distraction, or similar obstacles. A demand may simply remove those obstacles and enable the agent to act on motivations that already exist. Even where a demand makes the fulfilment of the duty somewhat less valuable, she argues, it does not deprive the fulfilment of value altogether (Eskens 2024, 213–214).

Whether this reply succeeds in ordinary interpersonal cases need not be decided here. My concern is the case of worship. Even if demanding an expressive duty does not eliminate the value of its fulfilment in cases of gratitude or apology, divine demands introduce a distinctive difficulty. Even if worship is already a moral obligation, God's demand changes the normative situation in which that obligation is performed.

Even if Eskens is right that demands may sometimes help an already well-disposed agent overcome psychological obstacles and fulfil an expressive duty, this by itself does not justify divine demands for worship. The relevant question is not whether a divine demand can causally contribute to worship, but whether it provides sufficient reason for God to alter the normative relationship between himself and human beings.

I contend that it does not. On the contrary, divine demands generate at least two serious normative costs. First, they diminish the value that worship would otherwise possess when offered independently of any divine demand. Second, they worsen the normative position of those who fail to worship without providing any corresponding benefit that could justify this additional cost.

The first consideration may be formulated as follows:

The Value-Reduction Argument

1. One should not, without sufficient reason, reduce the value of another person's morally good action.
2. If worship is already a moral duty, then demanding worship makes its performance less valuable.
3. God has no sufficient reason to make human worship less valuable.
4. Therefore, God should not demand worship.

The first premise expresses a straightforward moral consideration. We should not unnecessarily deprive people of the opportunity to perform a morally good action in its more valuable form. If worship is already a moral obligation, then demanding it does exactly this: it deprives believers of the opportunity to worship God without being placed under a personal divine demand. The second premise follows from the very intuition underlying the Value Argument. Even Eskens concedes that a demand may reduce the value of fulfilling an expressive duty, although she denies that it eliminates that value altogether (Eskens 2024, 213). The crucial issue, therefore, is the third premise. I do not claim that no reason could justify a divine demand for worship, nor do I claim that no such reason has been offered. Rather, my claim is that merely identifying a benefit of divine demands is not sufficient to justify them. The proposed benefit must both outweigh the normative cost imposed by the demand and be such that it could not have been secured by a less costly means. Unless it is shown that the reduction in worship's value is an unavoidable condition for securing some greater good, or that no alternative means of securing that good would avoid this cost, the demand remains unjustified. Until such a justification is provided, the argument gives us a defeasible reason to conclude that God should not demand worship.[6]

The preceding argument focuses on the cost that divine demands impose on believers by reducing the value of their worship. A second, complementary consideration concerns those who fail to worship. Divine demands do not merely reduce the value of worship for

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believers; they also increase the normative burden borne by non-worshippers. This may be formulated as follows:

The Burden-Increasing Argument

1. God should not unnecessarily worsen the normative position of human beings.
2. A divine demand for worship worsens the normative position of those who fail to worship.
3. No sufficient reason has been shown for imposing this additional normative burden.
4. Therefore, God should not demand worship.

The first premise follows naturally from the assumption that God is perfectly good and seeks the good of human beings. Absent a sufficiently weighty justification, a perfectly good being should not place people in a normatively worse position than they would otherwise occupy.[7] The second premise does not depend on any particular account of the normative effects of demand. One possible account holds that a divine demand creates an additional obligation. If so, non-worshippers are plainly in a worse normative position, since they now fail to comply with two obligations rather than one. If, however, no additional obligation is created, the result is still similar. Once God has personally demanded worship, failure to worship is no longer merely the violation of an antecedent moral duty. It also constitutes a direct refusal to comply with God's personal demand and therefore involves a further act of defiance towards God. On either understanding, the normative position of those who continue not to worship is worsened. Since, as a matter of fact, the class of non-worshippers is substantial, a divine demand predictably places many people in a normatively worse position. The defender of divine demands must therefore identify a sufficiently weighty good that could justify imposing this additional normative cost. Until such a justification is provided, the argument supplies a further defeasible reason for thinking that God should not demand worship.

Accordingly, even if Eskens is right that the Value Argument fails as a general objection to demanding expressive duties, her reply does not extend to worship. Once worship is understood as an antecedently existing moral obligation owed to a perfectly good God, demanding it generates distinctive normative costs that remain unanswered.

Eskens next considers what she calls the Grounds Argument. Unlike the Value Argument, this objection targets not the value of fulfilling the duty but the very grounds on which the duty rests, claiming that the very act of demanding may undermine those grounds. In the case of gratitude, for example, Berger argues that when a benefactor demands gratitude, the demand may reveal that the original benefit was not offered from pure benevolence but, at least in part, in order to secure recognition or appreciation. To that extent, the moral basis of the beneficiary's duty of gratitude is weakened (Berger 1975, 300). Eskens notes that a structurally similar argument has been developed in the literature on forgiveness. When a wrongdoer demands forgiveness, the demand may reveal a continuing failure to respect the victim, thereby undermining one of the conditions under which forgiveness could appropriately be owed (Eskens 2024, 214).

Eskens argues that this line of reasoning is valid only in some cases of expressive duties. A demand for gratitude or forgiveness may indeed reveal an objectionable quality of will, but it need not do so. Her principal discussion focuses on forgiveness. Through the example of a genuinely repentant wrongdoer who asks to be forgiven after making every reasonable effort to repair the wrong, she argues that the demand may express frustration rather than continuing ill will. If so, the grounds of the victim's duty to forgive remain intact (Eskens 2024, 215–216). Although she does not develop a parallel case for gratitude in the main text, she briefly suggests in a footnote that the same reply extends to gratitude: a benefactor who

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later remarks that 'a thank you would've been nice' does not thereby cease to have acted benevolently in conferring the original benefit (Eskens 2024, 216, n. 25).

A structurally parallel concern appears in the philosophy of worship. Some philosophers have argued that God's demanding worship would reveal a morally problematic feature of the divine character. Aikin, for example, suggests that a person who deserves praise but later demands it thereby reveals an important defect in character, and argues that a similar concern arises if God commands worship (Aikin 2010, 108–109). Choo labels this family of objections the Egotistical Objection, according to which commanding worship manifests egotism or pride incompatible with genuine worship-worthiness (Choo 2022, 81). Related concerns also appear in Cahn (2017, 12, 16) and Smuts (2012, 230, 231), both of whom question whether a being who demands worship can possess the moral perfection required of an appropriate object of worship. The common thought behind these discussions is that demanding worship may itself reveal a defect in the character of the demander and thereby cast doubt on whether the agent possesses the kind of moral excellence that could ground worship.

Even if Eskens's reply successfully defuses the Grounds Argument in cases of gratitude and forgiveness, it cannot be extended to worship. This is because the plausibility of her response depends on features of ordinary interpersonal relationships that have no parallel once the object of worship is a perfectly good God. In her examples, the demand does not undermine the relevant moral ground because it can be explained by human limitations. A benefactor or wrongdoer may demand gratitude or forgiveness out of understandable frustration, emotional weakness, or practical concern without thereby revealing a defect incompatible with the attitudes that originally grounded the duty. A perfectly good God, however, cannot appeal to such considerations. Divine action is not constrained by emotional weakness, impatience, insecurity, or practical necessity. Consequently, the range of plausible explanations available in ordinary human relationships is unavailable in the divine case.

The burden therefore shifts back to the defender of divine demands. They must explain why a perfectly good God would demand worship rather than leave morally obligated creatures to worship voluntarily. Until such an explanation is provided, the Grounds Argument continues to pose a serious challenge to the demandability of worship, even if Eskens's response succeeds in ordinary interpersonal contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that recent discussions of worship overlook a philosophical problem distinct from the familiar question of what grounds the obligation to worship. I have argued that this neglected problem is best understood by drawing on the more developed literature on gratitude, where an analogous tension concerning directed expressive duties has already been identified. The structural similarities between gratitude and worship justify formulating a corresponding Demand Problem in Worship, while the important asymmetries between them explain why the strategies proposed for the Demand Problem in Gratitude – even if successful there – either cannot be extended to worship or can be extended only at substantial theological cost. This matters because traditional theism has typically portrayed God as both worthy of worship and entitled to require it. If the tension identified in this paper cannot be satisfactorily resolved, then a central feature of the traditional theistic conception of God remains in need of philosophical explanation. If this argument is correct, the Demand Problem in Worship constitutes a distinct philosophical challenge for traditional theism. Any adequate account of worship must explain not only why worship is owed to God, but also how a worship-worthy God can fittingly claim, require, or demand the very worship owed to him.

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Notes

1. There is disagreement about whether the Bible contains explicit commands to worship. Crowe notes that, although the Great Commandment does not explicitly mention worship, many theists regard worship as expressive of the very attitudes it commands – such as love, fear, and service towards God (Crowe 2007, 469; see also Choo 2022, 95, n. 1). By contrast, the Qur'an explicitly commands worship in several passages (e.g., Qur'an 36: 61, 98: 5, 53: 62). In any case, many believers seem to regard worship as obligatory and see nothing problematic about God demanding it and punishing failures to comply.
2. In this paper, I use 'obligation' and 'duty' interchangeably.
3. For different accounts of the normative significance of directed duties, see, e.g., Sreenivasan (2010), Hayward (2013), Hedahl (2014), and May (2015).
4. My discussion of gratitude throughout this paper concerns prepositional gratitude – gratitude to someone for some benefaction – rather than merely propositional gratitude, that is, being grateful that some state of affairs obtains. On this distinction, see (Manela 2015b; Manela 2016, 291; Manela 2020).
5. Manela's proposal may be understood as developing an intuition already present in Berger. Berger explicitly denies that gratitude is 'something owed the grantor in the sense that he has a right to demand it' (Berger 1975, 300). Yet he adds that 'the person to whom it is owed may be entitled to complain of the insult such a failure represents' (Berger 1975, 300, n. 1). Although Berger does not formulate this distinction in terms of perfect and imperfect rights, the underlying intuition is similar: the benefactor lacks standing to demand gratitude while nevertheless occupying a distinctive normative position with respect to its absence.
6. I do not claim that no response to these arguments or to the Demand Problem in Worship is available. For example, Soloveitchik, as discussed by Harris (2022, 33), emphasizes a distinctive role for divine command in granting human beings permission to approach God in prayer. On this view, divine command is not merely a further source of normative pressure; rather, it helps explain why human beings are permitted to approach God in prayer in the first place. This perspective could potentially challenge some of the assumptions underlying the Value-Reduction and Burden-Increasing Arguments above. Wygoda Cohen (2024), meanwhile, argues that divine commands may serve purposes beyond securing compliance or conformance. I do not take these proposals to establish the two conditions identified above: that the benefit of divine command is sufficient to outweigh its normative costs and that the same benefit cannot be secured by a less costly means. Assessing these and other possible responses, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper, whose primary aims are to formulate the Demand Problem in Worship and to show that the strategies proposed for resolving the Demand Problem in Gratitude do not extend to it, even if they succeed in the case of gratitude.
7. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī considers a case in which a father knows that his child may disobey him and argues that the father should not directly command the child to perform an action, since disobedience would then involve not only failure to perform the action but also direct defiance of the father's command. He suggests instead that the father inform the child that the action is obligatory, thereby reducing the child's culpability if he fails to comply (al-Rāzī 2001, vol. 1, 196, 2018, 355). A related concern appears in a discussion of Aquinas: God may withhold certain good gifts from an ungrateful person when he foresees that receiving them would aggravate that person's sin (Kaczor 2022, 9). These cases suggest a broader theological sensitivity to unnecessarily worsening a person's moral condition.

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